

JOACHIM FUNKE

## 17 “Just Plain Folks”. Anthropology Meets Psychology

Near encounter 1973

Back to my earliest memories having to do with Jürg: When I was a young student, I began my studies in psychology and philosophy at Basel University, Switzerland, in the summer of 1973. At that time, I had no clear goal in mind. I was officially enrolled in philosophy as a major and psychology as a minor but the borders were open at that time. I went to lectures in art history, German literature, psychiatry, and sociology. And I also went to the Anthropology Department, located at Münsterplatz, but Meinhard Schuster – head of the Basel Anthropology Department at that time – with his interest in the Sepik region (Papua New Guinea) did not match my interests (at least not in these years). So I was happy with the Philosophy Department (Arnold Künzli, Hans Kunz, Kurt Rossmann, Hansjörg Salmony). During my philosophy studies, I came into contact with a doctoral student named Olga, who was at that time the girl friend of Jürg – unbeknownst to me. I left Basel in 1975 for Trier University to complete my psychology studies. Anthropology was no longer on my intellectual landscape.

So: I *could* have met Jürg during my Basel days but I have no conscious memory of a face-to-face encounter. That happened years later in our Heidelberg faculty when I entered Heidelberg University in 1997. Human memory is not perfectly reliable: I do not remember exactly when I first met Jürg there but it must have been in the context of one of my first faculty meetings shortly after my start at Heidelberg University. Our Heidelberg Faculty of Behavioral and Cultural Studies comprises such heterogeneous departments like Anthropology, Educational Science, Gerontology, Psychology, as well as Sport and Sports Science. Normally, we meet people from other departments only at faculty meetings, because there is little or no overlap in teaching between the

mentioned subjects. For some reasons unknown to me, one day I was invited to the Department of Anthropology to drink a glass of wine and eat some finger food together with people from the Department. This type of informal “get-together” was typical at that time for Jürg’s style of management.

From these beginnings, my wife Marlene and I became friends with Jürg and his colleague/wife Verena. They introduced the legendary „Zungenschlag“ (a local cabaret and entertainment show) to us and during their regularly held „aperos“ (informal meetings with colleagues and students at the beginning of a term in their private rooms) I made contact with a lot of interesting friends of Verena and Jürg’s. It was a long way from the near-encounter in Basel to the first real encounter in Heidelberg. But from the beginning, it was a mixture of friendship and common research interests in Cognitive Anthropology (see Illustration 17.1).



Illustration 17.1: Jürg Wassmann with the author (July 2013).

## Common lectures – common research interests since 1998

Since winter 1998, Jürg and I had repeatedly held cooperative seminars at Heidelberg University. The titles of these seminars were „Research on cognition from the viewpoints of anthropology and psychology“ (winter term 1998/99; summer term 2002); “Space and time from the viewpoints of anthropology and psychology“ (winter term 1999/2000); “Cognitive anthropology“ (winter term 2003/04); “Cognitive psychology meets anthropology“ (summer term 2005; summer term 2007). I wrote a short paper about this cooperation in the German anthropological journal “Zeitschrift für Ethnologie” (Funke 2010). Some people from the Anthropology Department in our faculty have since called me the guy who published in “our” journal. That is a consequence of interdisciplinary work.

The battlefield between Psychology and Anthropology was a field of methods, especially the issue of participant observation (a favorite method for anthropology) versus experimental lab research (the ideal method for psychologists). Two different worlds of experience! But the truth is, both have their advantages and their disadvantages (see also the contribution by Dasen, this volume). There is no panacea. Reliance on informants could lead to erroneous conclusions (Margaret Mead could tell a story) – Jürg and his plea for “just plain folks” reads for me like “don’t believe in the big man”; ask more than one person (even if this person is the chief).

There was no lecture (and for some time no doctoral examination) without “Animals in a Row”: That was a task that Jürg loved very much! Three animals were positioned sequentially on a table on one side of a room, then the participant had to turn 180 degrees and reproduce the sequence on another table. It served to demonstrate egocentric vs. geocentric representations (Wassmann and Dasen 1998, see also Dasen, this volume).

## Theory of mind

As a result of our teaching cooperation and with generous support from the “Volkswagen Foundation,” five teams of two persons (each team consisting of one psychology student and one anthropology student)

went to the Pacific for field studies to test hypotheses about the universality of a unique human “Theory of Mind.” The five Pacific societies and the respective research teams (psychologists mentioned first) were Eva Oberle and Jochen Resch on Fais and Yap Islands (Yap State, Federated States of Micronesia), Alexandra Tietz and Svenja Völkel in Tonga, Andreas Mayer and Julius Riese in Samoa, Mirjam Hoelzel and Verena Keck among the Yupno (Papua New Guinea) as well as Bettina Ubl and Anita von Poser with the Bosmun (Papua New Guinea).

Bringing together students from at least two disciplines was necessary to bring experimental research techniques down to earth and to adapt them to local environments. Universality assumptions hold widely in psychological research. The use of objective measurements and the use of (quasi-)experimental methods is standard procedure in normal lab-based research under controlled conditions. But under field conditions, some compromises have to be made: the control of noise factors becomes more problematic, the understanding of instructions has to be proved and test material has to be localized. All in all: not “business as usual” for the psychologists in this enterprise but a lot of challenges that require creative problem solving. The resulting book “Theory of Mind in the Pacific. Reasoning Across Cultures” (Wassmann et al. 2013) shows this in detail. Another point: Psychology is becoming more and more aware of its status as a postcolonial science (see, for instance, Teo 2005). Anthropological insights and knowledge are one of the sources for this process. The fact that most of the psychological experiments were run with WEIRD people (=participants from western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies), is another relatively recent insight from Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010). The cooperation with Jürg helped me to overcome these limitations, at least in this case.

Concerning the book from Wassmann et al. (2013), a recent book review from Luhrmann (2015) finishes its critique with the statement: “This is a remarkable book. It represents a quite considerable amount of work and it is a significant achievement. There is nothing like it in the literature. That it leaves you wanting more is a sign of how much it has accomplished.” What more could we wish for than such a positive and rewarding evaluation!

## The new freedom: Emeritus 2009

Since 2009 Jürg has enjoyed the privileges of an emeritus: Without being disturbed by boring administration, without a teaching load, and without losing time during committee meetings he has focused on the most important issue for a scientist: science! Together with Verena, he has spent a lot of time at their country residence in Feldberg in the Black Forest (see Illustration 17.2), reading and writing books and articles (besides swimming and visiting pubs).

I know of many visitors who have gone to Feldberg to discuss issues in anthropology with Jürg and Verena. Marlene and I have been there repeatedly and were impressed by their hospitality. I hope that the scientific results of this freedom will find their ways into anthropology and also into psychology in the future.



Illustration 17.2: Jürg Wassmann (August 2015) in his Feldberg office, writing his next book.

## Final remarks

Nigel Barley, the recalcitrant (and unconventional) anthropologist, author of the famous book *“Adventures in a Mud Hut: An Innocent Anthropologist Abroad”* (in German translation simply labelled: „Traumatische Tropen“), said recently in an interview with the German weekly magazine „Die Zeit“:

„Für mich ist Ethnologie eher eine Form aufgeklärter Subjektivität, Sympathie und Empathie. Deshalb verpacke ich Ethnologie auch gern in Geschichten. Denn Geschichten sind immer vieldeutig und schaffen Freiraum. ... Wenn Sie Ethnologe sind, dann müssen Sie letztlich an die Menschen glauben.“ (Die Zeit Nr. 31, Juli 2015, Seite 29; translation by JF: “For me, anthropology is preferably a kind of enlightened subjectivity, sympathy and empathy. That’s the reason I like to wrap anthropology in stories. Stories are always ambiguous and free up space. ... If you are an anthropologist, eventually you have to believe in people”).

Jürg Wassmann would have no problems telling stories about folks. To my knowledge, this is his understanding of anthropology too. I assume that Jürg would also agree with this last statement from Nigel Barley:

“Collecting and telling stories: that is also part of my own research agenda. It is part of an anthropological research agenda that connects psychology with anthropology: Listening to people and trying to understand them.”

Dear Jürg: I will listen to what you say and try to understand you! The funny thing is, the older I become, the better I understand! “Gently bowing” (Wassmann 1993, 2016) is not only a useful metaphor for a person but could also be used for a friendship as well.

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ALEXIS TH. VON POSER  
ANITA VON POSER (Eds.)

# Facets of Fieldwork

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