

Introduction

Hope and Insufficiency Capacity Building in Ethnographic Comparison

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Introduction

On June 11th, 2019, three very different events took place around the world under the heading of capacity building.¹ The Chinese Embassy in Ethiopia celebrated forty-five graduates, returned after an eight-month stint in Zhengzhou, China on a competitive capacity building training for train drivers, to begin their jobs traversing the new line between Addis Ababa and Djibouti's Port of Doraleh (FOCAC 2019). Across the Atlantic, the Global Climate Change Alliance of Suriname sat down in Paramaribo at their WaterForum to address concerns about the country's water management infrastructure they felt best addressed by a new capacity building program (GCCA 2019: 7). And on the same day, participants gathered at a capacity building workshop at the Centre de Recherche Forestière in Rabat, Morocco to discuss how to bring about large-scale forest and landscape restoration, echoing conversations occurring in Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Fiji and more (Silva Mediterranea 2019, UNFAO 2019). From skills to physical infrastructure, conversation to networking, capacity building is a concept full of hope and potential. Yet, as we aim to show in this collection, across

its instantiations, it operates from perceptions of insufficiency or absence, summoned because the future it works towards is seen as more desirable than the present.

In this edited collection, we bring capacity building into ethnographic focus. We use the tension between hope and insufficiency at work in capacity building to explore its intended and unintended effects. Since neither the term nor the practices it engenders have been systematically examined or theorised within the social sciences, we ethnographically interrogate how and where the concept is put to work. Central to many projects under anthropological scrutiny, from institution building and national development projects to individual and community initiatives, capacity building is 'presented as the core solution for solving global problems' (Bueger and Tholens 2021: 22). Reaching across ethnographies from different sectors and continents, the contributions to this collection question capacity building's ubiquity and self-evident character. Along the way, the chapters open up what *capacities*, human or otherwise, are thought to be. By not taking capacity building's promises for granted, these ethnographic accounts both advance our understanding of capacity building's ubiquity and develop anthropological purchase on its persuasive power.

To lay the ground for the ethnographies to follow, we outline the history of capacity building within development, before showing its transition to a rich life of its own in the lexicons of government, religious organisations, environmental campaigns, biomedical trainings and more. We offer a thematic framing of the contributions, which are based on ethnographic fieldwork in from Bolivia, Brazil, Cambodia, Ghana, Haiti, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, and the United States. Each chapter is ethnographically specific, yet the effect of reading them alongside one another captures capacity building's mobile character, and points to the political consequences of the malleability evidenced in the opening news stories. A comparative approach provides an opportunity to theorise the concept's emergence and ubiquity at this particular historical moment, where what we might call 'conceptual borrowing' or 'templating' (Simpson 2012: 157) is happening rapidly, and on a global scale (Ong and Collier 2005). Terms from one sector arise in another: collaborations and agreements, for example, push the repeated use of 'partnership' (Jensen and Winthereik 2013; Brown 2015; Herrick and Brooks 2018; Gimbel et al. 2018), and capacity building travels easily. We use this broader observation as an entry point to a theoretical discussion that highlights the challenges the widespread use of 'capacity building' poses for analysis. If audit receives attention as a pervasive governing technology (Shore and Wright 2015), should not capacity building also be examined as 'a mode of thinking and analysis that makes particular political actions seem reasonable and justified' (Merry 2015: 435)? If missionizing Christianity's overt and implicit efforts at salvation have, as some have argued, been difficult for anthropologists to see for the way they share values and teloi, what can we learn from attempts to uncover this 'theoretical repressed' from the within anthropology itself? (Cannell 2005, 2006; Robbins and Engelke 2010; McDougall 2013)? We emphasise three questions for current and future anthropological engagement. First, how do we theorise capacity building as a concept and practice constrained neither by cultural or geopolitical region, nor by classical thematic divisions within anthropology? Second, who gets to define capacities – as present, lacking, or needing to be built? How do these claims gain legitimacy? Finally, what strategies are available to us as anthropologists to

analytically address the way those who use capacity building conceptualise and enact change? Let us begin by first providing a brief genealogy of capacity building.

Approaching Capacity

Though the term capacity building is now colloquially familiar, it entered development terminology in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Eade 1997) when ‘capacity’ became tied to terms of improvement like ‘strengthening’, ‘enhancement’ and ‘development’ itself (Fuduka-Parr et al. 2002; UNDP 1995, 1998, 2003; OECD 2006). At the outset, the new term appeared to leave some commentators almost breathless with a sense of possibility. Take this description of the ‘spiral’ model of capacity building from the late 1990s, which

assumes that behind every new latrine, weaving room, or irrigation canal in a village, for example, there are less visible but equally important changes in individual and group knowledge, attitudes and skills (Robinson and Cox 1998: 127)

In this un-sited description of ‘village life’, we encounter a capacity building which locates measurable efficacy in material artefacts – latrines and weaving rooms – yet extends into less visible capacities such as ‘knowledge’. Capacity building can be put to work as both an approach and objective, as a set of methodologies towards a goal and itself a measurable outcome (Bolger 2000: 1). As mode and goal, what capacity building targets may be anything from ‘abilities’ to ‘understandings, attitudes, values, relationships, behaviours, motivations, resources and conditions’ (Bolger 2000: 2). Given such an all-encompassing mandate, it is little wonder that capacity building has been critiqued within development discourse for its vagueness: it is ‘elusive’ (Kaplan 2000: 517), ‘ambiguous’ (Black 2003: 116), ‘elastic’ (Lusthaus et al. 1999: 3) or worse, a ‘sloppy piece of aid jargon’ (Eade 2010: 204). Given its generic character, commentators wonder: which capacities are desired? Where should efforts be targeted?

These questions are asked by many practitioners. Capacity building emerged during a time when top-down development strategies were being dismantled, with ‘partnership’ and ‘dialogue’ promoted as a shift away from hierarchical language (Linnell 2003). Thus questions it elicited – of which capacities, and whose – were imagined as part of an open conversation between those who sought to intervene and those who stood as partners or participants in such projects. Capacity building was, and still is,² seen to take into account paradigm shifts towards ‘local ownership’ of initiatives (OECD 1996) as well as a growing recognition of the role ‘external factors in the broader environment’ have on the ‘capacity of an individual, team, organisation or system’ (Milèn 2001: 2). Attending to a broader environment, in turn, involved the dismantling of a further dominant association of capacity with what were termed ‘technical competences’ (Cherlet 2014). By 1996, critiques of a ‘technical’ mindset had taken hold, with increasing acknowledgement that capacity meant more than mere technical competence. ‘The international development community was mistaken’, Lusthaus et al. remarked cuttingly, ‘when it thought that the technologies required to build a bridge were the same as those required to build a society – civil or otherwise’

(1999: 19). Amidst these changes, however, calls for capacity building continued to grow. Towards the end of the 1990s, Deborah Eade, a prominent commentator on capacity building noted that ‘no UN Summit goes by without ritual calls for capacity building programmes for NGOs’ (Eade 1997: 1). Two decades on, her observation has remained apposite: From the Accra Agenda for Action (OECD 2008) to the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (UNMDG 2013), the SAMOA Pathway (United Nations 2014) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations 2015), capacity building is centrally placed as a key instrument of change.

Even in this thumbnail sketch, it is evident that the rhetoric of capacity building has been caught between – and captured the imagination of – different movements in policy and become enrolled into quite different forms of political service. As structural adjustment policies shrank the state and downplayed institutions capacity building became a tool to attend to individuals, and their capacities. Through these shifting eras, definitional clarity remained elusive. As a result, those using the term go to some lengths to pin it down and organise its conceptual landscape – in rapidly proliferating new configurations. We find capacities arranged by ‘levels’ and ‘types’, separated into ‘functional and technical’ (UNDP 2009), ‘soft’ elements (motivational and process) and ‘hard’ elements (technical) (Land 1999). Some took issue with the idea of building at all: In 2006, the OECD sought to replace ‘building’ with ‘development’ in a document aimed at good practice, arguing ‘[t]he “building” metaphor suggests a process starting with a plain surface and involving the step-by-step erection of a new structure, based on a preconceived design. Experience suggests that capacity is not successfully enhanced in this way’ (OECD 2006: 9). Yet between defining capacities to building them, practitioner authors offer key steps to success, from initial stakeholder engagement to end of project evaluation. For this reason, Chris Roche of Oxfam sets up capacity building as a concept to be *tested* (Roche 1997: v), measured against a *goal*, marking an alignment with policy orientations wherein capacities are ‘most usefully assessed in relation to their development purpose’ (Malik 2002: 27). The question of ‘which capacities’ is transformed into a concern about ‘which ends’, opening new sets of disagreements of what capacity building might ultimately be ‘for’.

Amidst this disagreement, change is given central importance. ‘Whether they are aware of it or not’, write Lusthaus, et al., ‘those involved in the field of capacity development are engaged in trying to understand and predict change’ (1999: 10). They are also trying to bring it about. Commentators emphasise the importance of a ‘baseline’ from which change can be measured, anxieties arising about ‘pejorative’ assumption of deficits entailed (Linnell 2003). Yet once insufficiencies have been defined and a plan drawn up, implementation is key: the express aim being as explicit as ‘chang[ing] a society’s rules, situations and standards of behaviour’ (Morgan and Qualman 1996: no pagination). A focus on change places capacity building alongside ideas that aid its smooth passage within managerial worlds, such as monitoring and evaluation, results based management, and good practice (Milèn 2001; OECD 2005). Is it working? Is capacity actually being built? *What has changed?* As Gimbel et al. observe for global health, the ‘data expectations’ of donors place heavy demands, with reporting indicators requiring further disaggregated data: ‘by 2017’, they tell us, ‘more than 350 additional data points were required’ (2018: 87), the data collection on health outcomes also being

seen as building local capacity in monitoring and evaluation. Measurement brings the problem of definitional clarity to the fore: how to measure, evaluate or enhance something that is poorly defined from the outset? Monitoring and evaluation intensify the hopeful promises of capacity building – transformation becomes the new ‘essential ingredient’, what capacity building is ‘fundamentally about’ (Bolger 2000: 2). Scrutinised within a reflexive community of practitioners, then, the latest advice is that there are no recipes, and ‘the particulars of [mistakes and successes] must be scrutinised carefully to determine what can be replicated, what can’t and why’ (UNDP 2009: 35).

If this is how capacity building appears in development and government literatures, what might an anthropological approach to this arena entail? Yarrow and Venkatesan’s *Differentiating Development* (2012) provides a starting point oriented away from antagonistic positions, with a call that anthropologists relinquish ‘the belief that anthropologists *see* more than various development workers because they *know* more’ (2012: 6). They push us instead to attend to what development comes to mean in particular social contexts (Venkatesan 2009) and for reading development issues ‘more squarely in relation to mainstream anthropological concerns’ (Yarrow and Venkatesan 2012: 23). Yet despite the differentiation of development that ensues in Yarrow and Venkatesan’s broad collection, the concept of capacity building is arguably even *more* expansive, an easy ‘actionable’ generic, ready for uptake in any social field. As West notes, capacity development schemes are ‘thought to be appropriate for all scales: individuals, organizations, and whole societies’ (2016: 71). As such, ‘*how* exactly it is manifested in projects’ remains obscured (Mayville 2020: 1).

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, capacity building³ has noticeably decoupled from development agendas and is now valued as a tool of governance, administration, future building, and ‘progress’ in its own right. A bewildering range of sites today present themselves: it can be found in the lexicons of government (Hughes et al. 2010), third sector (Linnel 2003; O’Reilly 2011), heritage (Bortolotto et al. 2020), religious (McDougall 2013), medical (Kelly 2011; Geissler et al. 2014), transport (Heslop and Jeffery 2020), maritime security and piracy (Bueger et al. 2020), environmental (Watanabe 2019; UNEP 2002), conservation (West et al. 2006) and even familiar academic agendas (Danaher et al. 2012; Pfothenhauer et al. 2013; Pfothenhauer et al. 2016). One of the questions we seek to explore in this edited collection is thus how ‘capacity building’ has been made to ‘work’ in such diverse settings? What in it carries such broad ranging appeal?

The concept of capacity has a rich history both in Euro-American philosophy and science as well as in anthropological thinking. Invoking ‘capacity’ means mobilising a concept borrowed into English from fifteenth-century French’s Latinate *capacité*, meaning the ability to hold. Capacity retains its early definition: we still speak of a reservoir’s capacity to hold water, or – for a contemporary reference – the capacity of the internet’s material infrastructure to transport data as light, down optic cables (Starosielski 2015). This sense of ‘holding’ transfers in the familiar usage of capacity as a role one might take – to write in my capacity (a position or role I *hold*) as chairperson, or friend. Yet we also speak of our personal capacities, often to refer to the ability to learn: ‘the mind in ignorance is like a sleeping giant’, wrote the English essayist Usher early in the nineteenth century, ‘it has immense capacities without the power of using them’

(Usher 1824: 465). It is this ‘capacity view’ of the person – certainly not confined to the 1800s – which opens towards intervention, development, and potential. It provides a moment in which we might consider the relationship between a capacity that is held (*in potentia*) and a capacity that is expressed (*in actualitas*), being brought forth in action.

The history of anthropology is bound up in the conceptualisation of capacities, human and otherwise. Readings have wavered between capacities being human universals, and specific capacities being thought absent, not observed or demonstrated by encountered ‘others.’ A full account of these shifting tides would take us through the significance of how, since the beginning of the discipline, capacities were attributed explicitly or otherwise, or entire peoples seen to be ‘lacking’ in one measure or another – belief systems, kinship systems, the presence of ‘law’ (Nader 2002, Falk Moore 2004, Foblets et al. 2020). Such attribution took place against the backdrop of evolutionary and colonial frames informed by moral judgments both of emerging nineteenth century empirical sciences (Tylor [1871] 2010; Spencer [1855] 1999; Squadrito 2002) and of who and what they studied (Moore 1994). Indeed, Paige West shows how capacity building’s ideology smuggles back in the assumptions that there is ‘an inherent lack in non-European persons, institutions and social systems’ as the driver for technical solutions such as training, structures and audit cultures (West 2016: 72). Similarly, in her trenchant critique of the vernacular of development in West Africa, Jemima Pierre identifies ‘capacity building’ as a companion to discourses of ‘corruption’ and ‘resource curse’ in ‘construct[ing] Africans as peculiar types of beings’ (Pierre 2019: 87). Though a full historical review of the guises taken by the concept of capacity is beyond the scope of this introduction, an historical frame is nonetheless significant for how anthropological accounts position themselves relative to capacities today. For some, capacity continues to hold validity as a route for discussions that would ‘bring the nature of the human again to the centre of anthropological deliberation’ (Rapport 2005: 2). However, the resonance we find for capacity building with contemporary work lies not in pursuing it against ideas of ‘human nature,’ but in the common ground between capacity and ‘potential’.

In their overview of *potentiality* as an anthropological keyword, Taussig et al. (2013) turned to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

1.a A capacity, a possibility; an instance of the latent capacity for development of a person, thing, etc., in which the quality of having potential is embodied.

Here, potential *is* itself a capacity, latent or otherwise. Though their article deals with the suffusion of potentiality in the ‘contemporary life sciences and medical practice’ (Taussig et al. 2013:S3), their breadth of discussion bears upon our interest in capacity. Clear parallels emerge: potential shares with capacity the trait of having been both ‘explicit and tacit in the history of anthropology’ (2013: S3); it is (unequally) allocated and attributed (2013: S11), giving rise to what the ‘right’ potentials or capacities might be (2013: S10); and, in what could be a critical reading of capacity building within development discourse, it is concerned with identifying the absences that are preventing the realisation of more promising futures, ‘even as promises and expectations continually recede on the horizon’ (2013: S10). As Taussig et al. note, ‘[t]o study potentiality as an empirical object [...] can provide a route to renewed reflexivity

along with a better understanding of the implications of how people think about human capacities and where they are located' (2013: S7).

The chapters in this edited collection take off from the following proposal: where in potentiality Taussig et al. find capacities, in capacities we find potentials. Yet if employing potentiality analytically requires an 'anthropological awareness that things could be other than they are' (Taussig et al. 2013: S6), the combination of 'capacity' with 'building' means we must attend to how (and which) capacities can become sites of cultivation or intervention. For the intention of capacity building is precisely to make things other than they are: to transform. And with this transformational intent come a broad range of empirical sites. A critical anthropological insight thus obtains: it cannot be known in advance how much of their 'originary' contexts concepts carry within themselves (Wagner 1986) when they are put to use in new settings. We also cannot assume that the 'understandings that produced them' (Strathern 1995: 154) – the priorities, intentions, frameworks – will be borrowed along with the terms themselves.

Exemplary of this analytical caution are two recent explorations of capacity building practices in Myanmar and the Maldives. When Watanabe explores a Japanese NGO's concurrent use of *hitozukuri* alongside 'capacity development' it is to understand how the practice of the Japanese concept of *hitozukuri* – 'cultivation of people's holistic character as well as skills' (Watanabe 2019: 17) – continue even as vocabularies shift (2019: 48); when Heslop and Jeffery attend to the Sinhala word *dharanaya* (capacity) and Divehi phrases that approximate it in their work on road construction in the Maldives it is to show how capacity is made multi-scalar: from personal skills to the financing of roadbuilding, '[a] lack of capacity is at the heart of subcontracting' (2020: 289). As many are coming to realise, the 'object of capacity building [...] is developed in the conduct of performing the practice of capacity building' (Bueger and Tholens 2021: 24). In this way, capacity building's current ubiquity presents a broader challenge for an anthropology that seeks to both describe and interrogate it, for as it moves, it carries its promises of hope and creation of insufficiency in uneven and unequal measure.

Overview of themes and arrangement of the collection

The stimulus for the present collection follows from our discomfort with how capacity building frequently goes unquestioned in ethnographic accounts. Each chapter addresses a distinct encounter with capacity building, and each presents a variation on what ethnographic attention does for critical analysis. The first set of overarching questions in the collection are ethnographic. What does capacity building look like in practice? Who is involved? How does it gain traction and translate into activities, events and policies? Through this attention, a second set of questions appear: where is capacity thought to inhere? In what or in whom? The third set of questions take up the themes which give this collection its title: the interplay of hope and insufficiency which – we suggest – makes the idea of capacity building persuasive. Following the lead of Miyazaki, whose work on Fijian knowledge practices links philosophical literature on hope with questions of ethnographic method (2004), many scholars have taken up the concept of hope in diverse settings (Mattingly 2010; Pedersen 2012). Our interest in the hope of 'capacity building' lies in its ties to promised futures, and the transformations that will

ferry participants there. This requires attending to how possibilities and potentials are invoked and mobilised in the pursuit of other ways of doing or being. Where hope may be ‘held’ and sustained by a range of supporting infrastructures – people, documents, devices – it is rarely measured, and attempts to quantify it sit uneasily with both its intangible expansiveness and its often-private character.

Capacity building, in contrast, is increasingly implicated in mechanisms of measurement, enmeshed in the politics of governing futures. Conceptualising capacity through the *absences* it uses as its starting points, which it identifies in order to ‘fill’, the chapters attend to *what it is* that capacity building projects intend to remedy. We argue that capacity building ‘works’ through comparative transformation. It must generate (preferably measurable) insufficiencies which need to be made appear – an absence that becomes a potential. How, then, is this absence or ‘lack’ identified, codified and made available, given the potential, for intervention? What is defined as insufficient, and crucially, by whom? The position and power to make claims specifying absences gives shape to the global currency of capacity building. Critical questions our authors ask include: what becomes of other ways of doing and being, or unwelcome new capacities? What and whose are the standards against which a present is deemed insufficient? What of the capacity to rework projects, to refuse engagement or intervention (Benjamin n.d.: 2016)?

These questions result in tensions across the chapters in how the authors read capacity building: is it a neo-colonialist imposition, or a site for creative re-working on the part of partners or other participants? Are we speaking of the coercive reproduction of familiar power structures, or rather of arenas of re-descriptive hijacking, where projects are re-purposed towards new ends by those who are its targets? Furthermore, if we attribute flexible interpretation to those who would build capacity, can those it targets not receive the same credit? The opening chapter by Kristin LaHatte takes us to the heart of this question. As she shows, in post-earthquake Haiti, ‘capacity building’ has been naturalised as part of both societal and infrastructural reconstruction. But what is being (re)built? LaHatte shows us projects for the rebuilding of homes, yes, but in her careful analysis of the ways in which capacity building projects intervene with a valuation of certain relationships over others, we find competing notions of capacity building’s purpose and potential mapped amongst those engaged in it. LaHatte introduces us to the Haitian phrase *moun pa’m se dra* (‘My people are my sheets’) which becomes an entry point for her reading of a Haitian ‘blanket’ of relationships, a sociality understood by local capacity builders to persist through time, into a future when NGO ‘projects’ will inevitably dry up. Working with Haitian NGO staff, who both carry out capacity building and remain subjects of it, we see through LaHatte’s ethnography how staff select which capacities to cultivate relative to anticipated futures. Such futures do not always match those of their funders, who, in their implicit critique of Haitian social worlds, would see changed persons and a more ‘morally appropriate’ sociality. Andrea Ballestero takes up this theme of capacities which secure futures in her ethnography of a political device called the ‘Water Pact’ in North-eastern Brazil, an experimental intervention in problems of water scarcity designed to increase a community’s ‘capacity’ to care for water. Ballestero takes us from low reservoirs to public meetings and the index cards of promises through which the pact to manage water is built. It is in these

ethnographic moments where conceptual puzzles arise: what is the pact if there is nothing to 'belong' to? Ballestero's analysis takes us into new readings of the capacities of the aggregate, highlighting in contrast with the part-whole dynamics of Hobbesian collectives the importance of criteria – *selectivity* – as a device which allows, in this form of aggregation, for a collective capacity based on moral commitments, not holistic identification.

Similar questions of moral commitment arise in Rachel Douglas-Jones's chapter, which examines the capacity building work taking place amongst ethics review committees in the Asian region. Explicitly named, capacity building in this setting involves implementing standards formulated in international documents, and crucially, learning how to demonstrate and evidence adherence to those standards. Having capacity in this setting is fulfilling a pre-defined role. Yet Douglas-Jones goes on to introduce a contrast between ethics as a capacity to be displayed by committees and a capacity for ethics, where trainers focus instead on the qualities of the person. Doing ethics and being ethical are mutually targeted capacities, with capacity building exercises targeting both institutional and personal transformations. Susan Ellison's chapter also encounters individualised capacity building within initiatives that target specific forms of social relationships in the Bolivian Andes. We learn through her ethnography about a place and people long targeted by international capacity building interventions heavily oriented at statecraft, bureaucracy and institutions. As capacity building is newly captured by shifting policy modes, recent projects have begun instead to foreground interpersonal habits of speech, deportment, and techniques of deliberation seen as necessary for a national, democratic future. Ellison shows that select modes of interacting – regarded by capacity builders as conflictual, militant, resistant – are the target of interventions by so-called *conversatorios*. In these spaces, the democracy-ready skills of speaking respectfully and listening can be rehearsed, and displace an unwanted, excess 'capacity': the 'unreasonableness' and 'irrationality' which is dangerously present in the union trained citizenry. Ellison formulates the tension precisely: *conversatorios* 'unmask competing political stakes and expectations of state-citizen relations as skeptical participants revalorize demonized capacities' (Ellison, this collection).

The disjunction in Ellison and Douglas-Jones's chapters between the value of new capacities and those they replace is also taken up by Harriet Boulding, drawing on fieldwork with health workers in the Shai-Osudoku district of Ghana. Boulding's approach traces how the *definition* of capacity building within Ghana's Community-Based Health Planning and Services Program implicates health workers' home visits with communities. From the 'blueprints' for improved interaction provided at trainings – laudably oriented at supporting and growing trusting relationships between rural communities and their health workers – we find contact time coded into 'regular visits' and pre-set questions. As Boulding's ethnography shows, these time slots find no place in the practices of health workers or their communities, resulting in missed sessions or worse, endangerment of employees. The required questions leave health workers struggling to handle the sociality of home visits, and the politics of talking about reproductive health publicly in close-knit communities. In the equation of capacity building with training activities, then, other 'capacities' are overlooked, with capacity

building's definitional *rigidity* itself becoming the object of the analysis. Viktoryia Kalesnikava's chapter similarly stays with these definitional problems, pushing us to consider the capacities of categories to sustain the work of different institutions of social care, SOS Children's Villages and Supportive Housing, aimed at ensuring respectively that children are linked up with families, and the homeless are provided with affordable housing. Her core interest lies in showing ethnographically the capacity of concepts to organise, muddle, order and even break institutions. Drawing on ethnographic and document work in Australia, Russia and the US, she selects moments where divisions between capacities associated with personal and professional domains collapse, or re-shape institutional life. Tracing her own biographical transition from trainee anthropologist to trainee social worker, Kalesnikava is in the unique position of being able to draw on her own shifting positions as she takes the reader between fieldwork sites, herself moving between roles.

The transformation of persons is central to Hewlett's chapter, which is focused on decades long 'capacitation' in the Peruvian Amazon. Hewlett examines a Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) project originating in the 1950s which had the intention of bringing isolated groups, such as the Amahuaca with whom he worked, into the 'modern world' so they would participate as productive members of Peruvian society. The main mechanism for this was bringing Amahuaca people to 'live together'. The sixty year timespan of this work produced a wealth of historical documents, earlier ethnographies, life histories and present day ethnography, which Hewlett channels to show the changing readings of what needs to be transformed, and how the SIL's 'living together' articulates with Amahuaca understandings of bodily transformations and becoming kin. By the time we arrive at Casper Bruun Jensen's chapter, we are also reaching the limits of the concept of capacity building itself, simply by troubling *which* capacities are being targeted. Jensen's question is whether capacity building, in spite of its apparently comprehensive mandate, is *sufficiently* encompassing. His question seems simple: Are there capacities which would not fall under capacity building's gaze? How might they appear? He asks in order to perform a 'lateral' comparison (Gad and Jensen 2016): that is, one intended to test capacity building's conceptual capacities against other contexts. In this case the capacities within the working lives of bureaucrats and sex workers in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Here, we see different orders of 'growing one's capacity' evidenced, but – as Jensen shows – when laterally compared, they do not fit within 'expected' orders of capacity building's personal, collective, or institutional improvement. Thus, by holding up unexpected descriptions of capacity building, we start to see the edges of where capacity building might, despite its breadth, find limits.

The challenge of capacity: intervention, transformation and social change

This collection brings ethnographic depth to studies of capacity building. It also identifies the wide variety of things that are targeted as 'capacities'. Where Kalesnikava pushes for closer attention to how capacities for care are attributed, Ballesteros ponders how a collective capacity can be conceptualised. Where capacities for living together take

on double meanings in Hewlett's piece – as both the capacitated bodies of Amazonians and their political participation in national projects – Ellison's *conversatorios* rapidly become *contestatorios*, rejecting the naivety of 'new', training sanctioned capacities. Each chapter gives nuance to the ways capacity building is used, demonstrating that the identification of 'capacity', as well as its absence, is a political project, whether these identifications occur in the empirical cases or in our ethnographic descriptions. It therefore remains for us to lay out some of the challenges that exploring capacity building poses for anthropology, and put forward possible strategies for readers who bring it to their ethnographic attention.

We return first to the problem posed at the opening: how do we develop an anthropological approach to concepts that operate across quite distinct settings? The issue is one of shifting conceptual meanings in an era of mobile policy and practice. In this sense, capacity building keeps company with a growing repertoire of concept-practices such as audit (Strathern 2000; Shore and Wright 2015), ethics (Simpson 2012, Douglas-Jones 2015), collaboration (Konrad 2012; Sariola and Simpson 2019) and partnership (Jensen and Winthereik 2013), which act upon accepted and desired form(at)s of knowledge and practice. This edited collection employs comparison across ethnographic settings as a key technique for drawing contrasts in how capacity building is put to use. The capacity building used by Boulding's community health officers is simply not the same thing as that used by Haitian capacity builders in LaHatte's account, a connection produced through differentiation rather than similitude (Viveiros de Castro 2004). In its ubiquity, capacity building provides an ideal vehicle for experimental cross-regional conversations about the lives of contemporary concepts (Koselleck 2002). As the papers in this collection demonstrate, the purchase of capacity building is not everywhere the same. Therefore, while comparison between settings is generative, so too is comparison within: if a concept seems to proliferate, where, when pushed to its 'limits', does it break down in relation to itself? Described in Jensen's closing chapter as 'lateral comparison', this move opens new questions at the edges of a conceptual arena. Where capacities might be imagined as infinite, when they are tied to the everyday work of building, as Jensen shows, the term paradoxically has limits. Asking what capacity cannot contain makes visible what will count as the 'right' capacities.

A second challenge lies in how capacity building re-describes the world in its own terms – defining people and situations as having potential, while also constituting them in the present as insufficient, relative to an envisaged future. In Ellison's chapter, for example, the 'capacity' view of NGO trainers makes it possible to cast existing modes of political interaction as 'unwelcome' capacities, and to replace them with 'good' ones, grown in 'corrective' training sessions. Re-described as an insufficiency, combative debate is made – and made useful – as a justification for imposing other capacities. Yet re-description is also a capacity itself, cultivated particularly within anthropology (Strathern 2005: xiv, Corsín Jiménez 2015). The lesson Ellison's Bolivian interlocutors teach us – through their reactions to capacity building's dismissive re-description of their capacities for debate – is that doing re-description is political work. The opportunity arises, therefore, to turn the lens back – as Hewlett's chapter does – on accounts of these descriptions and attributions, with a view to critiquing the identification and valuation

of some capacities over others. Laura Mentore has demonstrated that it is not only capacity builders who work conceptually with capacity building (2017, see also Arthur 2021). Presenting the ‘workshop space’ of sustainable development and conservation projects taking place in Erefoiomo and Surama villages in Guyana, Mentore shows how those who stand to be ‘capacitated’ rework the intentions of capacity building projects. Mentore argues that willingness to ‘go along’ with the exercises is rooted not in compliance but ‘in-the-hope-of-transformation’ of their *guests* (2017: 304),⁴ demonstrating how clearly workshop participants recognise the political work that concepts like capacity building do, and the ways they seek to redeploy this power.

The final, and possibly most significant, challenge for analysis is the way the generic form of capacity building appears self-evident to development experts, policy-makers and some enrolled in its projects. Such self-evidence generates a sense that the forms of change, progress, and transformation that it heralds are unremarkable. The chapters collected here illustrate that while capacity building does carry generic principles and assumptions, we cannot know in advance how these will be put to work in practice. It is important to examine how the targets of capacity building shape its enactment. In Ballestero’s analysis, for example, focusing on capacity allows for novel theorization around images: the selective aggregate versus holistic membership, a water Pact open to multiplicity versus one predicated on commonality. Ethnographies should explore *how* these models for change are put into practice. Capacity building not only tries to bring about change, it *necessarily* carries models of how that change can happen and what it will mean with it, and ethnographic attention is needed at moments of action and inaction alike. Exemplary of this approach are Tess Lea’s accounts of Australian state bureaucracy (2008, 2020). Lea shows ethnographers how to keep in view the worlds of those who would enact change, seeing how, in swings between ‘futility and optimism [...] the compulsion to act flourishes at the very point where the ability to act seems annihilated’ (Lea 2008: 12). By studying policy makers, she makes an extended case for studying how ‘[p]olicies infect psyches, making some relationships and forms of well-being feel natural or deserved, cutting into and lacerating others’ (2020: 167). Capacity building, we suggest, is one such policy in need of close ethnographic attention.

Engaging with models of change analytically requires that we also engage reflexively with the models of change and transformation we bring into anthropological description (Viveiros de Castro 2012, see also Hewlett this collection). If those within the field of capacity building are asking ‘who, actually, is building whose capacity?’ (Eade 2010: 203), then so too, must anthropologists suspend assumptions about the direction and character of change in encounters between those who intend to capacitate, and those who stand to be capacitated.

Conclusion

Capacity building was intended to be transformative (UNDP 2009), yet it is now also itself transformed. In this introduction we have traced a brief genealogy of its emergence, and its expansion into many new arenas. To date, we argue, it has been analytically and empirically overlooked in anthropological accounts. The approaches outlined above extend and support existing anthropological sensitivities which routinely highlight the

capacities of others: whether in the form of imaginations, practices or concepts. To bring this sensitivity to encounters with capacity building activities is to retain a non-determinate view of capacities, one which prepares the analyst for the contestations, struggles and ambitions embedded in such projects (Crook 2007) the potential within a given capacity building exercise for its terms to be redrawn (MacIntyre, this collection; Mentore 2017) and the importance of attending the capacity to refuse (Benjamin 2016). The chapters in this collection all point to disagreements about what will count as a desirable capacity (Lahatte, Douglas-Jones, Ellison) what capacities themselves might be (Hewlett, Ballestero, Boulding) or what will trouble the concept of capacity building itself (Kalesnikava, Jensen). By opening up capacity building activities to analysis in these varied ways, we hope to stimulate further empirical engagement with its practices and policies, its hopes and insufficiencies, and also spark discussion of the descriptive and transformational capacities of anthropology itself.

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Notes

1. These examples update the original set dating from 2015 (Douglas-Jones and Shaffner 2017), illustrating that any given day could be chosen. A good classroom exercise would be to pick a week of the given year and search international newspapers. Capacity Building, or Capacity Development will show up.
2. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) established a new series of talks in November 2020, the second of which focused on fostering ownership and thereby facilitating more effective and sustainable capacity-building (UNFCCC 2021)
3. Mayville covers the distinction between capacity building and capacity development in her analysis of institutional framework definitions (2017: 47–49).
4. For further analyses of mutual entanglements of Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds, see de la Cadena 2015.

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