Encountering Anthropology: 
An Exploratory Study of Degree Choice

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Abstract: Social anthropology in the U.K. is largely absent from the pre-university curriculum, contributing to the discipline’s marginal status within higher education. My paper reports a small-scale empirical study of the transition to undergraduate anthropology as a socializing process that begins with the choice of discipline, continues as a learning experience and enables students to acquire elements of the discipline’s ‘culture’. The study identified ‘chance’ factors, serendipity and opportunism as important influences on choice of degree. These factors reflected the availability to applicants of cultural and economic capital. Students demonstrated varying degrees of socialization in identifying with anthropology’s epistemological and social norms and values. My findings justify current attempts to increase the visibility of anthropology among pre-university students. They also support teaching initiatives that promote deep learning at undergraduate level. Both developments are necessary to sustain anthropology as a university discipline.

Keywords: cultural capital, deep learning, degree choice, disciplinary culture, disciplinary socialization

encounter v.t. Meet, come upon, especially by chance or unexpectedly

‘Encountering’ anthropology implies more than ‘choosing’ the discipline. It suggests an element of chance or, on the most positive interpretation, of serendipitous choice-making. This paper derives from a wider empirical and conceptual study of the transition to higher education: of ‘choosing’ a degree subject that for most applicants is likely to be largely unfamiliar; and of induction into the ‘habit’ of the discipline, or academic socialization. Effective socialization increases the likelihood of a successful undergraduate experience. Socialization ‘into’ a discipline also implies reproduction of the discipline’s values. These themes have relevance to current attempts to popularize the discipline, especially among young people, and to promote pedagogical innovation in the delivery of the subject to undergraduates.

As a contribution to the debate on ‘Pathways to Anthropology’, this paper will focus principally on the degree choices made at 18+ and confine attention to social (or cultural) anthropology. The distinct discipline of biological anthropology was not an object of the original study.

Anthropology retains a marginal presence in the curriculum of British higher education; its relative position has changed little during the period of ‘massification’ (Becher and Trowler 2001: 4) of the university system. At the same time, anthropology has failed to correct its low
profile in the public consciousness. Significant paradigmatic change since the 1960s, mirroring the decline of ‘British social anthropology’ as a distinctive ‘intellectual tradition’ (Kuper 1973: 227), may have done little to present a coherent projection of the subject. Besides, academic anthropologists have shown a reticence to contribute to public debate around current affairs. This situation points to an absence of intellectual role models able to raise or sharpen perceptions of the discipline (Eriksen 2006: ix). Indeed, the public is as likely to ‘meet’ anthropology in the media through examples whose legitimacy is contested by academic anthropologists and which may serve to confirm outmoded notions of the subject’s exoticism (cf. Caplan 2005; Singer 2006).

Public perceptions of anthropology are important, not least for their impact on the recruitment of new students to the discipline. The depth or accuracy of these perceptions influences the attitudes of schools, parents, employers and potential students themselves. However, a more direct explanation for anthropology’s marginality is surely its near-exclusion from the examined sixth form curriculum. The absence of a GCE A-Level in the subject prior to its introduction from September 2010 has closed down an important pathway into undergraduate studies available to more familiar subjects. Moreover, identified as an ‘academic’ discipline, anthropology lacks the vocational pull of some other novel disciplines, such as law and engineering.

In the 1970s, Leach could argue against any attempt to introduce anthropology to the pre-university curriculum, claiming that ‘It could be very confusing to learn about other people’s moral values before you have confident understanding of your own’ (1973: 4). Three decades on, his position is not tenable when the viability of a university discipline depends, in part, on recruiting undergraduate students in sufficient numbers and demonstrating ‘relevance’. Popularization is accompanied by an increased attention to pedagogical innovation within the academy. Such imperatives may partly reflect a sense of anthropology’s intrinsic educational value and its contribution to the ‘democratizing’ and ‘empowering’ role of higher education (Mills 1999). This view is shared here. Anthropology is deeply humanistic: on a broad canvas, it promotes a comparative perspective that gives insight into alternative conceptions of society, with their complementary sets of values and expectations of life. By giving primacy to the insider’s view, it throws into relief the lived experience of ‘ordinary people’ and ‘the texture of their lifeworlds’ (Eriksen 2006: 41).

However, contemporary anthropologists are responding pragmatically, too, to an ‘audit culture’ that embraces ‘measures’ of student recruitment, and attempts to make teaching more accountable: ‘in this new state of accountability, faculty and students alike have little choice but to negotiate the contradictory convergence of “top-down” impositions and “bottom-up” initiatives’ (Mills 1999: 3). At the same time, the personal costs of study to undergraduates have increased. More than ever, departments have an incentive to ‘reach out’ to potential students and demonstrate the ‘relevance’ of their discipline; they have the same incentive to give their current students a ‘good experience’.

**Anthropology: An ‘Invisible’ Discipline**

Predictably, the demographic development of anthropology within U.K. higher education has reflected, to some extent, the expansion of British higher education over half a century. However, in the context of higher education expansion in general, and social science expansion in particular, the growth of anthropology appears very constrained. A comparison with sociology’s much more rapid expansion is instructive: for example, during the 1960s anthropology secured only a marginal presence in the newly-established polytechnics and Open
University. It should also be noted that anthropology failed to follow other social sciences in developing an A-Level for sixth-formers. These facts hint at a ‘compelling’ explanation for anthropology’s limited expansion, its relative failure to match (at the disciplinary level) the institutional transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education. This explanation is internal to the discipline, the resistance of a relatively small anthropological community to expansion: as Spencer notes, ‘Anthropology did not expand into other educational settings because anthropologists themselves did not want to expand’ (2000: 5).

Sillitoe (2003) cautions that the demographics of undergraduate anthropology must be set against the expansion in overall student numbers as the U.K. government presses for a 50 percent participation rate of 18–30-year-olds in higher education. In the five years before 2008, acceptances into first degree courses at U.K. universities rose by 12.6 percent overall, by 22.1 percent in the social sciences and by 30.5 percent in anthropology. However, in 2008, anthropology acceptances represented only 2.5 percent of the social science total, having risen by just 163 students in five years (UCAS). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate a minority discipline whose marginal status confers a continuing demographic vulnerability.

Sillitoe is speaking a language familiar to many current academic anthropologists:

While not wishing to scaremonger, readers will be aware of the collapses suffered by such subjects as classics, philosophy and theology, which at one time dominated academia. Anthropology does not have the institutional resources and historical background to survive a comparative catastrophic fall. If such a thing were to occur, it would reduce the discipline to the level of ancient Akkadian, Anglo-Saxon or numismatic studies, with a post or two at Oxbridge. We need to do something. (2003: 2)

Beyond this rhetoric is a sense that anthropology could retreat into the niche it occupied prior to the major expansion of the university sector initiated by the Robbins Report (1963) into the future of U.K. higher education. Sillitoe (2003) locates the problem, in part, to the absence of anthropology in the schools curriculum and a corresponding ignorance of the discipline by a majority of school leavers. Callan identifies the troubles of an ‘invisible’ discipline: ‘Anthropology in the UK is confronted by a problem at two levels. It is not just that “people” at large know rather little about anthropology; it is also that what they “know”
about it often bears a dim and distorted relationship to the actual concerns and practices of anthropologists’ (2006: 11). These commentators cite a need to demonstrate anthropology’s vocational relevance, whether to potential students or prospective employers. This requires ‘promoting a professional identity beyond the academy’ (Sillitoe 2003: 2). Coleman and Simpson acknowledge the problems of making anthropology seem relevant: ‘When asked what use the discipline is on the job market, many professional anthropologists are likely to speak of the values of a liberal education, of literacy and perhaps of numeracy. They are unlikely, for understandable reasons, to be able to give specific answers to employers who may require concrete evidence of specific and transferable skills acquired’ (2004: 21).

The Research Instrumentation and Sample

In seeking data to assist explanations for the decision of students to choose undergraduate social anthropology, two research instruments were used, a questionnaire and group interviews (or focus groups). Quantitative analysis (primarily principal components analysis) of questionnaire responses was undertaken. The qualitative data from the focus group meetings provided a complementary narrative.

The research instruments were administered to groups of undergraduates, drawn from two English university departments of anthropology. All participants had chosen to major in anthropology. Students in the second year of a three-year degree course were chosen as these were in a position to recall the decision-making process that had led each to choose anthropology as a degree course, and yet reflect on the experiences of more than one year of university study. Only students who made the transition to undergraduate study at 18+ were included; the experiences of mature students were not relevant to the current study and these students were excluded. However, the actual sample of 47 students included some who had transferred to anthropology from other disciplines during their degree studies. Their experience and ability to supply a comparative perspective were felt to be valuable to this research.

The universities and departments were chosen to reflect a widely perceived hierarchy of institutions and introduce an important comparative element to the analysis of data. Pseudonyms were used for these institutions (and for focus group participants). Meridian University is a member of the elite Russell Group of research-intensive universities. The matriculation requirement of its anthropology department is high, although even this is a significant understatement of the actual GCE A-Level performance of student entrants. Shire University developed as a research-led institution in the wake of the 1960s post-Robbins Report expansion; its anthropology department sets a more modest matriculation standard for entrants.

Dependence on the goodwill of gatekeepers to determine access to the student populations implied a constraint on the type of sampling method adopted. Non-probability (convenience) samples were accepted as a practical necessity, precluding safe generalization from the sample data. However, the departments were chosen to represent contrasting institutional settings; therefore, data obtained from their students might permit inferences to be drawn suggestive of wider application.

The student sample was evenly drawn from the two institutions; a significant majority of these students were female (81 percent) and of white ethnicity (81 percent). Over half (53 percent) came from professional or managerial backgrounds. The principal difference related to post-16 schooling: a clear majority (65 percent) of Meridian students came from independent schools; Shire students were most likely (88 percent) to be state-educated. Five students from each institution volunteered to
participate in one of two focus group sessions held in January and February 2007.

Choosing Anthropology

The empirical study of choice of undergraduate field of study in the U.K. is not well represented in the research literature. Much of the limited evidence from anthropology is anecdotal (Callan 2006), though as part of a study (Wilson 2006) of final-year anthropology undergraduates at Durham University, participating students were asked to reflect on their pathways into the discipline. Callan discerns some recurring motifs: ‘those now coming into anthropology as undergraduates draw, it seems, on an indeterminate bundle of sources of knowledge, in which impressions gained directly through reading or personal experience interact with those mediated indirectly through the perceptions and influence of relatives, teachers or popularisations in the media’ (2006: 17).

Competing analyses of decision-making can be differentiated by the degree of agency or ‘real’ choice accorded to decision-makers. The agency of students choosing anthropology was addressed in the questionnaire by asking respondents:

- To rate the importance of thirteen factors in their original decision to choose anthropology;
- To rate the level of involvement and the level of influence of different categories of people in their choice of degree subject.

Further questions were intended to elicit data on those structural factors that might have a bearing on these students’ decision-making and that render the very notion of ‘choice’ problematic. These related to ‘family’ background, including the occupational background and the educational qualifications of male and female parents; and to the type of schooling and pre-university curriculum experienced. The questionnaire also provided data on the gender and ethnicity of respondents. In the context of the wider research study, but of some relevance to this paper, students were further asked to identify one significant benefit from studying anthropology, and to identify one occupation or career that they might consider after graduation for which an anthropology degree provides an appropriate background or skills.

Table 1 summarizes the responses to a questionnaire instrument whose thirteen items were selected to cover a range of diverse factors that might have a bearing on the choice of anthropology as a degree course. The selection of items was aided by a prior discussion within a focus group of students from a sixth form college to ascertain factors that might influence their choice of university discipline.

The choice of an anthropology degree did not reflect a strong ‘investment’ motivation involving assessments of future income or employment prospects. Certainly, students were aware of anthropology’s capacity to develop vocationally relevant, transferable skills and expressed a frustration that employers and other ‘outsiders’ might fail to recognize this. However, the principal ‘investment’ acknowledged was in the acquisition of cultural rather than economic capital. Identified ‘life’ skills included empathy and reflexivity. For some, perceptions of anthropology as having a weak vocational pull could be dismissed by references to their own career uncertainty and a need to ‘buy’ time for reflection.

‘Rational pragmatism’ (Hodkinson 1998) is a useful construct to describe these students’ decision-making behaviour. The relative ‘middle-class’ homogeneity of the present student sample implied a common ‘horizon for action’ that encompassed an expectation of university, and therefore confined their active choices to those of institution and course. For many, the choice of anthropology was ‘opportunistic, being based on fortuitous contacts and experiences’ (1998: 96). Analysis of this
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Very important / some importance (%)</th>
<th>Little importance / no importance (%)</th>
<th>Significant difference identified between departments*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The content of anthropology courses reflected my own interests</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>University prospectuses or departmental guides as a source of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>information for me</td>
<td>76.6</td>
<td>23.4</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal experience of living overseas or travelling widely abroad</td>
<td>72.4</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet as a source of information for me</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wanted the novelty of an unfamiliar subject</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance played a significant part in my decision to study anthropology</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td>z = −2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>p = 0.035 (2-tailed)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean rank: Meridian = 28.17 Shire = 20.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the time of my application, I had some knowledge of anthropology</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>46.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of university came first. Choice of degree subject followed</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>z = −3.66</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>p = 0.000 (2-tailed)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mean rank: Meridian = 30.98 Shire = 17.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have previously read a book or books linked to anthropology</td>
<td>51.1</td>
<td>48.9</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>An anthropology degree would offer good employment prospects</td>
<td>38.3</td>
<td>61.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the time of my application, I had a potential career or occupation</td>
<td>37.0</td>
<td>63.0</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>for which anthropology was relevant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at university open-days or HE fairs</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>z = −2.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>p = 0.041 (2-tailed)</td>
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<td>Mean rank: Meridian = 20.11 Shire = 27.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An anthropology degree would offer good income prospects</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>89.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Identified by Mann-Whitney U two-independent samples test: N=23 (Meridian), 24 (Shire); p<0.05 (2-tailed). Each respondent ranked each item on a four-point scale: ‘No importance’ (=1), ‘Little importance’ (=2), ‘Some importance’ (=3), ‘Very important’ (=4).
'resocialized' choice may draw additionally on the work of Bourdieu. A degree itself is institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu 1997); a graduate career would allow this advantage to be transformed later into economic returns. As a partial contribution to the full explanation of decision-making behaviour, consumer rationalism cannot be dismissed. Indeed, it is a strength of the Bourdieuan approach that it analyses both ‘investment’ and its returns in cultural as well as economic forms.

Questionnaire responses demonstrate the importance, prior to choosing, of accessing information through departmental literature or the Internet. A majority of Shire respondents considered ‘open days’ also to be important to decision-making; however, Meridian students placed much less emphasis on this item. A majority of Shire respondents gave precedence to choice of degree over choice of institution. Here, Meridian students were far more likely than those from Shire to consider university ahead of discipline. The high status accorded to the elite Meridian University (and its first degree) may have made this institution attractive to its future students, irrespective of discipline. It may have accounted too for the lower importance they attached to open days in the context of departments and universities competing for students.

There was unanimity amongst respondents that, in choosing anthropology, they were deciding upon a subject that reflected their own interests. More than half claimed some prior knowledge of disciplinary content. Prior reading was important for a small majority of students as a source of knowledge or interest. Strikingly, a sizeable majority indicated experience of overseas travel or living abroad as an important influence; 44 percent regarded this as very important. Other students may have relied on university ‘marketing’ information to make the equation between subject and personal interest. These observations should not be interpreted as students having familiarity with the subject matter. A small majority were influenced in their choice by the novelty of the discipline, the opportunity to study an unfamiliar subject that nonetheless seemed to accord with a latent interest.

For a small majority of respondents, chance played a significant part in their decision to study anthropology, with almost one-quarter of students regarding this as very important. This seems a likely outcome of anthropology’s near-invisibility in the pre-university curriculum; it assigns importance to the ‘chance’ factors determining students’ ‘impressions’ of anthropology (Callan 2006: 17):

**Tom (Shire):** I was influenced a lot by a teacher [who was] not an anthropologist but had read a lot and used to tell me about it, and it excited me.

**Sara (Meridian):** I'd done some travelling in South Africa and in Mexico … somewhere in Mexico that is politically fraught, and you know there are sixty three different indigenous languages in Mexico, and I was just, like, ‘How can I get to study [such countries] in a little more detail?’

**Katya (Shire):** My parents are not British and this gave me exposure to different cultures from which I gained an interest.

The structure of the Meridian degree, exposing students to anthropology within a broad first-year curriculum, or facilitating course transfers after this initial year, may have provided an additional context for ‘chance’ factors to operate.

Reay (1998) has commented on the great complexity, ‘the messy reality’, of choice-making that small-scale intensive studies can reveal. Family, school, peer groups and the wider community all exert an influence, whilst the media and consumer culture have effects that may be more diffuse but no less significant. At the same time, gender, ethnicity and class contribute to the ongoing development
of an individual’s identities. These influences are cross-cutting.

In the final movement towards ‘mass’ higher education during the 1990s, the participation from the ‘lowest’ socio-economic groups has increased but their low share of the total student body has remained little-changed (David 2005). In 2002, nearly two-thirds of anthropology students whose economic background was known came from the top two social class categories, compared to just over half of sociology undergraduates (Mills 2003a) and around 57 percent of all undergraduates (Mayhew et al. 2004). This may reflect ‘anthropology’s’ resonance for young people of particular backgrounds and social experiences, but also the social composition of the old universities in which most departments are located’ (Mills 2003a: 20). Such a comment implies too that undergraduate subject and university institution are not discrete choices, at least in the case of a minority discipline.

Disappointingly for a discipline that engages in the comparative study of cultures, anthropology’s recruitment of home students from ethnic minorities compares unfavourably with the university sector as a whole (Mills 2003a). Eighty-one percent of questionnaire respondents identified themselves with a ‘White’ ethnicity, while 53 percent described their socio-economic parental background as ‘managerial or professional’. These representations were reflected in the composition of the focus groups where one of ten participants was minority ethnic, and another claimed ‘working-class’ status. Asked to explain anthropology’s identification in U.K. higher education as a strongly middle-class discipline with under-representation of ethnic minorities, group members focused more comfortably on class:

**Mike (Meridian):** I think the middle-classes [sic] have more – it sounds really bad to say it – more interest in more exotic cultures ... [They] might have more experience of it, from travelling and that sort of thing.

**Lola:** I see what you mean by the travel thing. I think the ability to travel makes a much bigger difference than seeing something on television.

In general, explanations pointed to a middle-class advantage in terms of available cultural capital, as the above quotes imply, or economic capital (in the quoted examples, providing the resources to travel).

Whilst overall, female undergraduates continue to outnumber males, this gender imbalance is particularly marked in anthropology. Research indicates school subjects are gender-stereotyped (cf. Whitehead 1996); perceived gendered traits link ‘feminine’ qualities of empathy and interpersonal relationships to ‘people-oriented’ disciplines including the social sciences. The questionnaire sought data on students’ sixth-form curricular experience. However, these data were patchy: not all respondents gave details; others cited non-GCE A-Level qualifications; the GCE AS/A2 split provided a further level of complexity. However, respondents provided 108 examples of completed GCE A-Levels (excluding General Studies), allowing the breadth of prior subject experience of these anthropology undergraduates to be gauged. Of these, 61 percent could be classed as humanities and a further 15 percent as social sciences. Natural sciences accounted for 15 percent of GCE A-Levels and mathematics/computing the remaining nine percent. These statistics show a preponderance of ‘soft’ disciplines, including those that attract a disproportionate number of female students such as English and modern languages (both classified here as humanities). This does not explain why anthropology, itself a ‘soft’ discipline in Biglan’s (1973) taxonomy, attracts a high ratio of female to male undergraduates; it does suggest that the choice of anthropology provides an opportunity to carry over a gender bias from secondary to higher education.

In their respective focus groups, Meridian and Shire students offered similar explanations.
for this gender bias, allowing construction of this cross-group ‘virtual’ dialogue between Tom (Shire) and Mike (Meridian); economics was categorized as a ‘masculine’ subject (Tom), a term relating male choices to the occupational worth of a discipline; males wanted ‘more practical degrees’ (Mike) whilst anthropology suffered by ‘not leading up to a job’ (Tom). At the same time, anthropology might come across as ‘a bit wishy-washy’ (Mike):

Mike (Meridian): [Anthropology] has the potential ... to be a lot more scientific, a lot more rigorous ... but it seems a bit wishy-washy. Just a bit like, the same as, sociology.

These students acknowledge they are using stereotypes to compare disciplines. At the same time, however, their explanations draw upon Biglan’s (1973) taxonomic distinctions by locating anthropology as a ‘soft’ (lacking an agreed conceptual core) and ‘pure’ (non-vocational) discipline. Gendered perceptions of anthropology may help to explain degree choice: anthropology attracts a disproportionate share of female students, consistent with the claim that ‘soft subjects attract a greater proportion of female students’ (Jarvis and Woodrow 2001: 14).

The questionnaire invited respondents to rate the importance of other contributors to their decision-making, in terms of both involvement and influence. These ‘others’ were parents, older siblings, friends, careers teachers or advisers, other teachers and university personnel. Involvement was defined to include consultation, discussion or advice during the decision-making process; influence related to the choice made. For each category of contributors a majority of respondents acknowledged no significant role, whether in discussion or consultation at the decision-making stage, or through exerting an influence over the final choice of degree subject. Students were keen to emphasize their ownership of decision-making, making use of ‘the rhetoric of individual choice’ (Brooks 2003: 242). They, like their parents, assign importance to personal responsibility for negotiating their own pathways into higher education, implicitly adopting the culture of consumers, choice and a higher education market place. If choice is highly individualized, the (limited) direct involvement of friends may be seen as instrumental rather than a reflection of mutual or shared interest. Any involvement of ‘important others’ did not translate into a strong, acknowledged influence. Reading and overseas experience were important influences towards the choice of anthropology, a clear case of students using available cultural capital to shape an interest. More generally, the ‘class’ advantages of most of these students – the high occupational status and educational attainment of parents – gave access to both cultural capital and economic capital, the latter making ‘affordable’ or ‘thinkable’ the pursuit of a non-‘applied’ discipline such as anthropology. For many students, however, the family – or more precisely, forms of capital and familial habitus – remained unacknowledged or understated influences on choice. The study provides evidence, therefore, in support of structured individualism (Ball et al. 2000), with individual choice or agency bounded by unrecognized structures, including family, ethnicity and school. Familial habitus, as an incorporation of ethnic and class identities, values and expectations, may help to account too for minority ethnic under-representation among anthropology undergraduates.

The institutional habitus of schools was a source of empowerment or, conversely, of closure in the matter of course choice. Given the relative invisibility of the discipline in the pre-university curriculum, the influence of teachers is likely to have had great significance albeit for a very small number of students. One Meridian respondent reported a careers teacher as discouraging her from choosing anthropology. Contrasting ‘school effects’ (Reay et al. 2001), reflecting institutional habitus, were cited by students:
Katya (Shire): For me there was a school influence in that it was a very multi-cultural school and many of my friends had one foreign parent and two languages, and because of the student body, teachers were very open to discuss anthropology.

Lola (Meridian): Like, one person had applied to [do] anthropology somewhere. The school didn’t encourage it … we were encouraged to do traditional subjects.

Sara (Meridian): My school didn’t offer [sociology] ... they only just offered psychology and that was just considered to be a ‘muppet’ subject ... But no-one from my school went on to do sociology, and no-one went off to do social anthropology either.

The last two of these students had ‘discovered’ anthropology at university after commencing other courses. One surprise was the relatively greater involvement of university personnel which in turn proved influential. The role of university teachers advising students on late course changes is a partial explanation; another seems to relate to attendance at university open days. (The four-year course structure of Scottish universities, permitting a broader first-year curriculum, performs a similar function in attracting students to anthropology, with students able to delay their choice of specialist degree programme until the second year.)

Early Disciplinary Socialization

Student expectations inevitably play a crucial role in degree choice. Achieving a match between student expectations of higher education and the subsequent reality will ease the transition to undergraduate studies and impact positively upon levels of student satisfaction and therefore performance. Callan contrasts the experience of students entering higher education to study subjects encountered at A-Level or, at least, with a clear public profile; and of those choosing a discipline (anthropology) absent from the school curriculum and largely ‘invisible’ to a wider public. Both will be required to acquire the elements of ‘higher’ learning, encountering along the way the different pedagogical approaches characteristic of higher education. But anthropology students ‘will also face additional demands to re-process whatever previous understanding they may have had of anthropology, to bring it into line with what is formally taught’ (Callan 2006: 18).

Mills (2003b) and Coleman and Simpson (1999) differentiate between ‘substantivist’ and ‘imaginationist’ approaches to teaching and learning. The former requires students to master a body of factual and theoretical material; the latter encourages them to acquire an ‘anthropological imagination’, ‘to think like anthropologists’ (Mills 2003b: 366). This mirrors the distinction between ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ learning approaches (Biggs 1994). In the broader study on which this paper draws, student respondents were more likely to emphasize deep learning, whether as an indication of their preferred or predisposed approach (‘a habitual way of learning that is fairly stable within the individual but at the same time adaptable to the situation and so is context dependent’ [Jarvis and Woodrow 2001: 4]), or as the outcome of a learning experience influenced both by teaching approaches and more generally by the institutional and disciplinary context. This observation provides broad encouragement to current pedagogic initiatives to deliver innovative teaching and learning to the undergraduate study of anthropology. However, deep learning requires conceptual clarification. ‘Anthropology is “culture” as well as “knowledge”’ (Coleman and Simpson 1999: 6). Meanings therefore range from an intrinsic interest in the subject and the acquisition of ‘useful’ knowledge, to more thorough-going socialization in which the student acquires various elements of anthropology’s disciplinary culture. The group interviews enabled a more focussed examination of these processes. These students were mid-way through their undergraduate courses. Their movement ‘through
the status passage of university studies’ (Engler 1990: 172) was incomplete but they demonstrated varying degrees of socialization, as a process leading them towards identification with the discipline.

What meanings, therefore, attach to the disciplinary socialization of these students? Students identified to a significant degree with anthropology’s social norms and values. They identified too, albeit to varying degrees, (with) anthropology’s epistemological norms as an interpretive and reflexive discipline. Whilst some found the absence of a single, dominant paradigm disorientating, others welcomed the discipline’s incorporation of diffuse elements.

Asked to identify one benefit from studying anthropology, responses could be grouped into a limited number of categories that, taken together, indicated a coherent view of what anthropology ‘is about’. For some students, these were expressions of a disciplinary worldview that invites cross-cultural comparison; for others, they represented the acquisition of enhanced ‘life skills’ such as self-understanding and empathy for others. The following responses are representative and reiterate these themes:

- ‘Gaining a true understanding into the lives of other people, and therefore an empathy and tolerance of the way different people live.’
- ‘Different ways of thinking. Different perceptions.’
- ‘Not taking things for granted – questioning assumptions about your and other cultures.’

For some, the value of an anthropological education was given a more personal expression:

- ‘Understand cultures, and view the multicultural background of my upbringing in a different perspective …’
- ‘Biggest learning curve of my life. Great instrument to live in today’s society.’
- ‘Deeper and more colourful perception of myself and ‘the world’ around.’
- ‘The opportunity for self-reflection and questioning your own boundaries for personal development.’

Common to these responses was an emphasis on open-mindedness and critical evaluation of that which is taken for granted. Acceptance of these results should, however, be qualified. For some students a more active engagement with anthropology may be used to ‘reinforce and enable them to develop their own, previously established, views of the world … They retain agency and control in their use of ethnography, appropriating it in ways that translate its findings into already established categories’ (Coleman and Simpson 1999: 4–5). This suggests a personal habitus resistant to the influence of the discipline-as-culture, constraining the process of disciplinary socialization.

In summary, the broader study produced some qualified evidence of students learning to think as anthropologists (Mills 2003b). Beyond this intellectual conception of the disciplinary habitus, it may be instructive to attempt a positioning of these students in social space (Engler 1990); in effect to ask to what extent disciplinary socialization represents induction into an anticipated occupational culture. Students expressed a certain frustration: they could justify to themselves the value of an anthropological education but recognized this was not how an anthropology degree was generally perceived:

**Lola (Meridian):** I had always wanted to go into Law and everyone told me ‘Do classics’ … To be honest, I think you can say I’ve learned stuff that’s so much more relevant to Law in social anthropology. But if I was in a group of people, I’m not as employable at all. Which is just stupid!

Students themselves were keen to assert anthropology’s ‘usefulness’ relative to other disciplines, in terms of its discipline-specific perspectives and skills, implicitly again assigning to the discipline a distinct identity. However,
anthropology’s culture incorporates a discipline with porous boundaries. The discipline’s breadth contributes to its work-related usefulness, as this study found students keen to assert. However, by raising problems of disciplinary definition, this breadth may also be a weakness. Sillitoe asks:

What comprises the kernel of anthropology from which we might seek applications, beyond saying that its study imparts some skills that are difficult convincingly to specify as different from those acquired studying other subjects, as well as an approach to life that is equally hard to define? (2007: 150)

This challenges anthropology, at a time of market-driven change in higher education, to demonstrate its ‘applied’ credentials, its occupational relevance. The risk of failure to demonstrate anthropology’s occupational relevance is heightened for those departments in non-elite institutions, unable to offer their recruits an investment in the cultural capital of an elite degree. This might be particularly so if perceptions of degree inflation, articulated by one Shire student, were to reduce the attraction of anthropology as students move to those courses considered to support high-status graduate employment.

Sillitoe points to occupational fields of ‘obvious relevance’ beyond academia (2003: 2), including international development, the media, teaching and museum work; but cites other areas where the benefits of an anthropological training are less clearly expressed. These include social work, human resources, and financial and commercial activities. In the present study, students were asked to identify one occupation or career that they might consider after graduation, for which an anthropology degree provides an appropriate background or skills. The results, summarized in Figure 3, show a high proportion of respondents identifying an occupation from a position half-way through their degree course. Fewer than one-fifth replied ‘undecided’ or ‘unknown’. (A strong incentive to reflect early upon potential career opportunities may indicate the importance attached by students to ‘relevance’.) It is noteworthy that the positive responses related to a relatively narrow range of (predictable) occupational categories, and these clearly correspond to the aforementioned fields of ‘obvious relevance’. These students are giving recognition to a professional identity for anthropology. However, in the context of encouraging recruitment to undergraduate courses, attempts to broaden the discipline’s vocational appeal may ‘suggest that anthropology has relevance to almost everything, which ultimately begs the discipline’s existence’ (Sillitoe 2007: 148). In other words, a professional identity is closely bound to disciplinary definition or identity. In recognizing the ‘uses’ of anthropology, the subject-specific skills and perspectives it offers, these student respondents are implicitly drawing boundaries around the discipline as they understand it.

Conclusions

Chance and serendipity will continue to play a crucial role in the take-up of undergraduate anthropology by school-leavers whilst the discipline remains virtually absent from the secondary curriculum. This reservation bolsters
the educational and practical case for introducing anthropology into the curriculum at 16+.

However, the matter of recruitment, of pathways into anthropology, cannot be separated from the undergraduate learning experience and, therefore, from pedagogic innovation that encourages deep learning and, more contestably, profiles the applied potential of the discipline. This paper has characterized anthropology as a discipline whose continuing viability in U.K. higher education cannot be taken for granted. Exploring the pathways to undergraduate anthropology is important to understanding problems and issues of recruitment. The subsequent learning experience too has implications for the ability of departments to recruit and – a related issue – to retain students. From a disciplinary perspective, learning represents ‘a practice through which the discipline is not only reproduced but transformed’ (Brennies 2007). The whole of this study has been predicated on the assertion that significant value attaches to an anthropological education in itself.

Callan argues for anthropology to be recognizable at the level of sixth-form study:

In pre-university education, it is both possible and useful to draw on isolated cross-cultural examples to give a comparative perspective to teaching in other subjects ... [but] if anthropology is to be made ‘present’ in education at pre-university level, the critical shift will involve recognising, and communicating, within the education process, that the material used comes out of a particular tradition of enquiry; and conveying some appreciation of what that tradition contains. (2006: 23)

Taking the form of this argument, we might question whether it would matter were anthropology effectively to disappear as a separate, university-taught discipline, as Sillitoe (2003) warns. Were it to do so, presumably certain principles, concepts and values would continue to be identified as valid, to be appropriated just as the ethnographic method has been, by other disciplines. Besides, increasingly undergraduates may encounter the discipline not as anthropology but in inter-disciplinary contexts or taught within other social science departments. The implication is that these students are participating in multiple academic communities and constructing multiple identities. However, a reduced ‘presence’ for anthropology in undergraduate studies would not guarantee a continuation of that disciplinary tradition identified by Callan. Since the time of anthropology’s inception as a professional, university-based discipline, one strand of ethnography has been applied to document ‘disappearing’ or endangered indigenous cultures, revealing as important the diversity of these social and cultural forms whilst they remain extant. How ironic it would be if anthropology, a marginal discipline, were itself effectively to be threatened as a distinctive academic culture!

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References


