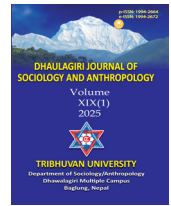


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Interview with Professor Jeremy Spoon

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Professor Jeremy Spoon is a distinguished cultural anthropologist with deep familial roots in Ashkenazic Judaism and more distant Sephardic Jewish ancestry. Since 2006, he has conducted fieldwork in Nepal for his PhD and collaborated with the Central Department of Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, undertaking an in-depth study of the 2015 Gorkha earthquake. Prof. Spoon engages closely with community members and government agencies at various levels, ensuring his findings are validated and contextualized by study participants, decision-makers, local and national leaders, and other stakeholders before publication. Currently, he serves as a Research Professor of Anthropology at Portland State University in the United States. Since 2004, his research has centered on Indigenous and local communities across Nepal's Himalayas, the Western United States, and other regions, including Detroit (Michigan, USA), Kenya, Tanzania, and Hawai'i. He has mentored numerous graduate and undergraduate students through research projects, honors theses, and internships. His scholarship has been supported by the U.S. National Science Foundation, various U.S. federal agencies, Native American Tribal Nations, and non-profit organizations, demonstrating the broad significance and impact of his anthropological contributions. We extend our sincere thanks to Professor Jeremy Spoon for generously sharing insights into his journey, professional work, and ongoing responsibilities.

Introduction and Background

I was born in May 1977 in Detroit, Michigan, USA, to Ashkenazic (Eastern European) Jewish parents and attended Conservative Jewish day and public schools in the Metro-Detroit suburbs. I also have more distant Sephardic (Spanish) Jewish ancestry. My family is the third generation Americans, migrating to the US in the early 20th century from Hungary



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and Poland to escape the persecution of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and the Pogroms in Russia from locations that are now situated in contemporary Belarus. I reside with my wife of 10 years in Portland, Oregon, USA, and do not have children.

I received a BA in American Culture-Ethnic Studies from the University of Michigan in 1999 and an MA and PhD in Cultural Anthropology from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 2005 and 2008. I am currently a Research Professor of Anthropology at Portland State University. I have conducted anthropological research with Indigenous and local peoples in the Nepalese Himalaya since 2004 and the Western US since 2008. My research has also engaged populations in my hometown of Detroit, Michigan, as well as Kenya, Tanzania, and the Big Island of Hawai'i. This research has included serving as the primary mentor for 13 graduate students' master's research projects, participation in more than 30 undergraduate honors and graduate student committees, and leading over 30 internships for undergraduate, post-baccalaureate, and graduate students.

My graduate research was funded by a US National Science Foundation (NSF) Graduate Research Fellowship. Subsequently, my work has been funded by additional NSF grants as well as contracts from US federal agencies, including the National Park Service, National Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Energy, and Department of Defense. I have also received financial support for research from various Native American Tribal Nations, independent foundations, and non-profit organizations.

Question 1: What factors or individuals inspired you to study Anthropology? During your college years, what was your vision or aspiration of becoming an anthropologist?

During my undergraduate education at the University of Michigan, I had the opportunity in 1996 to conduct ethnographic research on sky folklore with African-American storytellers in Detroit for a planetarium presentation at the University of Michigan Natural History Museum for Black History Month. This was followed by an opportunity in 1997-98 to study Maasai and Okiek (Dorobo) knowledge in Kenya and Tanzania for an exhibition organized by an international non-governmental organization (INGO) from Belgium called Cultures and Communications aimed at re-introducing Indigenous cultures to European peoples from nations that colonized various African peoples in the late 19th century. Next, in 2000, I worked in Belgium to help prepare the Maasai and Okiek exhibition. During this time, I also helped to prepare an exhibition on African puppets for the International Puppet Festival in Charleville-Mezieres, France. Later in 2000, I began what would become a twenty-year engagement working for the US-based INGO

The Mountain Institute following a brief period living in Jamaica studying Rastafarian ideology, food, and medicine.

These foundational experiences pushed me to shift from the more academic and activist-oriented discipline of Ethnic Studies that I pursued in my undergraduate education to what I felt was the more practical and applicable social science of Cultural Anthropology in graduate school. During this time, I was exposed to global issues affecting Indigenous and rural peoples, such as the expulsion of Indigenous peoples from newly established protected areas in the name of nature conservation and traumas afforded by settler-colonial contexts.

Question 2: Who or what motivated you to conduct fieldwork among Sherpa communities of Nepal for your PhD research?

During my early years at The Mountain Institute, I had the honor of meeting and collaborating with Dr. Lhakpa Norbu Sherpa. Dr. Lhakpa proposed that I conduct my doctoral research in his home area of Khumbu on generational knowledge change. I was also interested in the Sherpa experience with the establishment of Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park and Buffer Zone (SNPBZ) and the exponential increase in trekking and mountaineering tourism thereafter. My decisions and approaches were also shaped by the mentorship of Dr. Ram Bahadur Chhetri in the Central Department of Anthropology at Tribhuvan University, where I first became a research affiliate in 2006. Lastly, my Native Hawaiian mentor Ty Kawika Tengan at University of Hawai'i encouraged me to work on the proposed project with the Sherpa in SNPBZ because he felt there was a bias in the study of Indigenous peoples that focused on the most marginalized communities and not other examples of Indigenous experiences, such as those with successful market integration through businesses.

I then had multiple opportunities between 2004 and 2008 to visit Nepal and trek throughout the Khumbu area with Pemba Tshering Sherpa and Ngima Nuru Sherpa from Khumjung settlement and other wonderful Sherpas who opened their homes and hearts to me and have since become lifelong friends. I ended up living in Thamo settlement in the same house that Dr. Lhakpa lived in when he conducted his doctoral research in the late 1990s.

Question 3: You studied at the University of Michigan, and the University of Hawai'i; and you are currently working at Portland State University, USA. What are the key similarities and differences in teaching-learning environment as well as the academic focus among these universities?

The University of Michigan was an incredible place to attend as an undergraduate. Even though it was not far from where I grew up in Metro-Detroit, I was exposed to students and global studies that forever shaped my perspective. I

was especially grateful for how open the Ethnic Studies program was to my interests and innovations. I was able to learn from multiple disciplines and meet incredible people. It was full of opportunities. I also met a social and professional network of people at the university that I continue to interact with. As part of my undergraduate education, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Kenya and Tanzania, which was one of the initial pathways to my current work. The program was through the University of Minnesota, which had a reciprocal relationship with the University of Michigan, where credits from one of these universities' programs counted at the other.

Attending the University of Hawai'i (UH) was one of the best decisions I ever made. It is one of the only Research universities in the US where Euro-American people are the minority. I not only had the privilege of learning and engaging with Native Hawaiian culture, but also benefited from the extensive population of students from Asian countries and the research and training-based East-West Center, where many Nepali students have engaged. UH's Cultural Anthropology program also allowed me to search out interdisciplinary learning in Geography and Ecology. My mentor, the late Dr. Nina Etkin, was the center of my UH universe as she guided me towards my strengths and interests grounded in rigorous, progressive, and ethical methodologies.

Portland State University (PSU) hired me as an Assistant Professor in 2009. There, I had the opportunity to apply the teachings of my mentors, as well as my vision for an applied anthropology training curriculum that teaches the skills necessary for students to secure employment in anthropology and pursue their passions to make the world a better place. My PSU colleagues encouraged me to be creative and actualize this vision at an urban public university with one of the most diverse student populations in the US Northwest. PSU is now striving to become the largest minority-serving institution in the region. PSU's mission and student population were a great fit for the skills I could provide. I am now entering my 17th year at PSU. It feels like that time has flown by.

Question 4: Your studies originally focused on tourism, mountain people, indigenous ecological knowledge systems, but shifted following the 2015 Gorkha earthquake in Nepal. How do you justify this shift in focus? Similarly, would you briefly present major findings of your study of Gorkha earthquake?

In April and May 2015, I planned to return to the Khumbu region and repeat my doctoral research 10 years later to observe changes in local knowledge over time. This plan did not make sense to carry out after the earthquakes and their cascading effects. I looked inward and tried to think about how my skill set could be useful in the recovery from these catastrophic seismic events. I engaged in many conversations with my colleagues at The Mountain

Institute, Tribhuvan University, and Nepali academics abroad. The outcomes of these conversations were to initiate a collaborative mixed-method applied research project on rural and Indigenous disaster recoveries.

The NSF-sponsored study focused on short- and long-term disaster recoveries over ten years in four clusters of settlements with similar impacts from the earthquakes and connected landslides (e.g., all houses and infrastructure damaged or destroyed, but with differing cultures, histories, road accessibility, education levels, and literacy rates). We focused on tangible (e.g., impacts to the ability to keep livestock or grow traditional crops) and intangible (e.g., state of mental well-being, connections to place, and perceptions of uncertainty towards the future) dynamics. The research aimed to identify intersecting vulnerabilities that made the geohazards into a disaster, such as social and spatial inequalities, exposure to natural hazards such as landslides, and reliance on place-based herding and farming livelihoods in marginal geographies with increasingly erratic and intense weather and limited water. We also identified adaptive capacities, such as mutual aid through work exchange and local knowledge of architecture, herding, farming, and forest harvesting, that mitigated disaster impacts and assisted with recovery. We randomly selected 100 households at each location (400 total) and conducted household surveys and in-depth interviews at 9 months, 1.5 years, 6.5 years, and 7.5 years after the 2015 earthquakes. We also returned our preliminary findings to decision-makers locally and nationally at 2.5 years and 9.5 years to validate and contextualize the results.

In general, we found that short-term disaster recoveries were primarily shaped by identity (e.g., ethnic group and associated location of settlement and social network), degree of hazard exposure, livelihood, and accessibility. Long-term recoveries were also influenced by these factors, but also by representation in local governance and the subsequent integration of local ideas into decision-making processes. Adaptive capacities included situated cultural traditions like *parma* (work exchange), serving as social safety nets when needed, such as neighbors co-rebuilding one another's homes in the same way that they help one another harvest crops from their fields. Adaptive capacities also included accessibility to market opportunities and credit, such as the ability to start and sustain various businesses. We also found that these situated practices may be more effective for certain challenges than others. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, households could not practice social traditions like *parma*, which in turn impacted their capacities to adapt to this form of change. Our work also illustrated that households typically chose convenience over safety when recovering from disasters or in development decisions. The extensive contemporary road building throughout Nepal is an example of this process unfolding as disaster recovery and development merge over time.

Question 5: Spirituality in relation to ecological knowledge has been one of your areas of focus, which is quite fascinating. Could you elaborate on why this is important in the field of anthropology?

I find place-based spirituality to be a gift, often practiced by Indigenous and some rural peoples, which connects people to their place in environmentally sustainable ways. In these contexts, humans have not created a firm divide with nature and instead construct themselves as part of the broader ecological system, which includes humans. Some spiritual practices do not specifically aim to conserve the environment but have these outcomes nonetheless, such as designating a forest as a sacred grove with taboos on harvesting old-growth firewood or grazing in the understory. Another example is designating a mountain as the home of a particular deity, which in turn has a cultural restriction on climbing or harvesting resources.

Question 6: You have won various awards, fellowships, and research grants including grants from the U.S. National Science Foundation, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of Energy, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and several others. What key academic insights or lessons learned have you gained from getting these awards and grants?

I feel that my success in securing research funds and gaining recognition for our projects is a product of selecting timely, relevant research topics that are critically important to people. This includes utilizing approaches that are ethically grounded, participatory, and applicable in tangible ways. I also strongly believe in return research to participants and other stakeholders so that knowledge is co-produced. I see my role as more of a facilitator than an expert, which continually changes depending on the circumstances. This adaptability has made our work relevant over time. In this way, the topics, approaches, and applications evolve in pragmatic ways, creating outcomes with utility. I also feel that using mixed quantitative and qualitative methods along with community outreach makes our work more easily integrated with other disciplines, helping to engage more complex problems and emergent solutions co-produced by everyone involved. Lastly, I believe in the value of rapport building over time and staying dedicated to the same nation, region, and people.

Question 7: Participating in and organizing national and international seminars, symposia, workshop, and delivering invited lectures are integral aspects of your academic life. What do you consider the most significant benefits of these experiences?

I feel that it is critical to always remain open-minded to new ideas and lessons learned. Bringing together

international scholars and practitioners is a great way to exchange knowledge and grow as a scholar and human. The network of scholars assembled over a career can be one of the most critical and satisfying aspects of the work. I like to share skills and approaches through workshops and seminars, and plan symposia to workshop new study designs or preliminary results. It is a great way to get feedback before the writing process or applying findings to some type of project or intervention.

Question 8: You emphasize the use of mixed research methods in your studies. What is your perspective on traditional ethnography and primarily qualitative research in terms of publication opportunities?

Traditional ethnography using qualitative methods will always be a foundation of anthropology; however, these methods often do not have large sample sizes and generalizable findings that scholars from other disciplines or practitioners out in the world can use. I like using mixed-methods so that the work expresses the best of the traditional ethnographic traditions with new techniques that have more power, utility, and generalizability to other contexts. For me, I often tell my students that quantitative methods can build the frame of a house, and qualitative methods furnish the house.

Question 9: Most of your papers are published in high-ranking Scimago Q1 journals (e.g., *Ecology and Society*, *Progress in Disaster Science*, *Human Organization*, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, *World Development*, and *Human Ecology*). What strategies would you recommend young scholars aiming to publish in these esteemed journals?

My esteemed doctoral mentor, Dr. Nina Etkin, advised me to publish in specific topical journals first, as you build your career. Once these more targeted publications emerge and the portfolio builds, it is easier to publish in higher-ranked journals. I was also advised to stay focused and not take on research topics that are too large to conduct rigorous research on.

Question 10: You have published your several work on edited volumes what significant differences do you perceive between publishing in journals and contributing to book chapters?

I would advise young scholars to focus on journal articles and not book chapters for their work. Book chapters can take a long time and be hard to access, whereas journal articles can be open-access and have quicker turnaround times, so that the research is more timely. Special issues of journals can be a good middle path, where a scholar gets to put their work into communication with other parallel

research, assist with networking, and provide mentorship from senior scholars.

Question 11: You have stated that the context of Native American peoples and Nepali peoples who identify as Indigenous are different, would you elaborate this statement with concrete criteria or indicators?

The US is a settler-colonial context. This means that there were people in these geographies for thousands of years before the arrival and subsequent colonization by European descendant peoples. In this case, it is quite clear who the first people are and who the settlers are. In Nepal, the colonial history is more internal than external through the application of the caste system by certain ethnic groups over others and the centralization of the nation under the monarchy in the late 18th century. The division is less clear than in the US or analogous contexts where the colonizers never left, such as Canada, Australia, South Africa, and New Zealand.

Question 12: You have primarily engaged in collaborative research with Native Americans. Could you share your specific strategies for this collaboration and explain its benefits to the field of anthropology?

When I started working with Native Americans, it was clear to me that they had a negative perception of the field of anthropology. At the same time, they have a need for the anthropological skill-set to document their cultures to help stitch back together what had been fragmented by the extreme colonial process and depopulation through disease, conflict, and gradual encroachment by settlers onto Indigenous lands. I therefore felt that I, as the “expert,” needed to be “de-centered” and that my Native colleagues should be empowered to be integral parts of the research and knowledge co-production processes.

Question 13: Based on your experiences, what opportunities and challenges arise when conducting anthropological fieldwork in Nepal, and collaborating with academic organizations?

It is such a privilege to conduct anthropological fieldwork in Nepal. Of course, the extreme geography can be challenging, but not insurmountable. Nepalese have been the most welcoming I have ever worked with. In the past, there had been some misunderstandings and misaligned expectations between local populations and researchers, such as participants expecting foreign researchers to bring resources instead of information. Since 2017, Federalism has provided a structure for collaboration between local leaders and outside researchers. For example, collaboration with Ward Chairperson and Ward members has created opportunities for knowledge exchange and co-production instead of a situation that feels more like knowledge

extraction and a lack of researcher accountability to participants. This is why research return before publication is so important.

Question 14: There is a critique that foreign scholars often fail to collaborate with Nepali academic institutions while conducting research in Nepal and do not seek ethical approval for their studies. How would you respond to these concerns?

I find this to be often the case. I value my affiliate faculty status with the Central Department of Anthropology (CDA) at TU and obtaining proper research visas and permits. I also aim to collaborate with department faculty and hire Nepali graduate students to be part of our research teams. Further, I try to give back to the CDA through workshops and seminars where my skills are useful to faculty and students for their work. It may be quicker to come to Nepal and conduct research without these efforts, but to me, it is questionable how much scholars who do this are helpful to Nepal as allies.

Question 15: As a member of the International Advisory Board of Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology, how would you assist the editorial team in improving the quality and visibility of the journal?

My role with the journal can be to serve as a bridge between outside scholarship and Nepali scholarship. I want to help ensure that the scholarship in the journal speaks to broader global contemporary conversations in the literature. I also want to help emerging Nepali scholars create meaningful research that dually helps them progress in their academic careers while also serving Nepal and the nation’s diverse peoples.

Question 16: Could you share your perspectives as an anthropologist to the new generation of anthropologists? What topic and approaches should they focus for to success in the field?

In my view, young scholars should be vulnerable and adaptive in their research approaches so that they can “fit in” to the contexts where they do work. This happens by building rapport and conducting ethical research practices, including prior and informed consent. I would also think about your abilities as tangible skills that apply to cutting-edge, timely topics and can speak to other disciplines. We do not need anthropologists only talking with other anthropologists. Nor do we need anthropologists waiting for decision-makers to come to them. Rather, outreach to non-anthropologists should be done so that our work has more impact and speaks to issues as they emerge and change. Anthropologists then need to adapt and evolve in response to these circumstances, ensuring that their work remains relevant and addresses contemporary, multifaceted


problems in new and innovative ways.

Question 17: Any final remarks you would like to share?


I would not be the anthropologist or person I am today without the experiences of conducting research in Nepal. I am eternally grateful to the nation of Nepal and the Nepalese for welcoming and teaching me, as well as for their patience with the process of making mistakes and learning lessons from them. I will always strive to properly fit in, contribute, and be useful as a foreign ally.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts and reflections provided by this insightful interview. I look forward to years of collaboration and co-learning with the journal and CDA to come.

About Interviewer

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