

Themed Collection

What is ‘analysis’?

Between theory, ethnography and method.

Introduction: the analysis of analysis

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Recent years in anthropology have seen a noticeable shift, from debates about ‘theory’ to a concern with ‘method’. So while some generations ago we would tend to identify ourselves as anthropologists with reference to particular theoretical paradigms – e.g. Marxism, post/structuralism, cognitivism, cultural materialism, interpretivism – these days our tendency is to align ourselves, often eclectically, with proposals conceived as methodological: entanglements, assemblages, ontologies, technologies of description, epistemic partnerships, problematizations, collaborative anthropology, the art of noticing, and so on.

In an attempt to get a handle on this shift and explore its implications, this roundtable focuses on the activity of ‘analysis’ – itself an ambiguous notion in the practice of anthropology. Analysis, it seems, shifts unstably between theory, method and ethnography. One way to think of it is as the set of activities that take place in the ‘middle ground’ between ethnographic materials and their anthropological theorization: analysis, in other words, as the interface of the empirical and the conceptual. But if method is increasingly occupying the slot of theory in anthropologists’ preoccupations, then has ‘analysis’ and its cognates become increasingly indistinguishable from ‘theory’ – e.g. is one’s ‘analytical approach’ the same as one’s ‘theoretical’ one? What difference does it make, at any rate, to think of such diverse activities as anthropological description, evocation, explanation, interpretation and conceptualization as ‘analytical operations’? Can a distinction between theory, method and analysis be stabilized at all, in fact, or is the ambiguous movement between them a characteristic part of anthropological practice – an element of its particular form of creativity, even?

Raising such questions also puts the spotlight on the ‘language’ of analysis; that is to say, a range of terms that come to operate within the procedures anthropologists might imagine as analytical. Terms such as ‘the relation’ (or ‘relational’), ‘scale’, or ‘proportion’, or such distinctions as quantity and quality, particular and general, local and global, continuous and discontinuous, connection and disconnection, collective and individual, and so on: neither theoretical as such, nor just descriptive, such terms and distinctions seem to format many of the procedures we think of as analytical in the practice of anthropology. So what might their epistemic status be? In what ways does their apparently formal character colour the way ethnographic materials are handled, and how do they serve to transfigure the contingencies anthropologists encounter during fieldwork into objects of contemplation? And how do such analytical tropes and procedures operate in anthropologists’ attempts to narrate their ethnographic experience, as well as theorizing it? What kinds of stories does analysis tell?

Based on a roundtable discussion held on the 2 December of 2017 at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, at Washington DC, this collection of short think-pieces brings together a deliberately diverse selection of anthropologists to explore the creative potentials of anthropological analysis in their full gambit. Contributors were invited to reflect on the role analysis plays in their own work, comment on its development within the discipline at large, or indeed treat analysis and its diverse operations as ethnographic objects in their own right. Helping in this way to problematize the operative concept of our journal's title, this venture in the analysis of analysis seeks to add new dimensions to the intellectual profile of *Social Analysis*, marking also my own conception of its outlook as the journal's new editor.