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What Good Is Anthropology? Celebrating 50 Years of *American Ethnologist*

Becoming malleable

How orienting to disability, communication, and the senses further commits anthropology to its moral project

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Abstract

Drawing on anthropological scholarship on the senses, embodiment, and communication, we argue for a capacity-based anthropology that takes account of human variation in all domains of everyday life, including "the field" and "the anthropology seminar." Such an approach allows us to consider the ways that humans are differently malleable, and we stress that enacting malleability, when possible, is a kind of ethical engagement. Attending to malleability—and its limits—allows us to imagine and produce a more sensitive anthropology. A more sensitive anthropology would expand the discipline's understanding of who counts as an anthropologist and what counts as anthropological praxis.

KEYWORDS

communication, disability, ethics, malleability, senses

The call for papers for the *American Ethnologist*'s 50th anniversary forum asks, "What other modalities of practice can, and should, anthropologists engage in?" In this essay, we draw from anthropological research on disability, the senses, and communication to argue for the importance of rethinking and doing anew everyday modes of engagement as well as research dissemination through a focus on the capacity for malleability. We argue that anthropological research and theorization around ethics, senses, and capacitation can and should be applied to our own quotidian practices as colleagues, teachers, and members of academic departments and scholarly societies. We further contend that critically reflecting on our practices in relation to our own malleability can enable us to better meet the needs of others; in doing so, we can further anthropology's moral project of articulating an inclusive politics that addresses the breadth of human needs, capacities, and desires. Here we think critically about a paradox: How can a discipline so invested in theorizing around and about the senses, embodiment, and communication be so rigid in its everyday practices? Why are anthropologists, who pride themselves on their attentiveness, sensitivity, and attunement in the field, inflexible at home? And how does this manifest as and in exclusionary practices?

In asking these questions and drawing attention to what we perceive as paradoxical, we draw inspiration from anti-racist and disability critiques of anthropology, and from the lived experiences of anthropologists as they encounter the exclusions that make anthropology what it is—and point to what anthropology could be (Durban, 2022; Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013; Harden, 2011; Jones, 1970; Song, 2006). Attention to malleability brings together expectations about ethnographic practice "out there" and professional and personal practice "at home," thereby infusing anthropological praxis with a finer attention to how we as community members can meet the needs of others. It is only through malleability—and attention to how and where it is enacted and refused—that we can develop anthropological modalities and sensibilities that are fully inclusive of human differences.

Undoing these exclusions starts at home and in everyday interactions that might on the surface appear trivial or strange. For example, providing access copies of talks or lectures enacts malleability; such a document modifies and extends our professional practice to meet the needs of others, typically with minimal exertion—yet providing access copies remains a vexed practice in anthropology (even though it is the norm in fields

such as disability studies). This was made clear when Friedner in 2023 attempted to attend a weekly anthropology colloquium at her home institution. Excited to attend a talk by a visiting anthropologist, Friedner confirmed with the colloquium organizers that the presenter would be reading a paper. Friedner then emailed the presenter in advance to ask if they could provide an access copy for their talk. Friedner did not receive a reply but thought it would be fine, since she had talked with the colloquium organizers in the past about the importance of asking invited scholars to provide access copies. At the talk, Friedner approached the visiting scholar and one of the organizers and asked if the presenter was going to be reading their talk and if there was an access copy. The presenter said yes, they would be reading, but they did not have an access copy. Friedner left the talk, silently berating herself for wasting time in attending the talk without knowing that an access copy would be made available to her.

On Friedner's way out of the talk, she ran into a senior scholar in the anthropology department. Friedner explained to them what had happened, to which they replied that "an access copy is a courtesy." Friedner said, "I think it's more than a courtesy. I think it's actually about ethical engagement and access." The senior anthropologist said, "Well, this university has so many ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] violations." Friedner responded, "I am not sure how this is a helpful thing to say." Friedner mentioned ethical engagement; the senior anthropologist mentioned ADA violations. Friedner mentioned a specific request she had made (and why did it have to be a personal request?), and the senior scholar replied by abstractly invoking the law, thereby letting the colloquium organizers and the visiting scholar off the hook for failing to meet the access needs of a disabled audience member because reading papers is an institutional norm.

To be clear, the institution does have a formal process of requesting accommodations and for filing complaints when access, as defined by and through the ADA, is not provided. It is not entirely clear, however, where an access copy lives in terms of legal requirements, and it is also quite awkward to file a complaint against one's own colleagues, even when it is tempting to do so (Ahmed, 2021). In this context, either Friedner or this more senior anthropologist could be cast as different kinds of "access killjoys," both foregrounding and backgrounding the lack of access. The disregard or lack of courtesy of not providing an access copy—and its casual, ordinary ableism—is a form of exclusion. Exclusion of this sort is subtle, and unless you are the target of it, it may go largely unnoticed by other community members and participants (after all, we are writing about institutional norms). But we want to point to how these subtle forms of exclusion betray a deeper exclusion at the heart of anthropology and its avoidance of disability, and we aim to do so as a challenge to anthropological conceptions of the human.

We can feel a sense of suspicion and a "but" coming from readers, and we want to be perfectly clear that an access copy is not always required. If someone speaks extemporaneously or improvises based on notes, a fully written access copy does not make sense. Indeed, in many disciplines and contexts, albeit not anthropology, a written talk would be inappropriate. But finding means to make a talk accessible is still necessary and may include sharing slides, an outline, or notes. It may be that an author fears the quotation or circulation of a not fully vetted argument or idea, but this is better remedied by asking audience members to not circulate or quote a presentation than by not providing access copies (and indeed, people can and do clandestinely record lectures or frantically take copious notes). Access copies can also be placed on time-dependent web platforms and then removed, or hard copies can be collected after the talk is finished. So where is the "but" coming from? What does this rejection of even basic "courtesy" subtly reveal? What is the motivation for maintaining the status quo? We take this failure to meet the access needs of community members as indexing implicit conceptions of the relationship between humanity and normative forms of sensory engagement and communication. This failure further sediments sensory and communicative hierarchies. Access copies—or requests to communicate differently—challenge anthropologists to recognize communicative modalities, not only "out there" in the societies we study, but "at home," in our daily academic community and as part of our "ordinary ethics" (Lambek, 2010). Pointing to such forms of exclusion—predicated on maintaining the status quo—reveals limits in anthropologists' ability to theorize and enact being malleable.

WHAT KIND OF PRAXIS IS MALLEABILITY?

Malleability is defined by the *OED* as the capability to be shaped or to be adaptable or pliable. We see it too as the morally inflected responsibility to meet others' needs. We write here of malleability, in a general sense, and not of "access intimacy" (Mingus, 2017) or "disability expertise" (Hartblay, 2020), because we recognize that not everyone has proximity or adjacency to disability or the skills that come from such closeness. We do not expect all anthropologists to have disability exposure. We focus on malleability because it is a general and capacious concept and way of being in the world; it is inclusive in ways that disability-specific conceptualizations of commensurability might not be. Indeed, anthropologists valorize their own malleability in the field, particularly as they overcome or negotiate their embodied cultural norms to meet the norms of the communities with whom they conduct fieldwork.

Malleability and accessibility are two sides of the same coin, and addressing one necessarily invokes the need to address the other. The disability studies scholar Tania Titchkosky (2011, p. ix) argues that access is "a complex form of perception that organizes socio-political relations between people in social space," and that access is a mode of perception, a way of engaging with others and the world. For her, access is interpersonal and worked out between and among people. Similarly, Peter Redfield (2013) writes about access to field sites and interlocutors—at least for anthropologists in the field—as embedded in relationality. But what happens when we are not in the field? What happens when we are in our institutions and in our conferences? Is it ironic—or pathetic—that anthropology, which claims to be committed to engaging with people with radically different ways of being in and sensing the

world, is somehow so resistant to changing its own practices of presentation and engagement?

Disability studies scholars Margaret Price (2011) and Jay Dolmage (2017) write about academic ableism and the requirement for normative forms of collegiality and presence in higher education. They stress that academic ableism shapes how classrooms operate and creates the kinds of faculty and students who succeed and fail in those spaces, thus reproducing norms about valued forms of being a student or educator. While Price and Dolmage do not explicitly write about malleability, they discuss nonreflexive processes of adjudication and the upholding of inaccessible norms in academic spaces, which are very much about rigidity and the lack of malleability. We might extend their work more specifically to the discipline of anthropology and its norms of professional engagement. When presenters do or do not provide access copies—or other forms of accessibility—they implicitly uphold norms about who can be in the room as a full participant. In denying disabled audience members what they need to participate, and in refusing to think more expansively, presenters implicitly suggest that only able-bodied people can participate in anthropology. Rather than being malleable in their expectations and practices, presenters impose malleability on other participants. In this way, presenters create barriers for others in and through their inability to be malleable. A visually impaired or b/Blind audience member often literally cannot see a slide and depends on presenters to describe necessary images or data. A hearing-impaired or d/Deaf audience member who depends on text to fully comprehend the signal of a speaker's voice often needs an access copy to follow a talk. A neuroexpansive audience member may need a fidget device to be able to focus their attention on a presenter. An audience member with chronic pain or discomfort may need to stand or stretch during a presentation. The list of needs goes on, none of which impinge on the presenter's needs or the sanctity of the professional proceedings, nor do they impinge on anthropology as a discipline; instead, addressing these needs makes anthropologists and anthropology more responsive to human diversity. To be clear: when malleability meets impairment at malleability's limit, some people can participate and others cannot.

Yes, an access copy can be considered a blunt "thing," depending on how it is framed, and we point to and acknowledge the backlash against top-down and clunky bureaucratic requests for access, particularly on social media around the time of the annual AAA meetings in 2022, as an example. Quite a few people complained about the need for access copies, keywords, image descriptions, and other requests, which seemingly came from on high, and appeared to be about checking boxes and compliance. Conference participants, many of them junior scholars organizing panels for the first time, were stressed about all the things they were being asked to compile and submit in advance (and many senior scholars ignored the requests). Participants did not know if there was going to be an actual user or if their efforts were addressing an actual need. To be clear, insensitive, top-down bureaucratic management is not what we are in favor of. We are in favor of anthropologists thinking critically about their practices of engagement and dissemination and engaging in acts of perception that orient toward accessibility, in Titchkosky's (2011) words. Another definition of malleability, from the *OED*, is "capable of being hammered or pressed out of shape without a tendency to return to the original shape or to fracture." This is the form of malleability we are invested in here: bending anthropology in ways that become more inclusive and create new conditions of possibility. We are not interested in blunt institutional force, however, and while we think institutional change is important, we don't want to let ordinary ethics off the hook: it is both/and, not either/or.

To put it crudely, anthropologists travel to the field and often adjust or change their ways of engaging with others in their field sites. For example, they might eat with their hands instead of with a fork or eat foods they wouldn't normally find palatable; they might bow instead of shaking hands; they might participate in rituals that would be upsetting at home; and they might sleep on hard mattresses. In doing so, they stress the malleabilities of their bodies, their ability to yield and be molded by those around them for the purpose of appearing responsive and meeting the needs of others as moral actors. Anthropologists also point to the things that they discover and learn through different forms of embodiment and engagement with people and objects. Yet that same ability—that same malleability—does not exist once they are no longer in the field. At home, norms about comportment and practice lead them to consider access needs to be a "courtesy." How might we embrace malleability at home as an ethical practice that meets the needs of others? And might it be possible that providing and using access copies, image descriptions, and fidgets, as examples, might also lead to new perceptions as well as novel understandings and engagements?

To be sure, anthropologists have always attended to malleability "out there" in exploring how individuals and communities respond to and inhabit changing norms and how, for example, individuals embark on ethical projects to make themselves anew. Indeed, studying human malleability has been part and parcel of the anthropological project. Recent approaches in the anthropological study of disability show how anthropologists might bridge the gap between being malleable "out there" and being malleable "at home." Analyzing the challenges that intellectual disability poses for anthropologists, Patrick McKearney and Tyler Zoanni argue that anthropologists implicitly assume the psychic unity of humanity and that people are fundamentally "the same" (McKearney & Zoanni, 2023). They stress that intellectual disability challenges how we define and understand personhood. In so doing, they build on the work of Faye Ginsburg and Rayna Rapp, who argue that anthropologists should focus on "disability worlds" because such worlds illuminate the life-changing and life-expanding work of having a disabled family member or other proximity to disability (Ginsburg & Rapp, 2013). This expansive analytical work includes attending to the ways that pleasure becomes a means of intersubjective enjoyment when personhood is difficult to parse (Driessen, 2018), and how alternative pathways of development disrupt normative ideas about childhood, parenting, and social belonging (Sargent, 2020). In all this work, families, caregivers, and kin commit—sometimes ambivalently—to the needs and preferences of family members with disabilities, and they do the work of discerning intention through atypical forms of communication (Wolf-Meyer, 2020). They become malleable

to meet the needs of others whom they want to include in the community. We are arguing that the same practice should infuse anthropology as a means of realizing the promise of its "good."

A CAPACITY-BASED ANTHROPOLOGY

Here, we point to scholarship that provides tools for articulating a disability-infused anthropological future, a future that takes seriously questions of difference and capacity. At heart, the cross-cultural and comparative project that anthropology promises is to demonstrate the variations across human capacities and their local articulations. A categorical approach to this issue would exclude "incapacities," stipulate what makes humans human, or presume that some humans are more human than others. In contrast, a capacity-focused approach draws our attention to the diversity of sensory experiences and communicative forms that humans engage in and the ways that they create the conditions of personal and institutional malleability. Indeed, a capacity-based approach furthers anthropology's project of understanding human difference and does something that a focus on culture or ontology cannot. Moreover, a capacity-based approach allows us to consider who or what needs to be malleable under what particular circumstances in order to create inclusive communities and futures. Attending to malleability's edges also helps us understand the existence of hierarchies and power relations.

Anthropologists have sought ways to analyze this malleability and the ways that these family members and other carers work on themselves alongside working on and with their loved ones. In 2023, during a University of Chicago seminar on the anthropology of disability led by Friedner, a graduate student named Fulden Arisan commented that anthropologists working on cognitive disability (such as McKearney, Zoanni, and Dreissen, as mentioned above) have developed "sensitive registers" in theorizing personhood, subjectivity, and the qualities of human and more-than-human interactions; Arisan was enthusiastic about the commitment in this work to developing ever more sensitive registers as a means of expanding anthropological conceptions of personhood and subjectivity. In the same seminar, participants discussed anthropologists' "moral orientations" (Green, 2014) to those with whom they worked. These sensitive registers exist in tension with the insensitivity that a lack of malleability creates. Such a lack of malleability is easily institutionalized, practiced by individuals, and abetted by institutions by making needs—like that of an access copy—a legal gray area such that these needs can be ignored without consequence. In drawing attention to these sites of insensitivity, we gesture toward how anthropology might be practiced otherwise—and more "sensitively" to the diversity of human experiences. By "sensitive" here, we mean having the capacity to responsively engage as moral actors, as well as to proactively work toward making connections between people in the effort to expand who counts as an anthropologist and what counts as anthropological praxis and theorizing. Sensitivity enables conditions of possibility for malleability.

To that end, attention to disability helps enliven a key set of anthropological concerns—namely, the wide range of ways that humans communicate and sense. Such work endeavors to analyze how disability impacts and imprints on people and how it is relational; disability-focused scholars attend to—and are open to—how disability makes worlds. Recent contributions from anthropologists of disability demonstrate how critical it is to attend to diverse forms of communication and to what recognizing an act, gesture, or utterance as communicative makes evident about human capacities for interaction. For example, Patrick McKearney's (2021) ethnography of a UK-based L'Arche community shows how nonverbal community members are treated as intentional communicators, in contradiction to dominant ideologies that would suggest that they are not. New caregivers are entreated by other caregivers to develop intimate understandings of each community member so as to create the space for them to behaviorally and gesturally communicate their needs—and the conditions for carers' malleable responses to these needs. Similarly, Danilyn Rutherford (2021) has shown how stretching ideas about communication has created the conditions to care for her disabled daughter, relying on carers' accepting full-body communication as a collaborative process. In Nathaniel Dumas's (2012) research on stuttering communities, he shows how impediments to typical forms of speech inspire community members to create the conditions for communication, which requires attention to the needs of communicators, such as additional time for speech acts and patience in their audiences. Across this work, it becomes evident that language as self-expression is only part of the dynamics of interpretation; the ways that community and kin collaborate in making interactions meaningful encompass far more communicative competence than "just" spoken language. In doing this work, *and it is work*, these anthropologists and those with whom they work create the conditions through which individuals are treated as persons and lay the basis for the individual and collective elaboration of subjectivity. And through attention to these practices, anthropologists demonstrate how communicative and representational capacities are shaped through relations that depend on—and create new forms of—malleability, which is situated as a necessary, if unmarked, capacity that community members share because they are committed to being animated by each other as persons (Wolf-Meyer, 2020).

Anthropologists have long relied on forms of self-representation—through language, gesture, and other representational practices—as a means to know the experiences of other people. This has led to assumptions about what ethnographic research can be—for example, number of interviews conducted, kinds of events observed, and so on—and ruled out the experiences of people who are nonverbal or communicate in atypical ways. But the work discussed above shows how an attention to malleability makes other modes of communication possible (see also Elliot & Culhane, 2016). Historically and currently still, key interlocutors are often valued because of their loquaciousness and their ability to perceive and share through conventional language the complex social dynamics at play in a community. "Good" and "bad" interviews often depend on an interviewee's ability to put their experiences

into language; representational practices are useful to anthropological analysis when they signify something meaningful. In all these cases, language and semiotic ideologies that accept some forms of communication as legitimate over others—which have shaped these assumptions about communication in anthropology—implicitly exclude atypical communicators and seemingly nonrepresentational practices. These communicators can include, for example, home sign communicators, people experiencing madness, and nonverbal people, all of whom are atypical communicators in different ways (Green, 2014; Groce, 1997; Haviland, 2013; Hoffmann-Dilloway, 2016; Myers, 2015). When anthropologists exclude such interlocutors, they uphold dominant language ideologies and reify the idea that only certain capacities of communication are central to human experience. Moreover, communicating only in dominant ways and with typical communicators exposes the limits of ethnographic malleability, even "out there," where anthropologists are most likely to valorize malleability. In these ways, a focus on typical forms of communication and representation lead to a paucity in the anthropological imagination of what communicative capacity is and how it can be exhibited as an interaction or foundation for representational practices.

Similarly, anthropologists (Howes & Classen, 2014) have argued that anthropologists should not approach the senses as an a priori given but rather explore how they have been culturally and socially constructed, as well as configured and valued differently depending on location. Not taking sensory commensurality for granted leads to productive questions: What happens, for example, if we interrogate whether we all hear the same soundscape of a mosque's call to prayers or see the same image in a community art mural? What happens if and when we have to describe the sounds and images to an audience and do not take their perception for granted? Addressing questions like these forces us to conceptualize the senses as capacities that are diverse and malleable. In addressing these concerns, Kathryn Geurts (2015, p. 163) argues, "A disability studies perspective is vital for sensory studies to stay grounded in the difficult political reality of diverse human bodies consistently experiencing exclusion in social organization across the globe." Geurts's statement is an important one for anthropology to take up, in that she points to the ways that sensory ideologies and sensory capacities are differentially valued. As we think through research as intersensorially produced (Friedner, 2022), and as we hold on to sensory variability, the diversity in our sensory capacities both "out there" and "at home" calls on us as anthropologists to be malleable; this malleability ultimately challenges sensory naturalism and universalism as givens and makes us better researchers and community members through practical, inclusive praxis. Here we think of Cinzia Greco's (2022) foregrounding of the experiences of neurodiverse anthropologists and her call for a "divergent ethnography," through which "new individual and theoretical entanglements can be built by exploring new ways of perceiving and interpreting reality." That point is central in both accounting for the lived realities of individuals and communities, and in making possible more inclusive worlds through anthropological practice.

BECOMING MALLEABLE/BECOMING ACCOUNTABLE

Disability approaches make evident that personhood and subjectivity are not intrinsic qualities that make some individuals people and others not. They are, rather, the products of complex social commitments that communities make to connect or disconnect people. Families and communities enact forms of malleability based on their moral orientation to meeting the needs of disabled community members and kin, providing models for how anthropologists can theorize personhood, subjectivity, and communication while enlivening malleability as an inclusive, community-building process. Indeed, malleability enables capacitation; malleability *is* capacitation and can also produce accessibility. Furthermore, expanding access is enacted not through individual practices—like providing access copies—but through ongoing commitments to including a diversity of human experiences and capacities. And such a commitment means taking the spectrum of capacities seriously and being malleable, responsive, and sensitive to them. An access copy is a sign of this malleability. It is not the whole answer, but a provisional one, and one that is necessary to minimally broaden the catchment of the anthropological community by allowing the participation of some—but still not all—interested parties.

Anthropologists have long accepted that being malleable "out there" makes us better scholars and community members. Being malleable "at home" makes us better scholars and community members too. In both cases, if we assume neither the psychic unity of all humankind—returning to McKearney's and Zoanni's (2023) provocation—or the sensory and communicative unity of all humankind, it creates the moral conditions for malleability. This moves us beyond the usual work that anthropologists do in terms of interrogating and being sensitive to the perceptions of those with whom they do research: *Did you see the rabbit in the moon? Did you feel the presence of the Holy Spirit in the music?* What happens when we need to describe the rabbit and the music on multiple levels and not take for granted a shared perception or understanding—not only with interlocutors in the field but also with our colleagues at home? Asking these questions is not merely about sensorial difference; it allows us to demonstrate how sensorial capacities are shaped and vary across and between, and even within, societies. Disability may inflect these capacities—and there may be material impairments that lead to differences between individuals—but access to the world through the senses is a primary route of malleability "out there" and "at home." Conceptualizing these differences as resources for ethical practice enlivens discussions about access and anthropological theorizations of the human.

This returns us to the question of what happens when we do not consider the fact that others have different forms of sensory engagements, communicative practices, and embodiments "at home"? What happens when we uncritically inhabit a space of unmalleability, and how might this be considered unresponsive or insensitive? To put a fine point on it, a refusal to become malleable upholds disciplinary norms that perpetuate forms of exclusion about who can be an anthropologist,

what kinds of questions we can ask as anthropologists, and the kinds of answers that we can provide. When we are insensitive to the world of human possibilities in our own daily practices, our questions are narrow, our answers are impoverished, and our conceptions of anthropology are exclusionary. In this context, providing an access copy is an act of a deeper commitment to remaking the anthropological project to be more inclusive, to demonstrate the diversity and vitality of human variation, and to allow the expectations of how we perform "out there" to inform who we are "at home." To return to the question we are answering: "What other modalities of practice can, and should, anthropologists engage in?" We stress that anthropological practice, in the field and at home, could draw from its own research on the senses, communication, and embodiment—and disability—to be more malleable and to embrace different modalities.

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