

Chapter 1 - Introduction: What can we learn from controversies?

Abstract

In this brief introduction we set out what we mean by controversies, why they offer a good entry point for understanding the discipline and the role played by controversies in shaping anthropological ethics and practice. Given the contentious and sometimes provocative nature of some of the issues discussed in this book, we also discuss how to read and talk about sensitive subjects.

Controversies

Anthropology is perhaps the most self-flagellating of academic disciplines. Many of the big shifts in anthropological thinking over the past century have centred around moments of profound self-reflection and critique, often in relation to problematic assumptions that lingered from the origins of the discipline in colonialism. Rather than shy away from these issues we like to deal with them head on – and this is the ethos of this book – learning from mistakes and staring directly at contentious events. Throughout the chapters of this book we will encounter many dubious practices – anthropologists acting as spies, the faking of research, allegations of complicity in a genocidal measles epidemic, covert research, racism, colonial and military complicity, and sexual relationships in the field. These extreme cases are certainly not representative of what most anthropologists do, but in the ensuing fall out they teach us a great deal about what it means to be an anthropologist. In introducing readers to the dark underbelly of anthropology, we lay bare how the ignominies of our past have shaped the discipline we have today.

This book is the distillation of a lot of teaching. In our first forays into teaching in the early 2000's it was always apparent that topics that had some kind of controversy attached engaged students in a different way. In discussing controversies in lectures and seminars, anthropologists became real people, with flaws and intentions and inner lives. Often with no immediately clear right or wrong answer, all students' opinions became meaningful – controversies became a puzzle, a means of thinking aloud, an opportunity to voice nagging doubts, and conflicted emotions that might otherwise go unsaid. This came through strongly both in class discussions and in later essays. Reading seemed like less of a burden for those in class, with more nuanced opinions emerging that were grounded in texts. Ethics emerged as a living breathing part of the discipline rather than an abstract set of limitations. Central to these debates was a sense of context. You had to know about the person being discussed in order for the conversation to make sense. A context in which relatively detailed biographies could be linked to histories presented itself. Over the course of a decade a series of lectures coalesced into the course that formed the basis for this book.

Before moving on to explore why controversies are good to think with, we first need to clarify what we mean by controversies and perhaps as importantly what we do not intend to include. For the purposes of this book, a controversy is a contentious debate about events or practices that frequently forms along moral lines. For this debate to emerge there must be some ambiguity. Outright morally reprehensible actions by

anthropologists (such as Bruno Beger's Nazi research) or clearly criminal wrongdoing where there is no cause for doubt are not treated as controversies requiring the debates found in this book. Certainly there are grey areas, and on encountering some of these cases I'm sure some of you will argue that crimes have been committed or behaviour has been unacceptably immoral. But in the controversies we describe there is always contention, even if the eventual end position reached might be unambiguous.

We also take controversies to be more than just academic debates. Other books such as *Key Debates in Anthropology* (Ingold 1996), *Taking Sides* (Welsch 2012) or *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1992) deal with this kind of intellectual sparring. Debates and contrary opinions are everyday practice within anthropology and are to be expected in the process of producing and testing knowledge. Controversies are much more exceptional – there is frequently an air of scandal as these cases grapple with morality. Restricting our identification of cases to those that have caused the greatest moral consternation allows us to focus on those controversies that are pedagogically useful.

Why study controversies?

Controversies are interesting to engage with because they overlap with gossip and scandal. The idea of focusing in on anthropology through the lives of anthropologists is far from new. Gluckman (1963) noted in his essay on 'Gossip and Scandal' that:

“Anthropology is a very tightly knit profession: it is one of the few professions which still has an initiation ceremony. You must have studied some exotic community. We maintain our tight bonds of friendship by a vast store of scandal and gossip as well as by legends. A most important part of my duty in training research workers is to teach them the scandals. I believe I am not alone among senior anthropologists in finding it more interesting to teach students about anthropologists than about anthropology.” (Gluckman 1963: 314)

As Gluckman notes of gossip, it is an activity that does a lot of invisible work. While gossiping is a form of entertainment, it simultaneously allows for the development of moral community. Gossip is inherently about seemingly immoral acts – if I tell you a friend's son just got a driving certificate it is merely news. If I tell you he got it through bribery – it is gossip. Conveying news can help foster a sense of a community of practice, but conveying moral judgement alongside that news fosters a moral community and plays a role in policing what is considered moral and immoral behaviour.

We do however need to be a little careful here, Gluckman also notes that gossip can be profoundly destructive. The reputation of the individuals being gossiped about is often at risk, stigma is a powerful force and it is not our intention to engage in acts of public shaming or cast doubt on what can be precarious academic careers through ill-considered hearsay. We have tried throughout this book to be even-handed where appropriate, to give nuance to the controversies to cut against knee-jerk moral stances. That is not to say that taking sides is inappropriate, but any such position ought to come about through much

consideration and reflection. As Jon Ronson (2015) notes, the process of publicly shaming has become increasingly swift, global and normalised through the rise in social media. This is not an attempt to stoke the flames of these controversies – it is an attempt to learn about our discipline through them and from them. In her book *Controversies in the Classroom* (2009) Diana Hess argues that open debate of political controversies builds tolerance of contrasting opinions, produces better informed and more civically engaged students. Hopefully the format of the book lends itself to this more considered and engaged approach to contentious topics than might be afforded by social media. At the very least we hope it causes our readers to pause, think back to the complexity of all we have disclosed, before coming to their own considered opinion as and when the next big controversy hits.

As Adam Kuper showed in *Anthropology and Anthropologists* (2015[1973]) having biographical context for an author helps us appreciate their work much more holistically. The controversies covered here work as Trojan horses (Weston 2012) allowing us to discuss anthropologists, and the occasional sociologist, and their work alongside the wider political and theoretical backdrops of the time. However strong the ivory tower, no discipline is fully outside of the machinations of history and identifying just how and how far these contextual elements have reached into our practice should give us all cause for reflection.

But more than this, controversies are themselves of profound importance. Controversies are transformative. They are the driving force for change, sparking crisis that cause disciplines to rethink their ethics and research practice, or generate new thinking. Controversies happen near the boundaries of acceptable practice, and by testing these boundaries they are either made more robust or caused to shift. Sometimes the most heinous occurrences bring about profound changes: World War II brought about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Code of Ethics, the Second Geneva Convention and the United Nations. Each arose out of the recognition of the inadequate protections and insufficient allegiances afforded by previous laws, agreements and institutions. That is not to say that catastrophe is always needed to drive change, but controversies often accompany tectonic shifts within academia as they represent moments for critical self-reflection.

This is not only true for anthropology, it is true across disciplines. While Gavin Weston, the co-author of this book, was presenting a paper on the pedagogical benefits of teaching controversies at an interdisciplinary conference, an engineer detailed how this type of focus had always been his approach to teaching. If you are teaching civil engineers about bridge building, you start with bridge collapses. Likewise Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer* (2018[1990]) is a mainstay of journalism teaching. Malcolm's text is a critique of Joe McGinniss' true crime best seller *Fatal Vision* (1984) about the Fort Bragg murders. In 1970 Captain Jeffrey MacDonald was found alive, but stabbed, in his house, while his wife and two daughters' bodies were found in their bedrooms. MacDonald claimed a Manson family-like group of hippy house-invaders chanted 'Acid is groovy, kill the pigs' while killing them (McGinniss 1984). After a bizarre TV appearance led to public suspicions of MacDonald, he hired the journalist Joe McGinniss to support his claims of innocence. While becoming good friends with MacDonald, Joe

became increasingly certain of his guilt, and the consequent book ended up being an exposé detailing McGinness' suspicions that MacDonald had killed his family in a spontaneous amphetamine exacerbated rage. He would not have been able to write this account were it not for the trust he had built up through a friendship that was then betrayed in print. Janet Malcom's book is a damning critique not only of McGinness but of journalism and journalistic ethics as a whole. She argues the journalist:

“is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction learns—when the article or book appears—*his* hard lesson. Journalists justify their treachery in various ways according to their temperaments. The more pompous talk about freedom of speech and "the public's right to know"; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about earning a living.” (Malcolm 1990:1)

In discussing what is and is not ethically or legally justified, this particular controversy causes reflection on the mainstay practices of journalism – issues such as consent, integrity and subterfuge. It is the ensuing criticism of journalistic practice that is of greater pedagogical value than the original story. As we see from the *Journalist and the Murderer* controversies are indeed good to think with. We hope that by the end of our book, you will also agree.

Reading the book

Our primary aim for this book is for it to appeal to students and teachers of the discipline, but it will certainly offer an insight, albeit a somewhat shocking introduction, to those who have never encountered anthropology before. The way in which the book is laid out does lean towards its use within teaching and learning. For a start, each section has its own bibliography to make it more useful as a resource for going deeper into each controversy. There are also occasional inset boxes of Talking Points to give us space to introduce related debates that fall slightly outside the controversy. This format also means that each chapter can be read as a standalone section, so readers can choose their own preferred order for reading.

There are a number of themes that span across the book. Questions regarding what anthropology is and by extension what it means to be an anthropologist echo throughout the book. Although some of the controversies highlight the tensions between socio-cultural and biological anthropology, our emphasis is much more on the emergence of the socio-cultural part of the discipline and what the controversies mean for the way we practice our craft. The general arc of the book is historical, loosely identifying and following controversies in chronological order. Given the historically grounded nature of these controversies we caution that there is a need to understand what now amounts to shocking behaviour within the historical particularities of each era. Historical relativism is as necessary for appreciating how people came to act in this book as cultural relativism is to understanding how people in different cultural

contexts behave. This is not to say historical relativism should be used to excuse behaviour, only to recognise that we are all products of our time. Throughout the book the micro-ethics of an individual's behaviour and the macro-ethics of the discipline hold these ideas together to explore the moral history of the discipline. A further word of caution however, given the nature of the subject, this book can at times be an emotionally difficult read because it deals with behaviour on the boundaries of morality. We have done our best to provide trigger warnings and content notices where appropriate but do take the time to read the following inset box on how to discuss sensitive issues in a class environment. A great deal of harm has already been done by some of the language and practices discussed in this book, and we ask that those reading take the time to adequately prepare so they do not fall into the trap of prolonging these harms.

-----INSET BOX-----

How to read and talk about sensitive subjects.

While this book aims to be a digestible read, not all readings or topics will be easy for all people. Some readers may have experienced traumatic events or may have family histories that make them sensitive to certain topics, while others might find themselves reacting with a heightened emotional responses to arguments they object to. In a teaching environment these might need talking through with a tutor or classmate. Some topics might need additional foregrounding. Some students might want to avoid certain topics altogether. All these paths are appropriate. If you are reading this book on your own and one or more of these issues apply – talk to a friend or contemplate skipping a chapter or putting the book down and doing something else.

The controversies covered in this book include the role of anthropology in the display of human subjects in ethnological exhibits, now often referred to as 'human zoos'; Malinowski's diaries which lay bare the racism behind the founder of British social anthropology; and the complicity of anthropology in colonial and military endeavours. In these chapters, and again in the final chapter on Alice Goffman, issues of racism make up a significant part of the topic under discussion. Chapters on Malinowski and Mead contain discussion of sexual relations in the field and the chapter on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights mentions very briefly Montgomery's research on child sexual exploitation. We will be using **Trigger warnings** – stated clearly in bold text in those chapters we think may cause the most issues. **Content notices** have been given where reference is fleeting but where readers might still require prior notice of content. This is to allow readers to make a conscious decision about whether to prepare themselves or to skip a section if it is not for them. Trigger warning will give some context so that the reader has a sense of what might be problematic in the section. If you decide to follow up on further readings then do read with caution if a topic is particularly sensitive. You might want to read a review before reading a text or check to see if anyone else has read it first. As always, if what you read upsets or angers you, talk to someone about it.

In Chapter 2 we have a separate Talking Point box detailing our use of language, particularly in regard to the use of the n-word which appears in some of the literature discussed in this book. While we have taken the decision to censor these uses in this book, much of the further reading on these topics will include uncensored use of such language. As such, where these additional texts are being used in a teaching context, we recommend establishing ground rules about what language is acceptable in class – as the Chapter 2 Talking Box explains, we believe the n-word has no place in any class discussion whether quoted from text or otherwise. Sensitivity is fundamental to a warm and hospitable class room, so be sure to establish your rules and guidelines together.

Debate and discussion of sensitive issues is an excellent skill to develop. Try not to presume to know the personal lives of others in a class room, but equally do not force people to share their experiences in order to get to know them. One of the most common problems encountered in teaching on sensitive topics is an individual or group calling on a particular person to detail their experience due to presumptions about them based upon their appearance. Another common occurrence is closing down a person's opinion due to their perceived membership of a particular group. Both are unpleasant experiences for the person targeted and ultimately lead to wariness among all present in sharing their ideas. Talk sensitively, use language carefully and be careful with generalization.

Anthropology classes are often full of people from across spectrums of ethnicity, religion, sexuality, nationality, and gender, while other factors such as urban or rural upbringings will influence exposure to difference or impact the way in which individuals communicate. Additionally, because our opinions may be inherently tied into our personal identities (such as our religious beliefs), an attack on a given opinion may feel like a direct challenge to who we are. Bearing this in mind can help us understand why people get upset in debates. Even if you do find yourself in a relatively homogenous social space, we still can't assume that everyone thinks and reacts the same way. If you have not found a particular topic or Chapter challenging, it does not necessarily mean that others have not. Use visual cues relating to discomfort or concern to moderate your language.

If you accidentally offend – apologise. Be prepared to talk through the offense caused with some humility. If the other person wants to explain what offended them, let them. At the same time, if you are offended by something, share this in a constructive way. What specifically made you uncomfortable? How could the issue or question be phrased differently to allow discussion to happen? We all make mistakes, and however cautious we are we cannot always second guess what may or may not be offensive or upsetting to others. What we need to do is find the right language, words and spaces to make communication across differences possible. We suggest approaching this along the lines of Wegerif's 'dialogic space' (2013). Wegerif suggests that learning emerges not through the replacement of one idea with another, but in the mingled interaction of shared ideas which augment and refine our perspectives. Dialogic space emerges where there is a multiplicity of voices, but more than this, it also demand we enter a space where we surrender some autonomy, where we grip our own ideas a little less firmly, so that we

are open to the possibility of learning something that could change us (Higham & Djohari 2018). In such a space we can build ideas and we can think together.

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