

Submitted  
4-26-95  
Anthrop.  
Newsletter -  
(5-12-95)

## Science in Anthropology: To Be or Not To Be?

Carmella Caracci Moore  
University of California, Irvine

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.

*A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens.

Example 1. An undergraduate student approaches me after the second lecture in my psychological anthropology class. She thrusts a paper at me that she has written in another class and demands I read the conclusion. I see the relevant citation to Foucault with the proclamation that the truth is nothing more than what people in power would have us believe.

Example 2. One of my graduate teaching assistants complains to me about how I'm teaching the Introductory Sociocultural Anthropology course. She asserts that I'm teaching the course too factually, that she doesn't believe there are any facts and moreover, I'm failing to address the political implications of anthropology. I ask, whose politics would you have me teach?

Example 3. At the 1994 AAA meetings in Atlanta, I find myself in a conversation with the editor of one of the leading journals in American anthropology. We are discussing an author's right to respond to criticism published against one's work. I assert that both scholarship and science are dependent on the free exchange of often conflicting ideas. The editor tells me that science in anthropology is nothing more than the "bullyboy" tactics of senior men. Don't I know that science is just another example of attempted male domination over women?

While I would like to say that the examples above are simply the worst nightmares of a female practitioner of anthropology as a science, I cannot. Indeed, they are my own recent experiences in American anthropology and illustrate some of the most destructive aspects of the postmodernist *credo* that has now pervaded every facet of our anthropological lives, namely, that there is no truth; that there are no ethnographic facts; and that science in

anthropology is an oppressive, impossible to achieve, mythology. For myself, I reject this view because I find it based on an ideology of politics and polemics, rather than upon rationality (also see Searle *Deadalus* 1993 122(4):55-84).

Weiner (AA 1995 97(1):16) has recently and rightly raised the specter of Boas in discussing her embrace of postmodernist anthropology, reminding us that in his time Boas was the great champion against racism, and against ideas of racial determinism (also see Kuper 1994:102-129 *The Chosen Primate* for a thoughtful discussion of what happens when well meaning people abandon science for politics, specifically, for eugenics). What Weiner conveniently forgets, is that Boas was also the great champion of anthropology as the "science of humankind in all its aspects" (1902 AAA Articles of Incorporation; Boas *Science* 1902 15:804-809; Stocking AA 1960 62:1-17), the man who valued anthropological knowledge for its own sake; the man who prized first-hand ethnographic facts over speculative anthropological theories; the man who viewed ethnology, linguistics, archaeology and biology as the four great heritages of humankind, without anyone of which our ability to understand ourselves would be diminished; the man who wrote, "all that man can do for humanity is to further the *truth*, whether it be sweet or bitter" (italics in original, quoted in Langness 1979[1974]:46 *The Study of Culture*; also see Boas 1982[1940] *Race Language and Culture*; Lowie 1937:128-155 *The History of Ethnological Theory*; Stocking 1992 *The Ethnographer's Magic*). Above all, Boas was the man who valued empirical science in anthropology. If, as Stocking (1992:113) surmises, some anthropologists find Boas' outlook "naively idealist," then I say, show me a more sophisticated set of ethics or an epistemology that works any better for producing knowledge of humankind.

In one sense, Geertz (1995 *After the Fact*), semi-hero of postmodernists (see *New York Times Sunday Magazine* April 9, 1995), is right: what comes after the fact is "interpretation" (some call it theory), and indeed, "interpretation" of the facts is a part of science. But again as Boas recognized long ago, talk is cheap, while evidence obtained by systematic observation, including measurement, requires work and self-discipline (Boas *Science* 1902 16:441-445). I value empirical science in anthropology so highly, because as far as I know, it is the only method we have for invalidating our own ideas (so near and dear to us)--be they called theories, biases, beliefs, interpretations, speculations, rationalizations, impressions, fantasies, or authoritarianism (see D'Andrade *AN* 1995:xx). While the standard of disconfirmation may seem too rigorous to some (cf., Tedlock and Tedlock *AA* 1995 97(1):8), it is not impossible to achieve, nor is anthropology by *fiat* any better. Moreover, how does one dare to disagree with the curators at a famous museum, or with a distinguished neurologist at the Harvard Medical School, if it is not on the basis of the empirical evidence (e.g., Moore and Romney *AA* 1994 96(2):370-396; or Moore 1991 PhD Dissertation, University of California, Irvine)? If the facts do not agree with our theories, it is our theories that are wrong. This is one implication of empirical science in anthropology.

Anthropology may indeed have to rethink itself in the 21st century--in psychological anthropology, for example, *tabula rasa* theories of the mind will have to be realigned, when necessary, with the findings of modern neuroscience (although many neuroscientific theories remain to be tested in non-Western contexts)--yet, I would suggest it's not our subject matter (humankind in all its aspects) that's problematic, it is rather our resistance, particularly in ethnology, to the application of systematic methodology. What would our knowledge of

human languages be without phonetic transcription, or our knowledge of archaeology without radiocarbon dating, or our knowledge of human origins without DNA analysis, or our knowledge of human ways of life not genetically transmitted (formerly called culture), and its correlates, without even the meager method of participant-observation or the much disparaged method of cross-cultural comparison? When we realize that *none* of these methods existed in 1895 as Boas began his quest for science in anthropology (with the possible exception of cross-cultural comparison), we might even say that anthropological knowledge has accrued, for certainly we know more today about humankind by applying these methods than we would know without them. As Boas (1982[1940]:311) wrote, "an unbiased investigator will utilize every method that can be devised to contribute to the solution of his problem." The solution to the postmodernist quagmire of narcissistic subjectivity is better methodology, not literary exegesis.

If we need to convince ourselves by example, then consider which work permeated anthropological consciousness and generated more research, Else Clews Parsons' (1922) *American Indian Life* or Margaret Mead's (1925) *Coming of Age in Samoa*? Both works were undertaken by Boasians and published in the same time period. Parsons' was an attempt to better explain native American life to the general public (a laudable goal) by having contemporary anthropologists write *fictionalized* accounts of the groups they had studied, whereas (as we all know) Mead's was an attempt to test a theory of biological determinism. The contributors to Parsons' volume read like a who's who of early twentieth century anthropology (including Boas, Kroeber, Lowie, Radin, Sapir, and Swanton among others), yet beyond a few specialists in life history research, who, honestly, remembers this volume

today? Mead's work is still provoking controversy and discussion (see Freeman 1983 *Margaret Mead and Samoa*; Special Section, *AA* 1983(4):908-948), and stimulating researchers to study the cultural and biological dimensions of adolescence (see Special Issue on Adolescence, *Ethos*, 1995, 23(1):1-118). I would also note that almost a decade before Freeman, Brim and Spain (1974:31-37 *Research Design in Anthropology*) respectfully, but critically, discussed a number of ways Mead's research design might be improved. In an empirical science a work is judged by the research it generates, and in this way, errors are corrected and knowledge accrues.

Measurement, too, is a part of methodology and the villification of quantification as "dehumanizing" runs rampant as a postmodernist theme (although this is actually nothing new). Boas' (1982[1940]:94-130) paper, "The Anthropological Study of Children" contains some 24 graphs and attempts to demonstrate through the measurement of human growth that environment affects human development; I can't help wondering how Boas would have responded to the "dehumanizing" charge. At a time when our computing power is greater than ever before, the postmodernist view is narrow-minded and rhetorical. I would agree that those of us who would count should explain our numerics clearly and in such a way that they might be replicated by others. This is the advantage that measurement confers. When our research questions lend themselves to a measurement approach we should be willing to use measurements. I am a firm believer in the adage "garbage in; garbage out" but tend to think this applies to words as well as to numbers. Neither qualitative nor quantitative obscurantism is acceptable. Furthermore, no group has a monopoly on "humanizing," nor is any methodology in and of itself "dehumanizing." Only humans dehumanize other humans.

This brings me to the problem of ethics within anthropology and to the examples with which I began. The difficulties women face in managing marriage, motherhood, and academic careers (scientific or otherwise), and in overcoming traditional biases, are real and need to be addressed. Yet, historically, anthropology has not been unkind to women. Once again the prescient Boas, welcomed women into his scientific program, recognizing that anthropological understanding would be limited without the participation of both males and females since certain domains of culture would be inaccessible to the opposite gender (see Lowie 1937:134). Tragically today, it is women themselves who are persuading younger women that science within anthropology is impossible. In my opinion, this tenet of the postmodernist *credo* does a great disservice to our students, both male and female, but particularly to our young women. Anthropology has much more to offer its students than "sex, lies, and videotape" combined with politics and polemics, namely, empirically derived knowledge of humankind. As practitioners of this science we have a greater responsibility than others to practice our craft with integrity, dignity, respect, compassion, and even love, for the people, living and dead, who participate in our studies. I simply do not believe this set of values is incompatible with an objective science, nor have I ever met an anthropologist who would favor human inhumanity to human.

What American anthropology needs now, is more empirical science, not less. Not just because I admire what Geertz (1995:23) disparages, "empiricism, that magpie amassment of cultural detail," but because we never know when an obscure ethnographic fact, like the X have only a two-color term system, will lead to a deeper and "truer" understanding of humankind when put into comparative perspective (e.g., Berlin and Kay 1969 *Basic Color*

*Terms*). At this juncture we have two choices: to develop a neo-Boasian program for the 21st century or to follow postmodernism down the path of nihilism and possible self-extinction. The time is now; the choice is ours. And if, like Kwakiutal twins, we sometimes feel "downhearted" (Boas 1921 *Ethnology of the Kwakiutal as told by George Hunt*, 35th *Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Part I, p. 637) as we watch gale force winds blow against "the ice-cold flame of the passion for seeking the truth" (Boas, quoted in Stocking 1992:111), we might take a little inspiration from the poet, Dylan Thomas: "do not go gentle into that good night, . . . rage, rage, against the dying of the light."