Interviewer: Hello and welcome to Annual Reviews audio, a podcast from Annual Reviews, where insightful research begins. I’m your host, Mia Lobel. Today we’ll speak with Professor Donald Brenneis, Co-Editor of the Annual Review of Anthropology. Brenneis specializes in social and linguistic anthropology and taught anthropology for more than 20 years at Pitzer College near Los Angeles before moving to U.C. Santa Cruz in 1996. He is past president of the American Anthropological Association, edited American Ethnologist, and has served on the editorial board of numerous publications, including American Anthropologist, Anthropology in Action, the University of California Press, and the Annual Review of Anthropology. Professor Brenneis, thank you so much for joining me.

Donald Brenneis: Thanks very much, and it’s a real pleasure to be talking with you.

Interviewer: So why don’t you start out by telling me a little about your field work in Fiji? How did you first become interested in that part of the world?
Donald Brenneis: Well, my interest when I went to graduate school after several years in the Peace Corps and working as a social worker was really in thinking about language and social life, and particularly the way that language is not only about the world, but a way of shaping the world that people use collaboratively. And very early on in my graduate school days at Harvard, my wife and I both began to work with a faculty member who was putting together a research project to look at law and conflict in Fiji, in the South Pacific. At the time he didn’t know that I already spoke Hindi and had been living on the Nepal-India border.

I didn’t know that there were people of South Asian extraction living in Fiji, and so my doctoral work really was informed in part by serendipity and in part by really being part of a comparative project that was looking at the kinds of conflicts that arose [and] the ways that people used the court in the context of the small but heterogeneous community, with ethnic Fijians, the descendants of Indian immigrants who had come over to work in the sugarcane plantations, and a variety of other folks as well. And then my wife was studying the court.

Interviewer: Now, your research in the Southwest Pacific falls into a pretty traditional view of anthropology: going out into the bush, away from urban areas. How has anthropology changed since those days?

Donald Brenneis: Well, there is—it’s changed dramatically. There was one point when Margaret Mead, at least apocryphally, was asked what the difference between anthropology and sociology was, to which her response was that anthropology was for sociologists who liked to camp. And the notion was that there was an almost geographic distribution of labor. We took the countryside, particularly the countryside outside of the Atlantic world, and the sociologists took the cities and the assumedly modern part of the world. Anthropologists, now, are almost everywhere: in cities, in very large scale complex societies.

And in part, even when they’re in those small-scale communities that used to be the heartland of our discipline, they are working there with the recognition that even the most remote community is embedded in a very complex set of regional and transnational relationships. So that kind of fiction of cultural isolation that had formed a lot of work in the past of our field has really gone away.

Interviewer: How have you been able to tie your work in the Southwest Pacific to the world at large?

Donald Brenneis: Well, I’ll give you one example because I—there’s been a kind of radical discontinuity in terms of my own work. For the first 15 years or so of my research career, I worked very much in a village in a local language, the local variety of Hindi, and was really studying primarily face-to-face interactions within the context of a larger society, but still very much at the local level. But the kinds of issues I was interested in—for example, how language figured as a way of generating conflicts, managing conflicts, making social relationships possible, that all in the community—occasionally even solving disputes when they arose—were broader questions and particularly interesting for me in the Fiji-Indian context because, in contrast to that part of north India where folks had—folks’ grandparents had emigrated from—the local notion was that people should treat each others as equals rather than within the caste hierarchies that certainly played an important role in India. So really thinking about how you shape a social world while at the same time sustaining relationships and equality, and not letting other people claim to be
better, or more powerful, or more valuable than you were, was a really crucial informing aspect to peoples’ lives in that village. To flash forward a bit to my current work, which really came out of my participation on funding panels, as an editor, as somebody increasingly invested in this sort of institutional life of anthropology: really got fascinated by a very similar kind of theoretical question, but in the context of peer review. And of those moments and quite complex, for example, social science funding bureaucracies, in which colleagues got together and were expected not only to be reviewing the work of their peers, but at the same time enacting being peers or equals with each other in the context of the committee meetings.

Interviewer: I want to come back to your work on peer review and evaluation in a minute, but tell me a little bit about your research on male gossip.

Donald Brenneis: Sure. In terms of thinking about and coming to understand the sort of social life of language in the village where I worked in Fiji, I was really interested in all sorts of contexts in which people talked, when they gave speeches at religious meetings [and] gatherings, when people just talked over the events of the day with each other, and also with gossip. A lot of people have looked at gossip in the U.S., where they tend, almost stereotypically, to associate it with women and girls. I'm one of the few people who's actually looked at men gossiping, and listened to men gossiping, and analyzed miles of tape of men gossiping in Hindi. And there's reason to think that American men gossip as well.

But one of the things about thinking about gossip is that in that context, it was not only a way of sort of evaluating and making comments on the usually less-than-desirable behavior of other people who didn't happen to be in the conversation, but it was also a way of really knitting together close social ties between the people who were gossiping. So there's was a great deal—one of the striking things about gossip for me was the fact that it sounded really interesting. People spoke often at the same time, they spoke in rhythm with each other, they often imitated each other's intonation contours to [a] sort of melody of conversation. My friends in Bhatgaon would say that “the deeper the gossip, the more we speak with one voice.” And, in many ways, that was actually what was happening. In a community where, given the egalitarian ethos or the egalitarian values that people claim to hold, it was actually very difficult to be sociable outside of the family. The sort of style of gossip as well as the amially scurrilous content of gossip made it possible for people to have these intense kinds of social relationships.

The other thing that was really important about gossip is that in many ways—because people rarely talked about conflicts in the village, and because part of what I was there to find about was conflict—I really got interested in the kind of information economy of the village. How did people contribute information, learn about what was going on? In some ways you can think of it is a face-to-face version of a network society, but where the information was being passed on often in quite coded ways, and gossip provided really important nodes in that communication system.

Interviewer: Now, can you translate that research to, say, a boardroom at the NSF [National Science Foundation] or some other place that our listeners would be more familiar with?

Donald Brenneis: Absolutely. I think that one thing that's crucial to point out is that we don't gossip at NSF. That’s not what's going on. However, some other kinds—it is a point at which face-to-face communication and understanding of the reputation of scholars, as well as the possibilities of their research, are being discussed—usually, almost always, being discussed with considerable admiration at the same time as criticism, but a lot of the similar kinds of issues
around the dynamics of social relationships among people around the table, as well as the nature of the scholarship itself, are both in play.

**Interviewer:** You told me a little bit about being able to hear a consensus developing in a room. Can you talk to me a little about that?

**Donald Brenneis:** Sure. One of the striking things in interviewing program officers at National Science Foundation about their work, and in also just in listening as a panel member myself to the discussion, there would often be a point at which the program officer would say, “I think I hear a consensus forming.” And at one level you could think of this as, “Enough already, we’ve talked enough about this one; let’s move on to the next case.” But in discussions with the program officers, they said, “No, they’re actually things you hear in the nature of the conversation that make you think that if not consensus, at least a common ground has been achieved.”

And that’s marked not only by what people are explicitly saying, but by how they are saying it. And by something actually similar to that kind of stylistic convergence that was really central to good gossip in Fiji. Again, panelists aren’t gossiping, but they’re doing kinds of similar things with the style of talk.

**Interviewer:** How do you define gossip? Because I’m curious: You very quickly said, “We don’t—NSF doesn’t gossip.” And in my mind gossip is a thing that happens all the time. It’s just people chattering about unimportant things, maybe, or important things, but in a very social context. What does it actually mean?

**Donald Brenneis:** I really love the way you asked that question, Mia. Because one of the things about gossip—in the literature about gossip—is it’s often defined as being by nature trivial, that it’s dealing with small incidents, with things that are worthy of ridicule, and the like. But at the same time, often gossip in the ordinary sort of day-to-day sense is often really about issues that we care the most about: appropriate behavior, people behaving badly, occasionally people behaving well. And anthropologists have written about gossip often as providing a kind of negative model for what good behavior is. So often even in these trivial interchanges, really important kinds of issues are in play.

When I’ve defined gossip in some of my writing, I really defined it partly in terms of the subject matter, that it’s usually about negative kinds of behavior rather than the general reporting on: “Have you heard this remarkable thing that’s happened?” So it’s often negative—commentary on negative behavior, with a fair amount of moral evaluation, and it by definition has to be about people who are not present in the event. So I would distinguish gossip from conversation or more general kind of catching up on what people are doing.

**Interviewer:** Is it possible to connect your work on gossip to your work with higher education assessment?

**Donald Brenneis:** Sure. Because one of the ways of thinking about gossip is that gossip is a crucial aspect of reputation and reputation management. You could think of the politics of reputation in any community from radio professionals, to people in communication media, to kids on the schoolyard, to academics in different scientific disciplines. And certainly in the context of the village where I worked in Fiji, where one’s reputation was, in some ways, a principal value that one relied on, but didn’t have total control over, gossip was absolutely central to the political
life of the community. Certainly a great deal of the work that goes on both in such practices as peer review, the assessment [and] the evaluation of programs, and the like has to do with the question of reputation—the past reputation and records, the past reputation of individual scholars, a particular research program, a particular department, particular areas within a discipline, and the like. And a lot of the discussion—while usually couched in different terms from how gossip would be couched—a lot of the discussion in evaluative context is around these same kinds of questions of reputation and the kind of future trajectory that those reputations suggest, whether for individuals or institutions.

**Interviewer:** Now I want to go back and talk about your work on peer review and evaluation. You mentioned that Google and other methods of quote, end quote mechanized evaluation are confusing what’s popular with what’s good. Can you talk about that a little bit?

**Donald Brenneis:** Sure. I think I would, in this context, phrase it somewhat differently and move Google for the moment a little bit to the sidelines. One of the things that’s been really remarkable over the past 20 or 30 years in terms assessing, again, both individuals and institutions, has been the rise of what’s sometimes called analytic or bibliometric methods of evaluation. Bibliometry or bibliometrics really comes out of some early attempts in the sociology of science to look at the relationship between different scientists or different scholars and the effect that they have on each other. The Thomson Scientific [Database] was developed as a resource for looking at who is citing whom in major journals in the scientific literature.

And initially that was meant to be a descriptive and analytical style. A way of understanding where the intellectual connectivity was and, in some ways, trying to help shape circumstances in which that kind of connectivity could be heightened—so again, a geographically displaced information community, but in some ways analogous to what went on in the village in Fiji.

What happened, as often happens, though, is that a technology developed for description and analysis became a technology for measurement. And so, an index that was developed for looking at the connections among scientists, that particular styles of science, also then became a way of assessing impact or the longer-term consequences in value of science, which in many ways could be a very good thing, but it’s also complicated because of the nature of the instrument that’s set up for measurement. What’s now called the Reuters Thomson index only—it involves 9,000 journals, which is a very large number of journals, but very small compared to the journals in science and social science that there are there. It also only considers citations that are made within a two-year window. So they have to be—there has to be a very rapid turnaround. In some sciences, this makes perfect sense because people do indeed read and sometimes even cite pieces before they actually appear in print. In other fields within the hard sciences, as well as within the social sciences that are also part of this, it takes much longer for works to be read, thought about, critiqued, and responded to. So there are different epistemologies or styles of coming to understand phenomena at work. There are also different kinds of citational practices.

So these kinds of—what are called quantitative or sometimes analytical methods have a lot of promise and provide a great deal of information. But it’s information that always needs to be contextualized in relationship to the norms and the practices of different kinds of fields or even of subfields. Within anthropology, for example, biological anthropology pieces often do get cited within the first two years. And in part, that reflects the close relationship between biological anthropology and particular branches of the natural sciences, where those kinds of practices are in play.
Work in cultural and linguistic anthropology, on the other hand, tends to have a much longer half-life. People may only start citing it four or five years later, but will keep on citing it for the longer term. And those kinds of practices of real influence, or those phenomena in which influence really matters, are invisible through the present analytical framework that we have available to us.

**Interviewer:** So putting this in Google terms: Is it possible that something that doesn’t get enough hits could sort of fall to the bottom of the list because of what you’re talking about?

**Donald Brenneis:** Absolutely, and that’s a real concern, I mean—you could think of hits in some ways—I wouldn’t say it’s just a popularity measure, but it certainly is kind of reputational measure. But it may be taken more seriously than it deserves to be. Again, in some fields, the hits probably provide a pretty accurate measure of impact. In other fields, the effects are slower; there are also actually questions of what’s being read or considered by Google when they put together their own reference points in the search engines. They often depend on mechanical readings, literally mechanical readings of abstracts, which often are quite concise and linear in some fields and in other fields are much more general and less likely to be seen as relevant to the topic under consideration. So you worry about large chunks of the literature really vanishing.

**Interviewer:** How can the process of peer review mitigate that problem?

**Donald Brenneis:** Well, I think that the greatest—and I’m not alone in this. A number of groups, including a panel commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences, have really argued that the most effective kinds of assessments are ones that take quantitative measures into account, but do it in the context of deliberative review. That is, of scholars who know the field, being able to think about the quantitative material, to think about it in terms of the practices characteristic of their own discipline, or subdiscipline or field of inquiry, and to evaluate the content and their view of the content of the materials—taking those measures into account, but not just falling back on them.

There was actually a move about three years ago, in the United Kingdom, to replace what was called the Research Assessment Exercise—which was a very large scale, quite time-consuming project of peer review within disciplines for evaluating programs—which was absolutely consequential for the funding of those programs in different institutions—to replace the research assessment exercise with a purely bibliometric one, at least for the sciences. That is, by just referring to the Thomson citation analysis framework into the impact factor as a basis for funding programs altogether. And that was defeated, but it led to a great deal of concern on how you can draw effectively upon these more economical but only necessarily partial measures within the context of expert judgment.

**Interviewer:** Shifting gears a little bit: In the preface to the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, you talk about taking a holistic approach to the field. Can you talk a little about the cross-disciplinary nature of anthropology?

**Donald Brenneis:** Sure, and one way of thinking about it—as I taught for many years in a liberal arts context, and spent a lot of conversations with parents of students saying: “What’s my child going to do with a major in anthropology?” And my argument—my response, never an argument, always a response—was that anthropology is some ways the liberal arts all in itself because we really are interested in humankind and nonhuman primates, increasingly, in terms of
the broadest range of their history; their prehistory; their development; their biology; the kinds of social, cultural, and linguistic rules that they collaboratively and at times competitively construct; and how all of these intersect with each other. And so, holism at one level really means trying to understand, even within a subspecialty within anthropology, the broadest possible context of human behavior or practice, belief, values. But it also really means thinking about humans in the broadest possible sense, taking into account the fact that we’re biological beings, that we’re beings that come out of particular histories, and at the same time that we’re actively engaged in a world both that shapes who we are and that we’re involved actively in shaping.

Particularly in terms of thinking about pedagogy and curriculum, about the ways in which our students learn about the field, I think it’s absolutely indispensable to expose them to everything from questions of evolution and human genetics and contemporary biological research to thinking about our relationship to nonhuman primates, thinking about both the fossil and the archeological records, and also thinking about how you come to understand the complexity of contemporary human lives, practices, communicative strategies and the like, worldwide. That’s a pretty big field of inquiry. And it’s one where we have sort of Velcro points of attachment with lots of other fields as well.

And our research, in fact—we may be more frequently in conversation with scholars in cognate or related disciplines than we are with other people in other parts of our own discipline; certainly the work of biological anthropologists is read by people within cultural anthropology, but it’s also read very immediately and very avidly by people in paleontology and genetics work, in psychology, and a range of other fields as well. Similarly, cultural anthropologists are also writing for and in conversation with literary scholars, linguistic scholars, increasingly historians, people in legal scholarship, and the like. So we have multiple audiences. There’s a kind of almost inevitable centrifugality within the field at the research level because of the breadth of the interest of anthropologists, and of the breadth of audiences from whom we want to be learning it and whom we want to be addressing.

**Interviewer:** It seems that, as an anthropology student myself, I remember the challenge of having to—we were exposed to the different branches of anthropology: the physical side and the cultural side. But we pretty much had to focus on one or the other. So how can students of anthropology now maintain a holistic approach in their own work?

Daniel Brenneis: I think it—and it really depends on the level in terms of undergraduate or graduate students. At the undergraduate level, there’s really a question of exposure and of getting people acquainted at least with core ideas in the different subfields and the kinds of intellectual perspectives that they afford you. And you can do that either in the framework of a curriculum, which certainly we do here at Santa Cruz, and most liberal arts colleges do as well, or you can even do it in the context of a particular course. So, for example, I teach a fairly experimental course on the anthropology of sound, which is a lower-division-wide open-enrollment course.

I always have a colleague who works on the evolution of primate sensory processing come in and do a talk on hearing and on the evolution of human auditory processing and the underlying sort of neurophysiology under a physics of sound, which is absolutely great, something I couldn’t cover myself, but which provides a really crucial resource point for students to go back and think about some of the more ethnographic kinds of projects we’re involved in. They say, “Oh yeah, now I remember. The insides of our ears are like the sides of fish, with those particular neurons for detecting pressure.”
At the graduate level, different programs have different strategies. Some really focus on a kind of more synthetic approach, to sometimes what’s called a biocultural approach, such as they’ve had for years at Emory [University]. Others have more separate tracks for biological, archeological, linguistic, and sociocultural anthropology. I think that the crucial encouragement I would have for students is really to try to continue to read and think omnivorously. One of the great—I’ll just give you a quick example of this. One of the great experiences I had was when I was co-editing *American Anthropologist* for a year and a half, during kind of an interim period, and the editor, she had—because I was co-editing I was in a position to read in detail or, actually, be forced to read in detail a set of articles about archeology on plantations from the antebellum South and a set of articles by cultural anthropologists who were looking at the contemporary consequences of the Welfare Reform Act passed during the Clinton presidency. And what was really striking about that was that people both in the historical archeological context and the contemporary context were forced to turn toward larger forms of mutual social support of taking care of families, of taking care of each other. And it was exhilarating to see these crossovers between hunting strategies among slaves on plantations in Mississippi and the kind of collaborative strategies for sharing resources among mothers on decreasing amounts of welfare support in Oregon.

And, I think, thinking about the possible connections and how we can continue to learn from both historical analogs and from detailed and really exciting emerging understandings in the biological nature of human life, at the same time that we maintain a kind of subtle and critical eye to what’s going on in the contemporary social and cultural world, is something that anthropologists are actually pretty good at. It’s also one of the reasons why I’m really excited about co-editing with Peter Ellison, my colleague in biologic anthropology, the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. Because I think one of our goals is really to provide this kind of conversational framework in which people are really presenting, thinking about, reframing, recontextualizing, really cutting a—research on particular topics, approaches, issues in contemporary anthropology across the subfields. But we’re in a position to try to help put those papers together in ways where a cultural anthropologist can see really interesting work that’s going on in biological anthropology, really kind of catalytic or thought-provoking work in historical archeology, cognate work in linguistic anthropology that’s presented in ways that are both theoretically sophisticated but not overly technical in their language, which is always a problem for us linguists. And to really bring that into thinking about their own projects, however specialized they might be.

**Interviewer:** I noticed that there was an article on neuroscience in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*. I thought that was fascinating.

**Donald Brenneis:** Right, and I think that Annual Review is really a remarkable opportunity for providing the possibilities for people to do their own synthetic work, to be exposed to—to follow all these—it’s actually one of the differences now that you can get the Annual Review articles online before publication, but October always used to be this exciting month for me because, I would open the Annual Review well before I was directly involved, and it was like Christmas because there were so many possible things to be exploring. And I think that that capacity of—it’s a very singular journal in terms of providing those kinds of Christmas moments, now year-long because of prepublication, in which we can really think somewhat more imaginatively about locating our own work, drawing from the work of others, and bringing things together in new ways.

**Interviewer:** Well, Professor Brenneis, it’s been wonderful to talk to you. Thank you so much.
for your time today.

*Donald Brenneis:* It was a real pleasure talking with you, Mia. Thanks.

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