ANTHROPOLOGY CAREER READINESS NETWORK

Reducing Polarization

The increase in political polarization[1] in the United States has had broader effects,[2] including on the ways in which we encounter opposition about seemingly non-political topics[3] and issues in our personal and work lives. One major impact has been on communication. We may encounter or take on more binary, rigid, and fixed positions, which makes it harder to collaborate effectively, learn from one another, navigate difficult issues, and solve complex problems.

However, as anthropologists, we acquire knowledge and skills that can be used to lessen the impacts of polarization that arise when we confront challenges. Particularly useful are these communication skills, listed in the chart below.

Communication Skills[4]	
Self-Monitoring	Ongoing, real-time, and intentional self-reflection, particularly in content and form of interactions
Active Listening	Refraining from speaking or leading conversations; listening carefully to what is said and not said in context to understand perspectives
Asking Questions	Prioritizing asking questions over making statements
Making Careful Lexical Choices	Making choices based on an understanding of how specific words might be aligned with a particular position or identity, whether intended or not
Storytelling	The telling of culturally salient personal stories and narratives

We are exposed to these skills through anthropological training in areas like cross-cultural communication and ethnographic research methods, through which we learn how to engage various perspectives and understand differences.[5] As we practice using these communication skills outside of our classrooms and research experiences, particularly with specific focus areas or imperatives in mind, we are well-positioned to mitigate the negative impacts that polarization can have on our working relationships and capacities.

With the following five focus areas, we guide you through how to use these communication skills to work through a common polarizing workplace challenge for anthropologists: **confrontation over the relative merits and values of qualitative vs. quantitative research.** Consider the following scenario:

In your first planning meeting to design a research project for a client, your new colleague leads with, “We all know that qualitative research isn’t particularly useful.”

How can you apply the skills you have acquired to respond both to lessen polarization and achieve a productive outcome?

1. Consider Your Goals, Consider Your Audience

Our goals often determine the form that our interactions will take. If your goal is to express your position authoritatively, to defend one side of a seemingly two-sided debate, the way you make statements or choose to interact with others is perceived differently than an interaction in which your goal is to solve a problem together, build community, establish consensus, or find common ground. Keep in mind that shifting your interaction style to persuade and build consensus may also vary depending on the person with whom you are speaking.

Communication Skills

- **Self-Monitoring.** Reflect on and reframe your goals and expectations. Ask yourself: *Is my goal to defend qualitative research or to reach consensus on its merits?*
- **Asking Questions.** Use questions in place of making authoritative statements, inviting an explanation of why others hold a potentially conflicting position: *Can you explain why you feel that qualitative research isn’t particularly useful?*

2. Identify Difference in Assumptions

Presuppositions are underlying assumptions that you believe and that you assume the person with whom you are speaking believes. Linguistics and socio-pragmatics research tells us that we cannot talk about anything substantial if these underlying assumptions are not aligned or addressed because what we are saying will not make sense to our listeners. If someone believes that qualitative data is opinion-based, any engagement about research design or data-driven results can easily devolve into unproductive conflict unless and until this baseline divergence is addressed.

Communication Skills

- **Self-Monitoring.** Reflect on your own baseline assumptions. Given your anthropological training, you likely assume that findings from qualitative data are valuable because they reveal patterns. However, it is possible that some colleagues assume that qualitative data interpretation is opinion-based.
- **Asking Questions and Active Listening**. Ask probing questions and listen carefully to understand the baseline assumptions of the person(s) with whom you are speaking so that you can address the issue. *Can you tell me more about…?*

3. Foreground Shared Identities & Issues

Based on our assumptions about the ideological identities of others,[5] and the perceived presence or absence of a shared identity, we know that identity considerations may lead listeners to shut down and not hear or process what someone else has to say.[6] Certain word choices, problem areas, or ways of talking about issues may be seen as emblematic of identity in a particular group or rigid alignment with a specific way of thinking. Foregrounding shared identity markers in a polarized environment can create opportunities to have more substantive and persuasive conversations about existing matters and issues.

Communication Skills

- **Self-Monitoring.** Consider the way you talk about or raise issues and notice others' reactions to what you say and how you say it.
- **Active Listening.** Listen carefully to determine the identities and issues most salient to others, as well as how they are framing the issue at hand.
- **Making Careful Lexical Choices.** Avoid labels and word choices that foreground your identity in terms of your affiliation with one side of the debate explicitly. Avoid leading with your identity as a qualitative researcher (e.g., *As a qualitative researcher, I think...*). Instead, try the following to find commonalities: *We are all researchers who have a desire for rigor. We all know that both exploratory and confirmatory research have value.*

4. Tell Stories and Encourage Storytelling

Good storytelling is accessible, clarifying, persuasive, and engaging.[7] Storytelling has not only been shown to persuade, but also to increase participant engagement by appealing to experiential knowledge bases, expand a sense of shared problem-solving, and invite second stories,[8] which can be used strategically.[9] Furthermore, given polarized and polarizing media consumption patterns and a landscape of alternative facts and deep fakes, an over-reliance on the use of "facts" to persuade can be counterproductive.

Communication Skills

- **Storytelling.** Tell a personal story to show how you have used qualitative data to shed light on the situation and the solution and/or how you have embedded participants' stories in impactful and persuasive reports. Centering storytelling, when possible, can connect research-driven evidence with experiential knowledge and elucidate the relevance of findings and outcomes.
- **Asking Questions.** Use questions to invite stories: *Can you tell me about a time when you...?*

5. Have Multiple Conversations

As we know from common learning models,[10] it often takes several contacts with a concept for that concept to be learned and understood. These contacts may also need to take place in multiple mediums, as well as over time. Advertising and marketing models draw from a similar set of theories regarding learning and persuasion. Likewise, you may have to engage in more than one conversation to reach common ground, as well as to persuade without reinforcing a polarizing opposition.

Communication Skills

- **Self-Monitoring, Asking Questions, Active Listening, Making Careful Lexical Choices, and Storytelling.** Apply all these skills strategically, revisiting the topic and the conversation on several occasions over time, and through multiple mediums, as needed. Keep in mind that concluding one conversation without reinforcing polarization may leave the door open for you to have additional conversations in the future.

While this guide has focused on tips for engaging in a more productive conversation about the merits of qualitative vs. quantitative research, anthropological training enables anthropology graduates to reduce polarization in interactions to help address a number of challenges that arise in our diverse and dynamic conversations, including:

- Mediating conflicts between different groups, departments, and organizations with competing priorities
- Bridging communication gaps in diverse teams
- Facilitating discussions on sensitive topics, including diversity and inclusion initiatives
- Helping to resolve disagreements over resource allocation or project direction
- Addressing tensions from organizational change

References

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