



Anthropology & Aging

Journal of the Association for Anthropology & Gerontology

A Conversation with Dr. Janelle S. Taylor, President of AAGE

Levi Mitzen

George Mason University

Author contact: lmitzen@masonlive.gmu.edu

Anthropology & Aging, Vol 40, No 1 (2019), pp. 1-4

ISSN 2374-2267 (online) DOI 10.5195/aa.2019.213



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).

A Conversation with Dr. Janelle S. Taylor, President of AAGE

Levi Mitzen

George Mason University

Author contact: lmitzen@masonlive.gmu.edu

I had the opportunity to sit down with Dr. Janelle S. Taylor in January 2019 to discuss her career, current work, prospects for AAGE, and the possible trajectory of anthropology. Dr. Taylor is a professor of anthropology at the University of Washington, the current president of AAGE, and an esteemed researcher, with publications covering the politics of reproductive medicine to the intersections of kinship and healthcare. This interview was done in observance of the 40th anniversary of AAGE, founded in 1979. It also served as a learning experience for myself and an opportunity to document the insight of someone progressing the field of anthropology into the expanding intellectual horizon.

We began by discussing the ways individuals become anthropologists, with two noted means being through an anthropological education and the later recognition of the value of an anthropological perspective via work. Dr. Taylor's described her own route to anthropology as "circuitous." Earning a B.A. in Chinese Language & Literature, this served to further her fascination with the diverse ways people come to understand and relate to the world they exist within. However, as she progressed through her undergraduate, her attention began to shift to the types of questions being asked by anthropologists: larger questions of how the story that is human experience is told. It was this, the types of questions asked in the field of anthropology, that drove her to enter graduate school as a student of the discipline.

From there we went on to talk about Dr. Taylor's background in medical anthropology and how it has informed her work. Her background in medical anthropology extends prior to what she termed the current "boom period" of medical anthropology when it had not yet experienced the popularity it enjoys today. Yet she said that many medical anthropologists have resisted being classified as belonging to a distinct field of anthropology, with separate training and methods: "And I think that's because really what we have to offer as anthropologists is insight into how health, and medicine, and aging are part of social life more broadly." In relation to her own work, Dr. Taylor spoke about how this insight translates to some overarching themes:

From one point of view, you can say that the topics I have studied over the years – reproductive technology, medical education, and aging -- are very different, but I think that they all concern how individuals are produced socially. So for example you can look at reproductive medicine and technology in terms of questions about how the unborn is socially produced as a person, a child, a citizen, a consumer, etc. You can look at medical education in terms of how experts of various stripes are produced socially through systems of education and institutional arrangements around labor and so forth. I think relate to how the anthropology of aging looks at situations where older adults are being produced socially as particular kinds of individuals, as some of the health impacts that come with aging and disability complicate their capacity to perform individual autonomy. The fundamental relationality of individual people also becomes more obvious as they become older, for example in the importance of struggles and efforts around family, and inheritance, and more generally the concern for legacy.

This led to me asking Dr. Taylor about the project she is currently working on: an NIA grant for a cross-disciplinary study titled "Health Outcomes for Patients with Dementia without Family Caregivers." This study builds on survey data collected through the longitudinal "Adult Changes in Thought (ACT)"

study, conducted by the Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute, which explores the development of dementia in patients 65 years and older. While the ACT study focuses on bio-medical questions (i.e., risk factors in terms of biomarkers and family genetic history), Dr. Taylor sets out to understand how dementia exists socially. Her study explores how the availability of social support, or lack thereof, affects the health outcomes of patients with dementia as evidenced in patients' health records post-diagnosis. While the relation of family support to health outcomes may seem obvious, Dr. Taylor noticed a lack of research on how the absence of familial social support manifests in the care of patients with dementia. Speaking about her own experience with the subject via previous research, "I heard stories about people who were being cared for by people that they had met pretty randomly. Where the grocery store clerk, for example, becomes the durable power of attorney." Stories like this shocked and intrigued Dr. Taylor, "Is someone so alone that they don't have anyone but the grocery store clerk? And what happens if the grocery store clerk doesn't go above and beyond their job to find out about this person? Then what?"

Through working on this study, Dr. Taylor has begun to uncover additional questions she may want to investigate in future research. "For better or for worse, I'm one of those people who tends to be working on something and then get interested in something else through that process, and it leads me into new topics that I don't know much about", describing the process as "always becoming ignorant over and over again." Her current work has turned her interest to the question of guardianship, specifically in cases where a patient lacks family. She said,

One of the things that happens is the state becomes involved and appoints someone to be their legal guardian, or financial guardian, there are a variety of different types of guardianships. And that's a very interesting topic to me and, again, there is very little social science research on that topic as far as I have been able to find. So, getting back to the question of how people are produced socially, what happens when it is someone appointed as a representative of the state rather than family, and friends, and people who've known you, that takes on the task of sustaining relational personhood?

Personally, I hope she goes on to develop this "keen curiosity" into full-fledged research on the subject.

Off of the topic of research, I turned my attention to Dr. Taylor's role as the new president of AAGE to discuss the value of the professional organization and what plans she may have. Dr. Taylor spoke about how the construction of scholarly communities is essential to ensure that the full potential of their work is realized,

Just like I think individuals, in general, are sustained through social relations, the same is true of scholars and our work. No individual scholar can really thrive and do their best work unless they're supported and sustained by an active, lively, welcoming scholarly community. I feel like I have been fortunate to benefit from that all along, even as I have bounced around different topics... Connecting with other scholars and learning what other people are doing and are interested in, benefiting from their experience and insight and advice, is just valuable no matter what field you're in. And in my view it is part of good citizenship, to do your bit to contribute to these thriving communities.

As president of AAGE, Dr. Taylor is in a position to be familiar with the significance of doing "your bit" to help further the scholarly community. In her view, her role is to maintain the work done by her predecessors while fostering the growth of the organization. One way Dr. Taylor wishes to do this is to increase student membership and involvement,

So we have a new person in the position of student liaison and a new membership director and we are going to be working together to figure out what would be helpful and cool and interesting to do from the point of view of students. And that's part of how you have a thriving community: is when there is always new people joining and stretching it in different directions. So working on that is going to be a priority.

In addition to supporting the future cohort of anthropologists through AAGE, Dr. Taylor wishes to strengthen the organization's international presence, "Jason Danely has done a lot in that regard. I have a slightly different configuration of international connections with scholars interested in aging, so I will try to draw on those to add some new things to the organization." Both of these tactics will facilitate AAGE's role in emboldening newcomers to the field of anthropology as well as broaden the perspectives present in the discipline.

In discussing her aspirations for AAGE, Dr. Taylor mentioned *Aging and Anthropology*, the flagship journal of AAGE, as one of the organization's strengths. I agreed and mentioned that I am particularly fond of the fact that the journal is online and open access, making it more accessible to a larger and more general audience. I believe this is critical in the evolution of scholarly work if it is to work against the academic elitism and quietism risked by confining it strictly to universities. I asked Dr. Taylor if she could speak more on the issue of accessibility of scholarly work. She began by stating that she believes there are at least two dimensions in making scholarly writing more accessible: how it is published and how it is written. "So how we publish: I think open access is a great thing in terms of making work available to people who maybe don't have an affiliation with a university so there is no ready way for them to get around a paywalls, for example." However, Dr. Taylor also acknowledged some of the challenges facing a non-profit model of published scholarly work: "It does raise questions of what is the financial model that is going to support the work of doing scholarly work and publishing it. And that is a big question that a lot of scholarly associations, as well as publishing houses, are struggling with at the moment."

Dr. Taylor then went on to detail how scholarly work may be written in a way that is more accessible, including the pros and cons of doing this.

I think that if you're interested in public anthropology as a goal, which I think a lot of people are, it's not enough to just want everyone to listen to us [laughs]. We have to actually be willing to write in a way that is accessible to people who not only might be outside of universities and not have subscriptions and all that, but might not take for granted all the jargon we learn in the course of our training. You learn specialized terms, that's one of the tools of our trade, and there's value in the specialized scholarly discussions that help develop sophisticated takes on things. But the jargon, the specialized language, can also exclude a lot of people, and if you rely on those terms to do a lot of the intellectual work in your writing, then that will limit where your arguments will be able to travel and who they will be able to engage. So I think there is a lot to learn about how to translate scholarly work into accessible terms without giving up the sophistication that these specialized discussions do provide... that's a challenge that I think we don't always train people in.

Dr. Taylor mentioned the open access news source *The Conversation* as a potential example of how scholarly work may be made more accessible, "[The Conversation] works with researchers to kind of help them develop arguments that are formatted and written in such a way that they're very accessible and then they make these articles available for free to anyone who wants to republish them. So they actually have

done a lot of interesting work and I think that it's an interesting model to look at in how to write in a public way." However, Dr. Taylor made it clear that this critique did not mean there is no value in more scholarly work. "I'm not trying to bash scholarly work at all... there is definitely also a place for specialized scholarly discussions that aren't specifically geared toward broader public audiences. I wouldn't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater."

As we neared the end of our discussion, I asked Dr. Taylor if there was any advice she would give to individuals like myself: those just now entering the field of anthropology as graduate students and/or young professionals. She said that it should be made known that academia, and the jobs tied to the institution of academia, are changing rapidly,

So, the kind of job I have, which I love [laughs], there are less and less of these jobs out there. As you may know, there are many more shorter term, more precarious kinds of positions being created in universities, and that's kind of a big, complex phenomenon that I think anthropologists as a profession are aware of and trying to work on.

As such, we, as the future of anthropology, will need to adapt to a rapidly changing job market that, while full of opportunities, is not as rooted in academia as it once was. While this can be beneficial in providing a wider range of career choices, this may mean "... a little leg work and little asking around to find connections to people who have found their way into meaningful employment that uses their research skills."

While the uncertainty that accompanies change can be frightening, I believe the future of anthropology remains quite bright. The work of Dr. Taylor and professional organizations such as AAGE demonstrate the immense amount of practical value contained in the work anthropologists produce. Thus, it is just a matter of finding novel ways of taking this valuable knowledge and translating it to the demands of modernity. Through conversations such as the one I had with Dr. Taylor, we may discuss both the opportunities as well as challenges present in anthropology, with the goal of overcoming these challenges in the pursuit of knowledge and the betterment of humanity.