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BRIEF REPORT

How Teaching Research Design Advances Applied Anthropology

Jeffrey C. Johnson[a] , Susan Weller[b] , Jeffrey Snodgrass[c], Mark Moritz[d] , Christopher McCarty[a], Alyssa Crittenden[e] , Francois Dengah[f], James K. Gibb[g] , and Robin Nelson[h]

aDepartment of Anthropology, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA; bDepartment of Population Health, University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas, USA; cDepartment of Anthropology and Geography, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado, USA; dDepartment of Anthropology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA; eDepartment of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, USA; fDepartment of Sociology and Anthropology, Utah State University, Logan, Utah, USA; gDepartment of Anthropology, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA; hSchool of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

Mastery of research design options offers a powerful tool in the Applied Anthropologist's toolkit. Because policy makers depend upon reliable evidence – and not just debates – applied anthropologists need to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses in data collection methods and designs to offer reasonable and strong approaches to problem solving. Future applied anthropologists may find themselves in situations where a variety of data collection methods are called for (from qualitative to quantitative) and must be able to think through various comparative designs (from simple two group designs to more complicated multi group comparisons) to find a reasonable answer to a problem. Students need to be exposed to the smorgasbord of design, data collection, and analysis options to make wise choices and to be able to pivot to a revised plan, which such action is called for.

Applied anthropologists address an array of contemporary societal or client concerns or issues. They work with various stakeholders, communities, and clients who may stand to gain or lose from the outcome of the research at hand. While community-centered praxis, participatory research, and community-based research are often discussed in the context of applied anthropology, they are not *synonymous* with applied anthropology. Community-based or community-inclusive research takes place across many settings, including applied circumstances. Applied anthropology also takes place across a range of other contexts (e.g., government, corporate, and development), including those where attention is paid to community or client engagement, the inclusion of local knowledge and meaning systems, and rapport/trust building within the community or organization.

One thing that separates applied anthropology from academic anthropology is that the research problem and questions are often determined by the client rather than the researcher (e.g., a federal agency). Nevertheless, appropriate design and methods are critical for achieving desired outcomes. This approach can include mixing methods that help a researcher effectively address their question. Distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative forms of *data* and qualitative and quantitative modes of *analysis* can be useful. Designing a project's exploratory and confirmatory phases of study is also advisable, either as distinctly defined phases or as an ongoing process. A well-thought-out research design increases the likelihood of a successful project that is perceived by the community or client as less biased and/or more trustworthy, which is essential for presenting research findings and possible solutions in a timely manner.

Presenting an explicit research design makes it possible for multiple stakeholders to better understand and provide input on the methods, identify potential complications with the process, and help determine whether the question(s) are

clear. This presentation is critical when multiple stakeholders (who may be in conflict with one another) are involved in a study setting (e.g., resource management). Reducing biases as perceived on the part of stakeholders goes a long way to building trust, agreement, and maximizing the potential for problem solutions. The lack of an explicit research design and methods leaves the research process entirely up to the researcher as the "black box" and makes the research process opaque to the client(s) and various stakeholders. In other words, the design and methods need to be explicit and the process transparent. Opaqueness and lack of transparency can prevent the success of any project.

A research design is not a static plan that is created at the beginning of the project. Rather, it is a logic that allows researchers to address the research problem in a practical manner and deduce what data are needed to answer the research question(s), what methods to utilize for data collection and analysis, and how to make informed decisions about the finer details (e.g., what demographic questions to include on a survey). The logic of research design allows researchers to pivot their focus to make informed decisions when things do not go as originally planned. The ability to defend these decisions is what makes the research trustworthy for those who are impacted by the findings and resulting recommendations. In other words, good design and methods allow the researcher to solve the problem by answering the question(s) in a way that benefits all parties involved and increases the potential for stakeholder buy-in.

Anthropological research, especially applied research, requires the researcher to be flexible to changes during the study and the evolving needs of communities, clients, and stakeholders. Often, research questions are reworked when entering the field and can even be scrapped and created anew as conditions change and important questions present themselves, taking priority. A strong background in research design and methods provides applied anthropologists with the ability to be more adaptive and to select the best approach for answering questions of concern, even in the most uncertain of research environments.

Thus, teaching research design is critical not only for the few students who are pursuing an academic career, but also for the students who aspire to be applied or practicing anthropologists. A good understanding of research design and methods contributes significantly to the adaptive and resilient application of anthropological knowledge for solving many of today's problems.

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Jeffrey C. Johnson: is Professor of Anthropology at the University of Florida. He is interested in how social networks influence human behavior and cognition. He is currently an associate editor for the Journal of Social Structure and the journal Social Networks. He is the author of Selecting Ethnographic Informants, Sage, 1990 and is co-author (with Borgatti, Everett, and Agneessens) of the books Analyzing Social Networks, Sage, 2024 and Analyzing Social Networks in R, Sage 2023.

Susan C. Weller: has worked as a Medical Anthropologist for over 40 years on medical school faculties and is currently a Professor in the School of Public and Population Health at the University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, Texas. She is author of Systematic Data Collection (Weller & Romney 1988) and the Cultural Consensus Model (Romney, Weller, Batchelder 1986; Romney, Batchelder, Weller 1987; Weller 2007).

Jeffrey G. Snodgrass: is a cultural and psychological anthropologist who examines how ritual and play identities and processes contribute to health and well-being, including in situations of social and environmental precarity. This topic is the focus of his recent book, The Avatar Faculty: Ecstatic Transformations in Religion and Video Games (University of California Press, 2023). He also specializes in research methods and mixes qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection and analysis in his ethnographic studies. You can read more about this approach in Systematic Methods for Analyzing Culture: A Practical Guide (Routledge, 2021).

Mark Moritz: is a professor and wicked scientist at The Ohio State University. His interdisciplinary research focuses on complex social-ecological systems, and in particular pastoral systems.

Christopher McCarty: is a Professor of Anthropology and Director of the Bureau of Economic and Business Research at the University of Florida. McCarty's research focuses on social network analysis, particularly the analysis of personal networks. His current research crosses several applications

of personal networks in healthcare as well as research on collaboration networks within and between universities.

H.J. Francois Dengah II: is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Florida State University. He is a biocultural anthropologist that employs mixed-method approaches to examine the interaction of cultural status and stress outcomes. He is also author of Systematic Methods for Analyzing Culture: A Practical Guide (Dengah II, Snodgrass, Polzer, Nixon 2021) that provides a step-by-step guide for employing cognitive anthropological methods.

James K. Gibb: is a biological anthropologist and PhD candidate at Northwestern University. His research uses a biosocial approach to explore how lived experiences shape biology and health among sexual and gender diverse people across the life course.

Robin G. Nelson: is an associate professor in the School of Human Evolution and Social Change. With a focus on critical periods of growth and development, she investigates the relationship between familial dynamics, culturally salient forms of social and financial capital and the health of Black Caribbean families. Nelson also studies equity in science and the legacy of racism on theory building in biological anthropology.

ORCID

Jeffrey C. Johnson ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1049-9813
Susan Weller ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6839-876X
Mark Moritz ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0644-0069
Alyssa Crittenden ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9196-737X
James K. Gibb ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1334-5433
Robin Nelson ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9455-4754