

'The Anthropology of Ignorance'

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High, C., Kelly, A., Mair, J. (eds.) 2012. The Anthropology of Ignorance: An Ethnographic Approach. New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

A new volume on the anthropology of ignorance, which I edited with Casey High and Ann Kelly, came out last week with Palgrave. I'm really pleased with the finished product, and that's all down to the contributors who have produced some excellent chapters...and stuck to all the deadlines—many thanks to all of you!

The general argument that the book advances is simply that ignorance is something that many people value, something whose particular characteristics in any context may have far reaching consequences, and that it is therefore something that deserves our attention.

Anthropologists have been reluctant to acknowledge this in the past. One reason for this has been because one of anthropology's most important roles has been to show that members of the societies in which anthropologists typically conduct research are *not* benighted and ignorant, but actually hold quite extensive and sophisticated knowledge about practical or technical things, such as botany, as well as culturally important things, such as genealogies and myth.

What we propose is a new approach—an ethnographic approach, exemplified by the chapters in the book. Actually, we suggest this is a new approach that is already becoming widespread.

A quotation from the first chapter:

"Making ignorance an ethnographic object is an important move because of the questions it leads us to ask. It means asking not: There are the things we don't know; why is it we don't know them? but rather, Given that the set of things we do not know is necessarily without limit, how and why do we become aware of particular areas of ignorance? How are various forms of the condition of being ignorant (the equivalent of expertise) recognized? How are forms of ignorance transmitted or taught? How are they regulated? What kinds of roles or relationships does ignorance depend on or produce? Do people intentionally act to develop their awareness of ignorance? Why do people engage in the production of forms of ignorance? What is the rationale for practices that produce ignorance? What effects does a given form of ignorance give rise to and how are these related to its production? How does a particular form of ignorance affect the relationships to forms of knowledge of those in whom it is produced?"

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