Rewind and Fast Forward, Parts 1 through 5

Mike Agar

Published with Savage Minds, savageminds.org

A couple of months ago I was having dinner with an old friend in Seattle. He stopped his fork in mid-flight and looked at me, astonished. “Microsoft hires anthropologists?” “Yes,” I answered, “They fire them too.” He’d just complained about the over-techification of his hometown, worried that the rumors of AliBaba adding to the existing digital mob were true. I had just said that “even anthropologists” were part of the new tech world. He still thought of us as collectors of quaint and curious customs of exotic people. Interesting and entertaining perhaps, but hardly relevant to the brave new digital world.

It made me wonder, again, how to explain what anthropology “is.” Why did my old friend still see it only in terms of the “savage slot,” Trouillot’s phrase that describes anthropology’s traditional academic assignment.

I do know that anthropology “is” something. It exists. It’s certainly the most self-conscious discipline that I know of, sometimes embarrassingly so at gatherings of diverse professions. It definitely tends to be more tied to the personal identity of its bearer than most professional labels that people use when you ask “what do you do?” Whatever it is, it has strong personal and social force. What is that force?

It’s been a half-century since I took the introductory cultural course at Stanford from Bernie Siegel. I signed up because a retired stockbroker and his wife, living in a restored house among the ruins of their abandoned former hometown in the California hills, asked me a lot of questions and then told me I should take it. I was there working for the State Department of Agriculture, looking for a moth whose eggs ate the leaves of grape vines. Cue

Rod Serling for an episode of the old TV show *Twilight Zone*

A year later, I heard that Alan Beals was about to pack up his family and return for a second year of fieldwork in Gopalpur, a village in Mysore State, now Karnataka. He let me, a junior anthropology major, tag along because I made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Much later I asked why he let me go and he said, "I don't know. You kept showing up." Just like Woody Allen wrote, that's what 80% of life is, just showing up. The offer was, I'd work half the time as a research assistant and during the other half he would teach me what this mysterious "fieldwork" was all about.

This was old-time anthropology. I rented a hut, a former shelter for cattle that refused to stop trying to come inside. It was like trying to throw large drunks out of a bar at closing time. I hired a cook, feeling like a colonial sellout, but Obya, the head of the clan, said the roughly translated Kannarese equivalent of "Hire him fer Krissake, he needs the work." Mukunda—that was his name—quickly became a colleague who could cook. The Human Relations Area Files project had published a codebook—*The Outline of Cultural Materials*—originally developed by G. P. Murdoch in the 1940s. I started working through the list, everything from cosmology to how to make a plow.

Once the villagers decided that their "secret tax assessor" and "Pakistani spy" suspicions were unfounded, a groove for me developed that we all enjoyed, a mix of entertainer, respectful listener, scribe and medic, and eventually a Peace Corps type job to get a well out of the government. It was a great experience and a sad departure. I'm still sympathetic towards the now disreputable "my village" syndrome. Months of empathy do create emotional attachment.

Now fast-forward a couple of years. I'm a graduate student at Berkeley, figuring a return trip to Karnataka is in my future. But there's this war going on and I'm ripe for the drafting. I'd heard

that the Public Health Service Commissioned Corps occasionally took on an anthropologist at an Indian Health Service hospital. I applied. But, no, kismet threw me a curve. A treatment center for narcotics addicts in Lexington, Kentucky, wanted to start up a "social science" unit. I had no idea what I was in for, but I gratefully accepted a commission and morphed overnight into the equivalent of a first lieutenant charged with doing "anthropology" in a federal institution full of psychiatrists, medical staff, social workers, psychologists, sociologists, security guards, and heroin addicts.

It was 1968, just a couple of years after Karnataka. I had no idea what to do. So, seeking the closest approximation to a village that I could find, I checked into the hospital to be a patient for a couple of weeks. And the clouds parted and the hand of Boas reached down and his fingertip touched mine and gave me anthropological life. I could do the same thing I'd done in the South Indian village. Well, not the identical thing, of course, but the same thing in terms of its fundamentals. I figured that that "same thing" was what anthropology "was."

In those dark days, though, academic anthropology didn't agree with my "we are one" conclusion. My first AAA meeting—for anthropology back then first meetings were as emotional as a telenovela—there was one session called "American Culture" that they put me in, me and papers on Scientology, wife-swapping—I know, I know, it was the late 60s—and I forget the fourth. We were a marginal exotic event within the gathering of specialists in the exotic. The rumor I heard later at Berkeley was that the only reason some faculty were comfortable giving me a PhD for a dissertation about heroin addicts was because I had, after all, worked in a South Indian village. When I took my first job in an academic anthropology department, new PhD in hand, a couple of old-timers told me what I'd done wasn't anthropology at all.

Only the fact that I had found one of the few sane faculty advisers of the time, Paul Kay, saved me. In fact, shortly after I

arrived at Lexington I called Paul and he asked, "What do they want you to do?" "Anthropology," I answered. "So," he replied, "write your dissertation." Paul didn't care what you worked on, as long as it had something to do with linguistic anthropology. What he cared about was that you did a good job and he gave generously of his time to help out. All grad students should be so lucky.

I knew from my experience working at the treatment center that the skeptics were inside a box they couldn't see the walls of. Now, of course, the kind of thing I did in Lexington isn't unusual at all. But back then, in my formative anthro years, it was beyond strange to most colleagues. And it *was* strange, really, I agree, because in Lexington most of my ideas about what I did took shape working with people who were *not* anthropologists, people whose image of us, to the extent they knew what we were at all, was of an unruly mob of savage slot, story-telling, pseudo-scientists. And Lexington was confusing in another way. It meant that most ethnographic colleagues I did find came out of sociology, out of a tradition of German phenomenology that we shared, and some other key figures, like Gregory Bateson for me, George Herbert Mead for them, that we didn't. At least they said "ethnography" now and then, too.

When *Savage Minds* thought it might be useful to invite this old-timer to write a few blogs over a two-week period about how he saw anthropology today, I was honored and interested. One thing I enjoy is being an oral history informant for anthropology students, not to teach anyone how to do anything, but rather to show how what we do has a story behind it. The invitation fit the personal agenda. It made me think back to the beginning, the stories I started this blog with, to the strange career that kismet handed me with the shift from a South Indian village to a U.S. treatment center for narcotics addicts. After all these years, what do I think anthropology "is? Is there a "there" there, to twist Gertrude Stein's words about Oakland? Lately I think there is, and I think the answer to what the "there" is sits inside the story of

whatever made it so easy to switch from a village to an addict hospital.

In the next installment, I want to write a little about the first question I asked in both places, a question I've continued asking in every project I've worked on, whether it was an elaborate research grant or a one hour consultation. I think it's a question that anthropologists ask automatically, more than most other people, professional or amateur, who approach a group they aren't a regular part of. Or even a group they are a part of, if they're particularly masochistic. The highly technical question is, who are the people we're talking about and what do they do all day? Not who you *think* they are and what you *think* they do. Outsider's opinions are guilty until proven innocent, including one's own. How do we learn the answers in a way where "they"—the people the question is about—participate in crafting them?

In posts to come, I'll offer concepts whose ambiguities have a respectable intellectual pedigree—like Weberian ideal types, Wittgenstein's family resemblance, a little of Zadeh's fuzzy sets. For those who don't recognize that peculiar mix of dated references, the mishigoss—a technical term from ontology—will come clear with time. I'll start out in the next blog with a peculiar concept—not so much to linguistic anthropologists—of "task communicative competence." Once it's unpacked a little, I think most anthropologists will agree that it's our first instinct, by birth or by training or by both, as soon as we aim our minds at a group we want to learn about.

The "task" in "task communicative competence" is a little strange. I use it for two reasons. First of all, traditional terms like "group" or "community" or "culture" have lost their edges in our globally-connected, post-structural world. More fine-grained concepts like "situation" or "event" ring too flat to signal their dynamics. Second, I've worked as an academic, an applied, and a practicing anthropologist. Historically those three categories are surrounded by moats filled with snark. If I think of "task" as the

minimal focus, I can link what I do under any of those labels as related, something I'll develop in the fifth and final blog in this series. "Task" will simply name those bounded stretches of activity where people do things together for some purpose.

A "task," then, is a minimal unit of purposive social action. A study or a project might include a narrow set or a broad range of them that encompasses most of life. The point is that "task" lets me talk about anthropology – whether academic, applied or practiced – as sharing some fundamentals and, having done all three myself, I believe that the fundamentals link our past with our present, erase the outdated arguments about academic versus applied versus practice, and pull the alienated "four fields" of my graduate school days back into a coherent package.

Just one more thing, speaking of four fields. The blogs to come will reflect my background as a sociocultural type who focuses on language. But in today's anthropology I believe that most of what I write in this series applies to how my colleagues think in archaeology and biocultural fields as well. Lately, my work on water in the Southwest shows this clearly, everything from Chaco Canyon irrigation to biologically grounded articles about water quality like "Fish on Prozac" are relevant. The old days when we divided anthro into bones and stones and words and customs are gone. I won't have time to fully develop that last theme in these blogs, but I think all of us anthropologists wonder, in a fundamental way, about actual tasks and the people doing them, and that's what these blogs will be about.

Promises, promises. On to blog #2.

In Part 1, I compared traditional fieldwork in a South Indian village with my unexpected and forced relocation to a U.S. treatment center for heroin addicts. Now, in Part 2, I want to try out a concept to explain why it felt like I was doing the "same"

thing in such different places. What fundamental of an anthropological perspective might have led to that feeling of sameness?

I'll continue to use those early experiences from the late 1960s and early 70s. I don't think the fundamentals have changed all that much. But more recent experiences will be added in now and then. Over the decades, I've used what we do in all kinds of ways in all kinds of places, some of them not suitable for mention in a family blog of this type.

It strikes me that—in contrast to most everyone else who talks about a human group not their own—anthropologists start out by wanting to *learn* about that group and what they do, *from* them, beginning with a suspicion that what the anthro and every other outsider thinks is true is probably wrong. I sometimes describe us as "ambulatory falsification machines." Tell me something that you or I think we know about the people we're interested in, and I'll bet my retirement savings it's at least a stick-figure version and maybe flat wrong.

Back in the dark ages there were a few other examples of traditional behavioral/social science that had this attitude, but most of them were the exceptions that proved the rule. For example, consider the classic work of Leon Festinger. In his book *When Prophecy Fails,* he made famous the concept of "cognitive dissonance," about as mainstream as a behavioral/social science idea would ever get. But in contrast to most psychology, the book was based on time spent in tasks with a group who prophesied a date for the end of the world which then didn't happen. The researchers dived in and learned what the group actually said and did. I'm not sure how well it measured up to anthropological research standards. I've never read the original. And of course once the book came out, the new concept was immediately hauled back into the hermetically sealed psyc lab, as if Festinger had been rehabilitated after he snuck out of a faculty meeting and jumped off an epistemological bridge while tethered

to an extremely short and strongly elastic bungee cord.

When I landed in the South Indian village as an anthropology undergraduate, I had already absorbed our skeptical attitude from readings and lectures without even thinking about it. "Don't trust what you think you know. Learn from the people who actually do the tasks you're interested in because you probably don't have any idea of what's really going on until you get up close and personal."

For example, I walked into the village on day one thinking in terms of a model where a "headman" ruled the roost. Once I got far enough into the language, I learned that the hereditary village headman, the *Naik*, was a young drunk who embarrassed everyone. So how did headman tasks get done? I spent a fair amount of time working out the answer based on how conflict in the village was handled in a *Naik*-free way, conflict resolution being the main job the current one couldn't be relied on to handle. I learned by going through one damn case after another.

Same anthropological perspective a couple of years later, when I landed in the treatment center for addicts in Lexington. As mentioned earlier, I checked in as a patient for a couple of weeks. I've told stories about that (mis)adventure in my farewell to the drug field, *Dope Double Agent: The Naked Emperor on Drugs*. Before check-in, I learned the description of the official structure of "patient" therapeutic tasks. Then, after I went through admissions, got my grey pants and white t-shirt, and moved into my room in the male residence unit, I learned how the tasks looked, with the "patients," from their point of view.

I wrote up a report about what I had learned, naive 60s student that I was, to single-handedly make the institution a better place. Senior colleagues, it turned out, didn't want to hear the difference between what I'd learned and what they wanted to believe, and they held me personally responsible for telling them. Probably the worst news from their point of view was the "therapy game." The phrase "the X game" was a common street formulation

to name various ways of hustling money or some other advantage from “squares.” In this case, “the X game” referred to how you should do therapy and produce an "insight" at the right time to secure an early release date.

Tasks in the streets interested me, too, but, like the addicts, I was confined to the “joint,” a slang term for a prison, the regular use of which offered another quick insight into patient views of the “treatment program.” Addicts talked about the street world all the time; staff, hardly ever. I tried to figure a way to learn about street events from a distance. My very first publication in *Human Organization* in 1969 called the method we invented "The Simulated Situation." It was a kind of role-play that the patients and I had a lot of fun with. It introduced some of the dynamics of a couple of key addict street tasks and helped me understand their transformation into life in the joint. Several years later I worked in New York and saw for myself the value and limits of studying "culture at a distance," as the anthropologists working during World War II called it.

The *context* of those two early research experiences, the village and the joint, was different in several ways, but that's not the point here. In spite of the different settings, that instinct to take a closer look at the tasks that people did and to learn about those tasks from the people doing them—that reaction came right out of an anthropological way of looking at things, an *anthropological perspective*, and it worked the same way in both places.

Here’s one way of describing what the learning is about. You want to learn how to talk about a task with people who do it, and maybe even learn to take part in it yourself. If you succeed, you will be able to tell. You will be able to take part in conversations with those people in terms of what the point of a task is and how it gets done. A linguistic anthropologist would use Dell Hymes’ phrase and say you become “communicatively competent” in the topic of that task among people who routinely do it. You can at least talk the talk, maybe even walk the walk.

Notice the hedge on participant observation, “maybe walk the walk." Claim actual competence in the *performance* of the task you’re learning about? Maybe, but probably not. For example, I’m talking right now with a colleague about a study of water managers. If I do it, I don’t expect to be qualified as a manager by the end. But I do expect to learn to talk with them in a way we will both understand as being about their work. I doubt I’ll ever say, “Here, I can figure the amount of water the city of Albuquerque gets this summer and explain it before the city council.” Such a performance would require a lot of additional training and experience in water management, not to mention local political savvy.

So let's stay with the more modest version. Say you want--at minimum--to learn to be communicatively competent in some new tasks. What does “learn” mean? Unfortunately there are enough theories of learning so that, laid end to end, they would circle the earth at the equator. I’ll use Bateson’s pioneering work on levels of learning, usually referenced with mention of his concept of “deutero-learning.” That original work has diffused into many places, for example into discussions of single-, double-, and triple-loop learning in organizational theory and practice.

Anthropologists typically begin at Level One, aware from their own experience that the semiotics that they brought to a task isn’t working to talk about what is going on, as made obvious by reactions of people who actually do it. Learning the “right way” to interpret and talk and act from the perspective of task participants requires anthropologists to create some new semiotics, semiotics that they didn’t have before. That is Level Two, Bateson’s "deutero-learning," not just a change in what you do, but a change by adding new possibilities of what you *might* do that you didn't have before. Eventually Level Three learning might occur, a profound change, similar to an epiphany or religious conversion. In this case many Level Two changes snap into a single coherent focus. An understanding of a different way of being in the world

takes shape—"different" with reference to the original state of the anthropologist before the work. The anthropologist is now becoming "bilingual/bicultural."

As far as most behavioral/social sciences go, this communicative competence is *not* required. You can comfortably research under the malevolent eyes of your peers and get away with a denial that any Level Two learning is required at all. Your training, and your similarly trained peers, do *not* require relevant task communicative competence of the "subjects" that the research is supposedly about. In fact, you can get away with murder describing your assumptions about who "those people" are and what they do in their life, as long as you don't write it until the "discussion" section at the end of an article. For that matter, the suspicious peers won't require an understanding of "subject" communicative competence for the actual *research* task itself, either. What are *subjects* doing when they do *your* experiment or answer *your* survey? Why are they doing it at all? Better not to know, any more than the staff at Lexington wanted to know about the therapy game.

The stories I could tell. Here's just one example. I once helped with a focus group project involving ten different drug treatment agencies. The only important result was that the program staff who ran the groups learned that their clients could actually talk about and had articulate views of program tasks that were different and useful and previously unknown. They were amazed. The clouds parted and they saw the possibility of deutero-learning. Their hard-won "conclusion" is actually an anthropological starting point.

I know it's awkward to name this important fundamental with the clunky clause, "learning communicative competence from those who do a task," but the concept has grown in my mind over the years as a core of anthropology, back in the old days and now, from research to application to practice to a brief conversation about what we do. Whatever I've done, long-term ethnography to

short-term intervention, if I'm the only anthropologist in the room, then, most of the time, I'm the one who wants communicative competence inside the task of interest, right away, before any other questions are asked or information gathered or conclusions reached. In recent years working as self-employed, that ability can get me rapidly hired or just as rapidly fired. It's seen as symptomatic of either genius or anarchy, but all it is is souped-up ANTH 101.

Here's one recent example, a short-term project for an outpatient cancer clinic. I use it a lot in talks to non-anthropologists, partly because almost everyone has some relationship to cancer—self, family, a friend—and so it engages audiences and, in the end, they can see the truth of it from their own experience.

A clinic contacted me to help reduce "waiting time," defined as the number of minutes from check-in at the reception desk to room-in, i.e when a patient starts their chemotherapy.

What, I wondered, was "waiting time" for an outpatient? No one had wondered that before in any serious way. The full project is too elaborate to describe here, but the answer was definitely *not* the absolute number of minutes. The answer, based on learning patient and front-line staff communicative competence in the "waiting" room, was that it was about the threatening uncertainty of those minutes in a context where cancer had abruptly taken over one's life and handed its control to professionals. As it turned out, you couldn't change the number of minutes much, but you could do a lot to change the quality of those minutes. The results of this brief project led to an action proposal that made sense to clinic staff and the patients I spoke with. Unfortunately it was never used, as far as I know, but that's a story about "implementation" for some future series of blogs.

A second contemporary example, based on this same task-based communicative competence fundamental, is the recent

history of UX, user experience research. It took off when companies realized that they really didn't know much about how their goods and services worked—or didn't—in the real lives of their customers and clients, either when they were shopping or when they put the product to use in their lives. Now UX is one of the more interesting areas of anthropology (and many other fields), witness the growth of EPIC (Ethnographic Practice in Industry Conference) over the last several years. A year or so ago I did a workshop for a UX group in Toronto and I could write a blog or two just on my own user experience.

Learning communicative competence for a task is like solving a puzzle. You start with a lot of pieces that you can't make sense of. But once the outlines of the puzzle start to appear, you look for other arrangements and other pieces and how they might complete the picture. And then, even in a limited project, the task you're working on has sub-tasks and is part of larger tasks that make up an even bigger picture. You don't finish the job, whether a brief consult or a multi-year ethnography, with a simple list of pieces and a new semiotics to interpret each one. You finish with a *pattern* that shows how the different pieces come together to make a bigger picture clear.

Pattern is my second nomination for a fundamental of an anthropological perspective. That will be the topic of the next blog in Part 3.

In the previous blog, Part 2, a first building block of an anthropological perspective was proposed, awkwardly named "learning task communicative competence from those who actually do it." This part of the perspective makes it easy to see, in retrospect, why the shift from a traditional Indian village to a U.S. treatment center for heroin addicts wasn't as big of a deal as I thought it was going to be. I just kept doing the same thing in

Lexington, even though by the anthropological rules of the times I wasn't supposed to be there. I wondered what "patients" and "staff" were up to and how they got it done. I spent time with them in "the joint"—the residence, the dining hall, the chapel, the gym, therapy groups. I was still looking at things anthropologically, even though Lexington was out of bounds as a traditional "field site."

Here in Part 3, I'd like to suggest a second building block, this one with the much simpler name of "pattern." *Pattern* will be a second part of the argument that this perspective—I'm still not sure whether to call it an "epistemology" or an "ontology" (or possibly a "pathology")—works the same once you learn it no matter what kind of anthropology you're doing, including applications where you're not actually doing research at all.

Traditional behavioral/social science obsesses over "variables" rather than "patterns." For some domain of situations or persons, a variable is an attribute that can be identified in each specific case. The rules for identifying it are set by an "operational definition" which means a guideline for how to assign a numerical value to a particular observation, that assignment being both "valid" and "reliable" with reference to the actual variation the researcher is interested in. It will be "objective," meaning that any person anywhere else would assign the same value to the same observation. This language will be familiar to anyone who has taken Stat 101 or Intro to Research Design in a social-behavioral science program.

The thing is, if you're trying to learn communicative competence for a particular task, "variable" gets in the way. "Variable" narrows your attention. It means stop the flow, then isolate, operationally define, and figure out how to assign a number to some fragment from one moment to the next, never mind what else is going on in those moments. Variable has its uses, an example in a moment, but not when you're trying to learn task-based communicative competence. That's about figuring out a

pattern in the dynamics of a moment, not ignoring everything and chasing only the measurement of what the traditional behavioral/social sciences would call a "prior" and the rest of the moment be damned.

According to the dictionary, “pattern" can mean many things—*repetition*, like a pattern of fur on a cat, or a *template*, like a diagram that shows how impossible it will be to assemble your kid’s Christmas present before sunrise. But in this blog, pattern is meant to be more general and abstract, agnostic as to what is connected and what the connections are made of. The point about pattern is that it—rather than a variable—is what an anthropological perspective leads you to look for.

It’s easy to describe the difference formally. You notice some interesting “x.” With visions of variables dancing in your head, you want to define x so that you can build a set {x1, x2, x3 … xn}. Then you can input that set into the statistical software. If you’re learning a pattern instead, the abstraction looks different. Now when you notice an x, you look for something else, a “y”, and a relation “R,” such that xRy is true.

An anthropologist trying to learn task communicative competence is after patterns, not variables. We notice something interesting and we wonder what else it might be connected with. Gregory Bateson—I fall back on his work again like I did in the previous blog—made famous the phrase “the pattern that connects.” You see something interesting? What else is it connected with in the task and in the world in which it is done? The puzzle metaphor used at the end of the previous blog still works, only now it’s more difficult (and interesting) because new pieces keep appearing on the table that weren’t in the original box.

This is not a normal attitude in behavioral/social science or organizational management, though it is in intelligence analysis, investigative journalism, police work, and history, but that’s another story. Ruth Benedict’s classic book is called *Patterns of*

Culture, not "variables of culture." That phrase would be more like Geert Hofstede's "cultural dimensions." Anthropologists who go to hell after they die are forced to read it for eternity.

Here's an example that shows the difference between variable and pattern and one possible connection between them. Recently I had a conversation with a colleague about "big data." Millions of variables are now available among all the digital breadcrumbs that we leave behind as we wander the forest of life. (That might make a good country/western song). How, my colleague wondered, could all those variables be packaged better for a smart phone user?

One answer we came up with was this: Big data variables have no *pattern*. Sure, you can spear a database with regression lines ´til the chips come home, but who knows if the linear equations have anything to do with what people really want to know when they ask Siri for help while engaged in their tasks? But ... the tasks that the people with smart phones are actually doing—they *do* pattern, from the phone-owner's point of view. If you knew the task pattern, you might be able to write some software that could cherry-pick the relevant big data variables and have Siri ready to respond with task-relevant information when you ask her a question. Or him, depending on which voice you selected.

That's what the Target store chain did in one of the early commercial uses of big data. A pregnant woman shopping in Target follows a pattern. She changes her purchases as her needs change through gestation and birth and early childhood of her baby. Her purchases at time T give the marketing department a pretty good idea of other things she'd be looking for at time T + 1. The clever Target marketers issued ads and coupons at the right moment to direct her attention to new products she was probably already thinking of buying, or maybe she hadn't yet thought of them but might buy them once she knew they existed.

The Target story shows the difference between variable and

pattern and illustrates how the two might work together, possibly to accomplish things more significant than just to increase Target's bottom line.

Is it really true that any pattern is possible in anthropology? No, not really, not once you've graduated from liminality into full clan membership. "Anthropology has no theory" scorn the traditional scientists. Actually, it does, but theories don't look like Euclid's *Elements*. Instead, they look like pattern templates that tell you, before you head out into the real world, "This important slot better be filled in in your pattern when you come back." Marx says you're going to have relation of task to the mode of production. Critical theory says you're going to tie task to interests of the one percent. Bourdieu asks you what sorts of capital are in play. Semiotics asks what might have happened but didn't, and how does what happened co-occur with other things that did, and when you're done deconstruct the whole damn thing. Gender theory requires links between task and gender identity of human participants. Me, I'm a complexity guy, I want feedback loops and nonlinearities in my patterns.

But in the end, outstanding anthropology, in my view, doesn't just funnel what it finds into a pre-fab pattern template. On the contrary, it puts the ready-to-wear pattern on the shelf, learns the tasks first, and then re-shapes or re-invents or just dumps the original template in favor of a pattern that preserves what was learned on the ground. Run-of-the-mill anthropology, on the other hand, concludes with, "So here we have another example of pattern X, for I am an X-ian." It's anthropology's way of "replicating," not to be scorned, but not as powerful as an innovation in how we understand the way the world works.

Anthropologists might agree, or so went the argument in the previous blog, that learning task communicative competence is the primary job from which all else follows. They will often disagree, to put it mildly, on what counts as the most important pattern template that connects up parts of a task with other things outside

of it. Nevertheless, my point in this blog is that anthropologists *will* agree that a search for pattern, be it in a village or a treatment center for addicts, will be the first order of business rather than a search for variables that can be isolated and measured.

Maybe *after* you get the patterns straight, maybe then you want to define and measure a couple of their pieces—now you can call them “variables" if you’re so inclined. Maybe you want to do some traditional behavioral/social science to see if the pieces act like the pattern says they should across a wide range of tasks. If you do that, you will already have a running start. Any two pieces of a pattern that co-occur most of the time as you learn them, now converted into variables, will probably produce a graph, maybe nonlinear, that’ll knock at least one sock off a pattern-challenged peer reviewer, who will then ask, “How did you measure that?” And at that point you can show them the pattern and knock the other sock off, too, because you didn't have to make up some pattern in the conclusion. Instead, you started with it already in the introduction.

In the previous blog, I mentioned an example of a pattern problem in the South Indian village. Since the Naik, the traditional headman, wasn’t acceptable as a leader, I wondered how Naik-assigned tasks got done. I looked at--sometimes literally--several conflict cases and learned that the Naik pretty much played no role whatsoever, even though that was one of his main jobs. What actually happened was that the “Daav,” officially “village council” but better translated as "group of respected old guys," pretty much ran the show. The Daav, as it turned out, was much more fluid in membership on any particular occasion than its description implied. Sometimes it involved participants from outside the village.

There’s more to that story, but the point here is that an anthropological perspective aimed me at the question, what is the pattern that best models how actual tasks get accomplished? When I started work in the addict treatment center, I did the same thing.

For example, one pattern that jumped out right away was the difference between how addict-patients talked during "treatment" tasks with professionals and how they talked when doing things with each other in the residential unit, the dining hall, the gym and so on. In this case I got lucky. It turned out that there were two items of folklore known to most addicts in the joint. They were called "toasts," and they modeled the two patterns pretty well.

I've written about the two toasts elsewhere, in the *Journal of American Folklore* long ago. I'll just tell you the first line of each one to give you the flavor. One, called "Honky Tonk Bud," starts with "Honky Tonk Bud, the hip cat stud, stood diggin' a game of pool." The other one, called "King Heroin," starts with "Behold my friends for I am King Heroin, known to all mankind as the destruction of men." Bud's story, spoken in street language, shows an accomplished street hustler. King Heroin, in standard English, describes a social-psychological failure.

The toasts summarized two patterns of addict communicative competence that I was seeing across different tasks. A major policy problem was that the professional literature and the Lexington program only acknowledged King Heroin as who heroin addicts were. They were also Honky Tonk Bud, in the joint and the more so when they went back home and hit the streets.

"Pattern" is my nominee for the number two fundamental on the list of what an anthropological perspective is all about. As we set out to learn task communicative competence in a world we're researching or practicing in, we go on a pattern quest, a search for the "pattern that connects," the way that the different pieces that we learn in our Level Two learning connect up into a bigger picture of people and the tasks that they do. And we don't just look inside the task. We look outside it as well, and back in time, and around it in the broader world.

And, like task communicative competence, the pattern quest is also part and parcel of applied research, or practice, or short term

projects like I've done since I left the university in the mid-90s. Here's a brief example.

The Thomas Edison museum in West Orange, New Jersey, wondered why townspeople and former workers did not participate in museum tasks, such as volunteering or helping with interpretation or just showing up at events. This was an interesting twist on task-based communicative competence—explain the *absence* of people that the museum staff thought should have been there because they supposedly already had it. So I visited with a small sample of townsfolk and retired workers.

It turned out that, in 1973, McGraw-Edison, the corporate descendant of the Thomas A. Edison company, closed up shop and moved south to a right-to-work state. This was a severe economic blow to the town of West Orange. In my first interview, with a town leader, in the 1990s, I heard what most other people I met with said, in one form or another. "Every time I drive by the museum I see a closed factory." Most people I spoke with saw the "factory" closing as a betrayal, the beginning of a decline in their community. That the former economic center of their town was now a "museum" only added insult to injury. It did not fill them with wild enthusiasm to serve as a resource for "closed factory" activities, to put it mildly. That pattern was clear in no time at all.

Pattern, and the task based communicative competence described in the previous blog, strike me as foundation stones of an anthropological perspective. They are simple to state and profound in their consequences. They go together like the proverbial bread and butter, a useful cliché that reminds me that I've made a living with them in academic, applied research, and practitioner working worlds for five decades.

So what is the next fundamental I should propose in the next blog, Part 4? The problem with this blog series is, once I started, the law of "one damn thing leads to another" reared its ugly head. Possibly a sign of the rambling tendencies of old age – or possibly

another sign of an anthropological perspective. I only have space in my two-week run for one more blog that describes one more fundamental. There is more than one left on my list. What to pick?

Well, speaking of one damn thing leading to another: As I thought back to the old days, another fundamental leapt out, the notion of "emergence." This time, though, there's a twist. We used the word all the time in the university but didn't really think much about what it meant. I took it for granted in the village. But it turned into a major headache in the treatment center. What I'd learned as a fundamental part of an anthropological perspective turned into an argument I had with colleagues from the day I arrived in Lexington until the day I left the drug field in the early 2000s. The transition from village to joint was easy as far as using the perspective went; the view of this fundamental from scientific and medical and administrative colleagues? Big problem.

So, let's talk about emergence to show a hard part of the change from village to joint. That's where we'll go in Part 4.

In Part 3, pattern-seeking was added to the list of fundamentals of an anthropological perspective, following on from Part 2 where task-based communicative competence was proposed. I'm now on the fourth installment of this five-blog run. Since #5 is stuck with the conclusion job, #4 is the last one where I can try out another fundamental. The problem is, more than one comes to mind. Too many things crawled up into consciousness after I opened the doors of perception and stepped into the hall of mirrors, to mix Aldous Huxley with the Palace of Versailles.

But as I think back on the original plot device—the shift from village to treatment center—another characteristic comes to mind that was then, and probably always will be, a fundamental of an anthropological perspective. It plays an important part, like the previous two characteristics, whether it's traditional or

contemporary anthropology, academic or applied or practice. We call it “emergence.” In this case, though, the transition from village to joint was rocky because it alienated most of my new non-anthropological colleagues in the treatment center. It turned out that "I dunno yet" was not an acceptable answer to the question, "what's your hypothesis?"

This third fundamental of an anthropological perspective is already implied in the description of the previous two. Recall that the first emphasized *learning* task-based communicative competence. The second emphasized *figuring out* pattern as you learn. “Learning” and “figuring out" are both forward looking verbs, called “change-of-state” verbs in linguistics. Writ large, they suggest a “quest narrativ*e*,” one classic way to tell a story, moving from a lack of something to a fulfillment of that lack. Where you are at the end isn't where you thought you'd be at the beginning. It's jazz rather than classical.

Compare this with the usual behavioral/social science script. It requires a controlled sequence of tasks from the start. It follows a set guideline for the doing and writing of it (though not for the *actual* doing; see the entire field of science and technology studies), and it often ends with a rejected null hypothesis. Many have written about this in other places. It's what you learn in research design courses in most social/behavioral sciences.

Back in undergrad school, and then later in grad school, we talked more about emergence than we did about research design. Our interests were emergent, our methodology was emergent, our research was emergent, our analysis of field notes when we came home was emergent, our writing was emergent. It was a veritable orgy of emergence. Well, within limits, if you remember the discussion of required patterns in the previous blog. I was training in linguistic anthropology, and if that’s what you wanted to be back then in the heyday of ethnographic semantics, your emergence better have a lot of lexical sets in it.

There was a famous story at Berkeley that summarized the attitude. A grad student asked Kroeber himself for advice before going off to do fieldwork. The great man said something like, “I suggest you buy a notebook and a pencil.” Emergence distilled, personified, and ratified by a member of the pantheon. You don’t know what will happen when you do fieldwork, so there’s no point in planning for it. That legend also shows emergence as a pathology, since the attitude blocked development of ways to talk about our methods until the 1980s.

Naturally I had no problem with emergence in the South Indian village. Of course that was how fieldwork was going to go. The main thing was to tolerate uncertainty until your interaction with the new world started to grow its own structure. My audience was a senior anthropologist. In fact, it was interesting when Alan said, pretty early on, “draft an outline for your senior thesis now. It’ll change a lot, but go ahead and draft it.” He was teaching me a strategy to develop the quest narrative.

But Lexington? Emergence didn’t allow for a smooth transition at all, even though task communicative competence and pattern did. All of a sudden I was alone with my emergence. My clinical and research colleagues thought it was the research Satan--anti-research design, anti-"instrument," anti-science. It was like hearing the door slam shut as they dragged me into the heroin withdrawal ward. Nothing like a skeptical if not hostile audience to make you conscious both of what you do and of the fact that your faculty never provided you with the words to describe it.

What did the word mean, really? We had used the term intuitively back in "the department" without discussing it much. It basically meant, you learn as you go. What you do at time T + 1 depends on what you learned at time T. This obviously creates heartbreak and pain and death by peer review for anyone who is supposed to specify the details of a project before it happens. Writing an anthropological research proposal for funding agencies, I would later decide, was actually a genre of science

fiction.

Nowadays “emergence” has become a popular term, a cliché of various self-help schools. Turn your inner moth into a butterfly, that kind of thing. But it has also become a technical term in complexity theory, because nonlinear dynamic systems in general, like anthropological work in particular, exhibit something called "path dependence.” It is a more recent term for our old intuition--the same sentence works for both--what happens at time T + 1 depends on what happened at time T. In other words, you can’t predict the exact trajectory of a specific "run" of a system in the long term; you can only know for certain what will happen after it actually happens. That’s one version of emergence.

Notice how well this first version fits “learning” communicative competence and “figuring out” pattern.
An anthropological perspective in motion in real time is also a complex, or nonlinear dynamic, system that exhibits path dependence. Emergence in this case is how an anthropological project unfolds in real time. You don't know exactly where you'll end up until you get there.

Here’s a second variation on the emergent theme: Once you have a lot of experience with a particular task, you will know that—though paths vary each time from one instance to the next—the space within which the many possible paths will take their shape does have its boundaries. Most likely, a few paths will occur most of the time and a few really weird ones will happen once in a great while. (There is a math for this, called "power law distributions," made popular recently with the phrase "black swan.")

In the village, for example, I expected that a headman would handle conflict cases. The path of those cases would no doubt vary, but a headman would always lead. No, fate handed me a "black swan" village where a fluid group of elders took care of the cases. I suspect this added to the variety of case paths though I

never did the comparative study so can't say for sure. At Lexington, I learned that that there were "drug use" paths I had never suspected existed, and recall that I moved there from Berkeley in the late 60s. Mace and nutmeg were two favorites, especially because guards would bring some in to sell since they were legal. One guy described how to capture and inhale the fumes of a burning pingpong ball. Reaction of his audience suggested he was a black swan, but mace and nutmeg? Happened all the time.

Universals and human biology are examples of limits on the paths that human social tasks can take. You won't find a group that doesn't have some tasks to handle conflict among its members. It won't last long without them. And you won't find a group that doesn't have ways to alter ordinary states of consciousness. Such assertions deserve their own series of blogs, because they are about a theory of being human, of limits on possible things that can happen, and that same theory represents the common human *ground* against which an outsider can come to understand the *figure* of differences in an unfamiliar human social world. I'll just end this paragraph with a favorite metaphor of a ski mountain. There are an infinite number of paths to the bottom, but there is also a mountain.

So "emergence" can just mean path dependence, or it can mean paths within a space whose boundaries can be identified. Then there's yet another version of emergence, kind of an "emergence light" because it's predictable. A path leads to a result that is unlike anything you could have predicted from the characteristics of the system parts. Chemistry is an easy example, one that John Stuart Mill struggled with when he developed his inductive logic. You mix hydrogen and oxygen and get water? Sodium and chloride and get salt? The path is clear and reproducible, but the final product bears no resemblance to the material you produced it with. That's emergence, too.

For example, in the village most cases of spirit possession were either new young brides who left the village to live with their

husband's family, or young men who went to the big city to earn some cash. The cure required a return to the home village. This only happened with a few brides and workers, not all of them, but if it did happen, that's who it happened to. Something in the tasks of those social types caused spirit possession to emerge among a few of them. Obviously it had something to do with returning to the comforts of home.

As another example, my office in the treatment center was a hangout for the few "patients" I was working with intensively at any particular point in time. Later I discovered that the bathroom on the fourth floor where the research unit was located had become a "stash," a place to securely hide contraband. And some time later, the fourth floor pharmacy across the hall was robbed. I was looking at the secure door with an addict. He pointed at the top, the bottom and the middle. The hinges were on the outside. A predictable pattern of addict emergence was, look at any space as a potential source of elements to support your addiction and figure out how to use it that way. In retrospect, I should have predicted both events.

And, finally, there's also emergence with a capital E. Some paths might turn out to change a system into something completely different from what it was before. Who would have guessed that 9/11 would happen? Who predicted the financial collapse of 2008 that changed our current world? Who thought Arab Spring would happen at all, never mind turn out so badly? Or, looking back to one of the favorite examples of the historians, who would have guessed that a Serb assassin would trigger—the appropriate verb—World War I?

Path dependencies like these are, in fact, about changing boundaries of the space, making old paths obsolete and new previously unimagined paths possible. This kind of path is a higher kind of "phase transition" between a system that disorganizes and another very different one that re-organizes and emerges from the chaos. With this kind of emergence, the change happens in a

surprising and perhaps traumatic way from a human point of view. Climate change is a contemporary case. The planetary system is changing from the Holocene into what we have named the Anthropocene, and we won't know exactly what that new epoch looks like until we're done with the transition. Climate change isn't just a change in the possible paths a system can take. It is a breakdown in a system and the emergence of a new one with different boundaries and paths within it.

As I write this blog I started thinking about Margaret Mead. Two of her early books told Americans that systems with other paths were possible, that adolescence wasn't always a time of turmoil, that men's and women's roles weren't determined by biology. But then in another book she showed that what looked like a major phase transition wasn't that at all, that World War II had powerfully impacted a traditional culture but that they had survived the disruption and continued their cultural ways. I guess it isn't a surprise that she and Gregory Bateson were part of the post-World War II Macy Foundation conference that invented cybernetics, an ancestor of today's complexity theory.

All of these variations on emergence are part of an anthropological perspective that we lumped under a single term back in the old days. I often say to complexity colleagues that anthropology said "emergence" before emergence was cool. I don't tell them that we never really talked much about what it meant beyond that general notion of path dependence.

Problematic as emergence is for traditional behavioral/social science research design and management strategic planning, it is fundamental to an anthropological perspective that emphasizes learning task communicative competence and figuring out pattern. Besides, there is some hope here. For example, in water governance reform, a new theme of "short term iterative learning cycles" is on the increase, to use one of their phrases. At least in New Mexico, though, "long range planning" still carries more weight in political discourse.

Emergence is key for how we work. And, together with learning task communicative competence and figuring out pattern, the trio start to look like a coherent and interconnected perspective rather than just a list of fundamentals. Our work is emergent because it is based on Level Two learning, sometimes even Level Three (from Part 2), the elements of which are organized into recurring patterns (from Part 3).

For now I have to stop with the characteristics of an anthropological perspective even though there is more ground to cover. Task communicative competence, pattern, and emergence aren't a bad start. I want to shift gears now and finish my *Savage Minds* moment in the sun with a question. Do these three fundamentals show how anthropology is the same whether you do it in an old-fashioned academic way or a new fangled way with a non-research oriented job that doesn't even have "anthropology" in its title? And do you need to study anthropology to learn it?

That's where we'll go in Part 5 to wind up this shaggy blog story.

I'm grateful to the many savage minds for making room for Rewind and Fast Forward. Our deal was two weeks as a guest blogger and four to five blogs. My assignment was to say what I thought anthropology is today, and I decided to anchor the assignment in the long-ago unexpected shift from a South Indian village to a U.S. drug treatment center. The best review would be if the concepts I've described put words to what looks obvious to an anthropological reader, but words that at the same time look reasonable to anyone, even someone who gets acid reflux whenever they hear someone say "social science." So now here comes Part 5, the last picture show.

As I look at the *Savage Minds* page right before I upload this final blog, it strikes me how many contemporary political issues

animate it at the moment. As a veteran of anthropology in the 60s and 70s and a lifelong anti-war-on-drugs activist, I'm tempted to change course and make some general comments about anthropology, ideology and activism from my experience--the good and the bad--and, more to the point, what the fundamentals I've talked about in these blogs have to do with them. But I think it best if I stay with the original plan and write about the different wings of anthropology and how they all belong on the same bird, at least as far as on the ground professional perspective goes. First, though, a summary of the previous blogs:

After setting up the village/treatment center plot device in the first blog, the second described one part of an anthropological perspective that stayed constant across the change, namely, acquiring communicative competence in the tasks that people do. The third blog added another part, modeling the competence by crafting patterns that showed how something of interest connected up with other things of interest, both inside and outside the task. And the fourth blog added one more part that didn't change, go with the emergent flow rather than forcing what you learn into structures that you started out with, be they professional or personal. Emergence worked across the change, but it also foregrounded a difference between a research setting that was part of traditional anthropology and another that was most decidedly not. In the end, I think these three fundamentals are parts of a perspective that anthropologists use, whatever their specialty, whatever kind of work they do. I stopped with just those three, a common Western structure for discourse, because of *Savage Minds* limits and personal fuel capacity.

As I've mentioned several times, there are still more fundamentals that carried across the transition from village to treatment center. For example, I drafted--but then didn't use--a blog on how we mix universals and particulars in the statements we make. Universals, I think, are where the most important anthropological theory lies, in spite of the fact that we were taught

to focus on differences. And then there's the issue of self-reference, how we consider ourselves part of the "data," or better said, how "data" is a joint construction built over time by us and the people in the task we're interested in. Arguments about "objective" versus "subjective" lose their edge when everyone is a subject. It is an "intersubjective" science. And recently, I've written about abduction and context/meaning questions in the research process that an anthropological perspective initiates, but I've been after "perspective" in these blogs rather than "method" so that got left out as well. You can see more of that in my 2013 book *The Lively Science: Remodeling Human Social Research*, rated G and suitable for birthdays and weddings.

I'd like to end the series by revisiting something I advertised at the beginning and mentioned again here and there, how this version of an anthropological perspective helps dissolve some distinctions that get in the way of 21st century anthropology. Actually, they got in the way of 20th century anthropology quite a bit as well. The simple concept of "task" helps us see why those old battle lines shouldn't matter.

One more rewind, then, back to the village and the treatment center. Both of them were clearly full-scale ethnographies, the first as traditional as they come, the second, weird back then but normal now. But, full-blown academic ethnographic research no longer describes what most anthropologists do today. In fact many—including me since I left the university—do things as anthropologists that are not research in any traditional academic sense at all. Recall the earlier examples of the cancer clinic and the museum.

Here's the tradition: Anthropology used two terms to name what we do and whom we do it with. What we do is "ethnography." That's the research and the book we write. And who we do it with is a "culture." That's the boundary we draw around the human social territory that we mean to generalize to. Both terms register very high on the contentious scale these days—

both inside and outside of anthropology—with good reason, what with the general "qualitative" explosion and the widespread use of "culture" in our blurry global era.

The Indian village was a classic fit with the historical template. Life in an isolated small community asking about, observing and participating in most everything that villagers did over a lengthy period. And the goal, a description of village culture, the assumption being that what I learned generalized, described and explained pretty much everything that the villagers believed and did.

Lexington was an ethnography as well, though different from the classic model. It's clear why the treatment center looked weird to the anthropology of the times, and to me as well when I started. The community wasn't isolated nor was the population stable or small. People were addicts but that's not all that they were, and they came from all over the country. They were in a "normal" context for addicts—a total institution—but not on the street, another important "normal" context in their lives. Still, at its core, it was an ethnography.

But addict "culture?" Don't be ridiculous, said more critics than I can remember. I grounded the claim in the observation that there were some things an addict at Lexington could say about who they were and what they did that most any other addict in the joint would understand, even if they had never met before. On the other hand, most any newly arrived staff member wouldn't know what in the world they were talking about. It was as close to a perfect correlation as any statistician's late night fantasy. What was that difference in task based communicative competence? Why not call it a "cultural" difference?

Nowadays, most anthropologists aren't employed in traditional academic anthropology departments and most--I'm guessing here--do not do prolonged ethnographic work. But in spite of that major difference, the work we all do is shaped by the

same "anthropological perspective," that mysterious phrase that we chanted in the university back in the day but never unpacked in a critical way. That perspective, so goes the argument here, is the "same thing" that threads through my checkered traditional past into my elderly project-oriented present. Anthropology, by this argument, isn't a particular theory or method or kind of data. It's a particular point of view on the human situation with implications for how to learn about it, explain it, and act in it.

The reason I wanted to use "task" as a core concept is that it helps climb out of this maze. It is a simple, easily understood name for a dynamic bounded unit of purposive social action. It can expand or contract in coverage, and the fact that its participants communicate in ways opaque to a newcomer means it is cultural. An anthropological perspective can be applied to a single task or to a massively complicated network of them. In the case of the village, the network was dense and it clustered with a clear boundary. In some of my recent projects, the network is much more diffuse and impossible to bound, a particular task in focus being one node in a lot of different non-overlapping task networks that participants bring to it. Recall the patients in the crowded waiting room at the cancer clinic? Their main task in common—the focus of the project—was the need to get their treatment "cocktail."

And culture? A concept even more contentious and more widely dispersed outside of anthropology than ethnography is. Whether we use terms like "poststructural" and "postcolonial," or use network notions like "global component," or recite the litany of "war, migration, neoliberalism, globalization," we know that calling a specific group and its members *a* culture is like nailing the proverbial jello to the wall. No single culture concept can generalize any person or group like we thought it could with small isolated communities. My old undergraduate teacher Roy D'Andrade supposedly said that studying culture today is like studying snow in the middle of an avalanche. The task concept

helps here as well, because communicative competence implies the background understandings and pragmatic abilities to participate in concert with others with reference to particular tasks. "Task pattern" anchors a partial but relevant culture concept.

The moral of the story? An anthropological perspective can be implemented in many different ways. That, I think, is *the* major difference between the old days and now, because in the old days there was only one way of doing cultural anthropology, based on a traditional academic research model called “ethnography" and a single cohesive and coherent pattern-based conclusion called "culture." But to argue that this single use of the more general perspective is the only possible one is wrong and short-sighted—fossilized “academocentrism" you could call it.

Tasks can also be described according to the kind of *engagement* an anthropologist had with the ones in focus, however narrow or broad that focus might have been. Did they already know about them from prior experience? Did they actually do them? Or did they visit with participants in their task context while *they* did them? Did they gather narratives of those tasks, but in contexts other than the tasks themselves? Or did they access tasks via secondary material, like films, written work, or documents from various archives? Or all of those things, or something else? Same task focus, but different kinds of information about them to challenge and change an outsider’s task communicative competence.

Those are useful questions to ask of any application of an anthropological perspective. What is the task network in focus and what kind of boundary does it have? What was the engagement of the anthropologist with the tasks relevant to a project? The question isn’t the old, “Is this a *real* ethnography?” It’s hard to tell what is anymore, if the old-fashioned model is the standard. The question changes to, what configuration of tasks were focused on and how were they engaged? That’s the information I would want to evaluate an instantiation of an anthropological perspective, be it

a five-year research grant in the Peruvian Andes or a one-week problem-solving project in a clinic. It's also the guideline I learned to use when deciding whether to take on a project or not. How elaborate was the task network and what kinds of engagement were possible? Could I structure an engagement to do the job or not? I had to figure this out on my own. Academic training provided no guidelines. I learned to turn down jobs once I left the classroom for the meeting room.

"Task communicative competence" and "pattern" and "emergence" cover a wide range of applications of an anthropological perspective, from the traditional to the never before imagined. Once I jettisoned the traditional academic model of "ethnography" and "culture" as the *only* legitimate versions of the perspective, I could better understand that early transition from village to treatment center, as well as the way that I have used the perspective from the old days in many projects since then, especially since leaving the university in the mid-1990s.

Even after rounding up all the usual hedges, most of this blog series I'm happy with, at least for now. The part I'm unsure of is, does an anthropological perspective as I've described it here only come with a graduate degree from an anthropology department, now, in 2015? Other academic and professional fields, still growing in number, have developed their own versions. Part of sociology has its own history, as long as anthropology's. Newer subfields of disciplines like Speech Communication and Political Science and Public Health and Business and Design and many more have also joined the parade, some quite a while ago. Traditional concepts like "ethnography" and "culture" are not our exclusive property anymore and anthropological perspective type projects are done under other names.

But then last year I gave an invited talk to an anthropology department. They wanted an outsider's view on how to integrate the academic tradition with applied and practice. I used the metaphor of a skyrocket. Anthropology shot up through time for a

good long while, a century or so, like a skyrocket with a trail of light that stayed fairly well formed and coherent. Then, not so long ago, it exploded out into many lights of different colors. Applied, formerly marginal, moved to the center. Practice appeared and grew dramatically. Anthropology blurred together with other disciplines and professions and popular interests. Who knows what anthropology--or any other historical discipline--"is" in a world like this, especially when it's all about "becoming" something different than it has ever been before rather than "maintaining" a single version of what it used to be.

Here's one thing I do know that I learned from giving that talk. An anthropological perspective, the parts of it I've described in this series of blogs? I learned them by riding--and doing in the village--that hundred year old tradition when the skyrocket was shooting through time with a coherent trail of light. That's where I learned the fundamentals. That much is clear to me. So is the fact that those fundamentals are at the heart of how I work, even when my project badge says things as different as epidemiologist, computer modeler, organizational developer, drug expert, intercultural communicator, qualitative researcher, computational linguist, or any number of other things that I've been called, some of them unprintable. Whatever the name tag says, I'm always using those fundamentals in an instinctive and intuitive way.

Something about the slow cooking of our historically marginal discipline is where those fundamentals marinated and developed their flavor. Perhaps we are like a previously maladapted species whose time has come because of dramatic and sudden changes in the environment. I really believe that, especially based on my self-employed life since the mid 1990s. But I also believe, to continue the biological metaphor, that interbreeding, or mind-melding if you're a Trekkie, is going on at an increasing rate. It throws up massive issues for—and receives resistance from—the 20th century institutional networks of traditional disciplines. It is also, in my view, where the exciting intellectual and practical

action is today.

The problem is, the fundamentals, in my case, came out of a world of knowledge and practice from a long time ago. And they first took shape with an early ethnographic experience that was right out of the old-fashioned model, an Anglo European or American living for an extended period of time in an isolated poor small community that was not in the U.S. or Europe, the research on indigenous people in the U.S. being an exception in terms of location. Does that mean I'm arguing that we have to go back to the way things were when I started out to learn the fundamentals? That the only way to learn them is to learn them like I did? No, that would be ridiculous. Why when I was a boy, you couldn't get a PhD until you'd had at least one life threatening disease ... you know the routine.

I learned the fundamentals in a different world, but they still seem to work in the one I work in today. Younger colleagues and students have learned them in other ways. I base that guess on many conversations with them in recent years, the majority of them not working or aiming to work in traditional academic anthropology departments. It looks to me like teachers are still teaching a perspective in ways that bring those fundamentals out of the past and carry them into the present, some better than others to be sure, and some still living only in the past, but the trend is there as I see it. They're still part of what you learn when you learn anthropology, then and now.

But then another question: Is anthropology the *only* place where you get those fundamentals today? Do they define a contemporary disciplinary boundary? I believe us to be in a post- or trans-disciplinary era, and I've worked with colleagues from all over the map of both town and gown. It's not frequent, but it's not rare either, to find among them people who look at things in terms of the same fundamentals. Morrie Freilich edited a great book a long time ago, *Marginal Natives*, to show how traditional anthropologists' "key informants" were often natural

ethnographers. I think it's fair to say that anthropology has the longest history with the fundamentals I've described and it probably hammers them home with more iterations and a higher variety of materials than anyone else. And, in recent projects, it still surprises me how something out of ANTH101 is reacted to as a novel way of looking at a problem by people without that training.

Maybe the best provisional conclusion is this: The perspective is a valuable lesson from history to be carried into the present in multiple ways, by anyone who gets it, however they got it. Most of the "getting," in this post- or trans-disciplinary day and age, will involve creolization with other perspectives. I experienced some of those blends early on with that shift from the village to the joint. But I also know that recent meetings, especially the applied anthropology gatherings, show a surge of younger anthropologists who are making blends for post-disciplinary work in multiple ways that still include the fundamentals I'm talking about here. I guess I feel, like Roy D'Andrade supposedly said about culture, that I'm trying to figure out snow in the middle of an avalanche here. So what the hell, maybe I'll just shift from Roy to Shawn Colvin and sing about "riding shotgun down the avalanche."

Age gradually overrides most other identity issues and therefore diminishes the number and frequency of existential crises. I know what I'm doing and still enjoy doing it. Whatever it is, it relies on an anthropological perspective as I've described it here. It doesn't matter to me personally anymore what you call it, unless a name helps leverage into a particular historical moment that I want to participate in. After I shifted to Lexington I was asked by colleagues all the time, "Is that really anthropology?" So I quit caring what anthropology "was."

Now though, especially with changes in anthropology and changes in the times and changes in the work I do, I've realized that--damn the early critics, full speed ahead--everything I do in

my professional life is fundamentally anthropological, at least in part, as I've described it here, as I learned it as part of my biography. Writing these blogs made it even more clear and convinced me that a hypothesis--hypothesis? Good lord, what am I thinking?--is warranted that fundamentals like those I've described endure in many different forms, certainly in anthropology, but not only there, and that they currently serve as fuel for change in an increasing number of other places as well.

In the end, I just kept doing the same fundamental thing with its roots in the history of anthropology along the very interesting road that I've been privileged to travel. As the old cliché of my youth goes—an Internet source claims it was first in print in 1848, interestingly enough the year *The Communist Manifesto* was published—"call me anything, just don't call me late for dinner."

It's been a great pleasure and a lot of work writing these blogs. There's much more to talk over and a lot more to do. Many thanks to the particular savage minds who created and now run this thing for inviting me as a guest. As older Nuevomexicanos sometimes say in local Spanish, *ay te watcho*. "I'll see you later." See, in the end I, an outsider, still have to prove I've learned something about local practices. Guess what I majored in?