**Moving Psychological Anthropologies [ENPA Roundtable]**

15 August 2018, 9:00-10:45

*Location*: SO-E487 (Sodra Huset bld division E, 4th floor) OR Rm 26

Stockholm University, Aula Magna

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Whenever I open the latest issue of *Ethos*, the flagship journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology, it contains several fascinating articles that I would like to discuss with my colleagues. Unfortunately, none of them is interested in psychological anthropology, so I used to turn to my wife, a colonial historian. I stopped doing this when I realized that her reception vacillated between enthusiasm and tedium. Fortunately, I found two new victims: two professors of psychology. One of them specialized in the cross-cultural variations of PTSD and the other in parenting and antisocial behavior. I copied the articles that might be of interest to them, and eagerly awaited our discussion over a cup of coffee. They were generous and willing interlocutors but I always sensed some puzzlement in their reactions. Yet, somehow I seemed to have raised their interest because when they retired some years ago, each of them invited me to give a presentation at their farewell symposia in the university’s auditorium to an audience of hundreds of psychologists. I was there for the cross-cultural touch, I think. The reactions at the reception were always kind, and some even remarked that more anthropologists should make an effort to share their cross-cultural knowledge with psychology.

Really? As if anthropologists had not tried so, many times before. Didn’t Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict try? Didn’t Gregory Bateson, Geoffrey Gorer, Mel Spiro, Vincent Crapanzano and Nancy Scheper-Hughes try? Their insights were only received when they would fit the psychological concepts, models and theories already in place.

Where to go from here?

I think that we should stay where we are, but that now and then we should make forays into the field of psychology on their terms. We should definitely continue to, as it says in this roundtable’s background text: “illuminate historically and socio-culturally situated concepts of self, personhood and what it means to be human,” but we should also pro-actively reach out to psychology by adopting some of their discourse and doing some anthropological proselytizing. In this way, we can engage in an interdisciplinary discussion on psychology’s own turf.

Of course, as you can imagine, I wouldn’t make this suggestion without having tried it myself. A number of years ago I was trying to understand why the national mourning of the dead and disappeared in Chile and Argentina was so different. Comparisons are always tricky in anthropology because of our ethnographic approach to local realities, and our tendency to emphasize the complexity of social worlds and practices rather than to look for ways to simplify matters by separating the chaff from the wheat, as is common in psychology. Nevertheless, Chile and Argentina had both experienced guerrilla insurgencies, and military dictatorships that disappeared and assassinated tens of thousands of people. And when the dictatorships fell from power, the two countries had truth commissions, amnesty laws, reparation measures, and commemorations. These similarities convinced me that I could pull off a comparison between the two countries about national mourning.

Now, if the two countries had comparable pasts, then what could explain the fact that Argentina had a noted emphasis on remembrance and retributive justice, while in Chile there was a pursuit of reconciliation and restorative justice? To complicate matters even further, there were also periods in Argentina with amnesties and policies directed at social peace, while in Chile there were periods in which perpetrators were brought to court for their crimes against humanity. It took me quite some time to write up the many aspects of the comparison but, once done, I still couldn’t make sense of it. I went to the anthropology of death literature but it only made me more uncertain about the validity of my comparison. As an American anthropologist and close friend told me: “Tony, it simply can’t be done.”

I was about to give up, when in my periodic browsing of psychology journals I ran into a model of mourning that seemed promising. Surprisingly, I discovered that this so-called Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement or DPM was in fact developed by two of my colleagues from the psychology department. This model hypothesizes that bereaved persons do not only search for the meaning of their losses but also try to make sense of their shattered lives through an oscillation between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping processes. In other words, people who are mourning alternate periods in which they are emotionally focused on the lost person with periods in which they try to pick up the pieces and lead a meaningful life without the presence of the deceased loved one. Immediately, things fell into place.

I adapted the model of oscillatory mourning designed for intrapersonal and interpersonal coping processes to the social and national level, and stayed clear from its therapeutic implications. Done! I sent the ms. to the journal *Death Studies*, and waited for the reviews. After six months, I finally received the reviews. They had been written by two psychologists who were very positive about the paper but… it needed ‘major revisions.’ What was the nature of this revision? Well, they wanted me to significantly expand the theoretical model and reduce the ethnographic data to a few tables. I was very surprised: basically they wanted me to get rid of what I regarded as the empirical proof of my analysis, and instead show the “universalizing tendencies” of my anthropological model. Although disappointed, upset and reticent—some of the emotional phases I went through—I did what was asked of me, and the article was subsequently published.

I came away from this experience with three lessons, which might be debated at this roundtable: First of all, ethnographic data are discipline-specific evidence. They may be interesting tidbits for psychologists but don’t have any general epistemic value. If we want to enter into a conversation with psychologists then we should let go of our overemphasis on ethnography. Secondly, we should be just as picky as psychologists, and adopt only those psychological concepts, models and theories that are suitable for our anthropological purposes. Finally, we should engage in serious self-critique, and ask ourselves why other disciplines listen so seldom to anthropologists. We should rethink our knee-jerk rejection of cross-cultural comparison and generalization, and search for ways to satisfy our need for local ethnographic detail while trying to fit those details into a larger model that will be inviting for psychologists.