

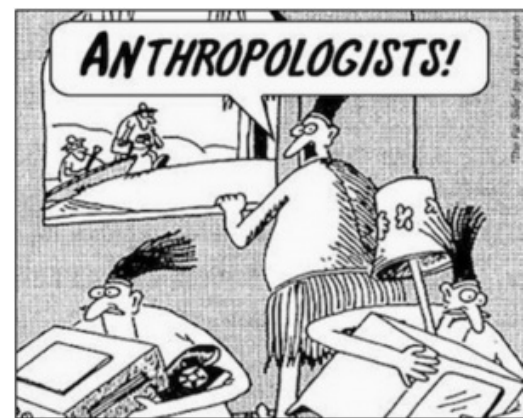
What I learned about #PublicAuthority from spending two days with a bunch of anthropologists, political scientists and others

Duncan Green reviews the annual CPAID workshop during which Public Authority researchers had a chance to discuss their upcoming work.

This article is part of the #PublicAuthority blog series, part of the ESRC-funded [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#).

The [Centre for Public Authority and International Development](#) had its annual get together in May 2018. It really hurt my head, but the pain was worth it – I learned a lot. Here are some overall impressions, and then tomorrow, my top lightbulb moment – public authority through the eyes of a dead fish.....

Firstly, anthropologists are amazing. I was left with an impression of thousands of dedicated young researchers scattered around the shanty towns and villages of the globe, living with families, mucking in with the chores, getting to know people and societies in a far more profound way than I have ever done. They latch onto the kinds of messy events that the aid/development biz tends to airbrush out of its narratives. A whole case study on a poisoning incident in a Ugandan refugee camp. The 'death of Auntie Marie' in a poor neighbourhood in Sierra Leone. When potato sellers posted their list of rules in a Ugandan market the biggest fines for infractions were for members who resorted to witchcraft or falling in love.....

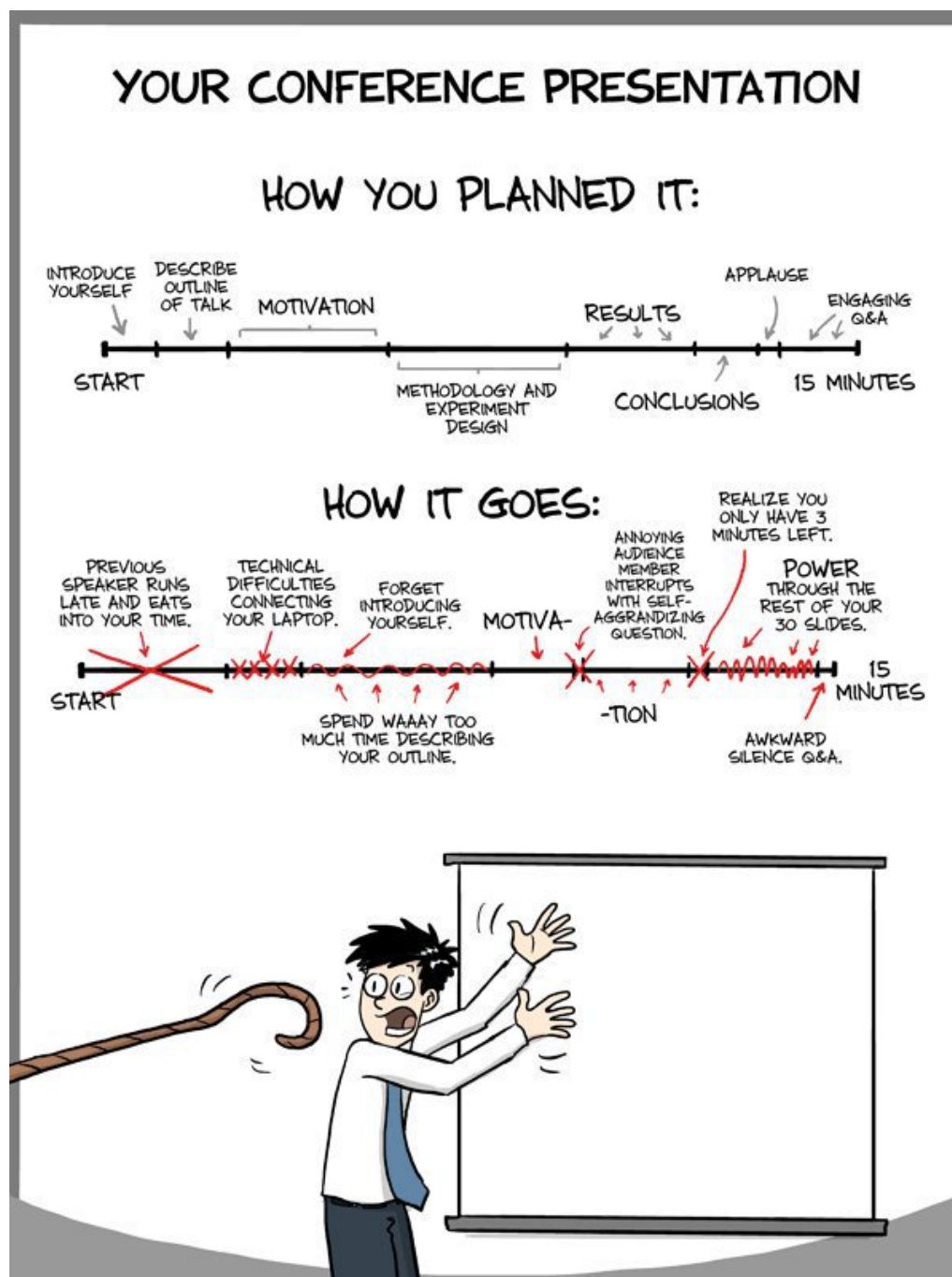


Secondly, the whole definition of 'public authority' has a problem.

According to its project document, 'CPAID uses the term 'public authority' to refer to any social institution or mechanism that exists beyond the immediate family and exercises a degree of voluntary compliance.' That places a nice neat wall between public and private, but reality turns out to be messier than that.

- In Sierra Leone family meetings including both immediate and extended family are 'the dominant form of politics and political authority in everyday life' ([Jonah Lipton](#)). They resolve disputes, determine what is/ is not socially acceptable and (in Sierra Leone at least) are much more female spaces than the male-dominated sphere of formal politics.
- On the ground in Northern Uganda, the big problems over land are intra-family and intra-clan, not land grabs by big bad multinationals (sorry, campaigners!) and once again, are resolved by big family and community meetings that are largely off the radar of governance policy and programmes.
- 'Love life histories' in Uganda show both that love and (good) sex can flourish during wartime, and just how much conflict and intimacy are intertwined – war's restrictions on mobility prevented traditional weddings from taking place, but Church weddings were still possible. That has big consequences since some customary rights for women are dependent on being traditionally married.

Thirdly, everything is fluid. In order for the aid/development sector to discuss issues and then devise projects, it has to use fixed concepts (families, communities, states, conflict) that remain reasonably constant as units of analysis. Once the anthropologists get involved, everything gets a lot more blurry. Lift the lid on '[disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration](#)' and you start to question the whole idea of ex combatants returning 'home' and find a process of 'circular return', in which combatants bounce disconsolately between civilian and armed life, never really fitting in to either.



Finally, deep awareness and emotional intelligence in the field does not, sadly, carry across into the seminar room. Two days of back-to-back 20 minute presentations followed by Q&A (when time allowed). Some of the speakers read out papers in that special academic monotone that has me climbing the walls and silently screaming for release. Everyone seemed completely oblivious to other ways of engaging people or keeping some energy in the room. I realized this is partly just my problem though – when I asked participants which presentations they liked, several name-checked talks that were so badly delivered I couldn't even take in what they were saying. Guess that must be an essential part of the academic training that I missed out on. (see here for longer rant about [academic conferences](#)).

This article was first published on the [From Power to Poverty](#) blog.

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