

Auto-anthropology as an Anthropology of the Individual: A Proposal

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Introduction

This paper argues that “auto-anthropology” can be a viable method for studying the individual anthropologically and that such a study may show a way out through an intellectual labyrinth in which anthropology has been trapped in the post-Writing Culture era (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It’s been almost a quarter century since its publication, yet we still have to ritualistically acknowledge the “Writing Culture Shock” whenever we give papers, as I just did. Let’s get over it!

In particular, I shall propose that we all do “auto-anthropology” of ourselves, that is, tell stories more about how we as individuals live “at home” than about how we as anthropologists do (or fail to do) our jobs in the field. Many reflexive autobiographical accounts of fieldwork situations have been written by anthropologists (Powdermaker 1967; Wax 1971; Rabinow 1977; Okely and Callaway 1992; Hertz 1997; Kim 2002), but they scarcely tell stories about their own ways of living “at home”—what they eat and drink, how they use toilet and bath, what TV they watch, how they lead their family life, how they deal with colleagues at work, what kind of rituals they observe, and so on.

Crucially important in my view is the question: Does being an anthropologist affect the way in which he or she lives “at home.” Do all “American anthropologists” live the “American way of life” just like any other “Americans”? Do they still keep their power dry (Mead 2000[1965])? Margaret Mead was hardly a typical “American” of her time, or was she? In short, does anthropology makes our personal life different? If so, what does that mean? If not, why not?

I shall contend that reflexive story-telling of one’s own everyday life at home allows an anthropologist to rethink “culture” and many other anthropological concepts more clearly and easily than through theoretical and pseudo-philosophical mumbo jumbo.

My Kind of Auto-Anthropology

According to Rapport and Overing, auto-anthropology designates “the notions of an

anthropological study of one's own, one's home and one's self, and explores that murky ground, at once physical, phenomenological, psychological, social and personal, which 'an anthropology at home' gives onto" (Rapport and Overing 2000: 18). I have recently been exploring the "murky ground" myself through reflections on my childhood life as a returnee from America in a not-so-open Japanese city (Numazaki 2013) and through reexamination of my "ethnic" encounter with Japanese Americans in Hawaii (Numazaki 2014).

In my early childhood experience, I certainly did not know the concept of "culture," and my parents or other adults around me—at home or in school—did not use the term, "culture." And yet, I was highly conscious of the things "Japanese" and things "American." My classmates or teachers would notice my "American" behavior and pointed that out by saying I was too "Americanized." I would do the same to my classmates and teachers, and I regarded their strange—in the eyes of a returnee kid—behavior "Japanese." This contrasting of "Japan" with "America" became a habit of mine quite early on.

So, when I finally learned the phrase, "Japanese culture," through history books and other reading, I easily connected the word, "culture," with my habit of contrasting "Japan" with "America" and with all the shocks and emotions that I experienced as a returnee kid. The term, "culture," nicely summarized the problems that I faced in school or elsewhere, yet knowing this word did not solve my emotional disturbance or sense of sorrow that I experienced as a returnee kid.

Ever since I learned it, "culture" has never been a neutral term for me. It is a highly emotionally charged and personally troubling word. I have had a love-hate relationship with the notion of "culture" even before I started to study anthropology and exasperatingly so after I became an anthropologist. I now strongly feel that I have to redefine the concept to suit my life and make peace with it. I shall return to this issue later in my presentation. Suffice it to say here that even such a basic term like "culture" cannot be separated from my own life experience, which is more important for me than any theoretical or philosophical critique of the term.

I was a PhD candidate when I spent a year in Honolulu, Hawaii, as an intern at the East West Center. I went there only because I failed in my grant applications for dissertation research in Taiwan, and I had to find a place to stay and a job for money so that I would

rewrite grant proposals and reapply. But, my encounter with Japanese Americans there raised my “ethnic” consciousness and made me seriously rethink the concept of “ethnicity.” My recent article is an attempt at rethinking my thirty-year-old rethinking.

I won’t go into the details today, but my point is that my current thinking about things ethnic is still grounded in my personal experience in Hawaii, especially the shocks and emotions that I felt then. Again, I cannot read the word, “ethnicity,” without remembering what I experienced in Hawaii. No theory of “ethnicity,” no matter how sophisticated and elegant it might be, would ever satisfy me if it did not “fit” the feelings that I had in Hawaii. If “personal is theoretical” (Okely 1992: 9), “theoretical is personal” as well.

The kind of anthropology I practice is intimately tied to my personal life, and my personal life is anthropologically informed (or contaminated). My anthropological understanding of the concept of “culture” or “ethnicity” is inseparable from my early cross-cultural upbringing or my sojourn in Hawaii. My being a professor at Tohoku University, a late-middle-aged male, a husband and a father to a son, a resident in the city of Sendai, which I regard as my “home,” is inseparable from my knowledge and practice of anthropology.

If this is the case, my personal life, my own self need to be re-examined anthropologically, first of all by myself, to fully contextualize my teaching and research. Needless to say, the link between my life and my endorsement of a particular view of culture or ethnicity may be absolutely irrelevant for others with their own life histories and their own precious as well as painful memories about culture or ethnicity. But, that is precisely the reason why we need to address this issue of personality and individuality of anthropologists (or any social scientists for that matter).

We have talked a lot about how personality and individuality inform and constrain, even taint our fieldwork and thinking/writing. Is it not time to start talking about how fieldwork and thinking/writing inform and constrain our everyday life? Is it not time to take anthropologists as “living creatures” and explore their ways of life “at home,” just as we do with those “others” in the field? It is time for the auto-anthropology of anthropologists. I propose to start telling stories about our personal ways of life.

I am not calling for “native” or “indigenous” anthropology. I am calling for the

anthropology of the individual by the anthropologically informed individual. My kind of auto-anthropology is an exercise in what may be called “double reflexivity”—a reflexive inquiry into the experience of a reflecting subject; an auto-critical re-viewing of the descriptions and interpretations of a describing and interpreting subject; a re-telling of the life stories of a story-teller.

Anthropological training and “the culture-shock of fieldwork—a new bodily becoming via immersion in new habitual practices” (Rapport and Overing 2000: 24) enable us to defamiliarize the familiar, to see the unseen, to question the unquestionable, and occasionally to breach the unbreachable when we are “at home.”

Anthropologists may not be the only people with such capabilities. As my own experience shows, the culture-shock of living abroad and coming back—a new bodily becoming via re-immersion in once-familiar-but-now-strange habitual practices after acquiring alien-yet-comfortable habitual practices—often force people to defamiliarize the familiar, to see the unseen, to question the unquestionable, and inadvertently to breach the unbreachable to the annoyance and dismay of their fellows “at home.”

Anthropologist or not, a person exposed to and immersed in different habitual practices for a long enough time will never be able to take his or her “home culture” for granted. Uprooted natives cannot be re-rooted as true natives again. They cannot help being conscious of their habits as habits, customs as customs.

These culture-conscious people inescapably and inevitably engage in comparative cultural reflections in their daily living, which is not so different from auto-anthropology. In this age of globalization and transnationalism, lay talks abound on my culture and your culture, on our culture and their culture. They are not talking about exotic others in a faraway place. They are talking about their spouses and relatives, neighbors and workmates. They are talking about today’s lunch and tomorrow’s dinner. They are talking about their everyday life and their talks involve cultural reflexivity—if in a somewhat unsystematic and non-theoretical manner.

We anthropologists are professionally culture-conscious people, aren’t we? We are trained to appreciate both radical and subtle differences, and articulate them in a systematic and theoretical manner, aren’t we? Should we not exercise our cultural reflexivity on our

own lives? Should we not all engage in auto-anthropology in order to offer professional talks on my culture and your culture, on our culture and their culture?

Reflexive Imperative and Individuality

I do not mean we go public and become pundits and critics “at home.” What I would like to propose is that using ourselves as “samples” of culturally reflexive creatures exercising their reflexivity in everyday life and doubly reflexively describe and interpret our culturally reflexive daily living in a systematic and theoretical manner the best we can.

In so doing, we must treat those individuals intruding into our daily lives also as culturally reflexive creatures exercising their reflexivity in their own lives and in their interaction with us, for “reflexivity is ... a universal part of human consciousness, a means and a practice by which people everywhere come to look askance at the particular socio-cultural milieu and languages in which their self-expressions find overt form” (Rapport and Overing 2000: 26). All social actors are reflexive agents engaged in hermeneutics and social theorizing (Giddens 1984, 1993). We now live in a world where reflexivity is an “imperative” (Archer 2012).

This is easier said than done. I have to confess that I do not know of any solid anthropological methodology that allows us to tackle reflexivities in action and interaction. I wonder if Paul Radin (1999[1926])’s *Crashing Thunder* or Oscar Lewis (2011[1961])’s *The Children of Sánchez* might serve as exemplars. What is lacking in their writings, however, is reflexive discussion and placement of the anthropologist-author in their texts. That will not do in this post-Writing Culture era. Nevertheless, their story-telling is superbly done.

Both Radin and Lewis recognized the importance of individuality. That is the reason, I believe, why they chose “autobiography” as a form of presentation. More recently, Nigel Rapport (2012)’s *Anyone* presents an autobiographical account to demonstrate “a real presence” of a cosmopolitan subject. Rapport also stresses “the intrinsic and irreducible individuality of human embodiment” (Rapport 2012: 4) and argues that “[n]othing has greater value than a human individual because he or she is a ‘perfect’ embodiment of the human whole” (Rapport 2012: 5).

How does the individual, situated in a particular socio-cultural milieu in a particular

time and space, embody and express universal humanity? How do I do that? Have I really done that? Can I know if and how I have done that? Can I tell if and how I have done that? These are the questions that I would like to address in my auto-anthropological project. Auto-anthropology as I envision it describes how “Anyone” in Rapport’s argument becomes “someone”—unique and different yet ordinary and similar to other individuals—and explores the meaning and significance of that “someone-ness.”

Am I overly narcissistic? Maybe I am, but why not? It’s my own life and I want to understand its meaning for me. Is it not the whole purpose of anthropology to understand the meaning of everyone’s life? If so, that includes me. Moreover, I am not only interested in my own life but in everyone else’s life, too. I want to tell who I am and how I became who I am, but I also want to listen to your story about who you are and how you became who you are. It is my contention that auto-anthropology is a viable method for knowing who you are and for telling who you are to those who are interested in who you are.

If “in contradistinction to a traditional anthropological view of the individual self as a socio-cultural construction ... [i]ndividuality is ubiquitous, and it is upon their consciousness of self that a person’s consciousness of things socio-cultural is built” (Rapport and Overing 2000: 27), then auto-anthropology by and of anthropologists will illuminate how things socio-cultural—both of others and of themselves—emerge in the consciousness of an anthropologist and thereby provide an existential and phenomenological basis for thinking and rethinking anthropological concepts and theories.

Back to “Capabilities and Habits”

Finally, I would like to tackle the concept of “culture.” As I said earlier, my personal life is entangled with the lay and anthropological notions of “culture.” The term is emotionally charged in my experience. I therefore cannot so easily say “adieu, culture” (Trouillot 2002).

Furthermore, I do not think that we should say goodbye to the concept of “culture” for the very simple reason that the term is alive and well in the world around us, lay talks on culture abound, and the term is used and abused by politicians and policy makers. Can we deal with such issues as family and marriage, gender and sexuality, racism and xenophobia,

whaling and horse meat, without mentioning the word, “culture”? If not, shouldn’t we anthropologists who have claimed to be the specialists of cultures—and I have not yet heard that we officially discarded this claim—a duty to clarify the confusions surrounding the term, “culture”?

I therefore strongly believe that “an old duty remains”—a duty to counter the popular and political misuse of the term by offering more sensible anthropological redefinition and reinterpretation.

My suggestion is to go back to the definition of culture in the 1930s, that is the “capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Lowie 1934: 3). I shall however modify it as follows: capabilities and habits acquired by the individual as a member of local, national, and global societies.

The phrase, “capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,” of course is included in the famous definition of “culture, or civilization” by Edward B. Tylor (2010[1871]: 1). Robert Lowie focused his attention on this part of Tylor’s definition first in his *Culture and Ethnology* (Lowie 1917). Ruth Benedict stated in 1929 that “culture is that complex whole which includes all the habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Benedict 1931[1929]: 806). She uses the term, “habits,” quite extensively in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, a book that focuses and analyzes the “trivial habits in daily living” (Benedict 2005[1946]: 10) of the Japanese. Finally, Papa Franz wrote in 1930 that “[c]ulture embraces all the manifestations of social habits of a community, the reactions of individuals as affected by the habits of the group in which he lives” (Boas 1930: 79). It therefore seems that there has been a consensus in American Anthropology to view culture as “capabilities and habits” possessed by a group. In fact, the role of habits in society was widely discussed in social sciences in the early part of the 20th century (Camic 1986). John Dewey, who influence both Boas and Benedict, also discussed the role of habits extensively (Dewey 2007[1922]).

I boldly (or stupidly) propose that we revive this classic definition of culture as “capabilities and habits.” Laugh at me as you will, but I do find the focus on “trivial habits of daily living” very useful in doing auto-anthropology myself (Numazaki 2013, 2014).

For one thing, “capabilities and habits” are observable and recordable. I can reflect

upon my capabilities and habits and remember when and how I acquired them where as a member of what group. For another, it is the difference in “capabilities and habits” that is the focus in lay discussion of culture. I can examine how my capabilities and habits differ from those of other individuals around me and explore the implications and consequences of the difference. By focusing on the similarities and differences in capabilities and habits, I can relate my auto-anthropology to the concerns of lay people.

Let me give you a concrete example. In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Benedict contrasts Japanese habits of order and hierarchy with American habits of freedom and equality. One day at a supermarket in Sendai, Japan, I suddenly realized that the way the shop clerk put my purchases into a plastic bag revealed her habit of order and hierarchy. She carefully sort out heavy things from light ones, big from small, hard from fragile and neatly and orderly stacked them in my bag—heavy, big, hard ones at the bottom, light, small, fragile ones at the top. Beautiful hierarchy there! I remembered at the same time how a shop clerk at American supermarket put stuff in a plastic bag. Surely she threw everything freely and equally into a bag regardless of weight, shape or fragility! Now that’s democracy, isn’t it?

I do insist on modifying the classic concept of culture by shifting our focus from society to individual. Individuals differ in their capabilities and habits even in a fairly homogeneous society let alone in multicultural or cosmopolitan societies. There are generational differences, too, as we all know how easily students handle their smart phones, which baffle us elders so much.

In an era when many people move from one locale to another, and from one nation to another, life trajectories vary tremendously from one individual to another. No capability or habit is tied to one place or to one group. Cultures are de-territorialized, de-nationalized, and de-ethnicized. Individuals acquire different capabilities and habits through their life course and combine them into their “personal culture” if you will.

By emphasizing the individuality of capabilities and habits, and thereby admitting the personal nature of culture, we might be able to make it understandable to lay people and rescue it from the hands of politicians and pundits who tend to reify culture as a possession of their favorite collectivity.

By emphasizing the universal capacity for “any” capability and habit, and thereby admitting the unity of humanity in wide diversity of capabilities and habits, we may be able to reaffirm our commonality as “Anyone” and our individuality as “someone” at the same time.

Let’s bring “culture” back into anthropology. Say “welcome back, culture” since our old duty remains.

Concluding Remarks

I am not denying the value of conventional ethnography written by outsider-anthropologists. I do contend, however, that the repeated calls for reflexivity in ethnography, first issued at around 1968 and then since 1986, and the recognition of the significance of individuality push us toward auto-anthropology of individual anthropologists as both a prerequisite and supplement for ethnographies of “the Other.”

I further contend that auto-anthropology of anthropologists has a genuine contribution to make for the anthropology of individual in particular and for anthropology in general by bringing reflexivity and individuality into concrete descriptions and interpretations of “culture” that capabilities and habits acquired by the individual as a member of local, national, and global societies.

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