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BRIEF REPORT

Building an Inclusive Big Tent for Methods: Invitation to a Community of Practice Where the Methods Belong to All of Us

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ABSTRACT
Creating a Community of Practice has been central to the vision of the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP). The CAMP Community of Practice explores the practices of doing research and teaching research methods, drawing on the great diversity of methods used by anthropologists who collect and analyze cultural data. The methodological diversity now represented in CAMP reflects exciting developments in our discipline, but it also poses challenges for forging shared definitions and visions for research methods training. Here we reflect on the lessons we've learned from building the CAMP Community of Practice—lessons that we hope will be useful for communities of practice in applied anthropology.

KEYWORDS
Research methods; community of practice; big tent anthropology

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY
The NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP) aims to create a community of practice where anthropologists can share and learn different ways to study and teach about research methods. This community of practice works with a variety of methods that cultural anthropologists use, in the spirit of creating a "big tent" for our field. Although this diversity is exciting, it also makes it challenging to agree on what these methods should look like and how to teach them. In this article, we share what we've learned from developing the CAMP community of practice. We hope these insights will help other groups working in applied anthropology.

From its inception, creating a Community of Practice has been central to the vision of the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP). Communities practice advance knowledge and promote best practices through shared learning, resources, and community building around a common interest—in this case research methods training (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The CAMP Community of Practice explores the practices of doing research and teaching research methods, drawing on the great diversity of methods used by anthropologists who collect and analyze cultural data. Therein lies the challenge of a "big tent" approach.

Among the social sciences, cultural anthropology is noted for its dedication to fieldwork, but also for its lack of attention to *systematic* methods for collecting and analyzing fieldwork data. For many years, methods training for cultural anthropology students consisted of reading published ethnographies and being told to go to the field, engage in "deep hanging out," and figure out on their own how to collect and analyze data (Negrón et al. 2024; Ruth et al. 2022; Snodgrass et al. 2024). To fill this gap in training, the U.S. National Science Foundation has supported summer courses on research methods for U.S.-based anthropologists since the 1950s (Bernard 2008 for details of this history). The methods taught in all the prior iterations of this effort were naturally limited to those known and used by the faculty who taught those

courses. But since 2020, the most recent iteration of CAMP has dramatically expanded the set of methods being taught by bringing in new faculty scholars with expertise in humanistic and arts-based methods, digital and critical methods, participatory and Indigenous methods, as well as methods from subfields like biocultural, evolutionary, and ecological anthropology.

The methodological diversity now represented in CAMP reflects exciting developments in our discipline, but it also poses challenges for forging shared definitions and visions for research methods training. Here we reflect on the lessons we've learned from building the CAMP Community of Practice—lessons that we hope will be useful for communities of practice in applied anthropology.

Building an inclusive community of practice

Communities of practice are constituted around common interests, relationships, and shared frameworks, tools, and language (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The last three may hinge on shared assumptions about the nature of the group's work. In the CAMP Community of Practice, we became aware of differences in assumptions about what research is for and what constitutes a research method. We learned that, in order to develop an environment of shared trust and transparency, communities of practice must make space for unspoken assumptions to come to the surface (Hemmasi and Csanda 2009). The CAMP Community of Practice structured interactions around workshops and collaborative writing—activities that build trust and a shared vision. A guiding principle of the CAMP Community of Practice is that differences (e.g., methods, viewpoints, and expertise) are a strength of our discipline to be embraced and bridged. Nevertheless, mutual learning about methods and epistemological positions can be challenging because our members express deeply held ideas about "right" and "wrong" ways to do research. We find that growth mindsets and epistemic humility are necessary to foster inclusive communities of practice, in our case around the teaching and practice of research.

We find, also, that close attention to power dynamics is also necessary. One feature of our CAMP Community of Practice is that many of our senior scholars focused on training students in ways that prioritize individual career advancement (a value prioritized during their own training). This contrasts with the goals of many of our early career scholars who wish to focus more broadly on the needs of communities and research participants—goals that reflect anthropology's move towards community-engaged practices and away from research that can become overly extractive. The concerns of younger scholars also reflect changes in the demography of the discipline. In 1966, about 20% of doctorates in anthropology were awarded in the United States to women. Today, it's over 60% (http://tinyurl.com/anthro-demography). Changes in the race-and-gender makeup of the professoriate introduce important opportunities and necessary challenges for dialogue about epistemological differences.

In fact, some of our most vigorous discussions were about the principles and values that undergird our use of research methods. While some members of our Community of Practice lean in the direction of methods as value-free instrumental tools, others argue that all methods come with their historical baggage that bear on ethical considerations. While choices about which methods to use must be guided by research questions and needs, we can no longer avoid considering the weight certain methods have in communities historically harmed by exploitative research (Smith 2021).

In reconciling these tensions through open discussion, we arrived at the need to consider both instrumental and historical strengths and weaknesses of research methods. Indeed, a method's instrumental value may be diminished if communities do not trust researchers and the research process. There are other tensions about methods within our discipline—about the merits of qualitative vs. quantitative and scientific vs. humanistic, for example—that the CAMP Community of Practice aims to transcend as a "big tent" where the "methods belong to all of us" (Bernard 1994). We do this through dialogue in CAMP co-learning workshops, through collaborative writing, and by coming together to train doctoral students in a range of methods.

Implications for practicing anthropology

Practicing and applied anthropologists who seek spaces for dialogue, methodological exploration, and collaboration are invited to join our Community of Practice (sign up for the listserv on methods4all.org). Practicing anthropologists might be the only anthropologist in their workplace or on their project, but the CAMP Community of Practice offers a place where we can all talk through ethics and research design, and partake in healthy and respectful debates that are core to our field.

In the CAMP Community of Practice, we have found it useful to offer multi-modal means of connecting with other members, from asynchronous online communications to in-person gatherings, fostering both social and scholarly connections. Prioritizing career growth and leadership development, we emphasize connecting members across career stages and institutional cultures. We carefully consider how to make our community of practice a particularly welcoming space for scholars who may feel excluded in mainstream institutions. We further strive for the CAMP Community of Practice to be an exciting space for innovation and cutting-edge thinking on methods. Community of practice membership may change over time and members may rotate leadership on CAMP collaborative papers, but a core commitment to building a big tent for methods in anthropology guides our work.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Rosalyn Negrón is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, where she is also Research Director for the Sustainable Solutions Lab. Rosalyn's research is primarily driven by issues of health and well-being, with particular attention to the role of decision-making, social connections, social environments, and migration. A past Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellow, Rosalyn's research has been funded by numerous agencies including the National Science Foundation and the Environmental Protection Agency. She is co-founder and director of UMass Boston's Transdisciplinary Dissertation Proposal Development Program.

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shah noor hussein is a Sudanese writer, multimedia visual artist, and public scholar crafting narratives at the nexus of Black feminist thought and Queer diaspora studies. They are a Cota-Robles Fellow in the Departments of Anthropology and Critical Race & Ethnic Studies at UC Santa Cruz and an Adjunct Professor at California College of the Arts. shah's research illuminates the significance of young women's cultural remixes through a multimedia study of music, dance, and performance in the Sudanese diaspora.

Melissa Beresford is an assistant professor of anthropology at San José State University and a faculty affiliate in the Center for Global Health at Arizona State University. Her research examines how humans use social and institutional arrangements adapt to water insecurity. She is also a methodologist and conducts research to advance social science research methods and research methods training. She is the Director of the Community of Practice for the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP).

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Amber Wutich is an ASU President's Professor, Director of the Center for Global Health, and 2023 MacArthur Fellow. An expert on water insecurity, Wutich directs the Global Ethnohydrology Study, a cross-cultural study of water knowledge and management in 20+ countries. Her two decades of community-based fieldwork explore how people respond, individually and collectively, to extremely water-scarce conditions. An ethnographer and methodologist, Wutich has authored 200+ papers and chapters, co-authored 6 books, edits the journal Field Methods, and directs the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program.

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