

8 Uncomfortable comparisons

Anthropology, development, and mixed feelings

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Introduction

‘Why is anthropology always so critical?’ For those anthropologists charged with teaching courses in the anthropology of development, the refrain is all too familiar. Whilst our students may hope to learn how to ‘do’ development or already have professional experience in the field, much anthropological analysis of development is highly critical, to say the least, revealing to an increasingly deflated audience its colonial teleology, complicity with capitalist extraction, anti-politics stance, and all-round problematic nature. To date, most academic discussion explains the unease or, indeed, downright hostility that many anthropologists exhibit towards development in terms of the conflicting aims and ethics of the two fields (Ferguson 1997; Gardner & Lewis 1996, 2015). In this chapter, we take a different tack by foregrounding the affective registers of hope and cynicism that occur all too often in our classrooms. One reason for this, we suggest, can be found in the ways that the two fields use divergent techniques of comparison and, in turn, in the types of affect that these contrasting techniques produce. Rather than pursuing a romantic attachment to unchanging, stable, pre-modern societies or an ongoing commitment to cultural relativism, which rejects universalising teleologies of modernity, we argue that the reason why twenty-first-century anthropologists struggle with development is the latter’s disavowal of ethnographic comparison, which disables the potential for cultural critique to challenge systems of inequality. Instead, development compares via exemplars and ideal types against which places or groups are juxtaposed; quantitative measures or ‘baseline and output metrics’ (in order to compare a place with itself over time) and ‘indicators’ (gauges for comparison). These development modes of comparison smooth out the rough contours of complexity and difference and clear the field for universalised techniques, models, and ideals to travel across space and time. This allows the possibility of hope, an emotion that anthropologists of development are all too quick to dash. Yet if development’s dreams are an easy target for the wake-up call of anthropological critique, anthropology is open to charges of holier-than-thou smugness. The anthropologist appears as the clever know-it-all who

refuses to risk or *do* anything but is all too eager to point out to the do-ers just how colonial, naïve, or plain ignorant their approaches are. Judging by our experience of teaching the anthropology of development to students keen to learn how anthropology might contribute to an enterprise that for many inspires hope, the result is exasperation, pessimism, and even despair.

Our argument is as follows: whilst anthropologists have largely withdrawn from the attempt to use cross-cultural comparison to generate grand theory of the sort favoured by Levi-Strauss or Mauss, the discipline still places ethnographic comparison at the heart of its mission. Comparison not only helps build new concepts and fields of study but also forms the basis of what Charles Hale (2006) calls ‘cultural critique’, an enterprise in which detailed ethnography is used to critique political and economic structures, via comparison with similar cases. Yet, as Hale argues, unless combined with activist research or other forms of action, anthropological critique alone is politically toothless. The challenge is therefore to use anthropological knowledge to generate action, an endeavour which anthropologists working within development have attempted with varying success (Crewe & Axelby 2013; Gardner & Lewis 2015).

Meanwhile, even if informed by anthropological insights, development – as a discourse and field of action – compares via metrics and bureaucratic techniques such as indices or outputs. Here, rather than generating insights or theory, the intention is to measure projects, groups, social categories, or countries against a standard of progress or success. It is necessarily evaluative, referencing a clearly stated aim or problematic against which to recalibrate these groups, social categories, or countries (e.g. the aim of empowering women). These standards of progress and models of success appear to be self-evident, or at least possible to define, stripping out the very complexity and social reality (and the politics of who sets the goals) that anthropologists attempt to make visible.

In order to illustrate this argument, this chapter discusses two important development devices: the exemplar (in this case that of the female entrepreneur, demonstrated in the iAgent social enterprise project in Bangladesh at the scale of everyday project implementation) and training (in this case gender awareness training, developed in the early 1990s, at the scale of international policy building). In our first case of the iAgent project (a pseudonym to protect identities), we examine the role of the exemplar in motivating supposed beneficiaries of development to behave in certain ways. As we will describe, while development practitioners judge the ‘beneficiaries’ through the lens of the exemplar, anthropologists judge exemplars through the lens of beneficiaries’ perspectives. This opposite directionality in the comparative act (of juxtaposing exemplars and beneficiaries), we argue, is the main reason why the two fields produce such markedly different states of affect.

In our second case, we explore how feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s generated rich ethnographic comparisons that revealed gender roles and relations in a variety of settings to be fluid and changeable. Such

an insight generated optimism among feminist anthropologists that gender inequalities could proactively be addressed. Yet once absorbed into the development apparatus, these insights were stripped of their complexity and rendered into one-size-fits-all gender awareness training models, thus converting anthropological hope into cynicism and critique.

Devices such as exemplars and training are aspects of what Li (2007) has termed development's 'assemblage', the means by which complex reality is reduced to a set of easily identifiable problems and techniques that the policy or project sets out to solve and apply, all the time stripping out the real issues. According to Li, the development assemblage involves three components: problematising, rendering technical, and containment. Rather than focusing on the much-discussed anti-politics aspect of these techniques (Ferguson 1990), in what follows we discuss how development techniques and the methods of comparison they use might also be understood in terms of particular states of affect and emotion. As Schwittay (2014) has argued, 'affect' matters to development because it mobilises support, creates relationships, and shapes outcomes. For the microfinance programme Kiva that Schwittay studied, for example, feelings of caring, compassion, and connection are vital in order to mobilise online lending to 'partners' in the Global South. As she writes: 'Affect shapes what matters to people, within a field of power that circumscribes its effects' (*ibid.*: 13). But as we shall see, affect can work both ways: the hope and enthusiasm generated by development's travelling techniques can end in cynicism and gloom when countered by anthropology's comparative critique.

Our argument thus rests upon a comparison of techniques of comparing, illustrated by comparative cases, which are drawn from our own ethnographic, participatory, and historical engagements of practising anthropology *of/in* development. What emerges from this feast of comparison is not only that anthropology and development have different aims but also that one reason the relationship between the two is so uncomfortable is because of the mixed emotions evoked.

The exemplar

Uncomfortable silence suffused the training room in an NGO office in rural Bangladesh. We had just finished watching a series of short videos featuring 'iAgent Mita', the young woman selected to be the face (and identity) of the iAgent social enterprise programme. Demonstrating topics ranging from 'Doorstep sales' and 'Self-promotion' to 'Preparing a correct weekly plan' and 'Daily accounting and savings', these videos had been recently produced in order to train village girls how to be proper female entrepreneurs – iAgents, or 'Information Agents' – ready to sell information- and communication-based services to impoverished villagers. Bangladesh's poverty, development practitioners reasoned, was due to people not possessing sufficient access to markets or to the information required to engage opportunistically with

them. Compounded by women's relative disempowerment and seclusion, the country's problems, defined in these ways, readily suggested their own solutions. Women, if empowered to become social entrepreneurs and active market-makers (Guérin 2017), could pull not only themselves, but also their rural communities and the nation more generally, out of poverty.

Two seasoned development practitioners from middle-class urban Bangladeshi families commented on how Mita's rags-to-riches success story inspired them in their work. Later they congratulated one another on the professionalism of the video production and how much of an impact they would have on these 'downtrodden' village girls, who now had a 'development-appropriate' role model to emulate. The anthropologist (Juli) felt troubled by the videos and the ways in which they narrated only a single version of acceptable 'success', marked by a *homo-economicus*-like rationality and stripped-away version of sociality. She had also watched as the iAgents displayed a *mélange* of reactions throughout the videos that ranged from admiration and hope to disbelief and suspicion.

Why did these videos generate such contrasting emotions? In this first case, we juxtapose development's and anthropology's acts of comparison and explore why these different approaches provoke such divergent states of affect. While development generates clean models (which are often represented by a combination of real-life and fictionalised exemplars) and seeks to bring the world in line with the models' image, anthropology focuses on the messy reality of the world as experienced by real people. It seeks to understand people's aspirations to achieve particular (and often multiple) models of ideal personhood and the socio-political projects that underlie each of these ideal types. While development begins with the model and critiques the individual for failing to conform to its indisputable logics, anthropology begins with people and critiques the model for failing to represent the complexity of reality. The opposite directionality in these acts of comparison (from generalised exemplars to particular real people, and vice versa) in this case is what generates opposite states of affect for the two professional groups in question.

The exemplar for development

In the decades since the explicit field of International Development arose after the Second World War, an ever-increasing and diversified set of institutions and policies have promoted a multiplicity of models for achieving economic growth, poverty alleviation, general well-being, and other stated objectives of the project of development. Development models are often expressed as process models, or frameworks for achieving desired end results. They operate deliberately on a free-floating, acontextual, abstract level so that they may readily be applied to any situation where development is perceived to be required. These blueprints for progress (e.g. community-based micro-credit; gender awareness training [see below]; import substitution) often

reference particular ideologies or theories (e.g. market-driven development or ‘trade not aid’; women’s empowerment; free-market economics). They are sometimes characterised more by the agent performing the developing than by the recipient of development (e.g. ‘The West’ vs. China in Africa [Fukuyama 2016]). These models are also sometimes expressed as end-state exemplars or best case practices. For instance, Botswana (Acemoglu, Johnson & Robinson 2003), Rwanda (Molt 2017), and Bangladesh (Chakravorty 2019) are often lauded as development success stories to which other countries might compare themselves in order subsequently to emulate.

Particular organisations also have their own sector-specific or location-targeted development models that, although emerging from a particular context, are often framed as tapping into International Development ideologies or as applicable to a wider setting. Muhammad Yunus developed his Grameen Bank model of microfinance (for which he and the bank won a Nobel Peace Prize in 2006) to meet a specific need he observed among poor women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, and this model has been scaled up and deemed suitable for poor women across the country and in nearly every country of the world. Another example is Acumen, an impact investment fund, which promotes a model of ‘patient capital’ that involves a blend of market-based and philanthropic principles for investing in social enterprises around the globe (Acumen 2018). From its many location-specific investees, Acumen has identified four universally applicable ‘models of social enterprise’ that best combine economic effectiveness with social impact. These models in turn become free-floating narratives that reinforce broader (market-driven) development ideologies and policies.

Although not as explicitly as the much-criticised 1960s’ modernisation theory of W.W. Rostow (who postulated five stages of economic growth from ‘Traditional Society’ to ‘Age of High Mass Consumption’ through which all countries should aspire to ascend [1959]), most development models presuppose a linear teleology of change. This linearity is evident in terms and goals such as ‘graduating from low-income status’, referring both to countries and to ultra-poor individuals. Having established a model towards which subjects are expected to aspire and work, development-industry professionals applaud participants who manage to attain some resemblance to this externally imposed exemplar.

The leaders of the iAgent social enterprise programme maintained that their development model was unique and innovative, and yet that it also tapped into the global consensus of recent decades that market-driven development (i.e. ‘helping the poor to help themselves’ rather than directly offering material, social, and political support) is the most dignified and effective mode of achieving progress. The iAgent model, as itself an internationally touted exemplar, won numerous international awards. Its leaders partnered with well-known development institutions to scale up the model, which was to be applied in countries as far apart (and as socially and culturally distinct) as Haiti and Nepal.

At the level of local implementation, the iAgent model or exemplar, as introduced above, is a young woman called Mita who demonstrated the perfect embodiment of the rural Bangladeshi woman entrepreneur who helps others by empowering herself. The iAgent programme had another exemplar, a cartoon superhero iAgent, who was described as being the Wonder Woman of Bangladesh. This avatar was external-facing, augmented the magnitude of social impact assumed to be achieved by the iAgent model, and served to attract partners and funders. This is a good example of Schwittay's (2014) observation of how affect is employed to draw together external support (also Karim 2011). Mita, by contrast, was the internal exemplar, deployed primarily in the form of her video presence and for the purpose of training other young women to become iAgents. The iAgent programme architects designed Mita's life to represent what they believed village girls should aspire to achieve. At the same time, Mita appeared on film while describing the everyday process of becoming and being an iAgent. As such, she personified both the end goal and the process of the iAgent model, against which participants were invited to compare themselves.

The video series began by introducing Mita as a recently married woman in an impoverished area of Bangladesh. Mita described how, upon her marriage, she worried about whether or not she would be accepted by her husband's family, whom she had not previously known and with whom she would go to live. She did not know whether or not they would allow her to continue to make and sell handicrafts as she had done as an unmarried girl. Yet instead of restricting her work to domestic upkeep, the new family helped her to take on an even bigger and more impressive role, to become an iAgent. In the course of her daily work, as shown in the video, Mita accomplished the following: tutoring small children using educational cartoons displayed on her laptop computer; leading a session for farmers about the most effective planting and harvesting techniques and selling them seeds; teaching adolescent girls about puberty and selling them menstrual hygiene products; accompanying a woman abandoned by her husband to the local administrative office to help her receive a state stipend; producing passport photos for aspiring migrant labourers; and measuring the blood pressures of a group of pregnant women. The earnings from all of these activities (because of course, no good entrepreneur provides services for free) were materially evident; Mita and her in-laws wore nice clothing and lived in a *pucca* (cement walled and tin-roofed) multi-room house and kept livestock and poultry in their large courtyard.

The video series continued by systematising Mita's 'success' and breaking it down into concrete, practical steps. Thus, she was not only the aspirational figure but also the model for enacting 'the entrepreneurial conversion' (Dolan 2014: 8) among newly minted iAgents. These videos each highlighted and replayed specific segments of the introductory ones. Topics included Mita's daily routines, personal habits, and dispositions and the ways in which she cultivated relationships with potential customers and converted one-off

purchases into habitual clients. Additional topics covered the seven steps of running a streamlined beneficiary group meeting (including how to speak articulately and write down people's concerns), preparing a weekly and daily plan, and performing daily accounting and savings activities. In this way, processes of social and political change and upward mobility were rendered technical (Li 2007) and reduced to tick-box exercises that, supposedly, any young woman could follow to achieve the same success as did Mita.

For development practitioners, the codified iAgent social enterprise model and the exemplar of Mita performed several roles. They provided a sense of personal direction for these development workers, a template for inducing positive change, a framework for action, a set of forward-oriented goals, a rubric against which to measure their success, and a logic to justify their activities to potential partners and funders. The states of affect generated by the exemplar for practitioners included feelings of virtuousness, self-respect, daily motivation, and hope for the future. In Bangladesh, where 'helping one's own poor' (Gardner 1995) was a staple of ethical patronage and personhood, this work of coaching impoverished women and their beneficiaries to become empowered took on a nationalistically compelling valence as well.

The promotion of an exemplar also worked to preserve this hope, optimism, and confidence in the development model when things went wrong. When young women's fledgling businesses failed, the ready explanation was that those individuals incorrectly or to an insufficient degree adopted the patterns and routines necessary to be successful, in comparison to the exemplar. When an entire location of ten iAgents defaulted on their bank loans and abandoned their businesses, an iAgent team leader lectured them:

It is only your responsibility for arriving at this situation today. Perhaps you are as talented as I assumed you were [when we selected you], but there was a great lack of effort to make it successful. You didn't show your talent in the field.

Her boss continued,

Did not Mita practice her group sessions the night before? Did she not constantly promote herself to new clients? I have been to each of your houses. I did not see you packing your bag before bed, nor did I see you in the field during your free time.

Such a systematic failure did not shake these development managers' faith in the model. 'The model is sound', they explained. 'These women here were simply not ready to accept it'. Condescension towards the unruly subjects of development did not pose a threat to the compelling logic of the model.

This case illustrates the ways in which the development exemplar is conceptualised as central and primary, and real women's progress is subsequently compared against the prescribed model. Such an orientation enables

the preservation of the affective states of hope, righteousness, and faith in the model by practitioners, even despite disappointment with the performance of non-conforming individuals.

The exemplar for anthropology

If development places the exemplary figure on a pedestal and compares beneficiaries' progress against this singular version of success, anthropological methods of comparison flow in the reverse direction. Anthropologists begin with real people living real lives, inhabiting all the complexities of reality, and faced with a multiplicity of standards of behaviour. It is against these actually existing people and circumstances that standards, 'ideal types', exemplars, and models are compared as often unrealistic and misleading simplifications. Anthropologists pay attention to the ways in which people construct and desire to follow exemplars. Anthropologists also attend to the ways in which these models mask political projects of (at best) motivating certain types of behaviours and influencing people's aspirations, or (at worst) exploiting people by manipulating their desires in the service of fulfilling external agendas. In many cases, exemplars generate the 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011) of setting forth exemplary objects of desire or models of the good life, which either prove impossible to obtain or which themselves become obstacles to one's well-being. This mode of anthropological comparison – people first, then exemplars – stems from the commitment to ethnographic methods. Anthropologists are the ones who talked to people before the trainers arrived, and the ones still talking to people once the trainers have left the room and the trainees react, debate, attempt to comply with, admire, or reject the delivered content.

'Mita is a falsehood, a lie', declared one iAgent, disputing the exemplar's suitability for emulation. 'There is no way a mother-in-law of a first daughter-in-law would allow her to skip domestic work and shame the family by being out of the house all day'. The iAgents in the room angrily analysed each aspect of the videos they had watched, critiquing them based not only on the myriad political and social-hierarchical constraints to implementing Mita's 'correct daily plan', but also on practical matters such as the fact that farmers are only available when they are back from the fields after dark, an unsuitable time for young women to travel by themselves.

And yet, knowing that Mita was indeed a real person behind the screen, the iAgents were determined to learn the secret of her success (evidenced by her clothing, accessories, house, well-placed marriage, etc.). They were certain that she was helped by the iAgent NGO and that it was good patronage – rather than regimented personal plans and market-oriented behaviour – that was the key to her material well-being and the acceptance of her work by community members.

And they were correct. While the cinematographic version of Mita was significantly fictionalised for the production of the iAgent model, Mita was

indeed a real iAgent who performed well in her business, but not because she followed the steps she acted out on video. In real life, Mita was recruited as an iAgent under the programme's pilot-stage model, in which all equipment and training were provided for free and an iAgent manager accompanied the young women to smooth over their relations with family, local authorities and potential customers. Many of the services she provided were free to villagers and she received an honorarium provided by charitable funders. By contrast, all new iAgents in the scale-up model were required to take a loan from a national bank and go deep into debt, pay for all of their equipment and training from the NGO and, by themselves, convince community members that they must pay for each service. This was deemed by project staff to be the more respectful model, as it did not subject anyone to the indignities of handouts and charity, as well as the most scalable model, since it was primarily the women's resources, not the NGO's, that needed to be invested.

The exemplar of Mita thus provided a cruel and impossible optimism. Mita's exemplary (on-screen) conduct and success were unrealistic not only for all other iAgents, but for real-life-Mita herself, whose mother-in-law disapproved of her, whose husband controlled her bank account, and whose earnings dropped sharply after the NGO stopped undergirding her activities. The anthropological commitment to understanding the long-term trajectory of people revealed how, in this case, any initial motivation and aspiration elicited by the model gradually turned to cynicism, the feeling of being exploited by the bank and the NGO (to whom iAgents paid licence fees to enact this proprietary model), family tensions because of the large financial debt incurred, dismay and depression as it became clear these debts could not be repaid from iAgent earnings, and, ultimately, damaged reputations and fear of the future.

Thus, the anthropological mode of comparison in studying development models produces a very different state of affect to that evoked by the development one, despite analysing the very same cases. Instead of hope and faith, the emotions produced for anthropologists include disappointment and critique, cynicism and disillusionment. While the reader would be forgiven for objecting, 'but this is merely an instance of *bad-case* practice!', it must be pointed out that the iAgent case was a '*success*' case that continued to win international awards and investments. The argument here is that it is the exemplar that allows this sustaining of 'success', because, by definition, Mita (or at least her avatar) will always be successful. On-screen exemplary Mita enables failure to be located not in the development model itself but instead in the deficiencies of unruly individual participants. While development and anthropology employ similar acts of comparison among exemplars and beneficiaries, the opposite directionality of comparison (prioritising the exemplar or the beneficiary?) leads to wildly divergent interpretations and states of affect for the analysts involved. More importantly, the exemplar invites development beneficiaries such as the iAgents to compare themselves

to the fictionalised model individual. This act of comparison produces a cascade of mixed emotions. New possibilities are imagined and aspirations are ignited but then mistrust is kindled and frustration spirals into despair. Thus, the affective states of both development specialists (e.g. hope) and anthropologists (e.g. cynicism) are distilled and amplified within the experiences of beneficiaries, which leads us to wonder: who benefits?

Gender training

In our second example, we consider a more complex case rooted in the history of anthropology's entanglements with development. Here, the development technique – gender awareness training – evolved from ethnographic comparison via the work of feminist anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s. As with anthropological theory, this comparison led to core theoretical concepts, though in this case the new field that arose from the work of comparison was the practitioner-driven 'gender and development' agenda rather than the academic discipline of anthropology. These core concepts were used to develop training materials in the early 1990s by feminist practitioners working within development.¹ The starting point was therefore anthropological cross-cultural comparison, but the end point within the context of development work was a set of 'tools' used for training which were designed to travel across space and up and down institutional and geopolitical hierarchies. Thus, we see how anthropological methods of comparison through engagement with complexity became translated and used in development practices that attempted to simplify and homogenise. Our story starts in the early days of gender training, a time of not only righteous feminist anger, but also hope.

Gender training arose from a call from feminist practitioners working in development organisations in the 1980s to early 1990s to 'mainstream gender' so that it was no longer a marginal concern within donor and 'developing country' bureaucracies (Ostergaard 1992). At that time, the agenda seemed radical, at least within the context of socially conservative government bureaucracies such as the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) where Katy was employed as a trainee social development advisor in the early 1990s; the account that follows is based partly on her recollections of that period and partly on secondary sources. This push for gender-aware development planning arose from a growing understanding, on the one hand, of the gender-blind and ethnocentric assumptions of planners and, on the other, of the adverse effects of colonialism and economic change on women in so-called developing countries. Whilst some of the earliest work had a tendency to create essentialisms and generalisations that today's reader is likely to find unfortunate (see, for example, Ester Boserup's discussion of 'African agriculture', 'African tribes', and her typologies of farming types into male and female systems of farming [1970]), these insights were largely generated by

the comparative work of feminist anthropologists of the 1970s and 1980s. Based on culturally and historically grounded descriptions of the complexities and fluidity of gender relations whilst theoretically underscored by an attempt to understand and critique women's subordination, feminist anthropology from these decades illustrates the potential of politically motivated cultural critique (Hale 2006).

The work of Ann Whitehead is emblematic. Drawing from her fieldwork in Ghana and the UK, her seminal paper 'I'm hungry Mum: the politics of domestic budgeting' (Whitehead 1981) introduces the concept of the 'conjugal contract', comparing the complexities of the gendered division of labour and resources in Kusai households in rural Ghana, where women and men produce different crops and have differing levels of rights over labour and produce, to the UK, where household goods are acquired with salaries from waged labour. In comparing her ethnographic cases, Whitehead argued that rather than being seen as co-operative mutually beneficial units, households should be understood as the sites of gendered inequality and domination, centred on differential rights over labour and its products and structurally generated conflicts of interest (see also Harris 1981; Moore 1988). Crucially, production, distribution, and consumption change over time and reflect broader socio-economic changes. Gender roles and relations, she argued, are thus infinitely fluid, a radical observation for its time.²

If this feminist work of comparison was associated with politically motivated indignation, its use in generating insights that could be carried over into action led to hope. In a seminal piece 'Some preliminary notes on the subordination of women' (1979), Whitehead set out the agenda. Rather than simply comparing case after case of the worsening situation of women, she argued, the goal was to theorise gender and gender relations, and in so doing, to develop tools for planning that could be passed on to those responsible for policy.³ These tools were taken up by those working within development institutions, who by the late 1980s were increasingly active in pushing the gender and development agenda.

The 1980s to mid-1990s was a time of excitement in which social development advisors believed that progressive change could come from within, so long as they had the courage and strength of purpose required. Writing of her time at the ODA as a social development advisor intent on bringing feminist and anthropological perspectives to the bureaucracy, Rosalind Eyben (2007: 65) describes how she and others saw themselves 'more as guerrillas than missionaries' fighting battles with men in suits whose initial response to the feminist activists bordered on alarm.

The men were clearly very uncomfortable with these women, who were so very different in behaviour from their own wives and secretaries. They wore long earrings and flowing, brightly coloured garments. They cut their hair very short like men, or, flagrantly feminine, wore it

loose down to the waist. Their bangles jangled discordantly when they thumped the table to make a vociferous point.

(*ibid.*: 69)

Elsewhere in her article Eyben talks of the ‘energy and enthusiasm’ and ‘aspiration’ that she and her colleagues took into the bureaucratic battles (*ibid.*).

ODA’s agreement to support gender training was an important step forward, one which Eyben had spearheaded within the institution and which was based on the work of Caroline Moser, who later published the course materials and underpinning concepts in her book *Gender Planning and Development* (1993). Here, Moser states that: ‘The goal of gender planning is the emancipation of women from their subordination, and their achievement of equality, equity and empowerment’ (*ibid.*: 1). To enable this, Moser argued that the first step was to train planners and other staff to consider gender issues as they designed and implemented projects and policies (see also Ostergaard 1992: 8). In the opening chapters of the book, Moser argues that a rich body of comparative research ‘provides the knowledge base for the new tradition of gender planning’ and deduces that ‘it is the gendered divisions of labour that are identified, above all, as embodying and perpetuating female subordination’ (1993: 28). From this, she proposes a set of underpinning principles to be taken forward into gender aware planning. After all, ‘planners require simplified tools which allow them to feed the particular complexities of specific contexts into the planning process’ (*ibid.*: 5).

As promised, the tools were simple to grasp and easy to transport: women’s triple roles and the distinction between ‘strategic’ and ‘practical’ gender needs were the core concepts.⁴ Comprising short lectures, discussions, and group exercises based around these core concepts, gender training was designed to be rolled out to a variety of institutional settings, from the ODA or World Bank to ‘developing country’ NGOs. The first exercise involved the analysis of case studies of women’s and men’s work in low-income households in different regions of the world, tailored to the location of the training session. The participants were to discuss and compare the case studies, drawing up lists of the work done by women and men and in so doing identifying women’s triple roles. This was followed by a lecture on the ‘critical issues in the theory and methodology of gender planning’, to be put into practice by participants applying their newly acquired gender-planning tools to three case studies of Development interventions (Puffed Rice in Bangladesh; Gari Processing in Ghana; Food for Work Nursery Tree Project in Sudan). The next exercise involved participants using their new knowledge of women’s triple roles and practical and strategic gender needs to analyse their own organisation’s policies and projects, marking up a chart to indicate the impacts of the project at household and community levels for men and women, and which gender needs were met. The final exercise

involved the trainees identifying how to operationalise gender awareness in their own work (Moser 1993: 229–46).

If the original end goal was political, the training was presented to participants in strictly technical terms. Trainers were reminded in their notes that the purpose of the workshop was ‘to offer a practical framework’,⁵ providing a new way of seeing so that the ODA’s gender perspective could be integrated into their work. Training notes that Katy was supplied with state the following:

The trainer may make an analogy with putting on a pair of spectacles; one lens is the development intervention, the other is the technical planning process. Together they provide a new way of looking ie the gender perspective.

Participants are being addressed as professionals requiring the means to implement ODA policies. We will provide a grid which will allow them to assess the effect of a development initiative on women as well as men ... It is important during the workshop to stick as closely as possible to facts rather than opinions or value judgements.⁶

Equipped with flip charts, definitions of core concepts, case study material and tables to be filled out during the exercises, the trainers aimed to give participants the analytic tools to ‘integrate ODA’s gender perspective into their work’.⁷ What had started with concepts drawn from the comparison of detailed ethnographic cases had been turned into technocratic tools and exercises detailing the roles and needs of ‘low-income women in the Third World’, which aimed at enabling planners to understand the potential impact of their policies on gender relations. Like the entrepreneurial exemplar, the training was designed to travel, with a methodology and materials that could theoretically be operationalised in any institutional setting, from ‘Southern partner NGOs’ to the global or country donors at the top of the hierarchy. Moser advises that different case study material can be used according to the setting, including, for example, examples from households in ‘advanced industrial countries’ when trainers come from such places (1993: 217) and with workshops tailored for longer or shorter sessions. Despite these adjustments, the training presupposes that all that is needed for gender to be placed at the heart of planning is for policy makers – whatever their backgrounds, intersectional identities, or politics – to use the analytical tools provided. Implicit to the methodology is the premise that if they are from low-income households and situated in the ‘Third World’, women’s lives, interests, and needs are essentially the same, a premise which has subsequently attracted much criticism from post-colonial scholars (e.g. Mohanty 1988,3; Lewis 2001).

Within this framing, all women struggle under the burden of the triple role and all women require assistance in tackling gender inequality via policies aimed at their strategic gender needs. All complexity – including the

infinite variations of gender roles identified by the original anthropological studies – became smoothed out, coalescing to form the singular version of the needy Third World Woman. Katy recalls her bemusement and discomfort at these simplifications during her training as a potential trainer, despite her youthful wish to be involved with what seemed at the outset to be a progressive feminist project. Predictably for the ever cynical anthropologist of development, the effect of all this training was disappointing. At a personal level, Katy's reservations about the ODA led to outright disillusionment, and she left the organisation in 1991. What had started as a hopeful foray into a field which seemed to promise poverty reduction and the tackling of global inequality had, in only a year, been subjected to the anthropological habit of critique and found wanting: too simplistic, undeniably colonial, overly constrained by bureaucracy, and institutionally conservative.

Within the institution, whilst success could be measured in terms of how many workshops were held and in which countries (the 'outputs' of the intervention), subsequent feminist analyses of the overall effects of mainstreaming gender point to how strategies intended as radical became diluted as they were absorbed into development and government bureaucracies, a process that Hilary Standing refers to as 'policy evaporation' (2007: 101). Standing argues that the original feminist activists were naïve about how policy works, since bureaucracies are fundamentally conservative. Terms such as empowerment quickly lost their political bite once taken on by development institutions (see Batliwala 2007 on the fate of gender empowerment policies in India). Gender training is thus a case *par excellence* of development's anti-politics, transmogrifying feminist theory drawn from comparative ethnography into a set of technical procedures via checklists, guidelines, form filling, and planning tools.

This returns us to the question of comparison. In contrast with the conceptually generative cross-cultural comparisons of feminist anthropologists, development policies aimed at 'strategic gender needs' have to demonstrate their success (or lack thereof) via measuring pre-defined outputs, which are compared against the situation before the intervention started and/or other interventions across space, often within a project's 'logical framework', a technique designed to chart 'impact' in terms of quantifiable inputs and outputs that often have nothing to do with participants' experiences of them. Measuring the effects of gender empowerment is obviously tricky since changes to the amount of choice or control that a woman has are likely to be spread over time and differ widely according to context (Kabeer 1999). Since ultimately development is teleological in nature, it is change over time that is being compared in order to produce a measurement of relative success, the ultimate bureaucratic tool. The techniques that emerge to do this measurement are checklists, indicators, and outputs, all of which are devoid of cultural and historical context.

We have thus come full circle. From the cultural critique of early feminist Anthropology, hope was generated by converting anthropological knowledge borne of cross-cultural comparison into action. At the time,

gender training opened up the possibility of enacting change from within, mainstreaming what until then had felt radical and marginal. But disappointment soon crept in, and with it, comparative accounts of the ways in which policies became watered down and ‘empowerment’ turned into a technical fix (Standing, 2007). In a workshop held at Sussex in 2003, the rallying cry of ‘Some preliminary notes on the subordination of women’ (arising from a workshop held at Sussex nearly 25 years earlier) had turned into a sombre reflection on how ‘what were once critical insights, the results of detailed research, have now become ‘gender myths’: essentialisms and generalisations, simplifying frameworks and simplistic slogans’ (Cornwall, Harrison & Whitehead 2007: 1).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have argued that, rather than contrasting the ethics and aims of development and anthropology, as is done in much commentary on the relationship between the two fields, a focus on their different methods of comparison might yield interesting insights. This is not only because these methods of comparison are used for different epistemological aims (for development, the aim of teleological measurement; for anthropology, the aim of scholarly theory and cultural critique) but also because they evoke different emotions. For development, the technical fix of exemplars and training evokes hope for practitioners, since complexity with all its attendant difficulties is distilled into powerful models of positive change, which are then used as fixed points against which real-life situations can be measured. When disappointment arrives, it is with the subjects of development, not the models: those irritating Bangladeshi iAgents who failed to do as required, or resolutely patriarchal bureaucracies which proved impenetrable to the technical fix of gender training.

Such are the generalisations and frameworks that today’s development practitioners celebrate and from which they derive hope while building models of women’s empowerment such as the iAgent programme. As the political bite disappears and technocracy takes over, the states of affect reverse. Initially framed optimistically, anthropological complexity-driven techniques of comparison increasingly yield disappointing conclusions about development models. Meanwhile, development’s initial scepticism and fear of anthropological contributions transform into confidence about the efficacy of its gendered models. The alarming table-thumping feminists were rendered bureaucratically manageable via the politically nullifying effects of ‘training’; and the exemplar of the successful iAgent became a cause for celebration and self-congratulation amongst practitioners, donors, and their audiences.

And what of the underlying epistemology of this chapter? In making our claims, we have compared two cases which have enough in common to draw some tentative conclusions whilst being sufficiently different to make totalising generalisation problematic. We are thus clearly in the ‘cultural

critique' camp of comparison makers. Though both our cases involve an aim of women's empowerment, in the first instance (the exemplar), the model was generated from a single case study of success (Mita), underscored by neoliberal theories which place the market and economic growth at the heart of a larger project of human development and freedom. In the second, located in an earlier era before market fundamentalism took centre stage, the training course was generated from feminist theory, based on ethnographic comparison and cultural critique. In accordance with the spirit of the times, the project of empowerment ('women's strategic gender needs') was political rather than economic: leading to a hoped-for change in gender relations. In both cases, the end results were to be measured, for such is the bureaucratic exigency of development practice. And rather than comparisons being made *between* cases, the comparisons made were *against* the desired outcome (whether behaviour adhered to the exemplar, or a measurement of gender awareness within bureaucratic planning processes).

As our examples suggest, paying attention to the divergent states of affect generated from anthropological versus development modes of comparison allows us to understand further how structures of feeling enable the perpetuation or overhaul of development fads as they come and go. Training and the exemplar, as we have shown, are techniques that instil confidence in development practitioners about the sensitivity and soundness of their models. Whilst training takes the bite out of potential threats (scary feminists with jangling bracelets and long hair) exemplars such as Mita inspire hope in the possibilities of human agency and positive change. Crucially, whether naïve hope, cruel optimism, or the seeming neutrality of numbers, the emotions produced by development's comparative devices (such as exemplars, models, best practices, ideal types, and standardised techniques), we argue, may be as significant as political will and funding access in defining the direction of global development policy. Comparison in development provides as much a validating script justifying the perpetuation of development activities as comparison in anthropology generates trenchant critiques of these very same activities. In their efforts to re-politicise the development process, anthropologists in the last decades have brought complexity back into the frame of analysis and generated ethnographic comparisons of how development beneficiaries reject, re-appropriate, and are empowered or exploited by development programmes, insights which in turn often make their way back into development policy models. And thus the players in this symbiotic (but antagonistic) drama continue to pivot.

Notes

- 1 For an account of how the field of gender and development emerged from earlier incarnations of 'women and development', see Cornwall, Harrison, and Whitehead 2007; Eyben 2007; Rai 2011.
- 2 Meanwhile edited volumes such as Young, Wolkowitz, & McCullagh's *Of marriage and the market: Women's subordination in international perspective*

(1981), which compared a series of ethnographic examples, and Henrietta Moore's *Feminism and anthropology* (1988), which provided a comparative overview of much of the seminal work, helped to generate a framework for understanding gender inequality as well as a critique of the patriarchal tendencies of mainstream anthropology. The gendered division of labour, plus inequalities *within* rather than between households, was central.

- 3 This arose from a workshop at the Institute of Development Studies on 'The Subordination of Women'.
- 4 Women's 'Triple Role' involved their role in production, reproduction, and community management. These triple roles meant that 'low income women in the Third world' (Moser 1993: 37) worked harder and for longer hours per day than men. Indeed, it was this division of labour that was seen as the root cause of their subordination. Building on the work of Maxine Molyneux (1985) Moser argued that planners should distinguish between 'practical and strategic gender needs'. To quote her:

'Strategic gender needs are the needs women identify because of their subordinate position to men in their society Meeting strategic gender needs helps women to achieve greater equality. It also changes existing roles and therefore challenges women's subordinate position.

(1993: 39)

Meanwhile 'practical gender needs are the needs women identify in their socially accepted roles in society. Practical gender needs do not challenge the gender divisions of labour or women's subordinate position in society' (ibid.: 40). Finally, different types of policy approach to WID (Women in Development) were categorised as Welfare, Equity, Anti-poverty, Efficiency, and Empowerment—the purpose of which is to 'empower women through greater self-reliance' (ibid.: 231).

- 5 ODA training materials, undated.
- 6 ODA training materials, undated.
- 7 KG's Trainer's notes, undated.

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