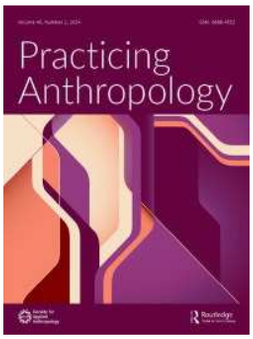

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Practicing Anthropology

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rpay20

Planning to Work as an Applied Medical Anthropologist? The Advantages of a Broad and Strategic Methodological Toolkit

Jessica Hardin, H. J. François Dengah II, James K. Gibb, Emily Mendenhall, Elie Nyembo, Kathryn Oths, Barbara A. Piperata, Jeffrey G. Snodgrass & Susan C. Weller

To cite this article: Jessica Hardin, H. J. François Dengah II, James K. Gibb, Emily Mendenhall, Elie Nyembo, Kathryn Oths, Barbara A. Piperata, Jeffrey G. Snodgrass & Susan C. Weller (2024) Planning to Work as an Applied Medical Anthropologist? The Advantages of a Broad and Strategic Methodological Toolkit, Practicing Anthropology, 46:2, 100-103, DOI: 10.1080/08884552.2024.2345805

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2345805

Published online: 18 Jun 2024.

PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY
2024, VOL. 46, NO. 2, 100–103
https://doi.org/10.1080/08884552.2024.2345805

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BRIEF REPORT

Planning to Work as an Applied Medical Anthropologist? The Advantages of a Broad and Strategic Methodological Toolkit

Jessica Hardin[a], H. J. François Dengah II[b], James K. Gibb[c], Emily Mendenhall[d], Elie Nyembo[e], Kathryn Oths[f], Barbara A. Piperata[g], Jeffrey G. Snodgrass[h] and Susan C. Weller[i]

[a]Sociology and Anthropology, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, USA; [b]Department of Anthropology, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA; [c]Anthropology, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL, USA; [d]Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University, Washington, DC, USA; [e]School of Human Evolution and Social Change, Arizona State University - Tempe Campus, Phoenix, AZ, USA; [f]Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama, Birmingham, AL, USA; [g]Anthropology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, USA; [h]Anthropology, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA; [i]School of Public and Population Health, University of Texas Medical Branch, Galveston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Applied medical anthropologists work in a variety of settings. This diversity of career paths is exciting as it allows anthropological theory and method to influence many spheres of society that impact people's everyday lived health. Success in this wide arena requires an inclusive and broad way of thinking about ethnography that incorporates multiple ways of thinking and the ability to employ a range of methodological tools. This short piece provides some guiding thoughts for developing a toolkit that is both broad and targeted over the course of your career.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Applied medical anthropologists can work in many different places and roles. This variety makes the field exciting because it lets anthropologists use their knowledge to improve many parts of society that affect people's health. To be successful, they need to think inclusively and use different approaches to ethnography. They must also be able to use various research methods. This article offers some advice on how to build a set of skills and tools that are both comprehensive and specialized throughout their career.

KEYWORDS

medical anthropology; mixed methods; toolkit

Applied medical anthropologists work in a variety of settings. They might work in policy/government, non-profit, industry, public health, or healthcare. Their work is equally varied, ranging from qualitative research, user design, implementation science to community organizing. This diversity of career paths is exciting as it allows anthropological theory and method to influence many spheres of society that impact people's everyday lived health. Success in this wide arena requires an inclusive and broad way of thinking about ethnography that incorporates multiple ways of thinking and the ability to employ a range of methodological tools.

What tools are needed? Across industry, organization and institution, participant observation is a constant (see Figure 1). In global public health, applied medical anthropologists may serve as the "qualitative" expert tasked with providing a deeper understanding of "what's going on." Tools of value may include interviews (structured and unstructured) or large scale survey design. Some work in industry, shaping the design process for myriad technologies, employing principles of human centered design. You might develop personas for product users, conduct useability evaluation or hold focus groups. In the health policy arena, the ability to conduct program analysis and evaluation will be key. This will require interpretive skills for critically reviewing documents to determine how, who, and where policies come from and their potential effectiveness in the communities of

CONTACT Jessica Hardin jahgss@rit.edu Sociology and Anthropology, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY, USA

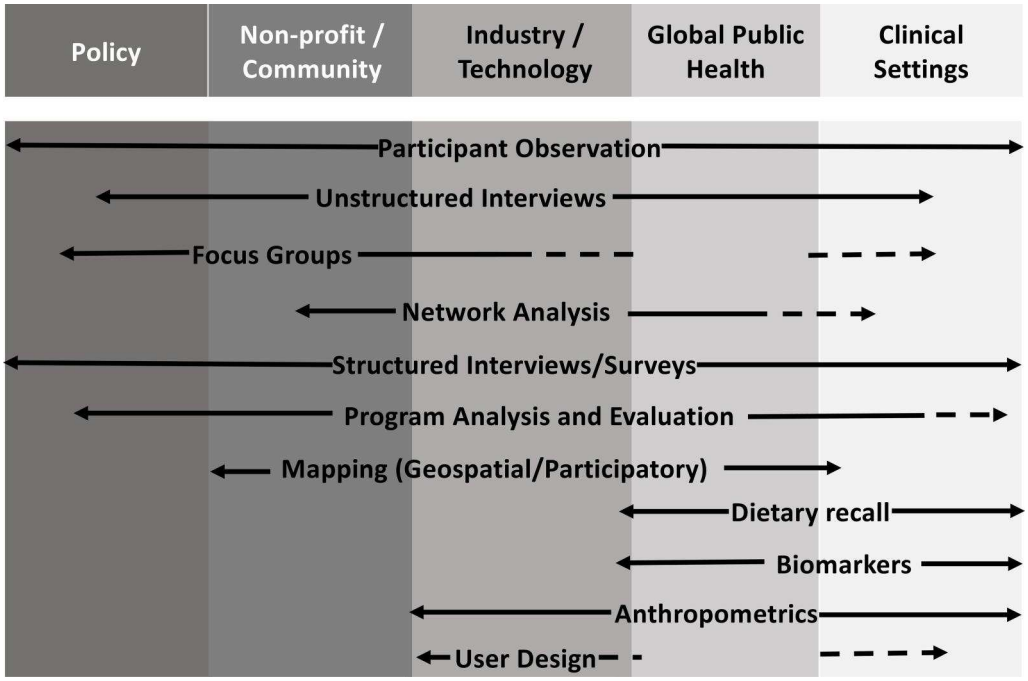

Figure 1. This figure outlines methods frequently used in five areas of work. The list is not exhaustive but meant to be a starting point, helping you to prioritize the kinds of methods you want to add to your tool box.

implementation. In clinical settings, applied medical anthropologists may be asked to collaborate with healthcare professionals to gain a deeper understanding of patients' experiences. Others may work in larger medical research teams to recruit and interface with participants involved in intervention studies and clinical trials. A rudimentary understanding of research design principles and introductory statistics are valuable skills for collaboration and communication in interdisciplinary medical settings. Knowledge of clinical data collection methods such as dietary recalls and anthropometrics may also be required, as might the ability to design and administer surveys or conduct lengthy ethnographic observations that contextualize the clinical measures. In the nonprofit and community sectors, mastery of community/participatory action research including participatory mapping and/or Photovoice will likely be useful. The examples above are just that, examples. In reality, the problem, approach, and context will determine the tools necessary.

Some methodologies may be unfamiliar to you and may not be taught in your academic program. It is also highly unlikely that any one department offers this wide range of training. This means you may need to look to other departments, (i.e., geography, sociology, education, or epidemiology and biostatistics), to professional courses or to the library of methodological training offered by CAMP International.

One way to ground your methodological training is to understand how to match methods with questions alongside a working understanding of how different methods are deployed within your targeted professional area. In fact, various anthropological methods are employed across different industries but sometimes called different things. Learning methods is thus also a process of learning *how* to learn methods. Knowing how your anthropologically informed toolkit complements those of your colleagues from other fields and being able to articulate the contributions these tools bring to solving the problem is essential. Keep in mind, you are there to complement the other members of the team, not replicate their expertise. This collaborative approach requires anthropologists to shift, in part, to

thinking about problem-based and team-based questions as opposed to exclusively ethnographically-driven, placed-based questions that are typified in the myth of the lone ethnographer.

While it may seem overwhelming to imagine developing a toolkit that is both broad and targeted, the point is that methodological training is iterative and develops over the course of your career. Developing a toolkit is an ongoing process, which requires you to use your anthropological skills in perspective-taking to learn what methodological tools are needed for any given project. In other words, if you are working on a mixed-methods team, you will likely be the only anthropologist. To work in these environments, you'll likely have to be an interpreter of disciplinary norms and methods and a translator for anthropological ways of doing methods. You'll also need to be an advocate for yourself and anthropology.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation Award SBE-2017491.

Notes on contributors

Jessica Hardin is a critical medical anthropologist, Associate Professor and Honorable Barber B. Conable Jr. Endowed Chair in International and Global Studies at Rochester Institute of Technology. She has published widely on topics of chronic illness, Christianity, embodiment and health inequity in Oceania. This ethnographic and archival research has been funded by the National Science Foundation, Wenner Gren Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her books include, Faith and the Pursuit of Health: Cardiometbaolic Disorders in Samoa (Rutgers University Press, 2019) and Fat in Four Cultures (University of Toronto Press, 2021).

H.J. François 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.

Emily Mendenhall is a medical anthropologist, Professor at the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, and Guggenheim Fellow. She has published widely at the boundaries of anthropology, psychology, medicine, and public health, and serves as Editor-in-Chief of Social Science and Medicine—Mental Health. Her monographs include Syndemic Suffering (2012), Rethinking Diabetes (2019), and Unmasked (2022).

Elie Nyembo is a Ph.D. Candidate in Global Health at Arizona State University. Elie uses mixed-methods to study formations of trauma among Congolese migrant populations resettling in the United States. Specifically, he investigates the role of white supremacy in the production of multigenerational anti-Black trauma in Congolese migrants in the U.S. Elie looks at the racialization of Africans as Black through imperialist and hegemonic constructions of white personhood through expressions of race, class, and gender to better understand the manifestation of trauma.

Kathryn Oths, now professor emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Alabama, Dr. Oths has conducted funded research on job strain and reproduction; health outcomes in highland Peru; and social aspects of food in Brazil and the US. As a biocultural medical anthropologist, she has been active in local public health assessment and promotion activities for 30 years.

Barbara A. Piperata is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at The Ohio State University. She employs biocultural models and mixedmethods to explore topics related to maternal-child health, including how economic and related nutrition transitions, as well as resource insecurities impact maternal mental and physical wellbeing and child growth.

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).

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).

ORCID

Jessica Hardin http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5340-2933
H. J. François Dengah, II http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3646-5160
James K. Gibb http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1334-5433
Emily Mendenhall http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5826-1321
Barbara A. Piperata http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7392-4517
Susan C. Weller http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6839-876X