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Reviews

Douglas-Jones, Rachel and Justin Shaffner (eds)

2021. *Hope and Insufficiency: Capacity Building in Ethnographic Comparison*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books. ISBN 9781800731011 (ebook)

This volume critically examines a ubiquitous and, according to editors Rachel Douglas-Jones and Justin Shaffner, undertheorised aspect of contemporary aid, development, and NGO work: capacity building. Capacity building, which became a prominent feature of development discourses in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is a nebulous concept that does a lot of ‘work,’ as the editors note in their introduction. At once a goal and a method for achieving that goal, capacity building encompasses a wide range of attributes, including abilities, attitudes, behaviours, conditions, infrastructures, knowledge, relationships, resources, skills, and values. It identifies them as inadequate or insufficient in the present. Then, capacity building seeks to transform them at a variety of levels (individual, organisational, societal) to bring about a desired future. The editors argue that ‘capacity building “works” through comparative transformation. It must generate (preferably measurable) insufficiencies which need to be made to appear – an absence that becomes a potential’ (page 8).

A second argument underpinning this volume, and the reason we decided to review it in *Commoning Ethnography*, is that ethnographic comparison is a generative approach for engaging with highly mobile concepts like capacity building. Accordingly, the eight ethnographic chapters in this volume take a comparative approach in attending to the contested, transformational, future-oriented ‘work’ that capacity building seeks to do in diverse settings.

Originally published in 2017 as a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 35(1), this volume began as a 2011 American Anthropological Association panel and was further developed at a 2015 Wenner-Gren workshop. The time invested in developing a shared theoretical framing has resulted in a cohesive collection that tracks ‘how (and which) capacities can become sites of cultivation or intervention’ (page 7) across a range of ethnographic contexts.

Following the introduction, Kristen LaHatte’s discussion of NGOs working in post-earthquake Haiti illustrates the tensions that arise when capacity building projects ask local capacity builders to act in ‘professional’ ways that devalue Haitian sociality. LaHatte also shows how local capacity builders selectively cultivate capacities for professional reciprocal relationships that have a longer temporal horizon than that of the NGO’s project. Andrea Ballesterio’s chapter traces the development of a ‘Water Pact’ in Ceará, northeast Brazil, that sought to increase a community’s capacity to care for water in the future through an aggregate of meetings, promise-making events, and documents involving more than eight thousand participants. Rachel Douglas-Jones’s ethnographic work on capacity building among ethical review committees in the Asia-Pacific region highlights a tension between the capacity to *conform*, where ethics review committees are able to demonstrate their compliance with global ethical standards, and the capacity to *transform*, where ethics committee members are expected to demonstrate their own transformations in ethical knowledge and their capacity to be ethical when determining how global standards can be modified to suit local contexts. Susan Ellison shows how a governance strategy of ‘reasonabilization’ – where donor priorities are shifted from repairing institutions to correcting political cultures, and where the persistence of inequality is located in ‘destabilizing and combative political subjectivities and tactics’ (page 70) – led to capacity building programmes that positioned existing modes of conflict resolution and democratic participation in Bolivia simultaneously as ‘lacks’ or insufficiencies that needed to be strengthened, and as threatening capacities that needed to be corrected. (Bolivian activists resist this, of course.)

In the second half of the book, Harriet Boulding’s chapter on community-based health workers in Ghana focuses on capacity building itself. Boulding shows how definitions of capacity building becomes a detriment to both the healthcare workers whose activities are limited by the ‘blueprint’ they must follow to improve community relationships – which also ignores their existing capacities and sometimes creates an unsafe working environment – and to the communities whose healthcare needs go unmet. Viktoriya Kalesnikava draws on ethnographic and document research with two NGOs (SOS Children’s Villages in Russia Australia, and Supportive Housing in the USA) to show how capacities associated with personal and professional domains encompass and transgress one another in ways that can sustain these organisations or contribute to their collapse. Christopher Hewlett troubles the idea of transformation in his chapter on the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ long history of ‘capacitation’ (page 129) in Peruvian Amazonia. He shows how the SIL’s understanding of ‘lack’ and what needs to be transformed has changed over the years, and how it sits alongside Amahuaca understandings of transformation as embodied, based on kin, and reciprocal.

Casper Bruun Jensen’s chapter on capacity building among nannies, bargirls, and government bureaucrats in Cambodia rounds out the ethnographic

contributions to this volume, raising important questions about the limits of capacity building. He asks: is it capacity building when nannies and bargirls teach themselves English to improve their future employment prospects? The chapter also explores the appeal of capacity building to Cambodian bureaucrats who demonstrate ‘the capacity to constantly reinvent ways of acquiring funds from international donors *while also* finding ways of not committing too much to the delivery of the promised goods’ (page 143). By focusing on these alternative capacities that fall outside of the capacity building discourse, the chapter’s approach offers a clever twist that jolts us to rethink other parts of the volume. Collectively these chapters work to stretch, problematise, and assess the limits of capacity building, inviting readers to think about this concept in new ways.

While the contributors explicitly engage with capacity building and its associated concepts – insufficiency, comparison, transformation – hope is paradoxically not given the same attention throughout the volume. Hope is primarily discussed in introduction, where it is evident (although not articulated in so many words) that the editors are interested in a specific form of hope: the ‘political making of a better world’ (Jansen, Stef. 2015. *Yearnings in the Meantime: ‘Normal Lives’ and the State in a Sarajevo Apartment Complex*, page 46. New York: Berghahn Books). Describing capacity building as ‘full of hope and potential’ yet operating ‘from perceptions of insufficiency or absence’ (page 1-2), Douglas-Jones and Shaffner explain that this volume seeks to ‘use the tension between hope and insufficiency at work in capacity building to explore its intended and unintended effects’ (page 2).

However, my reading of the ethnographic examples provided suggests something different; that instead of being in tension, hope and insufficiency co-construct each other and are both necessary conditions for capacity building. Many of the chapters implicitly show that the hopeful futures promised by capacity building are firmly connected to the insufficiencies created through discourses and material conditions in the present, highlighting the temporal dimensions of capacity building and illustrating how tensions emerge elsewhere, such as when different social actors have competing hopes or conflicting understandings of insufficiency.

I was also left with a question: is hope a capacity that is nurtured through capacity building, something that sustains people’s orientation to and investment in a better future even when capacity building practices are themselves deemed insufficient for bringing about those futures? While additional elaboration from the editors about how they conceptualise the relation between capacity building, hope, and insufficiency would have been welcome, ultimately I read this gap as an invitation for future work to engage with and extend the theoretical ideas presented here.

Overall, this is an engaging and thought-provoking volume that will appeal to scholars studying development issues as well as development practitioners and policymakers involved in capacity building. Bookended by an excellent preface (Martha Macintyre) and afterword (George Mentore), it offers a range of ethnographic perspectives and shows how analytically productive the concept of capacity building can be for the anthropology of development, policy, and NGOs.

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