

I would like to acknowledge that we are gathered on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples—Squamish, Sechelt, Stó:lō and Tsleil-Waututh, and Musqueam Nations.

Title slide

Anthropologists orchestrating collaboration: insights from anthropological leadership of a six country transdisciplinary research partnership on the social economy of dried fish in South and Southeast Asia

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The project on which our presentation focuses is called Dried Fish Matters: mapping the social economy of dried fish in South and Southeast Asia for enhanced wellbeing and nutrition. The project is a large six country study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, or SSHRC, under its Partnership Grants Program.

To my surprise many non-academics find the project interesting, and often have surprising connections to dried fish. Some also say - but why are you doing research on the other side of the world? A few say, why are you using Canadian taxpayers' money for something that has so little apparent benefit to Canada?

I confess to asking myself the same questions. My family is rooted in Winnipeg. Asia is far away. I am increasingly uncomfortable with the colonial echoes of the project's design – funded and led in the global North, studying the global South. Finally, I find myself doing often frustrating research administration tasks, which are very far from the joy of the direct research engagement which drew me into anthropology many years ago.

I am never fully confident in my answer to these troubling questions and the rather challenging position which I have made for myself. I expect the ripples of these questions will echo throughout the entire seven to eight years of the project. But, the project is still young and it raises many fascinating questions. It also provides ample opportunity for engagement across space and difference, the classic source of motivation for anthropology.

I want to talk today about this blend of ambivalence and promise that the project represents; I want to reflect on where I think deservedly critical light needs to be shone on large scale projects of this kind, but also on the shared excitement and promise that are present. I wonder: Can we ground our collaborations better when we recognize the imperfections of human cooperation? Can we continue to look critically at cross-national research but maintain a recognition of the unexpected and great joys of finding kinship across difference? In

reflection on projects of this kind can we imagine collaborations that are imbued with anthropological sensitivity?

I want to puzzle through these questions with reference to my as-yet fresh experience of leading the Dried Fish Matters project. Fabiana and I have found excellent ideas in recent feminist-inspired reflections on collaboration by Emily Yates-Doerr of the Universities of Oregon and Amsterdam. Yates-Doerr argues for seeing collaboration in research as necessarily **awkward by virtue of differences in discipline, experience, and position**. That awkwardness should not be seen as something to be **transcended** through “better” collaboration, but rather as a condition of collaboration best addressed by what she calls **careful equivocation**. She suggests that the **recognition** of difference, and the ways in which those in positions of difference influence each other through interaction, are **as** important matters of attention as the avowed goals of collaboration. Even these very goals of collaboration themselves are likely to be divergently understood.

Dried Fish Matters slide

The Dried Fish Matters project is funded through the SSHRC Partnership Grants program. This is a relatively new funding source, dating to 2011, which builds on earlier collaborative experiments in research funding by SSHRC.

The SSHRC Partnership Grants program calls its project leaders Project Director, a shift in terminology from the nomenclature of the standard SSHRC research envelope, Insight Grants, where the project lead is a Principal Investigator. This shift is intentionally significant; it certainly suggests a different job description, one where the lead is no longer an active researcher, but rather a research manager.

The scale of Partnership Grants merit this shift in role. The grants are large, up to 2.5 million dollars, with a minimum matching contribution of another 35%. They reflect a strategic shift in SSHRC funding towards interdisciplinary and applied research, where engagement with policy and the public is expected.

The dried fish focus of Dried Fish Matters lends itself well to the Partnership Grant framework and applied orientation. Dried fish tie together history, culinary and dietary patterns, nutritional importance, development interventions, varied and complex economic arrangements, and human-environmental arrangements. Dried fish have also largely escaped sustained social science and development attention perhaps because they are so mundane. Dried fish thus represent a real opportunity to build a new research network and develop a new research field.

The Dried Fish Matters project has a team that consists of more than 50 academic, civil society, and government participants. Our team includes members trained in numerous

disciplines including anthropology, history, environmental studies, geography, human nutrition, economics, and fisheries science. The project currently involves 21 partners in eight countries. The project's field research team is broken into 8 sub-teams. Three of these are in India, focused on the states of Gujarat, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and West Bengal. The remaining five teams cover the countries of Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand.

We frequently speak about the people and partners who constitute the project in terms of transdisciplinarity. Fabiana and I see transdisciplinarity in terms that echo Yates-Doerr's careful equivocation. We do not see transdisciplinarity as moving towards a seamless holism, or a knowledge synthesis within the team. Rather it facilitates an ongoing negotiated coexistence among different knowledge holders and knowledge brokers who represent academic, government, and civil society groups.

Dried Fish Matters rests on a dual value proposition that is reflected in its title. The first side of that proposition is a classic development move: dried fish are valuable because they offer nutrition and meaning to the people who consume them. Many of those people are poor and vulnerable to food insecurity. Yet, dried fish are largely overlooked in the benefits they offer and inattention to the sector risks failing to prevent erosion to a crucial source of nutrition, livelihood, and meaning.

The project title also contains a latent unsettling of this first value orientation in the terms matters and social economy. We are interested in how dried fish materializes value contingently – the matter of Dried Fish Matters is relational. Space, time, social positionality all constitute value that cannot be fixed, and should not be reduced to a monetary figure. The materiality of dried fish is thus multiple. Dried fish is highly commodified, yet the circuits of extraction, transformation, exchange, and consumption that constitute that commodification are an uneven patchwork of practices, policies, and preferences. Dried Fish Matters recognizes real applied problems like the increasing diversion of fish that could be consumed by humans to fishmeal production for aquaculture and poultry feed. But Dried Fish Matters also recognizes that these problems are embedded in social economies that produce complex assemblages of value. A failure to recognize the complex terrain of value of dried fish risks homogenizing experience of and engagement with its materiality.

Slide: Awkward collaboration

One of the elements of Dried Fish Matters that I find exciting is its novelty. The participants in Dried Fish Matters are co-creating something unprecedented. There has never been a network of this scale organized around a shared interest in research on dried fish in Asia. In flashes, I have felt a similar sense of enthusiasm from participants. This was particularly pronounced in the proposal writing phase, but has become patchier since. I could discuss many possible reasons for this increased patchiness, perhaps most important of which is the competition of

busy lives, but I want to focus on two particular features of this awkward collaboration, what we are calling dilemmas of autonomy and coherence and the dilemma of bureaucratic necessity.

As Yates-Doerr makes clear, motivations, interests, and perceptions in collaborations diverge. Levels of commitment diverge also. Dried Fish Matters, however, is structured in classic project terms with a goal, a list of objectives, a timeline, outputs, and deliverables, even while also anticipating perhaps wishfully an accompanying more relational sensitivity in project management. Clarity in the specific techniques of proposal writing contributed importantly to the proposal's success, but they also presuppose pursuit of a relatively coherent logic of collective production and an aspiration that the project would facilitate the coalescing of a dried fish research collective. This desire for coherence has been challenged by expressions of autonomy within the project that have arisen since the project began that are raising questions about the degree to which cohesion is a realistic, or shared, goal. There is a great deal that I could say about this tension, but I will just mention two examples.

First, the priorities of one of our important civil society partners appear to have changed since the project began. That organization's voice has changed from endorsement to skepticism, on grounds that appear to be based on a post-colonial critique of the project's structure. In short, the organization wants a high degree of latitude to set its own research agenda and to conduct its own research. It accepted a research budget from Dried Fish Matters but insisted that the funding be coupled with another project for which the core funds were from its own sources. The organization has explicitly voiced resistance to the extractivist model of research that has characterized some of its past project engagements.

Second, sensitivity to and interest in the politics of knowledge within the project varies greatly. Pushing too hard to emphasize the importance of project-level reflexivity could reduce engagement, thereby lessening coherence. Yet, for many of us an internalized process of self-reflection is also crucial to work against unintended exclusions.

The dilemma of bureaucratic necessity is directly related to the autonomy-coherence dilemma, but is also other than that as well. We use bureaucratic necessity to refer to the institutional mechanisms of accountability that provide structure to the project. These are mandated by SSHRC, by the University of Manitoba, and by our partners' institutions. Some of them are also internal procedures agreed upon by the project's participants. They are critical to a project of this size, and with this many players, as a way of institutionalizing the goals and activities to achieve sufficient coherence to make the project a viable whole. The dilemma is that they are a means to achieve coherent logics for the project, and to make the project administratively consistent with other projects, but that they also risk putting the research collaborators off because they are time consuming and impose limits on action.

The two most important bureaucratic mechanisms of the project's first phase are the need for adherence to the University of Manitoba ethics review process through formal ethics amendments for each team, and an internally developed process by which each project research team submitted a proposal for research. This proposal has then been refashioned into a contract between the University of Manitoba and the partners for the transfer of money in instalments over a one to two year timeline.

I would make two observations about these mechanisms. First, despite our efforts to interact around them, implementation has been distancing: the rendering contractual of working relationships in the project has noticeably dampened energy and engagement. In some cases, it has also triggered resentment. Second, we are trying to build a project management institution, when none of the lead figures in the project have been trained in project management. I think the assumption is that we are academics, so must be smart enough to make it up!

Slide: Conclusion

In her writing, Yates-Doerr talks about how some of the scientists to whom she spoke during her research found her attention to internal institutional process baffling and unsettling. When Fabiana and I have talked about our similar desire to be attentive to the dynamics of knowledge and power as the Dried Fish Matters project goes forward, we have been witness to similar head scratching by some project participants. Others, however, are very attuned to our desire for attention to process. Here also may be an illustration of a place for careful equivocation. Self-reflection in institutional design is unsettling, and thus does have to be done with care in the sense of attentiveness to the others with whom we are building this project together. We need to find ways to recognize and discuss how bureaucratic management tools can be differently triggering, demotivating, or just a way to organize a work plan, but then try to adapt these tools or move beyond them to other aspects of the project that are much more stimulating – like doing research together.