

*So What? Now What? The Anthropology of  
Consciousness Responds to a World in  
Crisis*

Edited by Matthew C. Bronson and Tina  
R. Fields

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*So What? Now What?* targets a diverse interdisciplinary academic audience and focuses on the environmental, economic and humanitarian crises facing our global community. The text crosses a number of boundaries including the liminal space between cultures, faith traditions, nations and professions, and seeks to engage in a productive dialogue with other scholars and the wider world.

The questions 'so what?' and 'now what?' were posed to the attendees of the 26<sup>th</sup> annual Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness (SAC) conference (2006). The SAC is an international collective of scholars and practitioners based in the United States; this diverse group is characterised by an interdisciplinary perspective and multiplicity. The result of this conference is an anthology of alternative ideas that challenge traditional Western methodologies.

The editors, Matthew C. Bronson and Tina R. Fields, believe that 'the fundamental crisis of our times is a failure of the human imagination' (p.1). Deeply rooted in the idea that what we can imagine, we can become, the SAC firmly believes it is in our imagination where all things are possible and the first paradigmatic

shift in consciousness takes place. It is this call to spark the human imagination that is the thread linking the various writers and their ideas. But it is not only the reader's imaginative consciousness that this group wants to spark, but also his or her individual conscience and culpability as members of the human race as well.

In part one, 'Building and Connecting Communities', Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo, anthropologist and advocate for cultural and political revitalization in the Solomon Islands, begins by calling for an

[...] "anthropology of conscience" in which researcher and community are engaged in a reciprocally transformative construction of knowledge and committed to a collaborative path of action for the good of the people (p.30).

Her ideas challenge the imagination of the post-colonial political sphere that exists in the islands. She speaks of an often self-serving, destructive Western colonial relationship with the natural world, yet offers suggestions for sustainable development through a shift of consciousness and conscience. Along the same lines, Phillip H. Duran and Glenn Aparicio Parry examine one way to implement an anthropology of consciousness through dialogue. Their article 'The Old is Now: Creating a Shift Toward Wholeness through Dialogue' examines how pre-colonial, indigenous knowledge and practices which emphasize a symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment could foster a conscious shift towards a more sustainable way of being in the world. While I agree with the eco-psychological ideas posed by Duran and Parry, I take issue with their dangerous use of the term 'myth' (p.95) as fiction. The meaning of myth has been skewed over the centuries: for indigenous

communities, 'myth' lives as an integral story of one's place in the world; whereas the contemporary Western conception of 'myth' suggests deception. I firmly believe that any paradigmatic shift in Western consciousness must also include a return to the indigenous understanding of and relation to 'myth'.

Part two, 'Healing and Medicine', examines the controversies surrounding euthanasia, disparities in health care, and shamanism. Stanley Krippner and Stefan J. Kasian explore the 'Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide' within a variety of nations. Their chapter focuses on the way each nation addresses the ethical, social and religious considerations for compassionate care and death with dignity. By presenting a plain comparison for the reader, Krippner and Kasian successfully spark the reader's imagination toward alternative ways of understanding life and death. This spark is magnified in Michael Winkelman's chapter, 'Shamanism: Ancient and Future Survival', as he discusses the shamanic universals present in this ancient form of spiritual healing found in pre-colonial societies all over the world. Its significance to the matter at hand, according to Winkelman, is that 'shamanism was the original transformation of human consciousness to levels of transcendence' (p.225). Echoing the theme began by Watson-Gegeo, Winkelman calls for not only a shift of consciousness but also a transformation of conscience as a necessary first step to solving the crises that face our global population.

Part three, 'Language and Learning', examines ways in which language is the 'principal mediator of culture and consciousness' (p.22). This section tests the boundaries of traditional Western thought about language and is epitomised in Dan Moonhawk Alford's chapter 'Manifesting Worldviews in Language'. Alford asks

the West to conceive of language 'from a completely new starting point of interconnectivity' (p.288). Alford speaks convincingly not only of the power words have to create new paradigms, but also the potential language holds for connecting humans with the natural world. Alford's 'interconnectivity' implies that language connects us with our environment and each other - echoing the shamanistic rites and rituals discussed in the previous section. Alford stretches the reader's imagination and assesses individual culpability when he calls for the West to learn to live 'in original participation [...] speaking only that which you would like to happen in reality' (p.304), a theoretical ideal some scholars see as possible.

Part four, 'Re-Animating the World', examines a highly controversial aspect of anthropological field research (often detrimentally referred to as 'going native') by focusing on relationships with elements that defy rational explanations and examining rituals and myths 'that connect people with their spirit ancestors and the living earth' (p.23). First-hand accounts from Edith L. B. Turner and Tina R. Fields offer a methodology seldom used in academia. Turner and Fields recall personal experiences with intangible realities (e.g. ghosts, spirits, animistic landscape, and plant energy). This section may stretch some readers' imaginations to lengths that push rational boundaries. The risk these authors take is having their experiences dismissed by scholars as products of their own imagination. However, its inclusion attempts to help validate this form of anthropological research as a viable methodology.

In many ways *So What? Now What?* is an active call for academics to consider the inherent potential in the knowledge, rites and practices of indigenous, pre-colonial cultures. These authors believe the answer to the crises facing our global community is not

more environmental or socio-economic hearings, legislation, or control; what is needed, at the base level, is a shift in individual consciousness and conscience. These fourteen scholars see a lack of imagination in the West (and particularly Western academia) as the foundational element standing in the way of truly solving the many crises facing our world today. Their ideas are provocative and accessible for both upper level students and scholars in anthropology, environmental studies and comparative studies, and they succeed in sparking the reader's imagination. For those who are dubious of their ideas, this text, at the very least, will spark some intriguing interdisciplinary debate as to the research, methodologies and theories presented within its pages.

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