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"Bioculturalism" -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka

2016-03-07 05:00:56

By Daniel Hruschka

This series aims to get anthropologists and closely-related others talking seriously, and thinking practically, about how to synergize biological and social scientific approaches to human health and well-being, and to what positive ends. In this interview, [Daniel Hruschka](#) responds to questions posed by [Jeffrey G. Snodgrass](#).

How and why might cultural anthropologists and social scientists interested in health benefit from integrating biological variables/biomarkers into their research and analysis?

I was originally drawn to biocultural anthropology because of its open-minded approach to answering questions and solving problems. Rather than requiring the use of a specific method as a litmus test for quality work, the biocultural approach permitted me to use any combination of study designs and methods that were best suited to answering my specific questions. A common form of integration in biocultural anthropology is to study both biological and sociocultural variables to understand how social, political, and cultural forces shape human health and functioning. However, the integrative promise of a biocultural approach goes far beyond this specific set of health-related problems. Rather, I see biocultural anthropology as creating a free space for researchers to experiment with whatever set of empirical approaches—whether they are quantitative, qualitative, experimental, observational, subjective, objective—to best answer their questions.

In addition to helping researchers better answer their question, this methodological open-mindedness also equips biocultural researchers to critique work in other fields where methods not traditionally available in a cultural anthropologist's toolkit are more highly valued. For example, in recent studies, colleagues and I have used a diverse set of methods including on-the-ground fieldwork, open-ended interviews and observations, behavioral experiments, and quantitative analyses of secondary data to challenge popular theories in evolutionary psychology about the origins of cross-cultural diversity in collectivism and

parochialism.

For these reasons, I see biocultural anthropology as the best available option for an open-minded anthropology that permits researchers to use what they need to answer important questions about society, health, and well-being, while at the same time equipping them to work across (and to challenge) other fields.

How would you respond directly to one potential cultural anthropological or social scientific critique of such an integrative “biocultural” approach?

Some scholars have argued that a biocultural approach artificially imposes an outdated holism that doesn't improve our understanding of human diversity over and above what can be accomplished by divided approaches. I would argue that “bioculturalism” as outlined in my first response doesn't impose anything. Rather, it provides researchers with more freedom to choose the set of study designs that can best answer their questions. Viewed as such, a biocultural researcher may decide that a specific study will not benefit from biological measures. Indeed, many of my studies do not. Conversely, many of my studies do not involve cultural variables. Each question demands its own careful reasoning about what combination of approaches can best answer it, and a biocultural approach permits a researcher to jettison traditional tools and adopt new ones as long as she can make good arguments for her decisions.

What is one potential caution you'd have for cultural anthropologists or social scientists considering a biocultural approach?

Biocultural anthropology's methodological flexibility makes it impossible to become a master of all aspects of a study design one might use. Indeed, trying to do everything by oneself will lead to numerous rookie mistakes and bad interpretations. To truly profit from the approach, it is important to reach out to expert colleagues and build teams, so that you can be sure that you are using and interpreting each empirical tool most appropriately.

What is one piece of research (ideally your own) that points to the benefits of such an integrative approach?

There is so much good work out there that it is difficult to choose just one.

I will choose one of our recent projects to illustrate how an integrative approach can be used on a non-health related issue. For nearly a century, anthropologists and social scientists have observed that societies differ dramatically in the scope and severity of parochialism—or the differential treatment of insiders and outsiders. In the last few years, our lab has asked, “What cultural, social and psychological factors lead members of some societies to have much wider ‘insider’ spheres than members of other societies?” This requires a combination of in-depth fieldwork and data collection in diverse settings for a deeper understanding of potential cultural and social factors, behavioral experiments to illuminate the key factors shaping people’s behaviors in different contexts, and quantitative analysis of secondary data to assess at a broad (yet necessarily shallow) level the cultural and social determinants of varying levels of parochialism across many societies. None of these approaches in isolation would give a very satisfying answer to our broad question. Together, they are helping us identify where existing theories appear to work and where they are inadequate at these different levels of investigation.

How might cultural anthropologists or social scientists interested in such an approach get started? What would be some helpful references?

The first requirement is a willingness to find the set of tools and experts that will help you answer your questions, disregarding traditional field or discipline. As Jeff mentioned, it can be very useful to look outside your own discipline and subfield to find researchers who are asking similar questions (but with different skills and methodological training). The first place to start might be at home, searching through your university directory to find scholars who seem to share similar questions and inviting them to lunch to learn how they tackle similar questions from their own field.

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[Daniel Hruschka](#), PhD, MPH is an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Global Health at Arizona State University. Trained as an anthropologist and epidemiologist, he studies how cultural, social, and economic factors shape human behavior and health. He has worked for the past eight years with collaborators at LAMB Hospital (Bangladesh) and the International Center for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh, on two main topics: (1) interventions aimed at improving maternal and child health, and (2) determinants of within-community aid and assistance. He directs the Laboratory of Culture Change and Behavior which supports development of social science methods aimed at studying these issues as well as training of undergraduate and graduate students in social science research. His work has received funding from the Templeton Foundation and the U.S. National Science Foundation.

AMA citation

Hruschka D. "Bioculturalism" -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka. *Somatosphere*. 2016. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11750>. Accessed March 7, 2016.

APA citation

Hruschka, Daniel. (2016). "Bioculturalism" -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka. Retrieved March 7, 2016, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11750>

Chicago citation

Hruschka, Daniel. 2016. "Bioculturalism" -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka. *Somatosphere*. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=11750> (accessed March 7, 2016).

Harvard citation

Hruschka, D 2016, "Bioculturalism" -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka, *Somatosphere*. Retrieved March 7, 2016, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=11750>>

MLA citation

Hruschka, Daniel. "'Bioculturalism' -- An interview with Daniel Hruschka." 6 Mar. 2016. *Somatosphere*. Accessed 7 Mar. 2016. <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=11750>>