The Role of Anthropology in Improving Services for Children and Families:

An Introduction

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"The richness in family studies over the next decade, we believe, will come from considering the diversity of family forms – different ethnic groups and cultures, different stages of family life, different historical cohorts – as men and women attempt to raise their sons and daughters."

-Cowan et al. 2014:xi

Over the past decades, the provision of family services has started to shift to a more holistic, integrative, and complex view of the family (Bogenschneider and Corbett 2010). A wide diversity of family models are being integrated into policy designs and differences created by gender, class and ethnicity have been taken into account in the adaptation of service delivery programs (Ostner 2010). Multi-agency approaches focused on providing families with simultaneous access to different types of services such as health, education, disability, and social services in order to guarantee integral support are more common (Maattaa and Uusiautti 2012). Family members are engaged in interventions to deal with internal power differentials and ensure

issues are addressed from multiple viewpoints. In some cases, family needs are understood to be fluid as family members move across different contexts, locations and stages of life (Maattaa and Uusiautti 2012).

Even though policy and practice are becoming more responsive to the everyday realities of families, applied work destined to improve services for children and families continues to face challenges (Bogenschneider 2014). The fluid nature of conceptualizations of families, the wide diversity of family arrangements, and families' movement across space (e.g., migration) and time (e.g., life-course) demand constant reconfigurations of services (Bomar 2004; Cowan et al. 2014). Work with families is dependent on the capacity to be able to deliver the same quality of services and support to all family members while maintaining attention to variance within and among families with regard to developmental, educational, social and political status.

Even though advances have been made in policymaking, policies are often divorced from the realities of children and families and reproduce stereotypical views of "the child" and "the family". This has implications on the design of services and their distribution, as well as how we conceptualize ourselves, our families, and communities (Passmore 2012). As Shore and colleagues have argued, policy "creates new social and semantic spaces, new sets of relations, new political subjects and new webs of meaning" (2011: 1). The stereotypical views and the underlying ideologies framing current policies aimed at children and families lead to particular ways of visualizing "entitlement" and "deserving and non-deserving" populations (Passmore 2012). As a consequence, evident inequalities in access to services persist.

Anthropologists are engaged as practitioners and applied researchers in a variety of settings where services are provided to families and children (Kedia and Van Willigen 2005;

Nolan 2013). As the articles presented in this special issue demonstrate, the skills of anthropologists have resulted in the beneficial reconfiguration (and reflection upon) family services as well as the design, implementation and evaluation of programs within agencies tasked with providing these services. Ethnography, often used in anthropology as a method and a way or relating to our research participants (Darrouzet et al. 2009), allows us to develop rich descriptions of the everyday lives of families. Anthropology's focus on the local, or "low-flying" perspective (Ong 2006:13), lets us understand how children and their families' needs, expectations, values, desires, and plans are shaped by the context where they work, live, and play. It permits the visualization of the local meanings attributed to global and local ideas and practices (Passmore 2012:209) and helps uncover processes affecting the use of services that might otherwise remain obscured (Henry et al. 2007:315). As Passmore has argued, "an anthropologist can carefully parse the local impacts of macro-level decisions and sees cultural construction where others might see 'common sense'" (2012:221). In other words, anthropology provides evidence to question the neutrality of policies and highlights the power relations operating at different levels of policy-making (Shore and Wright 1997).

Anthropology's prioritization of the emic perspective (insiders' or research participants' view) allows us to document and bring forward the voices of people who are often muted in the design and implementation of policies and, therefore, not adequately represented in existing service models (Deitrick et al. 2010; Johannsen 1992). Many anthropologists approach their research as a collaborative process, using methods to promote the participation of a wide range of stakeholders (Lamphere 2004), and in some cases, even allowing the people they work with to play a leading role in designing and pursuing research and the interventions it seeks to inform (Johnson et al. 2012; Pfister et al. 2014; Whiteford and Vindrola-Padros 2015). This includes the

individuals and communities using services as well as the individuals and organizations in charge of planning and delivering them (Henry et al. 2007: 316).

The anthropological perspective, with its emphasis on privileging the voices of those affected by and affecting policies and services, its use of holism (focus on the interconnection of multiple levels of analysis and integration of different areas of human life), and reliance on on-the-ground experiences, becomes a powerful tool to critically analyze existing policies and service models and propose and help deliver alternatives (Passmore 2012; Pinsker 2012). Anthropological engagement is achieved in multiple ways, from offering evidence to policy-makers and practitioners (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006) or "framing" issues in new ways (Lakoff 1996) so as to uncover underlying ideologies and power structures (Pinsker 2012; Powell 2008), to participating in and even leading interventions aimed at making changes in practices (Lamphere 2004). The articles in this special issue of the *Annals of Anthropological Practice* are tangible examples of the wide range of ways in which anthropological theory and methods can be used to inform policy and improve service delivery within the field of family services.

This special issue

Family services encompass a diverse span of services for children and their families. In a global context – as this collection demonstrates – this field can include everything from US involvement in family planning services for Malawian women, to local family-oriented services for deaf youth in a rural Mexican community. The articles presented in this volume are therefore meant to illustrate, rather than define, the diversity of culturally specific understandings of 'family service' from local contexts in the Americas, Africa, and Europe. As the author(s) of

each of the articles elaborate, the socio-cultural positioning of how, where, and why family services are provided is deeply rooted in local responses to national and international pressures. The boundaries between families and "the outside world" are highly permeable and reconstituted on an on-going basis (Brannen et al. 2002). Service delivery is a highly complex process involving individual, family, community, and global factors and requires the visualization of service users or consumers as actors capable of negotiating the structural factors that influence the type and quality of services available to them (Barnes et al. 2006).

Together, the authors featured here outline the contributions and limitations of anthropological practices, describe the ways in which anthropologists grapple with applied work in family-oriented agencies, and identify future areas our discipline is well-suited to address. Throughout this issue, reflexivity is an underlying theme as authors are mindful of their positionality in the specific contexts where they work. Thoughtful consideration of the comprehensive role anthropology plays as an agent of change emerges from this diverse collection. Research from across the globe addresses policies and practices affecting families in marginalized positions vis-a-vis the State.

With an international and cross-cultural focus, this special issue presents experiences from the United States, Malawi, Mexico, Spain, and Canada. The primary authors are medical and sociocultural anthropologists, psychologists and applied human science researchers occupying varied roles both inside and outside of academia, and, in several cases, they form part of interdisciplinary departments or teams. Their work points to different levels of anthropological engagement including: informing policy, helping to design and implement interventions and services, advocating for the rights and needs of the families they work with, and applying new approaches to teach future researchers and practitioners. These applied efforts

have led several of the authors to join research projects, form special-interest research groups, and create non-profit organizations with the explicit goal of improving service provision for families and children.

The theoretical frameworks authors utilize – critical medical anthropology, feminist anthropology, and the anthropology of childhood, to name a few – aptly highlight the use of ethnographically engaged anthropological research to describe raced, classed, gendered and aged experiences of family service users and providers. Each article evidences the way anthropological theories and methods allow for a more holistic examination of family-oriented services by unpacking concepts often taken for granted within these realms.

The authors primarily draw on traditional ethnographic and participatory methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation to uncover a detailed understanding of how individuals and families interact with the programs and organizations they study. In some cases, ethnography functions to illuminate areas where programs and policies need improvement. Anthropological analysis also helps to substantiate, document, and promote organizational work aimed to ameliorate the effects of state-sponsored marginalization. These articles show that anthropology is useful not only for critique, but also to document and substantiate evidence of valuable practices for assisting families and children. The work of anthropologists and their partners showcased here creates a tangible record of advocacy, social, and policy work affecting families.

The collection is divided into two sections reflecting the broad themes emerging from the collection. The first set of articles reflects upon the potential of anthropological research to inform policy affecting children and families. In each of these articles, we see how ethnography

uncovers issues that corresponding policies do not adequately address. These articles illustrate the importance of recursive, qualitative analysis investigating the subjective experiences of people who are affected by policy-driven services. In the first article, Helmy uses in-depth, semi-structured interviews to understand adolescent reproductive health services oriented towards family planning in the Bronx (New York City) where the issue of teen pregnancy intimately intersects with ongoing controversies concerning policies on abortion, birth control, and adolescent sexuality. She found that each group of stakeholders (reproductive health leaders, healthcare workers, and young women) expressed differential views on family planning, which led to inconsistencies in the delivery of information and services. Furthermore, family planning was not well understood in the context where the young women lived, and policies often appeared to disregard the structural factors affecting the decision-making processes of youth in marginalized communities. Helmy's research documents how discretionary, and often inconsistent, family-planning professionals relayed information about contraceptive options to teen patients from a demographic with particularly high teen pregnancy rates. Helmy's research also reveals that, in an effort to compensate for the dearth of information, or to find meaningful solutions, teen patients in the Bronx actively sought out multiple sources for information and triangulated what they learned about contraceptives. These informal information-seeking networks reveal agency among these young women that appeared to be discounted by health care providers.

The article by Blanchet-Cohen and Denov also points to a gap between policies and the everyday lives of people affected by them. Their article focuses on the experiences of war-affected children resettling in two Canadian cities. Two dominant themes occurring in youth resettlement narratives were the importance of family and friends in their lives (or informal

support systems), and formal structures of assistance in their new location (e.g., agencies or organizations). The common thread running through each of these trends is the importance of youths' informal support systems and the formation of 'relationships across the social ecology' in the wake of adversity. Drawing on these youth-centric insights, the authors unpack notions of "the child", "the refugee" and "the family" within an anthropology of childhood theoretical framework. They use this perspective to advocate for the inclusion of children's perspectives in the design of policies. The authors argue that anthropology's emphasis on a holistic understanding of social issues can serve as a tool to transform services for war-affected children from a fragmented system to a continuum of support across multiple formal and informal sectors.

Barnes' article presents another way in which anthropology can be used to transform policies: by teaching students how to change them. The author reflects on the experiences of female African American social work graduate students while taking her course on family policy. She argues that anthropological perspectives: (1) can be used in the classroom to encourage students to critically examine policies and search for ways to make practitioners more responsive to the needs of the families they work with, and (2) can be used to incorporate social justice measures into public policy that could benefit families.

The second set of articles brings anthropologists' roles in liaising among children, families, and service providers into view. These articles provide vivid examples of the on-the-ground application of anthropological perspectives and ethnographic methods for an assortment of purposes (ranging from program design to evaluation), in a myriad of contexts (public service agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the wider community), and with a variety of outcomes (facilitating changes in practice, improving the quality of life of participants). Together, these articles exemplify the way ethnography can be used to inform research-based

services. In each case study, ethnographic findings and analyses directly informed decisions about organizations in order to provide services tailored to human groups' specific desires and needs. MacDougall describes the way her research revealed state-based misunderstandings about the experience and understanding of deafness in an indigenous Maya community in Yucatan, Mexico. Methodologically collaborative processes with participating community members resulted in the compilation of emically-informed community needs and desires. The author describes her role in founding a not-for-profit organization, YOUCAN, based on these discoveries and demonstrates how information gleaned through anthropological fieldwork shaped the kinds of services the organization provided.

Azevedo Mendoza and Robinson describe a process in which anthropological findings and interdisciplinary collaboration informed an intervention program with Latina girls and their families from disadvantaged California neighborhoods. The community-based program the authors describe – Stanford ECHALE – was conducted in seven public elementary schools in order to reduce cases of childhood obesity. Stanford ECHALE utilized ethnographic research findings for designing culturally competent programs, improving retention rates, and protecting participants. The two pillars of the intervention included an after-school folkloric dance program, and a screen-time (e.g., television and video games) reduction curriculum. The authors conclude that applied anthropologists can play an integral role in increasing community involvement in health-based projects, allowing for ethically conducted work with children, increased participant retention rates, and program sustainability once research funding concludes.

In order to improve health services, particularly family planning and sexual and reproductive health, Ahmed et al. utilize a knowledge sharing and capacity building approach (K4Health) in Malawi. The K4Health Malawi Demonstration Project, funded by the United

States Agency for International Development (USAID), involves a 'multi-level approach' to knowledge sharing that begins with participatory methods to assess the health information needs of key stakeholders (e.g., district level community health workers, mothers and caregivers). Needs assessment results are then used to collaborate with local government agencies, engaging them in designing, implementing, and evaluating interventions, in order to facilitate ownership and sustained interest in community-level programs. At its core, K4Health relies upon research methods that are foundational to applied anthropologists in order to thoughtfully manage and share knowledge gained from applied inquiry with community collaborators in developing contexts.

San Román et al. point to the challenges faced by anthropologists attempting to influence service delivery. The backdrop of this article is the recent transition of Spain from a place where foreign couples adopted children to a country with the highest number of foreign adoptions (second only to the United States). In response to the lack of attention by the Spanish government to issues facing families on both sides of transnational adoption, the authors formed the AFIN Research Group, an interdisciplinary group of Catalan researchers. In their article, San Román et al. describe the development of several research projects with the participation of practitioners and adoptive families using ethnographically engaged research methods that have helped AFIN make an impact on adoptive families. They also reflect upon the difficulty of disseminating AFIN's research results to policymakers and practitioners (i.e., clinicians, therapists, educators, social workers). Ultimately, the authors argue that AFIN's methods for understanding inter-country adoption and political and professional culture in Spain have resulted in the marginalization of AFIN by policymakers and practitioners, while simultaneously making them successful among adoptive families as a recognized expert group.

Continuing the efforts toward improving services for children and families

Most of the articles in this special issue point to the fact that policies across the world remain distant from the everyday realities of children and families. Throughout this series, a common theme is the encounter of policies and programs that created, perpetuated, or operated based upon stereotypical views of the people they intended to serve. Most of the articles have focused on unpacking these stereotypes by using methods from anthropology, which seek to provide rich descriptions of the everyday realities of the people they work with. As Shore and colleagues have argued, "the point of an anthropology of policy is not just to focus a new lens on particular fields of policy, but in doing so, to reveal processes of governance, power and social change that are shaping the world today" (2011: 1). To this we would add that the point of anthropology is to use this particular insight to inform changes in policies and help develop more responsive service models.

As the articles in this issue clearly demonstrate, anthropologists are well suited to contribute to this endeavor by providing a nuanced and rich understanding of the lived experiences of children and families in need of services, developing a critical examination of the concepts and discourses guiding the design of policies, and bringing together multiple stakeholders to make policies and services multidimensional and inclusive. Several of the articles selected for this collection recommend using participatory approaches to involve youth and families in the transformation of policy and practice. Current methods in applied anthropology, collaborative anthropology, and participatory action research are just some of the tools anthropologists can incorporate to involve participants in ways that reflect their experiences with family-based services.

The task of aligning anthropological research with services designed to aid children and families faces unique challenges. The situations described by the authors in this issue are a testament to the constraints on time, resources and barriers to access encountered by anthropologists attempting to bridge academia and practice. These authors have established collaborative practice as a potential strategy for overcoming the obstacles that continue to truncate the translation of research findings into tangible changes in policy and practice. These anthropologists aligned themselves with researchers from other disciplines, but most importantly, with policy-makers, non-profit organizations, professional associations, practitioners, and children and families in need of services. The editors of this special issue hope that this collection of articles inspires the development of strategies to further the endeavors of anthropologists interested in improving services for children and families.

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