

HOW CAN ANTHROPOLOGY WORK WITH SOCIAL WORK: A CASE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN FROM POOR FAMILIES

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Abstract: *This article examines how anthropology could work with social work. There are some studies from both anthropology and social work which attempted to cross the boundary between disciplines. This article follows these predecessors and examines further possibility through my fieldwork experience as a volunteer teacher for Japanese children from poor families. I focus on one beneficiary and assert that the beneficiary could not develop her capability or empower herself due to a lack of sense of future. In addition, I insist on the possibility that anthropology is valuable as a problem-finding method in social work.*

Key words: *Applied anthropology, NGO, Empowerment, Children in poverty, Japan*

1. Introduction

Anthropology has its long history in studying human societies and cultures all over the world, but the discipline hesitated or has hesitated to make itself applicable outside academic society. As Nolan (2017) criticised, academic anthropologists had or have had the tendency that they have worked for their position in university with their own rules. Considering the discipline's history, this tendency can be regarded as a reaction to criticism for its past attachment to colonialism even though the relation between anthropological studies and policies at that time is not so clear (Nolan, 2017).

Recently, however, anthropologists have set out to widen both topics of their studies and area of their research.

Firstly, now more anthropologists do their research on social phenomena developed countries such as the elders in Finland (Takahashi, 2013) and people with mental disorder in Italy (Matsushima, 2014). These anthropologists carry out their research on people in developed countries, nonetheless, their interlocutors, the elders and people with mental disorder, are in general people who are segregated from mainstream society. For example, Matsushima (2014) investigated the mental health system and those who were with mental problems by employing the concept of total institution by

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Erving Goffman, and he mentioned effects of institutionalisation which existed both inside and outside of hospitals.

Secondly, in terms of application of anthropology, Riall Nolan (2017) identified 3 types of anthropologists, that is, 2 types of anthropologists in university, academic anthropologists and applied anthropologists, and anthropology practitioners outside university. In addition, he emphasised importance of anthropology practitioners as those who worked outside university and employed anthropological knowledge and methodology in their jobs (Nolan, 2017). Nolan, in his writing with Briody, also put emphasis on the availability of skills in employment, which were educated in the applied anthropology course through class projects, internship and so on (Briody & Nolan, 2013). Although what he insisted on seems to put too much focus on employment so that his analysis looks like a kind of promotion and/or marketing for future students through indicating practicability in anthropology courses, what is likely obvious is that he attempted to identify usability of anthropology outside anthropology.

This paper follows their discussion. In my fieldwork I worked with a Japanese NGO which provided educational support to junior high school students from poor families. I worked as a volunteer teacher there, nonetheless, my duty was not only teaching them school subjects but also became a friend, an adult who can talk with, and a role-model for them to think about their future. Furthermore, some volunteers, including me, were required, to some extent, to assume the role as organisers of the project because the project had just begun when I joined in and I was, in fact, one of the first and starting members for the project.

Under such circumstances, my position had ambiguity. That is, I was a volunteer teacher who faced the children but what I did could be recognised, to some extent, as a job for social workers. Furthermore, what seems important is that I can also be an anthropologist when I reflexively review my fieldwork. My argument seems to synchronise with what Tim Ingold insisted (Ingold, 2007). I did not intend to make an ethnography of them, however, as a result, what I did with them becomes anthropological ethnography. Therefore, it is possible to assert that I did not write ethnography of those people but did ethnography with them.

In this paper, I explore the way to apply anthropology to social work through my fieldwork experience in the NGO. However, some academic works which struggle to widen and apply anthropology to social work will be shown before I depict my field data.

2. Previous Literature

In this section more precise explanation about trans-boundary struggle between anthropology and social work is shown. Even though there are a few examples, it can be indicated that not only anthropology but also social work have attempted to obtain insight from one another

In anthropology, as mentioned in the introduction, some researchers showed their academic focus on people in social work, both social workers and beneficiaries.

A study about Gerontology in Finland by Takahashi (2013), for instance, investigated the elders and social workers, and she described the space which was constructed

through the interaction between them. In her book, she dedicated pages to the social environment including legal systems. One point which the book seems to show is that, comparing with so-called indigenous people in the third world, people in developed countries live in complex social networks of people, products and social systems as we usually know. As a result, detailed explanation about them helps readers to more clearly and vividly imagine the circumstance surrounding beneficiaries.

In fact, this point is also found in another ethnography. Kligman (1998), who carried out anthropological studies about Romanian mothers and doctors with lots of narratives of abortion under the Ceausescu regime, filled more than half of her book with explanation about laws implemented and amended in Romania until 1989. Nonetheless, these descriptions of laws can become a support for readers to understand the ethnography. In modern societies, laws are an unmissable aspect as well.

In a study from social work, Yanagida attempted to apply the myth approach which Levi-Strauss developed to social work. She employed it to interpret narratives by “troublesome patients” (Yanagida, 2018, p. 294). The study analysed narratives by a troublesome patient and intended to identify logics behind the narratives. In this attempt, she codified patient’s narrative to 4 factors; geography, economy, society and cosmology. Then the codes were examined to clarify what may exist behind the narrative. According to her, these narratives were sometimes perceived as nonsensical by social workers due to the difference in logics behind them (Yanagida, 2018). In that sense, her attitude toward troublesome patients is similar to that of anthropologists toward their interlocutors in fieldwork sites in terms of presupposition of difference, to some extent, between *me (us)* and *them*.

Even though some prior struggles have already existed, there are still a couple of points to overcome. In anthropology, anthropologists’ positions are generally a visitor to institution and/or organisation, or a friend of beneficiaries. As a result, it is not sure whether their studies can connect to practical employment of anthropology, even if the works are academically anthropological. On the other hand, in social work, their application of anthropological methodology seems to be carried out without full of understanding. For example, Yanagida (2018) did not show any reaction to criticism toward Levi-Strauss and structuralism in anthropology nor any theoretical reasons why myth approach was applicable to a modern society.

3. Fieldwork

In this section, I describe my fieldwork data from May 2015 to March 2017. I worked with an NGO which organised educational support for children from poor families such as managing study spaces and after school education. In their activities with children from poor families, the NGO had 2 types of support. One was its own projects and the other was those which the NGO organised under the contracts with ward offices. The latter represented its main projects, and the children who joined in the latter projects came from families who received public assistance. Therefore, the children who came to the support were listed on the wards’ database and attended the activities when they and their parent(s) agreed with participation.

I worked as a volunteer in the NGO's after school educational project, which the NGO organised under the supervision of a ward office in Tokyo. There were 20 children at most and more than 30 volunteers registered. A staff employed by the NGO came there as a director and one volunteer worked as a manager with a little payment. No children ceased coming to the class for whole years even though only one of them attended all classes and some children graduated from the class because of age. In contrast, many of volunteers quit and approximately ten of them constantly joined in the activity.

Children in the support were 13-15 years old, who were in junior high schools. As mentioned above, all of them came there with their consent so that they were supposed to have, to some extent, enthusiasm with studying. Especially, those in their third year would finish their compulsory education and take entrance examination for high school, as a result, they tended to show more concentration on their studies. On the other hand, students in first or second year had more tendency to come there due to obedience to their parent(s).

Each class had two hours for studying and one more hour before and after the class for preparation. In general, one volunteer taught two children at most. However, the director of the project focused more on the third-year children so that sometimes one volunteer and one third-year student worked one-on-one and first- or second-year students were taught in groups of more than three students.

In the class, there was no curriculum for children, therefore children brought textbooks, homework or any other materials which they wanted to do on any school subjects. English and mathematics were the most popular subjects in the class because more children found difficulty in these subjects as well as because entrance examinations for high school required these two subjects at least.

Spending a lot of time on studying, children and volunteers also had the opportunity to enjoy chatting. Children especially liked to speak about their daily lives including what happened in school as well as their private lives. In conversation, volunteers were sometimes required to tell them their experience; their jobs, how university students spent their lives, what they thought they were in their junior high schools and so forth. Actually, this was also a requirement by the NGO to promote children's vision for their future. The NGO hoped the children would imagine what they could be and do in the future through conversation with adults and would obtain motivation for continuing studying or, at least, for not dropping out. The objectives of the project were, in fact, (1) giving children a space for studying, (2) raising their study habits, (3) rearing children's communication skill and (4) letting them imagine their future careers.

Under the circumstances, I focus on a girl who was 14 years old in the first year of the project. She had come to the space for two years and took the entrance examination for high school in the second year.

She lived in a family with both parents and one older brother. Her parents had only graduated from junior high schools and her brother was in a high school. Both of her parents had worked since their graduation and her brother also joined in a boxing gym and had a license. Her parents wanted her to go on to and to graduate from a high school as well as to get a better job in terms of salary. This was one of the reasons why her parents let her to come to the class.

In the beginning, she was not eager on classes and often be late for the class. She did not speak with her cohorts but only talked with volunteers.

The other children are too childish (fieldnotes, 6 June 2015).

This was what sometimes she mentioned in the beginning. Actually, she had more opportunity to communicate with adults than the other children. In addition, the fact that she had a boyfriend may have made her feel maturity more than the others.

She attended a dance lesson for free and did performance as 'idol'. 'Idol' in Japanese language means those who have mixed roles as "models, singers, dancers, personalities and actresses" and are "role models for the publically [sic] adorable subject" (Galbraith, 2016, p. 235). She could not get any money for her dancing and singing performance on a stage. Meanwhile, she was paid in accordance with her earning in photo sessions in which audiences/fans could take photos together with the performers. She did not know how much she could earn. But, according to what she told, her monthly salary at that time would be approximately 100,000 yen (800 euro).

She said that she attended dance lesson and joined in the performance because it was free. She did not have any future images as a professional idol or performer.

Actually, her image of future was likely less clear than the other children. There were interviews among a student, his/her parent(s) and the director once every six months to check their satisfaction, to tell parent(s) about how the student worked in the class and to discuss about career plan. Especially those who were in their third year needed to carefully think about the timing when he/she got a job. Then children were recommended to think about what they wanted to do as a job and how they could be.

This is because their career will become different in accordance with their educational background, and it connects to how much they can earn. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, those who graduate from university earn about 100,000 yen (men)/90,000 yen (women) more than workers only with high school diploma (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2018).

In fact, almost all of the children showed their career images. One of them had a clear vision of becoming a public officer after his graduation from high school, therefore, he chose a high school which had specific curriculum to be public officer. On the contrary, finally the girl did not give us any image about her future in any interviews or conversation with volunteers.

I want to go on to high school because my brother and my boyfriend are there. And after graduation, I'll get a job and keep staying with my family (fieldnotes, 17 November 2016).

I don't know what I'll do but don't need to earn so much because I don't need any rent or food expense if I live with my parents (fieldnotes, 17 November 2016).

In our conversation, as well as in her conversation with any other volunteers or the director, she did not show any anxiety over her future.

Needless to say, she had great improvement and change in her studying habits. For example, comparing with her first year and second year in the project, she spent more time on studying in the second year and sometimes complained to younger students

about their chatting due to its disturbance to her studying. Eventually, she chose her weak subjects for her work during classes and did self-study in her house.

Not only in studying but also in communication, she changed her attitude toward cohorts. She talked with other students in the class more and her topic in conversation got broader diversity than before.

4. Discussion

If this paper focuses on what the girl can bring up and what she cannot, as shown in a section above, her career image is the point to see. This is because the NGO has some objectives in the project but this is only one point which the project cannot nurture.

First of all, the NGO's programme can be considered as a method to reduce the risk that children become poor or poorer in the future. Its projects actually synchronised with the Japanese governmental action toward children in poverty and the government focused on education to prevent reproduction of poverty (Cabinet Office of Japan, 2014). In other words, the intention of the NGO was to reduce children's future risk through improving their academic skills (studying spaces and habits), building network for support (communication with others) and encouraging them to keep studying by setting a goal or a vision for the future (career education).

In terms of risk, the NGO was an actor in a space which Ulrich Beck called risk society (Beck, 1992). The NGO expected children's risk in the future and builds projects to raise children's ability with which children could predict the risk and avoid it through training on envisioning their careers. On the other hand, the girl who was my interlocutor did not seem to feel any risk in her future. In this context, the point of this paper is that what makes the difference in their attitude toward risk is likely based on their sense of future.

As shown above, her narratives were connected to the present itself. She did not talk anything about what she predicted or expected. Although she talked about her job in the future, she did not mention any specific jobs. What she could imagine was that she would work as her parents and/or her brother had done. Neither did she feel any vulnerability of herself in her future. When her attitude toward her future is examined, it seems incorrect to suggest that she did not perceive her risk nor avoided to see it but it is likely correct to insist that her perspective did not capture her future. As a result, she did not expect what may happen in the future, or she could not connect it to her present even if she had and a kind of opaque future image. That is to say, she lived in a risk society, however, she, herself, could not be considered as an actor of risk society.

This also connects to her empowerment. If her case is examined with capability approach by Amartya Sen, it is suspicious whether she can be considered empowered by the project.

Amartya Sen investigated social exclusion with his capability approach. In his analysis, he described the process of reaching poverty with capability deprivation as a result of social exclusion (Sen, 2000). However, the focus of this paper is actually that capability seems to require people to imagine their future as well. As he insisted, capability did not only mean that people knew what they chose but also that they knew what they did not choose, and the choice was carried out in accordance with comparison among results

which would come as a consequence of their choices (Sen, 2009). Therefore, capability also requires imagination toward the future to those who employ capability, and the imagined future needs to be connected to the present.

What is pointed out in the case of the girl is, thus, that she may not be empowered to some extent because she was not able to manipulate her capability, which required her to examine choices and results. In other words, capability and risk seem to be based on a sense of future, and in my field work, the girl seemed not to imagine her future which connected to herself because of her lack of role models and stability in her life.

5. Conclusion

As a conclusion, this paper comes back to the question, *how can anthropology work with social work*. In fact, there are some points to overcome when anthropology is employed as a problem-solving method in social work as mentioned above. Nevertheless, anthropological research, in other words, ethnographical methodology, has the possibility to be a problem-finding method in social work as indicated in the description of my field work in an NGO.

During my fieldwork, I was not completely a social worker. I did not do any administration neither was I hired by the organisation. Nevertheless, my occupation as a volunteer allows me to face children in needs, and this long-term participatory observation, which was taken place in a position as a quasi-social worker, possibly provides me an insight which cannot be found in quantitative research because the point in this article is not what the person consciously perceives though it starts from what she said. Actually, in an article by Yanagida (2018), she pointed out that with myth approach she was able to reach the beneficiary's needs which the person unconsciously had. Therefore, it can be said that anthropology is able to be one of the methodologies in social work in order to find out the root of problems which is sometimes hidden behind what beneficiaries talk about or consciously perceive.

This is one of the possibilities that anthropology and social work can construct a win-win relationship. That is to say, anthropology may be advantageous to realise what exists behind beneficiaries' consciousness and this perspective also may be useful to augment their well-being.

Needless to say, it is not enough that anthropology is only useful in problem-solving. When advantages of anthropology in interdisciplinary collaboration and application of anthropological insights are considered, anthropologists also need to think about its usefulness in problem-solving process. This point seems to still remain for further investigation in the future.

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