THEME SECTION

Horizons of choice:
An ethnographic approach to decision making

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Anthropology and decision making: An introduction

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Abstract: This article, part of a set of three articles, calls for a critical reexamination of a plethora of phenomena relating to choice and decision making, occasionally addressed by anthropologists, but more regularly studied by economists, political scientists, psychologists, and organization scholars. By means of a bird's-eye research overview, we identify certain weak spots pertaining to a formalistic unicentral view of human rationality, and argue that ethnographic approaches casting light on cultural contexts for thought, reason, and action can explain how choices are framed and constituted from horizons of perceptions and expectations. A positive account of socially and culturally embedded decision making heralds a mode of anthropology with a broad, integrating capacity to address public policy and administration and their interactions with everyday experience and practice.

Keywords: choice, cultural context, decision making, ethnography, framing

Background: Introducing the theme

With this set of three interlinked articles, we wish to push for a more integrated ethnographic approach to decision making. Each of the three contributions explicitly explores the cultural embedding of interactions and processes leading up to decisions. The empirical foci of the following two articles are on decision making among farmers in Poland and among wildlife inspectors in Sweden, respectively. As indicated by the subjects of these case studies, we aim particularly to engage in discussions about decision making with strong societal relevance.

The motivation behind the three articles stems from common experiences as professional anthropologists working in a range of multidisci-plinary research fields. These include infrastructure planning, environmental policy, risk management, institutional arrangements for energy provision and distribution, and agricultural policy implementation. Many of the research questions that have preoccupied us over the years concerned decisions made by individuals and by collectives (such as households, companies, governmental or nonprofit/nongovernmental organizations). We have explored the interplay between choice and determination as well as the sociocultural embedding of connections between individuals and groups/institutions/organizations.

In various research projects, we have collaborated with natural scientists, technicians, and social and behavioral scientists other than an-

thropologists. A common experience is that we, as anthropologists, tend to approach choice and decision making rather differently from our non-anthropological colleagues (Henning 2005a). They tend to be more preoccupied with normative issues (Bunge 1998); whether the right or wrong decisions are being made, or how people may be influenced to make the "right" (rather than the "wrong") decision. In anthropology, on the other hand, reflexivity about observer-dependent valuations of other people's reasons and actions is standard procedure. Consequently, the social and cultural building blocks of rationality will always be put in question. As was observed by Audrey Richards and Adam Kuper in 1971, decisions come in many shapes. They emerge from everyday collaboration, they result from highly formal and ceremonial arrangements (for example, executed by ostentatious voting procedures), and they vary according to clarity or consensus. All this social and cultural variation merits anthropological attention (Richards and Kuper 1971). In this special issue we want to bring some new life into this old anthropological topic, by raising again questions regarding the social and cultural nature of choice and decisions and how they are socially produced, accomplished, and constituted (Kuper 1971).

We have chosen the title "Horizons of Choice" for this special section to highlight the central tension involved in decision making. The Greek term *hori'zón* means limitation, while the most common current use of the term is for skyline, denoting the illusory dividing line between the sky and the surface of the ground. "Horizon" is also a central phenomenological concept, used by the early twentieth-century philosopher Edmund Husserl to address the constitution of experience from expectations (Kuhn 1940). All these definitions of "horizon" are adequate to our purpose here, since they point to the simultaneously limiting and enabling capacity that experience, perception, and expectations have for the framing of choices and decisions. The following three articles address questions concerning what enables decisions, what triggers us humans to act, and who

influences us to act the way we do. What do we understand as necessary, suitable, or relevant to choice and action in particular situations and contexts? What are the horizons of our experiences and expectations, and how do such horizons determine the scope of a decision in terms of how the present and future are envisaged and comprehended in realistic (and unrealistic) plans, forecasts, and options (Toda 1976)?

The governmentality of choice—from medieval times to now

The idea of free will and choice between alternatives constitutes a core idea of considerable longevity in the Western world. It was fundamental to the mode of understanding the relationship between the individual person and God in medieval theology, where the concept of "free will" was construed from two contradictory notions. Human beings were considered free to make their own choices, at the same time as their actions were understood as outcomes of causal factors such as natural desires and instinct. Thomas of Aquinas (d. 1274), in his treatise on theology, *Summa Theologica,* addressed this problem of volition versus determination by postulating the dual nature of human beings as composed of body (governed by natural causes) and a soul component (governed by reason). For this influential medieval scholar, the faculty of reason allows for free choices. It therefore opens up morality and ethical considerations concerning righteous actions and modes of life. This idea still characterizes the Western mode of humanism.

In neoliberal society, however, the idea of free will no longer structures the relationship between the individual person and God to the same extent. By means of techniques for "self-actualization", free will and the related concept of "choice" shape the relationship between the citizen and the state (Dean 1999: 155; Burchell, Gordon, and Miller 1991) and between the consumer and the market. In our private lives, we are expected to make innumerable acts of selection, concerning what political party to vote on

at elections or what goods and services to consume. We are supposed to "design" our individual lifestyle, career, and future, as well as to choose close relationships, partners, or even children. What we are and become as persons is constituted by decisions, both our own and those of others. Even so, decision making emerges as a taken-for-granted capacity attributed to individuals as well as collective agents. The moral dimension is ever present, although not so much as an issue of divine will and individual transcendental afterlife as it was in the past. Today, moral dilemmas in decision making are linked to other larger concerns, such as global sustainability, vulnerable ecosystems and natural species under threat, or social solidarity and compassion for fellow beings.

Decision making permeates everyday life, globally and locally. Decisions are everywhere, serving as an overarching "mentality" to make sense of the world and human affairs within it. The public domain, for example, in environmental, infrastructure, and urban planning (explored by anthropologists such as Abram and Waldren 1998; Boholm 2005; Binde and Boholm 2004; Darian-Smith 1999; Stoffle and Arnold 2003; Stoffle et al. 2004; Suchman 2000; Weskalnys 2010), revolves around a never-ending modus operandi of governing decision making. The "governmentality" (Dean 1999) of decision making serves to bridge the private and the public domains, connecting individual sentiments and desires to structures of social ordering, power, hierarchy, and authority. In our view, this state of affairs presents a veritable challenge to integrative anthropological efforts.

A bird's-eye view on decision research

Decision making constitutes a vast empirical and theoretical field in the social and behavioral sciences. Accordingly, we find in psychology and economics, as well as in political science, organization studies and philosophy, an enormous amount of literature referring to the how and what of choosing among alternatives. Research methodologies are dominated by deductive testing of hypotheses by means of statistical modeling and controlled laboratory experiments, but there are also explorative, inductive case studies of social life in realistic settings.

The issue of rationality and its boundaries is a major theme running through the literature (Simon 1956), raising questions such as: How can rationality be determined? Are there degrees of rationality? Is rationality singular or multiple, static or variable, temporal or situational (see Gigerenzer 2006)? However, while some approaches are normative, focusing on how decisions should be made to fulfill certain universal criteria for rational problem solving (Dewey [1910] 1997; Simon 1960), others take a descriptive turn toward how decisions are actually made (Langley et al. 1995).

The theoretical and analytical approaches covered by this literature come in many shapes, as they grow from a number of metatheoretical assumptions about human beings and the possible role of the social. Some analytical approaches concern individual utility maximization and economic choice (see Edwards 1954), decision making under risk and uncertainty (Knight 1921; von Neumann and Morgenstern 1944), maximization of expected utility (see Edwards 1954), and prospect theory (Tversky 1975; Tversky and Kahneman 1981, 1986). Others deal with the role of feelings and affect in decision making (Daniels 2008; Slovic, Finucane, and MacGregor 2002). Within the field we find game theory, mathematical modeling and measurement (Marley 1997), and cognitive mental models (Johnson Laird 1983). There is literature on ecological adaptive capacities and domain-specific reasoning (Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996) and decision-making processes and bounded rationality in organizations (Simon 1947; March and Simon 1958; March 1997), as well as on organizational features of real-life collective decision-making processes (Langley et al. 1995; Mintzberg, Raisinghani, and Theoret 1979; Mintzberg and Westley 2001). Finally, there are a family of approaches focusing on decision making as sense making (Weick 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld 2005), decisions and processes of decision making embedded in

political environments serving legitimizing functions (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972; Brunsson 2007) and in power structures (Flyvbjerg 1998).

Decision analysis, which emerged in the United States in the 1960s, derives from economics and game theory, and from an a priori theorizing on the rational nature of decisions (see Luce, Duncan, and Raiffa 1957; von Winterfeldt and Edwards 1986). Today, this field includes specialized international journals and academic networks with the purpose of helping decision makers in their search for the "best" decisions. The aim is to facilitate optimized evaluations of decision problems, including alternatives, benefits, and risks. The applicability of decision analysis is claimed to be broad, including business, management, planning, public administration, health, and environmental policy. This approach to the study of strategic decision making is hypothetical-deductive, and normative. It builds on the axiom that every decision, regardless of its context, is (or should be) the outcome of a rational calculation of alternative choices in accordance with expected utility and estimated risk or economic gain. Such conceptualization of strategic decision making has been criticized for being idealistic, a priori, and normative, for neglecting the social dimension of human intentionality and action, and for being based on unrealistic assumptions about human cognition (Bunge 1998; Hendry 2000; Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996). Still, despite this serious criticism, among academics and (not the least) policy makers and officials, models of rational choice continue to be highly influential in conceptualizations of what a decision "is" and what it means to make one.

With a particular focus on decision making in organizations, Langley et al. (1995) discuss various theories that have decision making as a common theme. They include in their analysis a wide range of theories, from Herbert Simon's (1947, 1956, 1960) assumption that decision making is an intellectual, rational, and cognitive process conducted according to a sequence of simple steps, to James G. March's theory (1997) that decision making in organizations is a chaotic, anarchic result of social interaction. Langley et al. (1995) point to three frequent critical problems pertaining to practically all major theories on decisions and decision making, namely, reification, dehumanization, and isolation. The first error is reification, a tendency to treat a "decision" as an object rather than a social construct. Decisions have a dubious ontology, since it is not always clear from facts at hand if there is a decision or not. And, if one is certain that a decision has been made, it may still be unclear what this decision consists of, or how it came into being. One reason is that answers to such questions are observer-dependent. In the same vein, Gladwin and Murtaugh (1980: 116) addressed the elusive nature of a decision by asking when it actually is "coming into existence." At what moment is it constituted? Is it at the moment when it is verbalized, or when it is only thought of? Or is it in the beginning of deliberating over a problem, or perhaps when action is put into practice? Gladwin and Murtaugh (1980) suggest that, rather than trying to establish this elusive nature of decisions, attention should be directed to a first, unreflected stage of decision making (an issue we will return to later, both in this article and in the following one by Krzyworzeka).

According to Langley et al. (1995), the second error, dehumanization, implies that decision making is deprived of the emotions, imaginations, and "irrationality" that emanate from experience and memory. As a result, many decision models assume that people who share information and preferences will make the same decision. However, this seldom happens. A decision maker is an active participant in a social process. Hence, as the article by Sjölander-Lindqvist and Cinque shows, decisions are unpredictable results of personality, past experiences, expectations, and emotions. The third error that Langley et al. (1995) identify is isolation; the idea that decision making can be understood as separated from other activities of an organization or decision maker. Langley et al. (2005) argue that, since different decisions are connected and influence one another, it is seldom feasible to select one of these decisions as a

basic, isolated unit of analysis. The processual nature of decision making makes it hard to univocally define the moment when a decision is actually taken, and to differentiate the preparations for making the decision (e.g., collecting information and deliberating alternatives) from the actual decision.

In response to such critiques, organization and management studies have increasingly begun to focus on the practices of decision making in organizational settings (see Hodgkinson and Starbuck 2008). For instance, studies of naturalistic decision making (Lipshitz and Strauss 1997; Rosen et al. 2008; Zsambok and Klein 1997) explore how people actually make decisions in social life. In contrast to the psychological laboratory or hypothetical settings, decision problems are less clearly structured; the goals are diverse, even shifting and contradictory, and many actors are expected to collaborate (Boholm in press; Henning 2009, 2010). Also, uncertainty contributes to the complexity of decision making (van Asselt 2005). Uncertainty may be due to lack of knowledge, or to ambiguous or contradictory information. It may also be due to inconsistent organizational norms and rules, inconsistency regarding how decisions should be made, or what should be regarded as "good" decisions.

Furthermore, actions are oftentimes temporally nested (Andreou 2007), and decisions are often made under time constraints (Rosen et al. 2008). Both administrative decisions and decisions in everyday life tend to be linked in hierarchical systems of plans and subdecisions that depend on, or preclude, each other. In a study of railway planning in Sweden, Boholm (2010) shows that what might seem to be a fairly simple decision problem regarding a crossing between a road and a railway line (i.e., mapping the pros and cons of the two alternatives and selecting the optimal one) turns out to be quite complicated. The decision is part of a history of past decisions that give rise to expectations about certain future decisions. The temporal trajectory of the problem, in combination with veto points of powerful stakeholders, add up to a complex social dynamic far from interest-based

calculations of "hard facts", as the game theory model of group decision making would predict (Kleindorfer, Kunreuther, and Schoemaker 1993: 241). In this railway planning case, decision making emerges as a shared cooperative activity, involving several mutually committed interdependent agents (see Bratman 1992). Decision making therefore involves interpretations of commitments and intentions of other planners and stakeholders (Boholm 2010, 2011, in press). Such sociotemporal systems of constraints create contexts for decision making, where some decisions emerge as possible and agreeable, while others are blocked as closed nodes (Langley et al. 1995; Toda 1976).

Thus, in examining the workings of organizations and management, scholars have begun to question the rationality of decisions. New institutional organization theory has since the 1980s emphasized that decisions are not merely created as a result of the following of administrative rules. Conceptions of time, social norms, learning, rituals, and symbols prove to be formative in shaping the working mode of organizational action (March and Olsen 1984; Powell and Di Maggio 1992). Scholars following this tradition have pointed out the irrational nature of organizational decision making as a systematic practice of inconsistent action, compensatory talk, and organizational hypocrisy (Brunsson 2007). Organizational decision-making processes, studied over time, present a picture of idiosyncrasies and rationalizations that speak more of power relations (Flyvjbjerg 1998) than of the ideal of the structured, logically ordered process of "rational choice". Decisions are matters of muddling through (Lindblom 1959) and managing everyday matters and problems, and are often satisfying rather than optimizing (Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996; Simon 1956). In social life, identifying a solution may sometimes preclude defining a problem, in accordance with a "garbage can" model of decision making (Cohen, March, and Olsen 1972). In addition, results from psychological experiments indicate that, when we investigate and compare possibilities, we tend to reduce our choices rather than expand them, and we tend to imitate others ra-

ther than calculate decision alternatives (Bunge 1998: 317; Henrich 2002).

So, we have a somewhat gloomy picture of human reasoning: if human beings are actually quite bad at processing information in a correct way, if they do not objectively compare alternatives or make proper calculations (which they would not care about anyway even if they did), why are human decisions so often adaptive despite the fact that decision makers do not act according to models of rational choice (see Gigerenzer and Selten 2001)? This now brings us to what anthropology has to say about decision making.

The legacy from anthropology

Skill to manage is a crucial feature of human life (Ingold 2000). In their daily lives, human beings must repeatedly make choices and decisions. A Trobriander asks what can be cultivated and where, how a canoe can be constructed, where fish can be caught, and how neighbors should be treated (Malinowski [1922] 1961), while a citizen of a modern welfare state has to make choices regarding what pension fund will yield the best returns when he or she grows old (Nyqvist 2008). Since anthropologists for many decades have systematically studied cultural experiences and modes of social life all around the globe, in past and present, the anthropological literature is rich with insight into culture-specific practices of decision making.

Political anthropology and action theory is one of the approaches where decision making and choice has been more explicitly addressed. Here, individual motifs, choices, actions, and social processes were seen as conditioned by formal and informal structures of social organization (Vincent 1978). In the 1960s and 1970s, the "freedom" of social actors to maneuver and manipulate within social organizations was emphasized within this tradition. So was the role of networks of interaction and social relationships, and the use of various strategies to achieve goals and ends (Bailey 1970; Boissevain and Mitchell 1973). In this vein, Fredrik Barth's (1966, 1967)

game theory focused on transactions driven by value maximization. Here, social processes and change were, for example, looked at through the study of entrepreneurs, and the way these use resources in making strategic choices. Such approaches have been criticized for neglecting the cultural constitution of value (e.g., Aijmer 1975), and for neglect of class relations and structures of exploitation (e.g., Asad 1972).

Economic anthropology is another main field where decision making and choice has been explicitly addressed. Over forty years ago, Sutti Ortiz (1970) studied decision making among Columbian Indian farmers. She suggested that an anthropological approach contributes by examining the structure of the situation in which decisions are made, that is, the "context of decision-making" (Ortiz 1970: 192). Since decision making precedes the undertaking of any form of action, it is a crucial activity within the sphere of economy. Although anthropologists, especially those concerned with economic anthropology, have paid attention to decision making in firms and households (e.g., Barlett 1980a, 1980b, 1989; Cancian 1980; Gladwin 1980; Jha 2004; Ortiz 1970, 1980, 2005; Wilk 1987), the subject of decision and choice has not been as salient as topics such as production, work, or consumption. Rather, the subject has tended to be dealt with indirectly (for a recent discussion, see Hann and Hart 2011), and only occasionally explicitly within the field of economic anthropology. We see, for instance, how a substantial volume like the latest edition of *Handbook of Economic Anthropology,* edited by James Carrier in 2012, covers past and current contributions to the study of elements, mechanisms, and processes of economic life. And still, the instances of "decisions" listed in the index all refer to a sole author: Sutti Ortiz. In our view, this suggests that this topic of universal relevance has not received proper scholarly attention among anthropologists.[1]

Although seldom addressed up front in the anthropological literature, it is still possible to identify some basic theoretical orientations bearing on how decisions can be fundamentally understood. The vast cultural differences between

economic systems has motivated proponents of conflicting schools of thought such as substantivists and formalists to debate about the applicability of general economic models to economic systems that are not constituted by the market (Dalton 1961, 1969; Polanyi 1957). For the formalists, decision making is assumed to have a generic universal structure irrespective of the content and context of a decision. This position is summarized as follows by Chris Hann:

The conditions in which an economic actor makes a decision of course differ depending on the case in point. However, on a certain level of abstraction, it is presumed that African shepherds, Australian hunters and collectors as well as European capitalist firms actually make their choices in the same way, aiming towards maximizing usefulness, if we accept that they have the same information at their disposal. (Hann 2008: 55)

In anthropology, *homo economicus* has generally been understood as a socially embedded person driven not only by rational maximizing behavior, but also by social norms and morality informed by cultural meanings (see Aijmer 1980; Burling 1962; Ensminger 2002; Firth 1967; Polanyi 1957). Neoclassical theoretical models and perspectives, together with basic assumptions about maximization of satisfaction and a universal economic rationality based on cost-benefit calculus, have been hotly debated and stand forth as a long-standing "bone of contention" in economic anthropology (Burling 1962). The paradigmatic divide between the perspectives of the disciplines of economics, on the one hand, and anthropology, on the other, was already noted by Robbins Burling fifty years ago. While the two share the basic idea that human beings tend to be goal-orientated in their actions, striving for (maximizing) fulfillment of satisfaction, anthropology looks for "actual behavior in situations of choice" (Burling 1962: 818), while economics asks how people can be more rational and efficient in their pursuit of maximization. "This difference in objectives creates an almost unbridgeable gap between economics and anthropology, because an anthropologist is always more interested in the actual behaviour of men in concrete situations" (Burling 1962: 819).

A key issue in economic anthropology has therefore been to identify and characterize choice between alternatives and to assess its economic status (Burling 1962), particularly in social systems that lack institutionalized markets and pricing instruments such as money. In discussing Marcel Mauss's theory of the gift ([1925] 1954) as a moral obligation (to give, receive, and return gifts) that is structured by a social system of status differentiation, Firth notes: "I would argue that the 'obligation to give' is not simply a matter of status involvement, but has a number of complex elements involving choices of a significant, possibly painful, character before decision is arrived at" (Firth 1967: 14).

What Firth notes is that a decision is something "more" than just the mere outcome of social forces such as norms, rules, and obligations. Another early key statement was Sahlins's (1976) assertion that economic objectivity, being a culturally formed representation of the world, lacks independent social existence. He proclaimed that

[m]aterialism and utilitarianism not only have been the tools of certain social scientists, but constitute the very way in which people in the industrialised countries generally perceive their society and their life. In the native perception economy is an arena for objective, rational, and need oriented actions. (Sahlins 1976: 166–167)

However, a cognitive approach to contextualized theorizing about economic actions has not succeeded in becoming established as a prominent approach in economic anthropology (Guyer 1995; Parry and Bloch 1991).

Horizons of choice

The close link between economic anthropology and the Western intellectual project to outline a

general theory of man (Hann and Hart 2011) has been its strength, but also its weakness. Since the late 1960s and 1970s, economic decision making has dwindled as an anthropological topic (except for occasional contributions, such as those of Carrier [2005, 2012], Hann [2008], Hann and Hart [2011], and Henrich [2002]). The advent of postmodernism, with its focus on reflexivity, subjectivity, and epistemological relativism, has not been favorable to an economic anthropology aiming at general findings on economic behavior (Ensminger 2002).

Through this special section, we hope to inspire other social anthropologists to take up the decision theme for renewed discussions. The theoretical and methodological approach of anthropology provide unique tools to clarify how decisions are horizon-constituted, and how they come into being through reflexive modes of aligning intentions and actions. Being more explicit about how more general human traits are linked to decision making in specific ethnographic contexts is analytically rewarding. In the following two ethnographic stories from energy implementation, aid, and development work, Mehlwana (1997) and Henrich (2002) illustrate how some of the problems that scholars and development workers perceive emanate from their inability of taking serious the fact that decisions are always culture-specific and horizon-constituted. We see here how people's own horizons of choice include attributions applied on the actions and behavior of others, as well as inferences they draw concerning the effects that such actions would have on these others.

The first example is taken from South African low-income households. Mehlwana (1997) tells us about the surprise, among the promoters of solar cell lamps, when they realized that householders were reluctant to replace paraffin with electricity. From an outsiders' perspective, electricity was a natural step toward improved welfare and modernity. It also seemed like a perfect way to counteract hazardous fire incidents and the frequent toxic accidents caused by paraffin use. However, from a native, inside perspective, paraffin has a social quality that electricity lacks. Like food and other household items, paraffin can be bought and shared in small quantities. It can be borrowed from a neighbor, relative, or friend whenever one runs out of it or when one does not have the cash to buy it. Since these households tend to rely on social relationships for survival, paraffin is well embedded in the social fabric, while electricity, which cannot be split and redistributed, is socially disadvantaged. With an ethnographic approach like this, it becomes clear that the reluctance among poor South African householders to change from paraffin to electricity is not simply due to some irrational traditional behavior. On the contrary, from a culture-specific horizon of perception and understanding of future prospects, decisions to continue to use paraffin make perfectly good sense.

The second ethnographic example comes from central Chile. Henrich (2002) describes how agronomists working among the Mapuche Indians were just as surprised about the decisions of these people as were the promoters of electricity in the previous example. Agronomists had tried to persuade the Indian farmers that, for several reasons, it would be better for them to start growing barley than to continue to grow wheat; barley is better suited to the climate and soil, and is in greater demand. However, when asked about their reasons for continuing to grow wheat, the predominant answer among the farmers was that "nobody around here grows barley." When they were asked about their knowledge of crops and their growth capacities, they did not believe that barley would yield poorer harvests, or that it would be susceptible to drought, be difficult to grow, or give low profits. On the contrary, most of them thought that barley could be grown very easily and that it would sell for a good price. Some even believed that barley would yield better harvests than wheat. Thus, the fact that these farmers continued to grow wheat had very little to do with lack of knowledge of the advantages of barley. The Mapuche Indians of Henrich's study (2002) simply did not perceive different crops as alternatives among which they could choose.

To them, growing wheat was simply part of everyday life, a matter of routine and habit. Neither wheat nor barley was visible on the horizon of choice of these Indians.

Hence, Henrich (2002) proposes that decision making should be seen as based on "biased cultural transmission." The argument is that, primarily, people learn how to act by observing others, and by drawing conclusions from what these others do. According to Henrich, conformism and prestige are two important driving forces in this. Either one continues to do what one normally does, or one takes after people whom one perceives as successful in some respect. In her article in this special section, Krzyworzeka explicitly discusses such "nondecisions," that is to say, decisions in everyday life that are more or less taken for granted (Henning 2008a: 62). Krzyworzeka argues that decisions to make a change, or to continue as usual, apply to different tasks and areas in life. Furthermore, and rather contrary to Henrich, she contends that Polish farmers certainly continue to perform many of their tasks the way they have "always" done, but they do so deliberately and for a reason. She also has a discussion of whom and what the farmers tend to listen to, which not merely includes success and respect, but also aspects such as trust and usefulness (for further discussions on trust, conformism, and prestige, see also Henning 2006; Miller 1992; Waterson 1996). Basic to these discussions is the fact that, although humans tend to base their decisions and actions on what they see others do, this does not mean that they merely repeat these activities. Neither does it mean that diffusion processes can be studied by simply mapping social relationships. In social life, neither habits nor artifacts spread "like an infection" from one individual to everyone he or she happens to meet (Knorr-Cetina 1988; Strang and Meyer 1993).

In a study of consumption among poor London householders, Daniel Miller (1995) proposes that decision-making processes can often be understood to be about making agreement upon priorities. Other scholars who have approached decision making as a matter of prior-ity making, and of choosing among alternatives, are Gladwin and Murtaugh (Gladwin 1980; Gladwin and Murtaugh 1980). However, the "real-life choice theory" of these scholars is more in line with our previous discussion on the degree to which decisions are deliberately attended to. This theory states a two-step process of decision making. Accordingly, the least-suitable alternatives are quickly rejected by the decision maker during a first stage of decision making. This stage tends to be unreflected and automatic; the decision maker may not even be aware of the existence of a first stage. Consequently, when the second stage is reached, there are usually few remaining alternatives to be given closer consideration (Gladwin 1980).

Henning (2007, 2008a: 60ff.) describes several similar tendencies in her research on Swedish householders' choice of heating system. For instance, interviews with householders (who had recently replaced the heating system in their detached one-family house) showed that a decision to replace one heating system with another did not concern the new heating system nearly as much as the significance of getting rid of the old one. Secondly, for many of the householders, the decision process was much more about eliminating inferior alternatives than making active choices between good ones. Furthermore, in several cases the options were restricted by circumstances or actors other than the householders themselves (see also Henning 2009, 2010). Finally, and interestingly enough, some informants took their decision completely for granted; they actually did not experience replacement of the heating system as a situation of choice at all.

Henning (2008a: 61) concludes that decision making is also very much about "gut-feeling"; about deciding something that simply feels right. She also suggests that we look upon this feature of decision making as no less "rational" than other parts of it. "Gut-feeling," she says, is based on those previous experiences that gave each individual his or her knowledge, insight, and assumptions about the nature of the world and how to relate to it. Or, putting it differently, the experiences we all have and use in the pres-

ent were obtained at earlier stages of our lives, through interaction with the social, material, and conceptual contexts and structures of that time. Feelings direct a decision maker toward a sense of what seems to be the right thing to do (Milton 2002, 2005). Milton has suggested that learning is dependent on emotion in two ways; it assists learning in the first place, and it plays a crucial role in helping to determine what we remember and therefore what we come to know about the world (Milton 2005: 33). In the article in this special section by Sjölander-Lindqvist and Cinque, we see this illustrated as an incongruity between the idea of decision making as something logical and rational, and the way in which the experiences, emotions, and modes of thinking among inspectors become an integrated part of their attempts to make decisions concerning suspected carnivore harm.

Now that we have stretched the "horizons of choice" toward the past, we may do the same toward the future. One of sociologist Niklas Luhmann's (2005) fundamental ideas about decisions is that they create expectations concerning future action (however, not in an automatic, linear way). There is, he says, always a discontinuity between decision and action, since action does not follow from decisions in any logical or causal sense. A decision indicates commitment to future action by confirming an intention to act (Bratman 1999, 2007). In doing so, it "absorbs" uncertainty about future courses of action. Still, as it confirms an intention to act, a decision directs future action by accepting the premises for a decision, and by using them as conditions for new decisions to follow (Luhmann 2005: 96). Furthermore, as Luhmann has observed (1995: 297), the emergence of "alternative horizons" implies that a reframing of choice is possible, as is the reframing of decisions and their meaning structures. This means that a decision is inherently flexible, having both an open and a closed meaning structure (Luhmann 2005). Thus, according to its paradoxical ontology, a decision is closed when it freezes a choice between a selection of identified alternatives. On the other hand, a choice can usually be reassessed and opened up for reinterpretation

and restructuring of meaning (Boholm 2005, 2010, in press). It is this reflexivity of the human mind that enables the adaptive planning of action in the face of changing environment and life circumstances, something Tim Ingold (2000) has pertinently denoted an "ecology of life."

The work by Stef Jansen (2006, 2007, 2009) on Bosnian refugees in exile, and their motivations for (and understandings of) returning back to their territorial land of "home", is an excellent illustration of the complex temporality involved in decision making. Jansen shows how returning policies are underpinned by the idea that, when structures of administrative and political order and force have been normalized, the "natural" option for refugees is to return back "home" (2006). However, not all refugees decide to move back when they have the opportunity. This is the case despite the fact that they have spent many years away longing to return, and despite the fact that safety now has been restored. According to Jansen (2007), the explanation is that "home" has changed its meaning over time. The "home" concept was associated with hope, as "socially structured engagements with possible futures" (Jansen 2009: 58), guiding refugees in their decision where to live. However, upon its actualization, the hope of being able to return home ceased to be a self-evident, unreflected, and natural response to a refugee predicament. Consequently, in social life, choice and decision making have a (natural) dynamic temporality that, as Luhmann has pointed out, allows it to change its meanings depending on when it is observed, i.e., before, during, or after the decision (Luhmann 1995: 296–297; 2005: 85–89).

The ethnographic perspective

A combination of internal perspectives and external observations in the light of theoretically informed ethnographic insights allows us to move beyond the economically motivated decision or formal decision processes of groups and organizations and detect something more than the apparent. By shedding light on how deci-

sions are socially embedded, culturally informed, and bestowed with meanings, an ethnographic approach contributes to the understanding of the everydayness of decision making. We see culture not as mere limitation on rationality, "the ultimate bounded rationality" (Rojot 2008: 139), but as enabling sense making, or "rationality" if you like. Therefore, a positive account of culturally embedded decision making is called for, an account that can explain how choices are framed and constituted from horizons of perceptions and expectations (or "hope," as Stef Jansen [2009] puts it).

In classic anthropological theory, structure and process was recurrently presented as a dichotomy, as a theoretical difference between abstract models of stable regularity in society and individual action (Henning 2008a: 57). In many social science research traditions, there is a tendency to focus on merely one of these aspects of human life. While some use an external perspective on action and choice seen as determined by norms and social structures, others, such as methodological individualists among psychologists and economists, tend to focus on the individual perspective alone and explore decision making as "free". However, as anthropologists, we are working toward a third view with focus on the interface between free will and the conditioning of action. It is only through a synthesis of the internal and external perspectives that we can overcome the theoretical divide between freedom and determination in human action.

Certainly, decisions emanate from modes of thinking among "ones own", complexes of ideas that tend to be more or less taken for granted. However, as Wilk (1987) has argued, decisions are rarely simply learned through socialization, but negotiated, established, and changed. A focus on the fluency of decision-making processes and the ongoing negotiation of meanings, statuses, and situations is therefore essential for understanding the complex nature of decisions. Household negotiations are a case in point here, where gender perspectives may be particularly prominent (Gullestad 1984, 1992; Henning 2005b; Miller 1995). Decision making may in-

volve very slow (and selective) processes of information gathering, as we see in Krzyworzeka's article here on Polish farmers, or noted by Henning in her work among Swedish house owners (2007). Essential here, however, is that decisions tend to evolve through interaction within or between groups of cultural fellowships. Decisions take shape when individuals or groups must relate their own ideas and modes of thinking to others. Decisions are also formed in the interaction between human beings and the more slow to change social and material structures of society (Henning 2008a).

Common to the following two articles is a focus on decision making as contextualized processes of interaction between individuals, authorities, and social structures. Other common features are their geographical loci in Europe, and the interest they all take in current problems of a more general societal worth. The article by Annelie Sjölander-Lindqvist and Serena Cinque concerns inspections of suspected cases of damage to private property inflicted by protected carnivores. The authors discuss the conflicts inherent in the roles of these inspectors, being both authority representatives and local residents. They describe how operations and decisions among the inspectors are not only politically and administratively structured, but emotionally and intuitively informed by the building of rapport between inspectors and owners of damaged property. In her article about Polish farmers, Amanda Krzyworzeka discusses creative ways in which these adapt to changed circumstances in terms of new European Union laws and new market institutions. In doing so, she addresses the individual and collective dimensions of such processes. She discusses in some detail the strategies in preparing for coming decisions, and ways in which knowledge (on which they base their decisions) is circulated and evaluated as being sensible or unnecessary.

The articles turn attention toward culture, not merely as something that tends to limit sensible actions, but as those more or less shared systems of meanings and habits, social relations, and physical externalizations that constitute the very context and reasons for decisions to be

made and executed (Henning 2000: 56ff.). They contribute to an understanding of the everydayness of decision making by shedding light on how strategies and processes that pave the way for decisions are socially embedded, culturally informed, and bestowed with meanings. Choices, wherever and whenever they arise, stem from contexts framed by horizons of perceptions and expectations.

By way of concluding

The integrative perspective on choice and decision making that we propose relies on an ethnographic approach that explores phenomena as embedded in social and cultural contexts. Of course, this idea is far from new. As we have seen, it has been salient in all previous efforts in economic and political anthropology to empirically and theoretically address decision making. However, earlier approaches in anthropology have, in one way or another, and as a key analytical premise, attributed to agents game-like calculations vis-à-vis identified decision alternatives in order to maximize value as the ultimate decision rationale. In contrast to these approaches, we propose a phenomenological perspective.

A phenomenological stance refrains from any presupposed constructions of meaning attributed to the thought and action of other agents. Therefore, in our view, the very first step of any decision making—namely, how a choice is identified and perceived, and which alternatives become associated (or disassociated) with it—remains an open question. Thus, we suggest as a (new) anthropological area of decision studies the socially and culturally embedded preunderstandings of choice and decision making that precondition any decision. Such an approach takes into account how the world is perceived, understood, and related to by means of lived experience (Ingold 2000).

If we follow this lead, and focus on how identification of "choice" is constituted and accomplished in social life (by means of its contextual and often implicit framing in terms of selections, attributions of meaning, and normativity), the study of decision making can be expanded to incorporate all kinds of decisions, and not only restricted to the economic or political sphere. What we are suggesting is a field of anthropological enquiry of strong societal relevance, a field that can provide positive accounts of socially and culturally embedded decision making with a forceful, integrating capacity to address, in new ways, public policy and administration and its interactions with everyday experience and practice.

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Notes

1. Neither "decision" nor "decisions" are listed in the comprehensive index to Jean Ensminger's edited volume *Theory in Economic Anthropology* (2002).

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