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Think Piece: Anthropological Gossip: On a Bad Habit in Our Discipline

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Abstract:

Anthropological gossip, that is, writing mainly for an anthropological audience while criticising other fields, undermines the discipline's relevance within academia and beyond. To realise the discipline's critical potential, this piece argues, anthropologists must speak more actively across disciplines.

Key words: public anthropology; engaged anthropology; interdisciplinary communication; early childhood intervention; international development

As social and cultural anthropologists, we are intimately familiar with gossip – both as a research subject and as a practice. We often encounter it among the people we study, and it offers valuable insights into everyday micro-politics (Besnier 2009). But gossip is also relevant as an anthropological practice. Here, I do not mean the obvious fact that informal conversations among anthropologists often consist of gossip about colleagues but rather gossip in our professional communication, especially our writing.

This form of gossip, which I refer to as *academic gossip* or, more specifically, *anthropological gossip*, is characterised by the sharing of critiques of non-anthropological research and theory primarily with fellow anthropologists rather than speaking to those being critiqued directly. Like everyday gossip, academic gossip refers to two audiences at once. On the semantic level, anthropological gossip refers critically to an external audience, such as scholars from other disciplines. On the performative level, however, this critique is communicated internally to other anthropologists, scholars from closely related disciplines, or like-minded lay people. In short, by *academic gossip* I mean writings that primarily speak to colleagues within one's own field while their critical thrust is directed at audiences from other fields.

Although everyday gossip is often associated with spreading rumours, I do not wish to carry this connotation over into academic gossip. Academic gossip may indeed facilitate the circulation of flawed critique, since communication among like-minded people reduces the chances of objections from those being criticised. Yet it can also consist of well-founded critique, and this is the scenario that prompts me to think with the notion of academic gossip: although our discipline generates abundant, well-grounded, and highly relevant critical insights, these too often fail to reach the scholarly or practical fields in which they could make a real difference. Hence, I wish to draw attention to the fact that merely publishing critique of other scientific

fields in anthropological formats does not automatically constitute a critical practice but may amount to academic gossip. Given that the social world we engage with through our publications is just as complex as the social worlds we study, it is unrealistic to expect that our critical findings, presented in a unique anthropological style, will automatically reach those fields we wish to criticise. Therefore, genuine critique requires actively addressing the audiences to whom it is directed. In what follows, I reflect on why academic gossip is common in anthropology, why I regard it as a bad habit, and how it might be transformed into more effective modes of critique.

Why academic gossip is common in anthropology

Although academic gossip exists across disciplines, it may be particularly common in anthropology owing to the interplay of two features that are especially pronounced in our field. On the one hand, anthropology has a strong tradition of being critical of knowledge produced by other disciplines. On the other hand, it places particular emphasis on a distinctive writing style, perhaps best exemplified by the ethnography as a peculiar genre of the discipline. Accordingly, anthropology generates abundant external critique that circulates within the anthropological realm, while often failing to reach those who are the actual targets of the critique.

The first constitutive feature of anthropological gossip, the critical stance of anthropology towards the methods, findings, and theories of other fields, is a central purpose of anthropology and a key source of its *raison d'être* as a discipline. Most anthropological subfields, such as economic anthropology, medical anthropology, and psychological anthropology, engage with subject areas dominated by specialised disciplines like economics, the medical sciences, and the psychological sciences. These hegemonic disciplines tend to exhibit Eurocentric biases, as their paradigmatic research continues to be conducted mostly in Euro-American settings (for psychology, see for example Thalmayer et al. 2021). By studying economic, medical, or psychological processes among people or in settings marginalised or entirely overlooked in dominant research, anthropology is positioned to identify such biases and to contribute to a more globally representative social science. As such, anthropology is fundamentally critical of other disciplines.

Despite its critical aspirations, anthropology does not have a strong tradition of engaging directly with other, more dominant disciplines. Exceptions notwithstanding, we write most of the time for other anthropologists or scholars from closely related fields. This is not necessarily an intentional act or failure by individual anthropologists but results in large part from a pronounced disciplinary culture of thinking and writing. This culture is often defined in distinction to neighbouring disciplines, especially the more 'positivistic' sciences that are typically the targets of critique. For example,

the discipline's appreciation of nuance may be expressed through particularly 'entangled' language, positioned in contrast to the more 'reductionist' modes of other disciplines.

By following such an anthropological writing culture, relying on assumptions or concepts familiar and credible within our field but not necessarily beyond it, and employing anthropological genres such as the ethnography, we are unwittingly addressing fellow anthropologists or those who share our intellectual culture. To speak primarily to one's own discipline is neither inherently problematic nor unique to anthropology. Only when this is combined with a critical focus on the findings of other disciplines, an endeavour that is in itself justifiable and indeed an important purpose of anthropology, does it turn into academic gossip.

In a review of three ethnographies about the Anthropocene and its destructive consequences, Alf Hornborg (2017) provides compelling examples of the gap between criticising other fields and speaking primarily to one's own peers, a practice he titles 'dithering while the planet burns'. The three ethnographies he reviews are written in such a stylised manner that 'the growth enthusiasts and ecomodernists who are promoting this [destructive] civilisation are unlikely to be the least perturbed' (Hornborg 2017: 67). While stylised anthropological writing can successfully engage a large, like-minded audience, it may actively alienate those who are supposed to learn from the critique and take action in response.

I do not deny that, time and again, anthropologists have called for, attempted to, and succeeded in reaching out and affecting those they criticise. However, repeated calls for an *engaged* or *public anthropology* (for example, Borofsky 2018; Low and Merry 2010) confirm rather than contradict a persistent practice of internal communication – otherwise such calls would not be necessary. Moreover, with anthropological gossip I do not wish simply to issue yet another call for public anthropology. Rather, I aim to highlight the need to speak to the specific audiences to whom critique is primarily directed. This is not necessarily a general public beyond academia, since many of the critical findings our discipline produces concern most directly the knowledge claims of other academic fields.

Why excessive anthropological gossip is a bad habit

To further illustrate the downside of academic gossip, I draw on my own engagement as an anthropologist with Early Childhood Development (ECD) interventions in the Global South, which has led me to reflect on this habit and how to overcome it. Global ECD is a booming area of international development and global health that seeks to promote economic growth by optimising individual development (Scheidecker et al. 2023). It assumes that poverty is intergenerationally transmitted through sub-optimal cognitive

and socio-emotional development in early childhood. By changing caregiving practices to align with Western middle-class norms, ECD interventions seek to improve early development and, in turn, enhance school performance and adult productivity. Broad implementation is promised to create a 'break-through generation' of fully developed, well-adjusted, and highly productive individuals who lift themselves and their societies out of poverty. Crucially, the field of global ECD legitimises the idea that inequality stems from brain deficits among the disadvantaged, as illustrated, for instance, in Save the Children's Building Brains programme (De Castro 2023). Increasingly, portable neuroimaging is used to demonstrate such deficits in the Global South (Lloyd-Fox et al. 2024) – not so different, in principle, from the skull measurements of earlier times.

Anthropological research is virtually absent from the evidence base that informs ECD interventions (Scheidecker et al. 2023, 2024). This is not because anthropology lacks relevant research. For many decades, the anthropology of childhood and related fields have produced abundant ethnographic studies around the world on child-rearing, socialisation, and developmental pathways (for example, Lancy 2022; Keller 2022). This research is highly relevant for global ECD: it offers concrete insights into many of the very communities in which ECD programmes operate and contradicts central assumptions of the field, especially that deviations from Western middle-class norms in child-rearing, development, and brain images represent deficits by default (Scheidecker et al. 2022, 2025). Hence, anthropology has produced abundant research on childhood that is in theory highly relevant to ECD but remains de facto irrelevant.

This is the case even though the anthropology of childhood is one of the more interdisciplinary subfields of anthropology, marked by close collaborations with cultural psychology and other disciplines. Nevertheless, it has largely failed to realise its critical potential in relation to an applied field like global ECD. This example highlights that academic gossip is usually neither a deliberate or malicious act nor merely a matter of self-reference. Rather, it is a pattern that emerges and persists like a habit, often unnoticed, unless conscious efforts are made to overcome it. It is a bad habit because it prevents anthropology from fully realising its critical potential, in the case of ECD, to effectively question scientifically legitimised and widely disseminated claims about brain deficits in the Global South, to counter potentially harmful and even colonial interventions, and to contribute to more meaningful forms of support for families.

From anthropological gossip to more effective critique

A straightforward way to avoid excessive academic gossip and to realise anthropology's critical potential is to speak directly to those whom our critiques

concern. There are many possible strategies to do so. One approach I have pursued along with colleagues is to publish in the major outlets of the fields we critique. In the case of global ECD, this means medical journals like *The Lancet* (for example, Scheidecker et al. 2022, 2025). While these venues may not accommodate original ethnographic articles because of their medical methodological standards, they often offer formats such as correspondence, commentaries, or viewpoints suitable for interdisciplinary exchange. Anthropologists have rarely made use of these opportunities (but see, for example, Krugman 2024; Lachman et al. 2021).

Publishing in the journals of those we critique helps overcome academic gossip in several ways. First, it makes the critique harder to ignore, as it appears in the very forums where the criticised claims are made and is directly linked to them. In the case of correspondences or commentaries, the editors usually invite the authors of the criticised article to reply. Second, the critique gains credibility in the eyes of those we critique when published in journals they respect. Third, to be accepted, anthropologists must make their arguments specific and comprehensible to that audience. While this may result in critiques that are less general (or sweeping) than those typically found in anthropological journals, it increases the chance of having an impact.

However, the main point is not whether a particular strategy works in every case but whether we as anthropologists take on the task to systematically speak to the relevant audiences. If we do so, suitable practices and strategies will emerge. As anthropologists, in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, we are already trained to acquire and adapt to various forms of communication. We could apply those same skills to our communication within a diverse academic landscape.

For this to happen, it is crucial to change the incentive structures that arguably promote anthropological gossip. As long as single-authored ethnographies and articles in anthropological journals – written in a distinct disciplinary style – remain the gold standard for measuring success and distributing recognition, anthropologists will be inclined to package their critical findings in ways that appeal primarily to colleagues rather than to those who could act on them. Under such exclusive standards, anthropologists who adapt their writing style and publication strategies to reach those for whom their findings are directly relevant risk not only backlash from those they criticise instead of approval from those who already share their perspective but may even undermine their recognition as proper anthropologists among colleagues.

To counter excessive anthropological gossip and foster a more effective critical practice, those who are in the position to define success in anthropology, especially the criteria for allocating jobs, promotions, and funding, could broaden and diversify these criteria of recognition. Academic performance should not be measured solely by traditional anthropological publica-

tions but also by serious efforts to speak to relevant audiences, if necessary across disciplinary boundaries.

Such efforts should not be treated as merely ‘nice to have’ but as integral to a discipline that seeks to realise its potential relevance within broader academia and upholds the fundamental scientific principle of critical scrutiny. Merely voicing critical perspectives about a theory or findings from, say, economics or psychology within an anthropological arena does not yet constitute proper critical scrutiny; it risks turning into academic gossip. Genuine critique requires conveying points of contention to ‘the other side’ and thus enabling academic exchange, learning, and action. While some may fear that engaging with other disciplines could dilute anthropology, I believe the opposite: it is precisely through such engagement that anthropology can underline its relevance within the social and medical sciences and demonstrate that it is needed.

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