

The Anthropology of Tradition and Transition

Noel Caméron¹, Ivor Janković² and Saša Missoni²

¹ Centre for Global Health and Human Development, School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough, UK

² Institute for Anthropological Research, Zagreb, Croatia

Introduction

Whilst it is widely accepted that the process of national transition from a »developing« to a »developed« status is assessed against economic indicators, it is also recognized that the process of transition is driven by a variety of demographic, social, political, cultural, and biological changes that both lead to and follow from economic transition. Anthropologists have traditionally sought to understand transition through examining cultural, social, or biological changes in, for example, the organization of society or in changes in human morphological variation. It was the aim of the collection of papers presented here to explore transition in the light of the empirical evidence from traditional, transitional and industrial societies that provide new insights into traditional anthropological theory regarding social, biological, and behavioral outcomes that result from »development«. In so doing the relationship between economic and demographic indicators of the level of transition and anthropological outcomes that reflect associated changes in social organization, behavior and morphology were explored. This workshop brought together a group of researchers representing social, cultural and biological anthropology in addition to economists, demographers and social scientists to review the evidence for transition in different national and international contexts and discuss and debate the critical issues in studying transition in anthropological terms. The different research fields, perspectives and backgrounds of our participants offered an innovative interdisciplinary approach to the topic and issues for discussion. The scientists are undertaking research in Bangladesh, Croatia, Ethiopia, Germany, Russia, Samoa, South Africa, and the USA dealing with topics relating to economic, demographic, social, cultural, behavioral, nutritional and epidemiological transition in addition to the underlying mechanism of epigenetics. This series of papers thus represents a unique collection of diverse approaches to societal transition in the 21st century.

Background

Socio-political and economic transitions at national levels are perhaps the most dramatic global changes in societies at the beginning of the 21st century. Whilst usually assessed using economic (e.g. GDP), demographic (e.g. birth rate and mortality) and epidemiological (e.g. prevalence of communicable vs. non-communicable diseases) measures, the outcomes of transition can also be seen in social, cultural, and biological changes. These changes have a direct influence on the way in which societies view themselves and their structure, value systems, and traditional modes of behavior. They are thus the focus of anthropological theory and research which seeks to understand society. Here we use family structure, economic organization, and epidemiological profile as examples of responses to transition.

Family structure

The process of economic and social transition has had profound effects on traditional family structures and kinship practices^{1,2}. In traditional societies where human labor was a source of strength to the family, more children were preferred³. In addition, the extended family offered social security, while coping with everyday problems and challenges such as childcare, illness, emotional support, and unemployment. Transition and industrialization, and in Eastern Europe the development of capitalism, have changed family economic dynamics most notably through the reduction in the childrens' contribution to capital. Family structure has changed from extended to nuclear, that can quickly adjust to changes in society and requires fewer resources. However, while some anthropologists and sociologists argue that the modern nuclear family is a product of industrialization, others suggest that the causality is reversed, i.e. that industrialization was so effective in northwestern Europe specifically because of the pre-existence of the nuclear family. The reduction in family size was also an inevita-

ble outcome of declining fertility rates, increasing age at marriage and increasing age at first birth in most of the countries in the world⁴. One of the main subjects for anthropological debate is in understanding which factors are most important in explaining the shift from extended to nuclear family, and if there are any methods for predicting the impact of development on family dynamics.

Economic organization

An important cultural change experienced by transitional societies is the shift to western values embodied in open market economies and democratization, and in Eastern Europe the transition from communism to capitalism⁵. In Central and Eastern Europe and the Russian Federation GDP dropped severely, many state-owned enterprises collapsed, several million workers lost their jobs, the paternalistic system of social protection was, to a large extent, dismantled, and, as a result, poverty rates, unemployment and income inequality dramatically increased with a large proportion of the population now living below the poverty threshold⁶. Dramatic changes also occurred in the labor structure, primarily involving a dismissal of workers in numerous state owned enterprises and increase in the number of unemployed, increase in employment in the private sector due to the privatization of the central planned economy, a drastic decrease of people working in the agricultural and industrial sector and the emergence of a new managerial elite and a new middle class⁷. The prevailing values of the eastern bloc countries (security, conformity, tradition), differed significantly from those in the west (ambition, individualism, self-realization) and while some countries were able to stabilize their economies and now appear set on the course toward rapid growth (Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, BRICSA countries), others experienced much more severe and protracted output declines and their prospects for rapid recovery are still doubtful⁸. When analyzing the transitional success of developing countries, the diversity of their transformation paths is a result of differences in civic and social institutions, reflecting different historical legacies, political trajectories, and religious and cultural traditions that have to be taken into consideration⁹ and anthropology has an important role in understanding these dynamics.

Epidemiologic profile

Documented secular trends in greater size and earlier puberty and important public health issues such as child welfare, social and domestic violence, teenage pregnancy etc. accompany the epidemiological transition and increases in non-communicable diseases (obesity, Type II diabetes) that are related to changes in social capital^{10–12}. Generally, the more social capital a society has, the better are its public health measures and the role of anthropology in this aspect should be to raise public awareness of this important issue¹³. Substantial transitional changes have also been identified in dietary patterns and habitual physical activity as traditional diets are replaced with »western« diets^{14–16}. The global epidemic of obesity (espe-

cially child obesity) calls for attention and its causes must be viewed as environmental rather than personal or genetic¹⁷. Anthropology has a key role to play in understanding the social dynamics that make such high-risk behaviors acceptable¹⁸.

Outcomes of the Workshop

The workshop was designed around the core components common to transitioning societies that display dramatic changes in economic, demographic, social, cultural, behavioral, nutritional and epidemiologic characteristics. Wide ranging discussion on social and economic transition in BRICSA nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) highlighted the complexity of factors contributing towards social and economic status (SES) at individual, family, community and national levels (Griffiths) and the need for longitudinal data on SES to monitor change across the life history from childhood through to old age. Within the context of South Asia the need for inclusive development and awareness of the importance of »the world of the third« (Chakrabarti, pp 1089–1099) were central to understanding transition. The demographic changes in rapidly transitioning Eastern European societies characterized by the movement of the population into urban areas and declining rural populations highlighted the need to face the reality of demographic transition (Grigulevich, pp 1101–1108). Economic, demographic and social transition carry concerns for the way in which debates over human rights are used as political tools and the need for a moral and ethical stance anthropologists who should be acquainting themselves with these issues (Špoljar-Vržina, pp 1109–1118). The concept of comparative nostalgias was relatively new to the biological and anthropological approach to transition yet its elucidation and discussion is both fruitful and stimulating within the context of transition (Hann pp 1119–1128). The collective nostalgia for a previous pre-transition society and the reality of the present in contrast to the past are powerful and sometimes opposing viewpoints. Within industrialized nations the plight of marginalized groups (e.g. Native and First-Nation Americans) faced with the need for federal governments to support their health and wellbeing through effective legislation regarding industrial pollution were highlighted in the Akwasasne nation of North America (Schell, pp 1129–1134). The theme of concern for our environment as a resource allowing transition to proceed highlighted the need for environmental protection and the realization of the intimate and precarious association we have with the air that we breathe, the water we drink, and the land on which we walk (Rudnev, pp 1135–1138). The globalization of food availability (Missoni, pp 1139–1142) and the dynamics of how our social and economic situation interacts with and allows us to control our relationship with food, alcohol, and tobacco (Rizov, pp 1143–1154) lie at the core of behavioral and nutritional transition. Both aspects of change are seen as positive and negative influences on the wellbeing of transitional societies and both are recognized as un-

derlying factors in epidemiological transition. The reality of the difficulties in sustaining the epidemiological transition in the least developed countries (Mascie-Taylor, pp 1155–1159), and the fact that interventions can have unexpected consequences (Gibson) prompts wide ranging consideration of the efficacy of intervention that needs to be tailored to the specific society and its behavioral characteristics. Finally the current focus on epigenetic forces and how they operate across generations to affect susceptibility to non-communicable diseases is exemplified in both industrialized and transitional societies of the USA

(Demerath, pp 1161–1168) and Samoa (McGarvey, pp 1169– 1173).

The wealth of expertise and experience evident in the following presentations highlights the breadth of understanding that was brought to bear on this consideration of the relationship between tradition and transition. Answers were by no means always forthcoming but questions that need to be answered were repeatedly highlighted prompting the continued search for a rational understanding of our many and varied societies and how they deal with change.

REFERENCES

1. GIBSON M, MACE R, *PLoS Medicine* 3(4) (2006) e87. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.0030087. — 2. DESSEN MA, TORRES CV, 2002. Family and Socialization Factors in Brazil: An Overview. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, Unit 6. Available from: URL: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/orpc/vol6/iss3/2>. — 3. DE SILVA W, *Asia-Pacific Population Journal*, 20(2) (2005) 13. — 4. DE SILVA W, Indralal. 2004. Family Transition in South Asia: Determinants and Implications. Available from: URL: <http://paa2005.princeton.edu/download.aspx?submissionId=50414>. — 5. HANN C, HART K, *Economic Anthropology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011). — 6. RIZOV M, SWINNEN JF, 2004. Human Capital, Market Imperfections, and Labor Reallocation in Transition. Available from: URL: https://www.econ.kuleuven.be/prg/papers/F_labor5.pdf. — 7. CERAMI A, *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, 9(1) (2009). — 8. BECKER C, PALTSEV SV, *World Development*, 32(11) (2004) 1849. DOI: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.06.0094. — 9. EKIERT G, FOA R, *Civil Society Weakness in Post-Communist Europe: A Preliminary Assessment* (Carlo Alberto Notebooks: University of Harvard. No. 198, 2008). — 10. SCHELL LM, GALLO MV, RAVENSCROFT J, *Ann Hum Biol*, 36(5) (2009) 459. DOI: 10.1080/03014460903067159. — 11. CROSBY RA, HOLTGRAVE DR, *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38 (2006) 556. DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.05.031. — 12. GOLD R, KENNEDY BP, CONNELL F, KAWACHI I, *Health & Place* 8(2) (2002) 77. — 13. ŠPOLJAR-VRŽINA SM, RUDAN P 2009. Medical Anthropology of the 21st Century: Between Local/Global Health Myths and Neoliberal Devastation of Global Health, IUAES Commission on Medical Anthropology and Epidemiology. In *Anthropology Now. Essays by the Scientific Commission of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences (IUAES)*. NAS PM, ZHANG J (Eds) Pp. 179-204. Kunming, China: Intellectual Property Publishing House China.2. — 14. DEKA R, NARANČIĆ SMOLEJ N, XIP H, TUREK S, CUBRILO-TUREK M, VRHOVSKI-HEBRANG D, JANIČIJEVIĆ B, TOMLJENOVIC A, SZIROVICZA L, JIN L, CHAKRABORTY R, RUDAN P, *Coll Antropol*, 32(1) (2008) 85. — 15. MISSONI S, *Coll Antropol*, 30(3) (2006) 673. — 16. BIDDLE SJ, O'CONNELL SS, BRAITHWAITE RE, *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 45(11) (2011) 937. DOI: 10.1136/bjsports-2011-090205. — 17. POPKIN BM, *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 10 (Suppl) (2001) s13. DOI: 10.1046/j.1440-6047.2001.0100s1S13.x — 18. MISRA A, KHURANA L, *The Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, 93(11 Suppl 1) (2008) s9.

N. Camëron

*School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences, Loughborough University, Loughborough LER11 3TU, UK
e-mail: N.Cameron@lboro.ac.uk*