The Tricky/Trickster Role of the Anthropologist: Ethical Dilemmas of the Consultant Anthropologist in Papua New Guinea

Sacha Geer

Follow this and additional works at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol11/iss1/6

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarsh1@uwo.ca.
The Tricky/Trickster Role of the Anthropologist: Ethical Dilemmas of the Consultant Anthropologist in Papua New Guinea

Keywords
Papua New Guinea, consultant, ethics, development

Creative Commons License
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
The Tricky/Trickster Role of the Anthropologist: Ethical Dilemmas of the Consultant Anthropologist in Papua New Guinea

Sacha Geer

It is for each individual to work out for themselves their own moral boundaries, to understand and delimit that with which she or he would or would not be involved. For anthropologists, members of a discipline that has for decades been the scapegoat of the social sciences as the hand-maidens of colonial oppressors, these limits need to be more explicit, more fully internalized and reckoned with. Globalization, as a process, is not new, nor are its effects fully determinable prior to any one action. In recent years, as global capital and technology move with greater rapidity towards what were once seemingly unreachable corners of the earth, anthropologists, generally Westerners who have studied these seemingly exotic corners, are being hired to come along for the ride in a new non-academic form. The vogue of development and its popular conception as having a synonymy with progress and globalization are issues which must be addressed.

As a student at the beginning of my academic career, I feel I can address the questions and concerns about the ethical responsibilities of the consultant anthropologist with the reference and reverence due to those who have negotiated these tricky situations before me. I am faced with many disconcerting questions: I want to know about the role of the anthropologist who works outside of an academic system, who lends their skills and knowledge gained by virtue of their research and training to systems and processes that have reasons for entering these ‘exotic’ far reaches of the earth very different than those of the pursuit of ethnographic inquiry. Rooted in these concerns are issues of responsibility, obligation, confidentiality, ownership and the inherent value of academia.

As a ‘fledgling anthropologist’, many of my peers will either eschew the life of academia for work in consultancy and development situations or attempt to maintain the difficult and delicate balance between academia and what we glily term ‘the real world’. Before I or any anthropologist does this, we need to puzzle these questions out for ourselves.

It is my feeling that the work of anthropology starts with an enormous gift—that of being allowed to immerse, as much as an outsider can, into another population’s culture and lives. I wonder however, if this gift does not also incur an enormous debt. If such a debt (one more figurative than literal) is accrued, how is it one retains their position and their positionality while fulfilling these obligations. I need, we need, each of us, to decide what we mean when we tell others that we hope to become an anthropologist of worth.

That being said, and with these lovely, lofty aspirations in mind, I will attempt to puzzle through a number of questions that seem to me to be ethical dilemmas. Exactly what are the ethical impasses that arise if an anthropologist works in an applied or consultancy situation for a capitalist enterprise? I will be focusing on a particular kind of consultancy with reference to Papua New Guinea and mining to ground my questions. Is there difference between working for a company and working for a local population as an anthropologist for hire? What about working for the state, or an NGO? Are the ground rules different in this case? Where can an anthropologist draw the line between fulfilling a debt and being complicit in destruction—though with the best of intentions? These questions are not entirely all personal or related to the anthropologist as an individual, questions
surrounding academic freedom, co-optation and ownership of research impact the discipline as a whole and therefore must also be examined. I find myself incredibly uncomfortable, both personally, and in reference to the discipline under which I hope to serve (and serve is a word I choose quite deliberately), when issues of research for money outside the scope of academia are brought to the fore. There is some very questionable ground that an anthropologist walks on in terms of her or his own legitimacy when she or he enters into a consultancy situation wherein they recognizing that she or he is being paid by a group (in the case of this piece, a mining company) that does not have the noblest of intentions, regardless of their purported or real purity of intent. Yet for most anthropologists, the argument most often made for involvement as a consultant is one based on emotion, and with the noblest of intentions in mind. Escobar (1991) writes that the most common reason for involvement in the development process is that non-involvement would be more detrimental to people in positions of poverty because without the intervention of the anthropologist (or social scientist) one is assured of failure. In other words, we know as anthropologists that a development project will fail regardless, but hope that if we accept a consultancy position we may lessen the burden on the local who will be affected. I would argue that until the development process uses methods and indicators of success that would make anthropological intervention fruitful, one is simply being paid to be complicit in the system; as a result, one’s position as an academic to criticize these wrong-doings is compromised. These statements may seem Draconian, but the discipline’s history bears the scars of these misjudgments.

In 1972, Jasper Ingersoll wrote about the situation of anthropologists in development as having “an old hate relationship and a new love affair”. He argues that anthropologists, while often involved in development projects as consultants, have little effect on the design and implementation of projects because those projects are conceived through the lens of economic growth and use measures such as GNP for evidence of success. Some would argue that little has changed since 1972. But the question that Ingersoll’s work spawns is one that I will return to later. Does the fact that an anthropologist’s work will be negated by virtue of the design and implicit goals of a project mean that she or he should disavow themselves of the process entirely, and thus ensure that there will be no pertinent analysis?

As a discipline, anthropology began with highly applied goals. Colonial and post colonial attempts to define the exotic ‘other’ for administrative and colonial use by way of funding anthropologists for their research has left a mark on the discipline. (Wilkins 1982: 112). In the 1950s, coincident with the spread of anthropology departments at many universities, a shift away from this policy oriented fieldwork began. Wilkins argues: “a professional social anthropology, created a body of published work which might be used for policy applications, but which was not, as a rule, generated by policy questions” was created (ibid.:114). Recently however, the rise of multinational corporations and increased and faster links between countries and peoples in a time when many countries are entering their post-colonial stage, has led to the call for anthropologists to return to working with an eye towards policy, business agreements, expert testimony, etc.

I have chosen as ethnographic grounds to explore my dilemmas the country of Papua New Guinea. This country has been an arena of vast anthropological research for many decades. Since independence in 1975, there have been several enormous mining projects working in the country. Mostly in isolated areas, these projects characteristically involve complicated negotiations with disenfranchised and relatively remote groups of people over compensation, land ownership, employment and environmental degradation. Because of the capital intensive nature of these projects, they are run almost exclusively by large multinational corporations from South East Asia and beyond. These transnational corporations are, however, welcomed by government and citizens because the projects are equated with economic and often cultural development, not to mention access to goods and services not easily provided by the state alone. Thus in Papua New Guinea development is equated with investment as well as major resource extraction.

What makes this situation especially pertinent for the purposes of this study is that Papua New Guinea law requires that mining and other companies commission social impact studies in order that potential social and economic problems might be identified. Anthropologists who have long worked in these proposed mining areas are often hired to write these studies and deal with other problems that involve ‘traditional
communities' of Papua New Guinea. These projects are notoriously ill-fated, the scale of social disruption and environmental catastrophe is similar in many ways to the problems experienced by other massive development projects. Strathern and Stewart argue, even for those not working as consultants "the arena of research in general, especially in places affected by large scale development projects, is rather like a minefield through which researchers must pick their way" (2001: 5). I will return to his question of the anthropologist working within a situation that he or she knows will be disruptive a little later. It is a question more contingent on factors personal to the anthropologist, although, the following will show, that it is difficult to separate the personal from the professional in a situation such as this. It is prudent to first outline the ways in which I believe the applied anthropologist who works for groups other than their own group of study is compromised.

The analogy of a minefield is extremely useful for the purposes of this discussion. Using a series of papers written by various anthropologists who have worked in various applied and academic positions in Papua New Guinea for development and other purposes as a base from which to construct my argument. I am forced to ask questions that relate to the people under study, the legitimacy of the discipline, and the personal integrity of consultant anthropologists. Previously, my primary concern had been to separate all of my questions into neat categories, to see which issue would affect which of the three above categories, but as Strathern and Stewart argue:

There is a sense that consultancy work is unusual and is enslaved away from the supposed mainstream array of topics. We maintain that a rigid compartmentalization of the work of anthropological consultancy within the discipline as a whole is unrealistic. Theory, analysis, description and practice need to be related to one another, and the pragmatic problems the ethical questions, and the imponderabilities of making appropriate theoretical analyses which face the anthropologist as general ethnographer. The question of analysis of material in relation to policy aims is particularly and obviously crucial (2001: 8).

One of the issues that we have to consider is the actual work that is produced by the consultant anthropologist. Unlike academic research, where anthropologists have a general idea of what they would like to study but let the course of fieldwork ultimately determine what is most cogent to write about, consultants working in and around development projects are much more constrained. Rohatynskyj did her work in Papua New Guinea as a consultant hired by the Tolai to survey the ethnic groups surrounding themselves. This in itself is a strange position to be in-one which does not necessarily fit into the scope of this work. Important, however, is Rohatynskyj's discussion of the consultant's report.

The parameter's of the consultant's report are set by the terms of reference of the research agreed to by the contractor and the researcher as well as the author's appreciation of the terms in which results will most readily be accepted...The relationship between the audience and the researcher becomes more emphasized than the one between the researcher and the community of study in the formulation of the text of the report (2001: 24 emphasis added).

Compromise it seems is inherent in the formulation of a consultant's report. My problem here is not so much the fact that consultants are not able to produce academic writing, rather that those who are producing these consultant's reports are academics. As academics, all we have is our name, and the backing of an institution from which comes our academic freedom. To work as a consultant is to co-opt the legitimacy that comes with the title of anthropologist and use it to produce work that is subject to a vastly different set of restraints. Rohatynskyj would disagree with me here. She argues:

The ethics of academic research are not so clearly

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2003
I find this questionable. The issue of short term versus long-term impact has clearly distinguishable characteristics for the academic versus consultant researcher. In theory, the academic researcher, if cognizant of detrimental effects that could come about as a result of her or his work, has the benefit of criticism and rebuttal. One only had to think of the decades long feud between E. R. Leach and pseudonyms to protect those about whom they write within a system of constant peer criticism and rebuttal. One only had to think of the work of that caliber. Anthropology is unique among the social sciences for its insistence on long periods of fieldwork. As a consultant who is accredited to be an anthropologist who does not follow the basic strictures of the discipline, does Rohatynskyj not do a discredit both to the discipline and to her own credibility? The immediate response to this line of inquiry would be to say that Rohatynskyj was not commissioned to write an academic piece and therefore is not to be held up to those standards. The reports that are produced by consultants for the state, a corporation or an NGO fall into the realm of grey literature (Bryant and Bailey: 1997). That is, literature that is more accessible to public consumption. It is not however, academic discourse, though it may be perceived as such and given the steady academic discourse because of the anthropological credentials of the author. Rohatynskyj says that there are ways in which one can frame their work and still implicate their anthropological credentials of the author. The contracted researcher does not have this benefit or obligation to make her or his work stand up to criticism. It is written by academics with claims to authority and legitimacy but does not stand for criticism by peers. It is my belief that the strongest criticism—the most cogent way to fulfill one’s moral bounds cannot and does not come from a consultant position wherein the contracting company makes claims of objectivity, authority and legitimacy by virtue of their purchase of the work of the anthropologist. Further, the areas of interest that are set out before fieldwork begins, as mentioned, bind the contracted researcher.

The academic anthropologist always has the option of choosing not to speak of a particular area of concern. Lorenzo Bruti (2001: 94) says that consultancy is a “take it or leave it situation”. The length of contract is generally very binding. If one needs more time, or the topic does not fit nicely within the researcher’s interests or comfort level, too bad...she or he has already been paid. This does not work nicely with the rigors and even constraints of academic research, where grants for funding are based on time and topics well, but are generally not revoked if the researcher strays from the initial topic or finds results not expected. In short, the problem here is that the contractor has a stake in the content of the applied researcher’s work, whereas the academic funding institution or group has a stake only in the quality.

Time constraints are one of the more important ways in which anthropologists are compromised in consultancy positions. More important than the timing of the contract, is the length of time in the field. Rohatynskyj writes that she wanted to spend at least one month in each of twelve different sites to prepare her report, but in fact “This proved unrealistic because of expense, needs to conform to other’s transportation schedules...In effect , I was doing cultural survey work and had to adjust my methodology” (2001: 30). The problem arises when Rohatynskyj is commissioned as an anthropologist, and then uses methods which are not conducive to anthropological study. Her results, which she admits suffer because of that compromise, are still viewed by wider audiences as the work of an anthropologist and given the credit and authority due work of that caliber. Rohatynskyj says that there are ways in which one can frame their work and still implicate their anthropological credentials of the author. Rohatynskyj says that there are ways in which one can frame their work and still implicate their consultant in a manner that would allow her to remain, to herself at least, ethically viable. But I find this a little hard to take. It seems that once an anthropologist accepts money for fees outside of the realm of academia, there is some form of identity shift, even if only in terms of others perceptions that is not easily negotiated.

In addition to the time and scope of contracts and reports, the applied or consultant researcher does not own the work produced, a factor which to me may be the single most important reason for my discomfort. Academics are able to work within a system of academic...
freedom. They are free to write whatever they desire with relative protection by virtue of their association with academia. This means that even great criticism can be made without fear of violating a contractual agreement. The academic who begins her or his career can extrapolate from her or his research to grander theory and more wide ranging ideas which, in turn, may be applied to other situations. Consultants are most often bound by non-disclosure agreements. This means that the work that they produce is not owned by themselves to do with what they wish, but is the property of the contractor. In the case of Papua New Guinea, consultant anthropologists generally come into the contract position having done some fieldwork in the area and are hired for that reason. Their report, either lauding or critical of the contractors to whom they are bound, is generally given only to the government or to the company which contracted the report, thus fulfilling the legal requirement of the country but often not working in any catalytic manner to change or better the lives of those whom they are writing about. Thus there is little that is accomplished besides the exchange of money. Dan Jorgensen, an anthropologist with considerable experience working in Papua New Guinea notes that it is generally extremely difficult for anyone to get a copy of these reports (personal correspondence, 2002). If granted, they are generally through ‘someone who knows some one who can get a photocopy’. While often argued that the only persons who read academic anthropological literature are other anthropologists, at least in the case of the academic, findings are published in the public domain and therefore are both open to critical debate and less likely to be entrenched as suggestions of ‘truth’. There are some notable exceptions to this rule, including the recently published set of reports surrounding the Porgera Gold Mine, which I will discuss later (Filer ed.: 2001). Given these constraints, is this type of consultancy work as Bratti (2001: 95) wonders, “scientific prostitution”? Jorgensen says that for the consultant who wishes to get around these non-disclosure agreements, and make social disruptions and company transgressions known, there are at least four possible avenues. The first, and, if successful, the best manner to straddle this divide is to negotiate into one’s contract a clause that allows the researcher to publish their findings in academic journals as well. While this is laudable, the contractor can be confident in knowing that, even in academic journals, most work will not reach the eyes of persons in a position to work against them. This is the rarest of the situations and the question of reading the academic work of a researcher who one knows has been commissioned by a mining company leads, in my mind to decreasing her or his authority and legitimacy.

The second method is to get the contractor to include a clause in the contract that says the author may publish in academic journals, but only if the contractor is first allowed to look at the work. However, the might and lawyer purchasing ability of the corporations who contract this work, and the ability of states to make future academic research difficult if not impossible means that any contract anthropologist is still extraordinarily constrained in this situation (see also Greider: 1993).

The third method is more specifically in relation to anthropologists who have been contracted in the beginning stages of a large project like the Papua New Guinea mines mentioned previously. This clause often stipulates that the contract anthropologist may publish her or his findings anywhere they please, but only after a delay of up to one year. Generally, according to Jorgensen, by the time that any publication of the negative effects of the project could be made known, the production process is already well under way and agreements and contracts with local peoples and government have already been pushed through. Again, any possible good that could have come from the report would have been lost due to the exigencies of the clauses in the contract. Those in favour of anthropological consultants argue the importance of creating some record of the transgressions and downfalls of the contracting company, and thus the anthropologist can have some measure of comfort knowing that she or he has done at least that. Is this a worthwhile enough cause? Is this conscience clearing exercise in the hopes that a future law suit (as many of the subjects of these studies are prone to file) will hopefully have access to this report enough? I have been, perhaps wrongfully, intimating that the people about whom these social impact studies are written are totally against the development projects which hire these consultant anthropologists. This is untrue. By and large, the people in this Papua New Guinean context who are involved with these projects are the most disenfranchised in the country. It would be paternalistic and naïve to think that these people are unaware of the more technologylly
advanced world around them and a silly essentialist argument to say that these 'traditional' people would prefer to live in what is perceived to be a static and unchanging world. Papua New Guineans do not live in a vacuum, globalization, as mentioned in the introduction is a process that has always been in action. Papua New Guineans recognize the benefits, socially and economically that could come about as a result of having access to the compensation and jobs provided by these mining initiatives. However, as Jorgensen (1997) notes, these issues are extremely complex and not easily solved even by a several month stint from a consulting anthropologist. The fourth method that Jorgensen presents (2002) as a way of circumventing these non-disclosure agreements is to lobby to include a clause in the consulting anthropologist’s contract that stipulates that the people about whom the study is written receive access to said study. Brutti notes that often reports are confidential, and asks “Why should the social actors of the survey not know the results of the study in which they stand as main characters?” (2001: 95). The idea behind this act of resistance is that the people about whom this study is written may then lobby more strongly for a stronger bargaining position or to stop the process of the development as a result of this study. This too seems a viable solution on the surface. Yet, if one is a researcher with enough invested in an area to write against the actions of a large scale development project such as a mine, would it not be better to advocate and work directly with the people involved rather than lend one’s own name and thus claims to legitimacy and explicit ownership of their work to the very people one is criticizing?

Implicit in these attempts to avoid a non-disclosure agreement is the issue of ownership. With or without any of these clauses in a consultant anthropologist’s contract there are still considerable obstacles for the anthropologist with a conscience who wants her or his findings to be made easily and broadly public without fear of pressure from the contracting body. Jorgensen suggests that anthropologists who have worked first as an academic researcher who then are hired to work as a consultant may try to publish their criticisms and findings based on the idea that their work comes out of their past research and is therefore not owned by the contracting company. Or, if the anthropologist wants that desperately to write academically the results of their contract work, she or he could simply return to the area of contract work, ask all of the same questions again, and now have their own ownership of the findings. Finally, if the anthropologist does want desperately to voice his or her concerns, she or he could simply publish despite the terms of their agreement, on the reasoning that any publication would be in areas not widely read by the public and any legal action taken on behalf of the contracting company would open them to too much media scrutiny and would not be pursued. Are these actions enough for a clear conscience? I am unsure. It seems that if the only way to work as an applied anthropologist for one of these companies or development projects is to have to circumvent the law, to get the money and then to voice one’s concerns, that one is too complicit to claim any authority about the matter.

The immediate response to this line or argument would be something on the lines of ‘well, at least it is doing something right’? Indeed, Brutti (2001) argues that none-involvement, “flailing against big bad windmills” is useless and that a Trojan horse method would be more effective for an anthropologist who really wants to seek some kind of positive impact:

Such a kind of approach [a consultant hired by the development firm writing a report] may be more helpful than an international court case, because once anthropologists are inside the mechanism they are perceived as interlocutors rather than adversaries and as interlocutors, they have much more negotiating power within the company (Brutti: 2001, 96).

I find it difficult to fall in line with this type of argument. The hired anthropologist may be an interlocutor in one sense, but they are also contractually bound. Because anthropologists generally feel some affiliation towards the people with whom they have completed their research, is this not some form of, at least perceptual transgression, to then work for the constituency (the mining company) who is trying to negotiate the most favourable deal for themselves and possibly against these persons as possible. This line of argument opens further questions. Consider the situation of the anthropologist who might be against a development project for reasons of social upheaval, environmental
damage, or long term effects to the population and area. Consider also that the 'local' people, that is those she or he is commissioned to study, may want this development. This begs the question of whether non-involvement on these grounds is akin to some form of paternalism and whether it is in fact a betrayal of the persons whom have given you the great gift of access to their culture. I will return to that idea of obligation later, but for now it seems prudent to explore the question of paternalism.

Mining initiatives are big business: the Porgera mine in Papua New Guinea represented an initial investment of nearly three quarters of a billion dollars (Filer, ed.: 2001). This represents an enormous boom in infrastructure and income for the entire country. A company with that much capital for investment will not easily be dissuaded. Arguably, regardless of the intervention of any number of anthropologists outlining the potential long and short term hazards, such a venture would go forth. In that case, would choosing the path of non-intervention, but knowing that the mine would go forth regardless be construed as a paternalistic act? What political statement would be made? Is non-involvement to be perceived as some throw-back to the origins of the discipline? Would the message be that the anthropologist would rather artificially wish for these particular Papua New Guineans to be frozen in time, bounded and isolated from the nefarious baddies of the outside world? Audre Lorde says “Your silence will not protect you”. Nor will it protect, by extension, those with which you have had some contact and research relationships. To my mind, non-intervention in this situation is not silence, it is a political act. It is choosing non-complicity with a system of capital movement and investment that has been shown time and time again, regardless of the number of ‘rapid ethnographic and social impact assessments’ to be disastrous. Framed in this manner, with regard to the larger social and structural, political and economic machinations, non-involvement may in fact be the strongest position from the anthropologist can take. There is, in Bourdieu’s terminology a “myth of non-political academic discourse and objectivity” (1990). In truth, everything that an anthropologist or academic writes or does not write is both subjective and highly political.

Debates of this kind always spawn questions of “Yeah, but what if...?”. What if you felt that there was a possibility that the social impact or assessment report would be beneficial? What if all of your recommendations as a consulting anthropologist were taken to heart and put into action and not used as a way of fulfilling the minimum in terms of the law of the land and identifying for the contracting body possible loopholes in future lawsuits? The truth of the matter is that these situations do not exist, or at least not as frequently as could be construed significant, and as long as the interests of the company lie in accruing maximum financial gain, the work of the anthropologist will always be compromised.

Having dealt with the question of paternalism, I must return then to the issues at stake with regards to obligation. In the case studies I have been examining, all of the anthropologists who worked either for the state, a mining outfit, or a NGO had previously done fieldwork in the area. If, as I maintain, anthropology starts with an enormous gift, this also means, on some level, it incurs an enormous debt. Martha Macintyre was hired by a mining company in Papua New Guinea to do a social impact assessment about a group of people with whom she had previously done fieldwork. She writes: “I felt that by putting my knowledge to some useful end, I could in some way ‘pay a debt’ to the people of Milne Bay who had provided me with hospitality and shared their knowledge and understandings with me as I did fieldwork over the previous eight years” (Macintyre: 2001, 109). Anthropologists must, on some level feel a sense of ‘reactive obligation’ to the people with whom they have shared their fieldwork experience. This feeling of obligation and emotional investment might be grounds for many to decide that if a consultancy position is offered they should accept it out of some form of duty to that community. Recall that my concern is with the anthropologist who works on behalf of the mining company, state or other larger more dominant group. Should, for example, the residents of Milne Bay have approached Martha Macintyre, I think that the reasoning and ethics would be entirely different. Paid or unpaid, to act as an advocate or researcher at the behest of the group who is to be studied brings with it far different power dynamics. Though the problems of the type of literature produced would be similar (grey as opposed to academic), I believe that the shift in positionality of working for the persons who are to be affected by these large ‘development’ projects mitigates those concerns. Presumably, in a situation wherein the anthropologist is working...
for a ‘local’ group the constraints of non-disclosure would certainly not apply.

Yet for all of this ethical pondering and table banging, I have still only addressed the concerns of the anthropologist as an individual, and the constraints on a personal professional academic career. I have not mentioned the possible effects the work of the consultant anthropologist on the discipline as a whole. These are, to my mind, many. Recall also that with regards to this paper, I am addressing anthropologists who straddle the divide between academic and consultant researcher. Whether or not these ground rules change if the anthropologist claims to be working outside of the academic spectrum is beyond the scope of this paper. Though it may be significant to note, that for academics, it is their obligation, ethically, to publish that which they find. It seems important to reiterate that contractual restraints if not deny this responsibility, then they at least limit the possibility of fulfilling this duty. Perhaps the title, the ascription of anthropologist, of doctor of anything to do with the social sciences carries with it some sort of authority and legitimacy that, if misused, could compromise the discipline. I have been questioned on this stance. Many would argue that I put too much emphasis on the power of the academic. But recall again the specific circumstances about which I am speaking. The consultant anthropologists in these situations are working in an area in which post-secondary (indeed in some cases, even secondary) education is not easily attainable. Just as high cost commodities such as vehicles, and foreign food are valued higher than local goods, so too is advanced education given a higher value, authority and legitimacy than local indigenous knowledge. The foreigner (i.e. the consultant anthropologist), is representative of both the highly desirable foreign goods as well as a foreign (and therefore somehow better) education. The power dialectic that is forged as a result must be taken into account.

That being said I think it is imperative to include in this argument some discussion on the ways in which the consultant or applied anthropologist’s work may affect the rest of the discipline. Strathern and Stewart argue:

The political position of the [consultant] research worker can be characterized by the following elements: [1] The research worker is interstitial between power groups. [2] the people may therefore overestimate the research worker’s ability to mediate between these groups. [3] The research worker is perceived as someone whose loyalty to another interest group must be won over. [4] The research worker must then demonstrate this loyalty; but from the researcher’s own viewpoint it is most important to be able to preserve a degree of neutrality in order to remain impartial (2001: 12).

There are many issues at work here. First, though secondary to the point to which I am trying to put forth is the difficulty that the consultant researcher has in attempting to present some form of objectivity while working ostensibly from a discipline which has in the past several decades made a point to argue that their work is neither objective nor impartial but recognition of this subjectivity can only add to the quality of the work. Second, and more important to the current issue, is the way in which the consulting anthropologist’s position is changed in relation to that of the studied population. The researcher is no longer someone who is there because she or he has an interest in the way that the ‘local’ population works. They are now using the research gained previously to gain recompense from a company that may or may not have the groups best interest in mind and who is someone whose work can at least perceptually, be manipulated by the company for a better negotiating position. It is my opinion that if something is perceived to be true, then it is true in its practice. To be sure, this position is not new by any stretch of the imagination. Many ethnographic accounts give detail of how the researcher is welcomed and then used as a tool to gain either bureaucratic or monetary assistance. The situation when the anthropologist is in actuality or perceived to be representative of another interest (e.g. in these cases, the mining company) however, changes the situation. Bruttı (2001) writes of his experience and others that there is a tendency to “assimilate the researcher to the company directing the survey”. This puts the researcher in a precarious position. Scaglion writes explicitly about this in his work (2001). Scaglion was employed by the government of New Guinea to oversee some changes in

http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/totem/vol11/iss1/6
fieldwork experience as one in which he groups. He writes in detail about his first to negotiate compensation payments with local groups. This nature could be very useful for mining and traditional law and ownership claims. Work of other resource development countries that need to formulate questions and resolutions in a way that as an anthropologist he knew were incompatible for the group with which he had done his fieldwork. Thus, in trying to fulfill his reactive obligation and provide assistance, Scaglion had committed a kind of cultural treason. Two things arise out of Scaglion’s account. The first is the difficulty that Scaglion had reconciling himself to his new position. Secondly, and more to do with the effect on the discipline as a whole, with the increase of anthropological consultants in Papua New Guinea, and their accompanying reception as persons of authority and synonymy with development and mining companies, how will future generations of anthropologists be able to conduct their academic research? I am not, to be sure, suggesting any form of simplicity on the part of the local populations. I am simply noting that the perception of the role of the anthropologist as someone who does research for the sake of research will be compromised. This is a tenuous point to be sure, but one that I feel must be mentioned. Beyond even these finer points, Greider argues that there is another way that the applied anthropologist does not fulfill their own reactive obligation to her or his own discipline: “Applied anthropologists often have a wealth of research findings that never become part of the academic literature, if the findings are reported, they may be masked to such an extent that their contribution to social science is limited” (Greider: 1993, 432). Barring even the ways around non-disclosure agreements proposed by Jorgensen earlier, this argument would seem to propose a stronger possible position of criticism and advocacy by virtue of having greater backing of other academics.

I have not yet brought up the issue of anthropologists who work as consultants or even employees for NGOs in relation to the effect of the work on the discipline as whole. It is perhaps in this arena that the issue of damage to the discipline as a result of a prevalence of applied anthropologists must be considered. To be clear, I do not believe that the same dangers are inherent in this situation as in those wherein the anthropologist works for the development initiative (mining company) directly. However, I would feel remiss if I were to ignore some of the potential hazards endemic in working for NGOs. Paige West worked independently as an academic researcher within a wildlife management project in Papua New Guinea and argues:

the people of …the project area are characterized by NGOs as both ignorant of and threatening to their environment. By using anthropologically based terminology to discuss indigenous or local peoples, NGOs give the allusion of attention being paid to local social practices and social relations (West: 2001, 68-9).

She says that rampant misrepresentation can be the result of this co-optation. Obviously anthropologists do not have the copyright on their language. But the addition of anthropologists in to the arena of NGOs, who can fall prey to the same development traps as either the state or corporation, has dangerous feel of complicity similar to that of working for a company. Wagner (2001: 88-9) sees trouble when NGOs use the presence of anthropologists as a claim to legitimacy for their own projects. He tells of being given office space within an NGO in Papua New Guinea for his own research purposes, only to find out that his presence was being publicized as a political strategy for the NGO to use his academic credibility to gain access to more funds. I find the 'ends justify the means' counter-argument to this allegation of complicity unhelpful especially when the anthropologist’s name (and if frequent enough the discipline’s name) is subjected to a loss of credibility in the process. West worries that the co-optation of anthropological terminology for the production
and reproduction of local peoples may be misconstrued as the new twenty first century anthropology. These misrepresentations may lead to essentialisms that do only disservice to the indigenous knowledge and claims that circulate and thus reflect both on the discipline and the ‘good intentions’ applied anthropologist who lends their name and credibility to an NGO.

These sins of good intent, are it seems lesser than the sins of those who feel it necessary to lend their name and legitimacy to companies on the reasoning that some intervention is better than none. Macintyre highlights an extremely salient point in the following.

The expectation that the most disruptive conflict will be between the mining company and the community informs most terms of reference....conflict with the company can be dramatic and disruptive, but conflict within the community is corrosive and the source of many of the social problems that emerge and become entrenched (2001:113).

Thus it seems that a false binary is set up when an anthropologist works as an interlocutor from within a company. Scaglion’s experience as well as Strathern and Stewart’s assertion that the contract can bind the scope of the analysis is important to remember. The academic researcher, or even the contract researcher who is working on behalf of the local indigenous group, is able to formulate their analysis in ways that may exceed the scope of the direct relationship between company and the local. Many of the authors examined who were in favor of the work of the applied anthropologist spoke in terms of being able to identify long and short term hazards. Yet, they are identified, mostly for the contractor. If the anthropologist is not constrained, and has the ability to report her or his findings to the population under study, does not this population have a greater base from which to provide resistance to the encroachment of development projects; or if halting the project is not the concern, at least negotiate from a stronger position?

Every decision that we make, both as academics and as people who are present in the world is political. The degree to which we feel we can work towards mitigation of perceived or potential wrong doings is affected by the arena in which we choose to act. History has shown that the ethical responsibilities of even the academic anthropologist are heavy. The burden representing, if even only one’s own experience of another culture is heavy, and misinterpretations can lead to dire consequences. Yet, the reflexivity and subjectivity of the discipline make its own demands in terms of where authority can most cogently be drawn.

I am not alone in my ethical table pounding. Kirsch, an anthropologist who began work as a consultant for the Ok Tedi mining project in Papua New Guinea and then moved to work as an advocate in conjunction with a NGO because he felt his work was being misrepresented argues, “activism is a logical extension of the commitment to reciprocity that underlies the practice of anthropology”. Perhaps it is the anthropologist who publishes where and when she or he wants, and works outside of the discipline, untethered by the constraints of the consultant’s contract who can most stand up for both their own personal beliefs as well as uphold the standards of the academy. Hyndman writes: “The role of the anthropologist and activist have been effectively combined to analyze the social costs of the environmental problems and suggest remedies for the mining crisis” (Hyndman 2001: 46).

The role of the anthropologist in development is tricky at best. The anthropologist who chooses to work for a major resource extraction company is compromised on several different levels. These include: ownership, censorship, co-option of work and legitimacy, as well as transgressions both to the informants as well as the discipline from which the trained anthropologist garners their authority and academic freedom. Escobar (1991: 677) writes: “Development anthropology, for all its claim to relevance to local problems, to cultural sensitivity, and to access to interpretive holistic methods, has done no more than recycle, and dress in more localized fabrics, the discourses of modernization and development”. Whether the severity of this situation bears truth, the sentiment needs to be recognized. The anthropologist has only her or his name and thus the choices that she or he makes in terms of for whom they will work have long term ramifications. It is my contention that writing from within the academy is the
strongest possible position from which any attempts to fulfill a reciprocal obligation to the people who first gave the anthropologist the enormous gift of access into their culture.

References


