

REFLECTIONS

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The authors of the articles in this issue describe research studies or training with households and informal waste collectors (IWCs)/waste pickers. Heide Kerber's article highlights the socio-spatial inequalities of waste. The studies encompass waste generation, collection, and disposal and span the Dominican Republic, Maldives, Philippines, and Vietnam. In this final paper, I will focus on connections among the articles.

Households

Four papers focus on households. Two of the four (Mohamed and Jameel; and Skoczen et al.) find that it is not viable for households to reduce their use of plastic without systemic change. In the case of the Maldives (Mohamed and Jameel), the national government instituted a ban on single-use plastic (SUP) bags, but the government waste collection and disposal company (WAMCO) currently requires households to dispose of waste in plastic bags. WAMCO simultaneously requires waste segregation, which leads to more SUP bags being used. Furthermore, the cost of reusable bags for all

family members who shop is prohibitive. Although it was difficult for family members to remember to take reusable bags when they went shopping—and sometimes to remember to use them if they had the bags—the field of social and behavior change practice and literature contain many techniques for making such behavior easier for people to do. Therefore, the internal reasons for avoiding use of SUP alternatives, such as reusable bags, impose far less on households than external, national, and systemic factors. However, the lack of available and affordable bags that can be deployed for waste disposal is a global issue. It is a matter of allocation of resources to research alternative materials by the petroleum extractive industry that supplies the raw material for plastics, as well as plastic manufacturers and packagers.

Skoczen et al., in their article, "The Wastescapes of Samaná," argue that households are part of global economic systems not only through where their waste plastic is recycled but also through plastic manufacturing, marketing, and packaging industries. The interests of these industries result in households having little or no choice in reducing plastic waste. Skoczen and her co-authors emphasize that reduction of plastic production is the only real way to reduce or eliminate the deleterious effects of plastics in the environment. Romanik, in her comments in this issue, also highlights the necessity to reduce the manufacture and use of plastics. Even a development agency as relatively

well-funded as USAID is limited in what it can do to affect the plastic global supply chain. It is encouraging that world governments came together in March 2022 to sign a resolution for a global plastics treaty, meeting most recently in Uruguay in Dec. 2022 to begin negotiations. It is possibly through the united legal provisions of many governments that the industries that manufacture and use plastics can be pressured to conduct the needed research to provide practical, affordable plastic alternatives and ultimately to reduce the amount of new plastics coming into this world. As anthropologists and applied social scientists, we can both provide research data to inform plastic policies as well as directly advocate to governments to take action.

Mohamed et al. and Krieger et al. focus on household segregation and disposal. Both articles reinforce Mohamed and Jameel's finding that a basic requirement for waste segregation is that the solid waste management (SWM) system must be able to support segregation from collection through disposal. While this finding may seem self-evident, the SWM sector is replete with failed segregation promotion campaigns that neglect to ensure that a SWM system is able to collect and otherwise maintain segregated waste.

The literature on waste segregation at the household level, a form of "segregation at source" (i.e., where the waste is produced), commonly claims that household waste is the responsibility of the woman, almost never citing data to support the

contention. The data, especially from Trials of Improved Practices (TIPs) conducted through CCBO, are showing that the claim is a kind of cultural imaginary. In Samaná Province, Dominican Republic, household waste “management” is not a gendered activity, even in the socialization of children to waste disposal, as both mothers and fathers talk to their children about waste disposal and the environment. In Baa Atoll, the Maldives, all household members contribute to waste segregation; earlier qualitative research by the Soneva Namoonaa team revealed that men and boys generally dispose of the household’s yard waste.

A major purpose of conducting the household research was to develop a social and behavior change (SBC) program tailored to each CCBO engagement site. SBC was pioneered largely in health, where it is derived from models of the individual patient-provider relationship and, as practiced, relies heavily on one or two schools of social psychology. The individual is the basic unit, and individual behavior is the focus. This is not the case in CCBO because, as these articles demonstrate, waste is generated by whole households and all members contribute to its management. The Soneva Namoonaa team (Mohamed et al.) used the household as the unit but did not approach whole households (few of the studies did), but rather one or two household members. Without inclusion of the entire household in the TIP visits, two households were unable to fully participate. The lesson for future research in SWM, then, is that the household, not the individual or a woman of the household, is the unit for household waste management. Furthermore, waste generators are only one portion of the SWM system. There are, of course,

other reasons to avoid focusing on the individual and individual behavior, but these household studies provide data to support avoidance of the Western neoliberal individual behavior approach.

Informal Waste Collectors

Skoczen, in her and Caram’s article on IWCs, employs gift theory to interpret the relationship of IWCs to their community. This application of theory fits well with how some IWCs in Samaná conceptualize their own role vis-à-vis their towns and even, for some, the planet. This insight and application of gift theory can have practical applications both for training IWCs and for programs attempting cultural and social change to raise the status of IWCs. Stigmatization of IWCs is nearly universal. This may be explained not only through the unrecognized reciprocity of the IWCs’ gifts to their community but also through the contagion of pollution since garbage may be categorized as polluting universally or nearly so. This topic requires further analysis and research.

The idea that IWCs are providing a not exactly reciprocal gift to their communities is applicable both to the kind of training that Caceres describes in his article from the Philippines and to SBC programs attempting to change cultural models for IWCs. It is a truism that part of being very poor often includes poverty of social capital. Caceres’s article describes in a very human way what this means to very poor IWCs in Puerto Princesa, Philippines, and also what can be done to ameliorate IWCs’ situation on an individual basis. Using the gift model to elevate both the self-worth of the IWCs in Puerto Princesa and simultaneously as part of SBC outreach to

communities may help to change self-image and perhaps cultural models of IWCs.

TIPs

This issue also serves as an introduction to a research approach that may be new to some or most readers of *Practicing Anthropology*. TIPs emerges from the results of qualitative, often ethnographic, research that projects or programs conduct first. I have generalized the qualitative research to TIPs model of formative research in CCBO among our grantees. CCBO staff members now also expect grantees and partners to follow this approach. Since the SWM and 3R (reduce, reuse, recycle) sector has seen a great deal of top-down “information and education” generally based on no research, this model represents a great step forward. It also shifts the emphasis from an outsider’s perspective on behavior to an approach closer to the anthropologist’s inquiry into what is going on in a given situation.

For anthropologists, TIPs can provide detailed data on behaviors in a household, clinic, couple, organization, etc. and further anthropology’s classic aim of comparing what people do to what they say they do. For applied and practicing anthropologists, TIPs can provide invaluable information on what people are able and willing to do. We can theorize about how integrated practices are with the rest of culture, but TIPs provides evidence on how and why members of a group are willing and able to change which behavior. TIPs is not designed to test changes in relationships, including power relationships. However, the researcher may catch useful glimpses of this, as we did decades ago from the results for TIPs in Pakistan (The

Asia Foundation, n.d.), to provide information to local NGOs seeking to increase male engagement in family planning.

Environmental Justice

Finally, Kerber's article illuminates the larger issue of inequality in services and waste infrastructure for different communities. Kerber uses Goffman's front- and backstage theoretical approach to reveal, through her

concrete spatial data, the inequity of what is supposed to be a public service but serves mainly the tourist sector. Such an approach can be taken to show inequalities in waste collection not just among the tourist and residential sections of a town but also between the different neighborhoods that reflect social class and, in some countries, also ethnicity.

The articles in this issue span several of the areas of SWM open

to investigation by anthropologists and other applied social scientists, but there are many other areas. Please join us in working on the intriguing and critical topic of plastic waste!

Reference

The Asia Foundation. (n.d.). *Trials of Improved Practices (TIPs) on male involvement in family planning in Pakistan*. ■

PETER KONG-MING NEW STUDENT RESEARCH AWARD

The Peter K. New Competition and Award honors the memory of the late Professor Peter Kong-ming New, a distinguished medical sociologist-anthropologist and former President of the Society. The interests of Peter K. New were wide-ranging, as seen in his studies on food cultists, faith healers, osteopathic students, stroke victims, alcoholics, nurses, public housing residents, medical missionaries in modern China, and the plight of incoming U.S. minority groups fighting to control their health care. The award will be given to the best paper which reports on an applied research project in the social/behavioral sciences. The research question should be in the domain of health care or human services (broadly construed).



The first place winner receives a cash prize of \$3,000 and \$350 to partially offset the cost of transportation and two nights lodging at the annual meeting of the Society. The winner also receives an engraved crystal trophy. Cash prizes of \$1,500 to second place and \$750 to third place may be awarded, including a \$350 travel stipend and two nights lodging.

The Peter Kong-ming New Prize is open to any graduate or undergraduate student registered at a college or university during the calendar year immediately preceding the presentation of the award. Students who have previously earned a doctorate are not eligible for the competition.

Students must submit a previously unpublished manuscript based on original field research in the social sciences. The competition is limited to manuscripts by a single author. The prize-winning author must present the paper in person at the Society's annual meeting immediately following the competition and is expected to submit the paper to *Human Organization* for review and possible publication.