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Anthropology and Economics in the Public Eye

By Elizabeth K. Briody and Marc S. Robinson, July 20, 2020

How can anthropologists approach the influence of economists?

The COVID-19 pandemic and how to mitigate its effects is only one recent public and policy issue on which anthropologists can contribute significant insights and solutions. Yet in policy debates and the media, anthropologists do not have an impact proportional to their insight. Despite actual and potential contributions of anthropologists to global problem-solving, anthropological influence has been far less than that of economics.

Anthropologists have a knack for identifying connections and themes due to their analytic and sensemaking competencies, and for telling persuasive stories from the field by conveying authenticity and empathy.

There is a Council of Economic Advisers in the White House and economists serve as advisors and decision makers throughout federal and state governments and legislatures. The International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Federal Reserve employ hundreds of economists. Most major corporations have chief economists, but not chief anthropologists. There is a Nobel Memorial Prize in economics, but none in anthropology. Joe Biden said, when speaking of the pandemic on [*Meet the Press*](#) in March 2020: "President Trump should listen to his scientists, health experts, and economists." Media outlets often turn to economists for analysis, predictions, and opinion on current social and political issues; prominent economists such as Jeffrey Sachs, Thomas Piketty, and Paul Krugman write influential books and op-eds.

As an anthropologist and an economist who are policy oriented (and married), we offer some explanations for this difference between anthropology and economics and argue that the gap can and should be narrowed. A number of anthropologists

work to bring their knowledge and views into the [public realm](#), initiatives on which we can build so that there is robust participation across the discipline. Many more anthropologists must find ways to persuade decision makers and the general public to alter policies—from economy to food security to public health—with their uncommon findings and insights created by the anthropological lens.

Economists' impact in public forums

Economists start with advantages for influencing policy. They tend to focus on a single objective—maximizing material well-being—and assume that everyone in any society has roughly that same objective. These assumptions underlie quantitative models that generate hypotheses, which economists can and do test—consistent with the scientific method and helpful for persuading noneconomists. Economists also have a policy orientation dating back to the discipline's founders, from Adam Smith and David Ricardo (microeconomics) to John Maynard Keynes (macroeconomics in response to Great Depression). The behavioral assumptions let economists fearlessly generalize beyond the traditional confines of the discipline (e.g., [on family](#), [on crime](#)). Models and mindsets give economists confidence in making policy recommendations on issues on which they have personally done no research.

The time is ripe for a step change in anthropologists' role on the world stage and public perception of the discipline.

The training and employment of economists reinforce these advantages. Graduate seminars often encourage challenge and debate, honing verbal skills and “thinking on your feet.” Economists outside academia must write and speak clearly and persuasively to noneconomists and make convincing recommendations to get and keep their jobs. Consulting opportunities for academics reward those skills as well. Economists know not to repeat the error of Edwin Nourse whose unwillingness to offer clear advice (“on the other hand...”) led President Truman to beg for a one-handed economist. Economists—or any experts—do not always win the argument. Economist and presidential advisor Michael Boskin stated one should only take the job of being on the Council of Economic Advisers if satisfied with Wade Boggs's batting average (one hit in three).

Anthropology's potential

We are overwhelmed with information and awash with survey data. Between the politicians and the pundits, it is challenging to make sense of what is happening during crises like the pandemic or resulting recession. Anthropologists have a knack for identifying connections and themes due to their analytic and sensemaking competencies, and for telling persuasive stories from the field by conveying authenticity and empathy. Using such techniques positions anthropologists to engage effectively in public discussions and disarm faulty arguments by posing simple questions drawn from their holistic and comparative perspective.

Narrowing the gap with economists

To increase public and policy impact, anthropologists need to do the following:

- Express insights in clear, concise, and compelling language (the American Anthropological Association's (AAA) collaboration with [The Op-Ed Project](#) is a good initiative with this goal; the shift as a result of the pandemic from Annual Meeting to a [fall event series](#) with many shorter live-streamed and interactive events should also be useful in this regard).
- Generalize how culture works, incorporating knowledge of structure (e.g., roles, rules) and dynamics (e.g., relationships, interactions) in the relevant context.
- Explain how and why past and present research sheds light on important policy questions and decisions.
- Get broadcast media training ([AAA](#) and universities are resources).
- Adopt a consultant's mindset, rather than decline to offer an explanation or insist that every question requires a new study before guidance can be offered.
- Be attentive to ongoing public conversations and link anthropology to them, weighing in on important issues even without incentives from employers.
- Think like an entrepreneur and network, since decision makers and reporters do not usually seek out anthropologists for advice.
- Take a cross-disciplinary and collaborative approach by establishing connections within policy communities and creating research designs, teams, and implementation strategies that cross boundaries (an approach that might have helped [Brunson and colleagues](#) influence the recent Medicaid expansion policy debate).

This list of actions can be intimidating for those who have not yet ventured into the public eye. However, anthropology has some current role models. Among them are anthropologists highly visible in the media and policy (e.g., [Gillian Tett](#), [Paul Farmer](#), [Jim Yong Kim](#), [Helen Fisher](#), [Genevieve Bell](#)). Another group consists of public-facing media who bring the value of anthropology to wider communities (e.g., [This Anthro Life](#), [Mindshare](#), [Sapiens](#)). A third group includes all anthropologists engaged in practice work. Taking a cue from all of these colleagues, anthropologists must be willing to offer *solutions* to thorny issues and defend them. It is now critical that we see a palpable integration between scholarship and public influence, theory and practice, individual exploration and collaborative networks. The time is ripe for a step change in anthropologists' role on the world stage and public perception of the discipline. If more anthropologists skilled in communication, generalization, and a change-oriented mindset promote their perspective publicly, society would benefit enormously.

Elizabeth K. Briody is founder of Cultural Keys LLC, a consulting practice dedicated to improving organizational effectiveness. She previously worked at General Motors R&D as an anthropologist. She is secretary of the American Anthropological Association and won the 2020 Bronislaw Malinowski Award from the Society for Applied Anthropology.

Marc S. Robinson is an economist and strategist now consulting externally after 33 years as an internal consultant at General Motors, including in strategic initiatives and strategic risk management. Earlier, he taught at the University of California, Los Angeles and Stanford. He served in the White House on George H.W. Bush's Council of Economic Advisers.