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The article was published in *Journal of Anthropology*, 3:1 (1983), pp. 25-35.

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The Journal of Anthropology Volume 3, Number 1

THE CHANGING RESEARCH INTEREST OF NORTH AMERICAN SOCIOCULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGISTS

by

Michael Chibnik and Mark Moberg

Since sociocultural anthropologists from North American universities began conducting research eight decades ago, there have been major shifts in the regional and topical foci of their studies. Although several writers (e.g. Meggers 1946; Stern and Bohannan 1970; Murphy 1976) have described these changes, Beals' (1960) study of Ph.D. dissertations in sociocultural anthropology stands virtually alone in providing systematic quantitative data. Beals showed that there was a gradual decline from 1925 to 1954 in the proportion of dissertations concerning North America. He also noted a decrease in the proportion of dissertations devoted to historical description and an increase in the number of theses concerned with "the individual and culture," "ethos, themes, or values," and "social and cultural change."

In recent years there have been further significant changes in the types of research done by North American anthropologists. In this paper we provide quantitative data on the areal and topical foci of doctoral dissertations accepted by North American universities in two years, 1970 and 1980. We show that in the past decade there has been a noteworthy increase in the proportion of dissertations concerned with "materialist" topics (economics, ecology, demography, etc.) and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of theses about social organization and politics. We also show that the shift away from North American research noted by Beals continued through the 1960s, but that in the past decade there has been a revival of fieldwork in this area, albeit no longer primarily among indigenous peoples. In addition to examining changes over time, we analyze the extent to which a doctoral student's sex and university affiliation correlates with his or her research orientation.

THE DATA

The annual Guide to Departments of Anthropology contains a listing of all doctoral dissertations in anthropology accepted by North American

universities in the previous year. For each thesis, the Guide lists the author, title, pertinent anthropological subfield, and name of the university awarding the degree. This paper is based on an analysis of the listings of recent doctoral dissertations in sociocultural anthropology reported in the Guides of 1970-71 and 1980-81 (American Anthropological Association 1970, 1980). For each thesis we noted the sex of the author, the name of the university awarding the degree, and a variety of information about the dissertation's regional and topical foci.

Geographical Area

Dissertations were categorized into one of seven research areas--North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe, the Mideast, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. These were delineated as follows:

North America--Canada and the United States.

Latin America and the Caribbean--Western Hemisphere other than Canada and the United States.

Europe--Western and Eastern Europe (including the western republics of the U.S.S.R.).

The Mideast--all nations in northern Africa bordering the Mediterranean, extending from Gibraltar to Egypt, all predominantly Arab nations on the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and the state of Israel.

Africa--all nations on the African continent south of the Sahara (i.e. south of Morocco, Algeria, Lybia, and Egypt).

Asia--all mainland nations from Afghanistan east to Korea, and Indonesia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Japan.

Oceania--Australia, New Zealand, Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia.

Thirty eight (of 381) dissertations were not assigned geographical areas because they were cross-cultural in nature or had an areal focus that could not be easily inferred. Most, but not all, of the dissertations assigned to one of the seven areas were apparently based on fieldwork.

Topical Focus

Classifying dissertations according to topic was considerably more difficult than determining research area. Besides the obvious problems associated with inferring a thesis' content from its title,

there are numerous possible taxonomies of dissertation topics. We originally coded dissertations as to whether or not they appeared to emphasize any of the following topics: agriculture, demography, ecology, economics, expressive culture, kinship, legal systems, medicine, migration, nutrition, politics, social change, social organization, symbolism, values, women's studies. Dissertations were also categorized with respect to their use of "Marxist" or ethnohistorical approaches. In instances in which dissertation titles were too vague readily to permit the inference of a topical emphasis, our consultation of Dissertation Abstracts International (1970, 1971, 1980, 1981) was occasionally successful in characterizing a thesis' content.

Once coded, this information was used to determine whether or not dissertations significantly emphasized "materialist," "sociopolitical," or "ideological" aspects of culture. Dissertations were classified as "materialist" if their titles suggested that they contained information on one or more of the following topics: agriculture, demography, ecology, economics, medicine, nutrition; or if Marxist approaches seemed to be indicated by the titles. Dissertations were characterized as "sociopolitical" if their titles implied a focus upon any of the following topics: kinship, legal systems, politics or social organization. Finally dissertations classified as "ideological" were those whose titles suggested cognitive orientations or an emphasis on one or more of the following categories: expressive culture, religion, symbolism, values. Using this method of classification, a number of studies fell into more than one of the three broad categories. Twenty-eight dissertations were categorized as both materialist and sociopolitical, 17 as materialist and ideological, 19 as sociopolitical and ideological, and 5 as materialist, sociopolitical and ideological. Sixty-six studies did not fall into any of the three general categories.

Our classification of topics differs greatly from Beals' (1960:13) division of dissertations according to "approaches and fields of interest." Beals used five broad categories--"historical, descriptive, distributional," "social structure, social interaction, essentially non-historical," "social and cultural change," "individual and culture," and "ethos, themes, or values." Although it was tempting for comparative purposes to use Beals' classificatory system, we thought his categories reflected the concerns of another time. Our threefold division of categories has been used over the years by many anthropologists and continues to be an organizing principle in many contemporary introductory anthropology textbooks and courses.

Influence/Prestige of Department Awarding Degree

Departments of anthropology offering doctoral degrees were divided into two classes which roughly indicate influence within the profession. Universities were classified according to the number of their Ph.D. graduates listed in the 1975-76 Guide to Departments of Anthropology as employed in academic departments or university-affiliated museums. Departments with 50 or more academically employed graduates in 1975-76 were categorized as "established," others as "newer." (The "established" departments are Arizona, Berkeley, Chicago, Columbia, Cornell, Harvard, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Northwestern, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Stanford, UCLA, Washington, Wisconsin, and Yale.) Although we use the terms "established" and "newer," this dichotomous category might equally well be described as "large/small," "more influential/less influential," or "prestigious/nonprestigious."

DATA ANALYSIS

The principal objective of our data analysis was to provide quantitive information on changes in the areal and topical foci of doctoral dissertations in sociocultural anthropology between 1970 and 1980. However, we also examined the effects of a student's sex and university affiliation on the geographical areas and substantive topics pursued in doctoral research. There were considerable increases over the decade in the proportions of female doctoral students and dissertation authors from newer departments. In 1970, 32 percent (49 of 155) of the dissertation writers whose sex could be easily inferred from their names were female, while by 1980 this figure had increased to 44 percent (95 of 217). In 1970 only 37 percent (43 of 157) of the dissertation writers came from newer departments of anthropology, compared to 63 percent (140 of 221) in 1980. These changes, we thought, might explain some of the differences in the areal and topical foci of 1970 and 1980 theses. For example, we initially hypothesized that a greater proportion of women than men might find it convenient to do fieldwork in North America because of family responsibilities and social mores.

Geographical Area

The most striking difference in areal focus between 1970 and 1980 dissertations is the increase in the proportion concerning North America (see Table 1). In 1970, 19 percent (28 of 146) of all area-specific dissertations concerned North America, compared with 34 percent (66 of 197) in 1980. This change cannot be attributed to the greater proportion of female dissertation authors in 1980 since women in that year were no more likely to conduct North American research than men. Thirty-one percent (28 of 90) of 1980 dissertations written

by women concerned North America, compared to 33 percent (35 of 105) of those written by men. (Interestingly, in 1970 the sex of researchers did appear to be associated with the geographical area in which they worked. In that year 14 percent (15 of 106) of dissertations written by males were about North America, compared to 33 percent (13 of 40) of those written by females.)

Changes in areal focus might be related to the greater proportion of dissertation writers from newer departments of anthropology. In 1980, 37 percent (47 of 127) of dissertations written by students from newer departments concerned North America, compared with 27 percent (19 of 70) of those written by students from established departments. This cannot be the only relevant factor, however, because only 17 percent (18 of 105) of 1970 dissertations from established departments were about North America.

This increase in the number of North American dissertations does not indicate a return to the focus of earlier North American anthropological research. Almost all pre-1930 North American dissertations concerned indigenous peoples, while the vast majority of contemporary North American theses examine non-indigenous minority subcultures, occupational groups, or women's roles in American society.

Topical Focus

Table 2 shows that from 1970 to 1980 there was a considerable increase in the proportion of dissertations about "materialist" topics and a corresponding decrease in the proportion of dissertations about "sociopolitical" topics. Table 2 includes all dissertations that seem to contain substantial information about one and only one of our three general topical categories (materialist, sociopolitical, ideological). An analysis of <u>all</u> dissertations, however, also indicated a marked increase in the proportion of materialist theses and a sizable decrease in the proportion of sociopolitical dissertations.

These changes in topical emphasis connot be attributed to the increase in the percentage of female dissertation writers over the ten year period. In both 1970 and 1980 there was little difference between males and females in the relative proportion of theses falling into each of the three general categories.

The greater proportion of 1980 dissertations written by students from newer departments may be a more relevant variable with regard to the shift in topical emphases. Table 2 shows that the proportion of materialist dissertations at established departments remained the same (39 percent) in 1970 and 1980. In contrast, doctoral research at newer departments was marked by an increase in the proportion of

materialist dissertations from 25 percent of the total in 1970 to 56 percent in 1980.

Our data provide some support for the widely-held belief that certain departments are more "materialistic" in orientation than others. Of 1970 and 1980 sociocultural dissertations containing substantial information about one and only one of our three general categories, 63 percent (5 of 8) of the theses from Michigan were characterized as materialist, compared to 38 percent (6 of 16) from Berkeley, 36 percent (9 of 25) from Columbia, 30 percent (3 of 10) from Harvard, and only 13 percent (1 of 8) from Chicago. It would be interesting to make a similar analysis of a larger sample, such as all dissertations completed in the past thirty years.

There is also considerable variation in the topical foci of dissertations concerning different world areas. For dissertations containing considerable information on one, and only one, of our three general categories, the proportion of materialist dissertations ranged from 20 percent (2 of 10) in the Mideast and 27 percent (10 of 37) in Asia up to 60 percent (9 of 15) in Europe and 61 percent (36 of 59) in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is not easy to explain these differences. Perhaps the seemingly pervasive effects of ritual and religious life in some of these areas (such as the Mideast or Southeast Asia) or the complexity of kinship systems in others (as in Africa or Australia) are likely to influence researchers to emphasize sociopolitical or ideological cultural components in these regions. Conversely, the relatively "Western" structures of kinship and essentially Christian religious beliefs (with varying degrees of "orthodoxy") in most of the Caribbean and non-tribal Latin America may lead to an entirely different emphasis, such as the problems of economic underdevelopment or modes of agricultural subsistence. However, it must be noted that the proportion of materialist dissertations in "exotic" sub-Saharan Africa (40 percent) scarcely differs from that in North America (42 percent).

Finally, there were striking increases between 1970 and 1980 in the proportions of dissertations using Marxist approaches and those examining the social roles and beliefs of women. In 1970 only 3 percent (4 of 157) of sociocultural dissertations appeared from their titles to employ Marxist approaches, compared to 11 percent (25 of 221) in 1980. In 1970, 3 percent (5 of 157) of dissertations explicitly focused on women, compared to 12 percent (26 of 221) in 1980.

DISCUSSION

This brief paper is intended to be primarily descriptive rather than interpretative. Untangling the causal factors underlying the data we have presented would be a difficult task, involving a thorough exam-

ination of the economics and sociology (and anthropology) of academia on this continent. Nevertheless, we would like to conclude by offering some tentative explanations for the recent increases in the proportions of North American research and materialist-oriented dissertations.

One consequence of the increasing political assertiveness of some Third World nations over the past decade has been the prohibition or severe restriction of anthropological fieldwork by North Americans in these countries. Furthermore, as the number of applicants to major funding agencies has increased, North American anthropologists have encountered greater difficulty in securing financial support for extended fieldwork abroad. These considerations have no doubt led some doctoral students, who may have originally wished to conduct fieldwork elsewhere, to carry out studies in North America.

Changes in the sociopolitical views of graduate students may also partially explain the increase in North American dissertations. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, student political activism and a growing awareness of the plight of American minority groups may have led to a greater number of dissertations based upon studies of North American subcultures. The American Anthropological Association recognized and legitimized this growing interest in "anthropology at home" by passing a resolution at the 1969 annual meeting. This resolution, offered by George Foster and Dell Hymes, noted that increasing numbers of students wanted to undertake research on contemporary American society and that such studies, and the training of students to undertake them, had been relatively neglected. The resolution stated that such studies were "essential to the advancement of anthropology as a science and to <u>the well being of the society</u>" (emphasis ours) and resolved that "the American Anthropological Association recognizes the <u>legitimacy</u> and importance of such research and training and urges the active development of both. (emphasis ours)"

The recognition by graduate students of the 1970s that academic positions were becoming increasingly scarce may be another reason why some chose to pursue local rather than foreign research. As major local alternatives to academic employment for doctoral graduates, social service agencies and consulting firms are perhaps more likely to regard as relevant experience a familiarity with working conditions in North American schools and factories than, for example, expertise on the religion of a group in New Guinea.

Concerns by doctoral students about the relevance of their research to potential employers may also partially explain the increase in materialist-oriented dissertations over the past decade. Institutions such as the Agency for International Development (AID) are more likely to hire anthropologists generally knowledgeable about the farming

systems of sub-Saharan Africa than ones primarily familiar with the complex kinship systems of the same region.

Employability considerations may help explain why the proportion of materialist dissertations has increased in the past ten years at the newer departments, but not at the established ones. Students from newer departments may be especially concerned about employment and select materialist topics, while students from established departments, perhaps more confident of obtaining employment, may be less influenced by job prospects in choosing theses subjects.

The shift to materialist topics also reflects changes in the kinds of groups anthropologists are studying. The integration of many band and tribal groups into nation-states has led to increasing interest among anthropologists in complex societies and regional systems and relatively less fieldwork in communities where kinship is of paramount importance. Many earlier anthropologists found they could not begin to understand the events they observed without extensive knowledge of local kinship systems. Contemporary anthropologists working in state societies often find other aspects of culture equally important or "interesting" and have been more likely to focus on economic or ideological systems.

Whatever the reasons underlying the shift to materialist topics, there can be no question that a major intellectual change in the discipline has occurred. Histories of anthropology (e.g. Harris 1968, Hatch 1973) often note the post-World War II revival of interest in ecology, economics, and cultural evolution. Our data demonstrate that research on these topics is becoming more common with each passing year.

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TABLE 1
AREAL FOCI OF 1970 AND 1980 DISSERTATIONS

	Year			
	1970		1980	
Areal Focus	N	%	N	%
North America	28	19	66	34
Latin America and the Caribbean	41	28	36	18
Asia	27	19	32	16
Africa	21	14	25	13
Oceania	13	9	17	9
Europe	6	4	15	8
Mideast	10	7	6	3
Totals	146	100%	197	101%

Percentages do not always sum to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 2
TOPICAL FOCI OF 1970 AND 1980 DISSERTAITIONS

	Year			
	1970		1980	
	N	%	N	%
All Departments				
Materialist	33	35	74	50
Sociopolitical	36	38	27	18
Ideological	26	27	47	32
Totals	95	100%	148	100%
Established Departments				
Materialist	26	39	20	39
Sociopolitical	23	34	10	19
Ideological	18	27	22	42
Totals	67	100%	52	100%
Newer Departments				
Materialist	7	25	54	56
Sociopolitical	13	46	17	18
Ideological	8	29	25	26
Totals	28	100%	96	100%

This table includes all dissertations that appear from, their titles, to contain substantial information about one and only one of the three general topical categories.

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