Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Anthropology of Friendship by Sandra Bell; Simon Coleman
Graham Allan


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approaches, a direction followed in subsequent chapters with remarkable consistency. The book accomplishes the very complex task of demarcating differences between divergent theoretical trends while emphasizing that definite and absolute boundaries between theoretical perspectives are more-or-less untenable. Barnard thus anticipates the most frequent criticism levelled against those who classify theory in terms of self-contained approaches, reducing permeable and dynamic ideas to artificial and rigid categories. In circumventing this pitfall, he clearly shows how anthropology has been shaped by the influence of particular theorists and national traditions, while anthropological ideas themselves do not constitute impenetrable fortresses.

Over three chapters, Barnard devotes considerable attention to early, pre-functionalist, phases of the discipline's development. This is both a strength and a weakness. The strength lies in the scholarly, concise account of the pre-evolutionist, evolutionist, and diffusionist approaches, which uniquely highlights how modern anthropological concerns are rooted in early conceptual paradigms, while illustrating how some central anthropological concerns preceded the formation of anthropology itself. On the other hand, the significant space devoted to outdated theories could easily have been filled with more recent (and attractive) examples of anthropology. Barnard partially evades criticism by discussing late twentieth-century varieties of evolutionism in the same chapter as he does nineteenth-century versions.

The remaining chapters unravel major theoretical approaches in anthropology, drawing stimulating portraits of the personalities of particular authors, and – to the delight of undergraduate students, but also lecturers designing new courses – include valuable summaries of particular debates. Barnard clearly draws the line between functionalism and structural functionalism, a distinction avoided by most other introductory books. However, he places a chapter on Structuralism after those on Marx and Cognitive Science, a presentation order which might cause difficulty to non-specialist readers. Barnard's discussion of post-structuralism and postmodernism as emerging movements in anthropology comprises one of the few available accounts at introductory level. His decision to examine feminism in the same chapter as post-structuralism is successful, although I would have preferred to see his excellent account followed by some more detailed portraits of recent feminist and post-structuralist authors and their work. Finally, the decision to discuss Evans-Pritchard with interpretivists from the United States brings British and American anthropology closer than in other accounts.

Barnard's textbook is an advanced introduction to anthropology. It will make valuable key reading for first year anthropology undergraduates – who might find the book demanding, but definitely thought-provoking – and students in all subsequent years. Postgraduate students attending intensive one-year MA courses will also find the book useful in offering a structure with which to organize the abundant information delivered in general core theory courses. Finally, teachers of anthropology would discover inspiration for future course preparation. Theory and history in anthropology will make a contribution, not only to those introductory courses presenting anthropology in terms of a chronological sequence of events, but also to those that emphasize a more thematic approach. As the author himself stresses, the boundaries between different anthropological approaches are fluid and permeable. However, as he demonstrates, it is also a good exercise to try to define them conceptually.

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Over the last decade, political and academic debates about social capital, communitarianism, and other aspects of informal solidarities have fostered a growing interest in friendship and its social patterning. In this volume, Bell and Coleman have brought together nine diverse papers taking an anthropological stance on friendship. Anthropology thus, of course, long been concerned with the significance of informal solidarities and ties of amity within different social and economic formations. At the same time, friendship remains problematic for anthropology in that the uncertain boundaries of the topic create tensions over the relationships to be included in the categorization. Such tensions are evident in this book.

In the first chapter, Carrier raises the question of the societal characteristics necessary for friendship to be possible at all. Arguing that friendship is inherently a relationship based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiment or affection, Carrier contends that bureaucratic, kinship, or other constrained relationships are ‘something very different from what we call “friendship”’ (p. 21). Core to his argument is that friendship involves a mode of thought about affective relationships which requires a notion of the self as an autonomous person. Friendship is consequently part of a ‘larger cluster of social and cultural practices’ (p. 35) and not a human universal. In his complex chapter, Paine is also concerned with the role of the self in friend-
ship. Drawing on a variety of sources, Paine analyses the quest for a 'verifiable self' emergent within Western culture and the significance of this within Western representations of friendship. What drives both these chapters is an awareness that friendship is a form of relationship rooted in those social and economic formations characterized as modernity.

This perspective also provides a starting-point for Smart's chapter contrasting friendship with guanxi ties in Chinese culture. Drawing on existing analyses, he relates the instrumentality inherent in guanxi relationships (but not friendship) to the 'fluid, person-centred networks' (p. 133) characteristic of Chinese social organization. Somewhat similarly, Abrahams's chapter focuses on the development and management of informal relationships of trust and instrumental reciprocity within Estonia, rather than on friendship as sociability or affection. His central argument is that such ties of informal solidarity are a means of managing personal and familial interests in a bureaucratized economy in which scarcity predominates.

Durrenberger and Passon write about the patterns of amity and reciprocity that individuals in pastoral African societies develop. They illustrate this by exploring how aspects of modernization, in particular education and global religion, alter the patterns of amity and reciprocity that individuals in pastoral societies develop.

These are made explicit in Aguilar's insightful chapter on shifting patterns of friendship in pastoral African societies. Aguilar's stance is that, being a social construction, friendship inevitably takes different forms in different societies. In his words, friendship's 'manifestations are influenced by localized ways of being human and being social...the social importance of friendship within societies and within groups of individuals varies' (p. 171). He demonstrates this by exploring how aspects of modernization, in particular education and global religion, alter the patterns of amity and reciprocity that individuals in pastoral societies develop.

Other contributors treat different idioms of informal solidarity as 'friendship', without the reflection explicit in Aguilar's chapter. For example, Durrenberger and Pålsson write about the alliances and friendships that developed in Iceland's Commonwealth period based on the Icelandic sagas. While they illustrate the importance of amity in the alliances recorded as generated — and broken — in the sagas, it is arguable that the framework of 'friendship' needs stretching a degree too far to fit the relationships they analyse. Similarly, Rezende's account of differences in friendship practices among groups she knew in England and Brazil depends on the claim that Brazilian mistress-maid relationships can usefully be characterized as friendships, rather than, say, patron-client relationships. Rapport's interesting analysis of domino-playing in an English village pub avoids this problem by highlighting the different, sometimes ambivalent, ways in which sociality is routinely generated in this context, facilitating the expression of 'friendly intimacies' in ties that, of themselves, are not obviously intimate.

The essays in this volume are certainly disparate, as the editors recognize in their thoughtful introduction. None the less, collectively they highlight key questions about the subject matter of an anthropology of friendship, particularly about the different ways ties of amity are organized and utilized cross-culturally. And while the language of 'friendship' is not wholly appropriate, alternative formulations lack a certain bite: 'the anthropology of informal, non-institutionalized personal solidarities' — no, perhaps not.

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Social (or cultural) anthropology is a subject in which theory is far more important than methodology. Ethnography may be as important as theory, but tradition tells us that common sense and human sensitivity are what are needed, not formal procedures or checklists. The methodological debate I recall before my first major fieldwork study, in the 1970s, was on whether one does or does not need a table and chair in the field (I settled on a chair but no table).

Over the decades, all that has changed. The most crucial change has been in the growing awareness that theory and method are, or at least can be, closely related. That seems to be the main (though sometimes only implicit) point Russell Bernard and his twenty-seven contributors make in this book. It is also one of the great strengths of the book, which covers 'method' in its widest sense. There is an excellent introductory overview by Bernard, then six chapters on methodological perspectives (epistemological, strategic, ethical, feminist, etc.), seven on acquiring information (mainly in the field but also in the archives), three on interpreting information (including numerical, textual, and cross-cultural information), and two on applying and presenting anthropology.

The interplay between theory and method comes out, for example, in discussions of migration and globalization (by Ulf Hannerz), brief allusions to the Captain Cook debate (by James Fernandez and Michael Herzfeld) and the Samoan controversy (by Jeffrey Johnson),