

Barbara Bodenhorn

**On being selfish or not:
explorations of an idea from the mountains of Oaxaca and the Alaskan tundra**

This paper draws on material from two communities organised around the principal of common property to explore multiple ways in which ‘non-selfishness’ may be essentially about ‘self’. Challenging models which put ‘the selfish individual’ at the center of ideas about what drives human action, this ethnographic material supports the suggestion that proper selves are expanded ones. ‘Selfishness’, in this context, is not an indication of ‘too much’ self, but is rather evidence of an incomplete one. This in turn invites the question of how young people in particular learn to value a self that values ‘us’, at times over ‘I’. Drawing on recent research in these same communities, we explore through young people’s views some of the ways in which this might develop.

Workshop with Barbara Bodenhorn abstract

This workshop is designed to provide the opportunity to discuss and share ideas about some of the concept which form part of my talk on being ‘not selfish’ – and that continue to be the subject of intense discussion in British Social Anthropology:

- who are persons? Individual / dividual / other-than-human / hybrids?
- how do we interact with knowledge forms that are not necessarily consonant with each other? (i.e., can we get beyond the science/lay; traditional/modern knowledge divides?)
- what is our ethical responsibility to engage with the people we work with?

A few references:

- M. Strathern. No Nature; No culture.
- J. Fabian. Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object.
- M. Brightman, V. Grotti, O. Ulturgasheva. Animism in Rain Forest and Tundra.
- B. Bodenhorn. Whales, souls, children and other things that are ‘good to share’: Core metaphors in a contemporary whaling society. *Cambridge Anthropology*, 13(1), 1–19.
- B. Bodenhorn. Meeting minds; encountering worlds: Sciences and other expertises on the North Slope of Alaska. In M. Konrad (Ed.), *Collaborators collaborating: Counterparts in anthropological knowledge and international research relations*.
- C. Humphrey. Reassembling Individual Subjects. In Laidlaw, Bodenhorn, Holbraad eds. *Recovering the Human subject*.
- D. Haraway. *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*.
- U. Bulag. *Nationalism and Hybridity in Mongolia*. *Oxford Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology*.

About the lecturer:

Barbara Bodenhorn has worked as a social anthropologist in arctic Alaska since 1980 and in Oaxaca, Mexico since 2004. She is currently Fellow Emerita at Pembroke College and a Senior Research Associate in the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge. Her focus on kinship, gender, economics, 4th world politics and cosmology has often led her to questions about self, personhood and agency. Her most recent work has had a focus on learning and young people’s environmental knowledge practices. She co-edited *The Anthropology of Names and Naming* and is currently working on two volumes on climate change as well as a festschrift for Esther Goody.