Illustration: Gary Waters

An anthropologist walks into a bar and asks,
'Why is this joke funny?'

Anthropologists don't just study primitive tribes. Some work for cutting-edge technology corporations while others are helping to progress social policy. CIARÁN WALSH meets with a number of Irish anthropologists and asks them what 2014 holds.

This year promises to be an interesting one. The Troika has left town and there is a sense of *what happens now*? Undoubtedly, there will be a lot of focus on post-bailout economics and the impact that these will have on the 'squeezed middle' and the 'new poor' — two groups that epitomise the social impact of the crash of 2007.

But it goes beyond economics. Ireland has transformed over the past six years. Attitudes to money, work, marriage, masculinity and femininity, care of the elderly and the very idea of society are changing.

The crash isn't the only factor driving this. New technologies are transforming the way we live, work and play. The impact of social media on youth culture is obvious, but technological innovations are also revolutionising healthcare and work.

So what happens next? Ask the anthropologists. They have been tracking changes in Irish society for more than 30 years and, more than ever, are influencing policy as health planners, educators and activists.

Intel is a major employer of anthropologists because it recognises its products need to work in human and technological terms. The idea that such people are involved in everything from the care of people with dementia to the roll-out of wearable computers may come as a surprise.

At a guess, most people think anthropologists work 'out there' with societies that are very different from ours.

While it is true that they come in all shapes and sizes, their work, at a basic level involves the same thing — using research tools to describe distinct groups of people, be in they in a different part of the world or at home.

Patrick Slevin is an ethnographer working with Applied Research for Connected Health (ARCH), a research company funded by the IDA and Enterprise Ireland, and based in UCD Belfield. It uses technology to deliver healthcare outside of hospitals with the objective of improving welfare and, in the new economy, delivering value for money by reducing the demand for in-patient care.

Slevin is one of 20 researchers who work in multidisciplinary teams of between four and seven specialists. He is currently working with people suffering from dementia, evaluating their 'care pathways' by following them through a complex network of hospital and community support systems.

"The key to the ethnographic approach is empathy, getting down to ground level, talking to people and trying to get a clear picture of each person's experience of the system," he says.

To be effective requires the rigorous application of standard anthropological investigation methods — participant observation and recording, and validating each piece of research through interviews with the people involved.

Slevin is looking for areas in the dementia pathway where technologies can support the system. This probably contradicts most people's idea of what anthropology is about, especially when one considers the history of anthropology in Ireland.

In the 1890s, scientists attempted to explain the difference between the Celt and the Anglo-Saxon in racial terms influenced by evolutionary theory. In the 1930s, doctoral students from Harvard carried out a seminal study of rural families in Co Clare, and a similar study was conducted in Dublin in the late 1940s.

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> *When you are studying your own SOCIETY, elements that seemed NORMAL appear not so normal when viewed anthropologically*

In the 1950s and 1960s Messenger wrote a thinly disguised account of life on Inisheer. And in 1967, Paul Hockings of UCLA filmed 'The Village', an ethnography of the people of Dún Chaoin in Co Kerry.

The pattern was set. Anthropology was about 'metropolitan' investigators observing complex yet 'traditional' communities that were out of step with modern society.

The Clare study started a vigorous debate about the validity of such studies, but anthropology, as a discipline, really 'went native' with the establishment of the Department of Anthropology in Maynooth in 1983.

This was followed in 1987 by the Anthropological Association of Ireland. Its current journal, marking 25 years of the Association, provides a guide to the development of the discipline and the scope of contemporary anthropological practice in Ireland.

Thirty years on, NUI Maynooth still has the only department of anthropology in Ireland. It caters for more than 500 students, 300 of them first year and 100 in both second and third year. There are about 30 graduate students.

Dr Mark Maguire is the head of the department. He sees anthropology, like all social sciences, as being intrinsically tied up with the exercise of power, but redeemed by a long tradition of radical analysis.

"Students of anthropology are shaken out of common sense and complacent attitudes, they are trained to think differently about society," says Maguire.

"They aren't any more political since the crash of 2007, but they are more critical. This is reflected in some of the projects undertaken in third year."

These cover everything from corporate speak and prison guards who train dogs to alternative medicine, civil partnerships and poverty and indebtedness in urban communities — a range that reflects the type of careers being considered by the students, who tend to work in education, healthcare, criminology, environmentalism and human rights and international development.

A Masters programme with NGOs such as Trocaire provides graduates with the opportunity to get involved in research programmes in areas that require cultural sensitivity and a critical evaluation of the local impact of development work.

Nicola Reynolds is president of the Anthropology Society in NUIM, founded in 2011. She worked in banking for almost 10 years before deciding she needed a change. She started looking at courses and was attracted to anthropology out of curiosity.

She says that, in essence, anthropology is a filter, a way of looking at society from the bottom up. "Our ethnographic field work and writing tells one group of people about another group of people," she tells me.

Nicola also repeats the mantra of anthropologists everywhere — "In anthropology, the strange becomes familiar and the familiar becomes strange. When you are studying your own society, elements that seemed normal appear not so normal when viewed anthropologically."

A recent graduate working her way through a master's degree, she thinks the main challenge facing students is the need to make the subject seem less strange to employers, and more like a flexible research skill set that is sensitive to societal changes.

She cites Genevieve Bell, the Australian anthropologist who is director of Intel's interaction and experience research group. Bell recently investigated how people think and feel about technology worn on the body, or 'wearable computing' as it is known.

Bell is one of a number of high-profile anthropologists working in Intel and other major corporations. She epitomises the trend in the technology sector to seek the assistance of anthropologists in ensuring that new products work socially.

Figures are not available, but guestimates place about a third of anthropologists working on academic research and the remainder in industry and the services sector.

Fiona Murphy came to the subject as a postgraduate student. Her PhD addressed trauma and reconciliation in Aboriginal Australians who were forcibly removed from their families and institutionalised.

This was followed by a research project with Dr Mark Maguire on the everyday experience of integration among Nigerian and Congolese migrants in Ireland.

Fiona works in DCU School of Business, where she is involved in a research project on sustainability with Dr Pierre McDonagh.

"Anthropology works in a corporate context because at its core it has a collaborative spirit, and trained anthropologists tend to work very well in an interdisciplinary context," she says.

Social policy is catching up and anthropologists are having more influence on developments in health and other areas. Maybe it's the tendency to go off script, to be critical in research and radical in their assessment of social systems that makes the perspectives of anthropologists so interesting.

So, what do the anthropologists see as the main challenges facing Irish society in 2014? Mark Maguire cites the massive impact of socialised debt.

Pressure on public services is another issue, and a third is the need for innovation around 'user experience' if companies are going to survive in the new economy.

Patrick Slevin agrees on the need for more innovation, but sees the primary issue as changes within the home, particularly our understanding of what it means to be married and how ideas about masculinity and femininity are affected by this.

Nicola Reynolds thinks the main issues are debt, changes in employment patterns and marriage and the risks faced by adolescents in connection with social media and milestones or rituals like the Leaving Cert.

Fiona Murphy cites migration and the need for an equal society, an intercultural ethos in schools and greater sensitivity to a plurality of belief systems, religious and otherwise. Sustainable development also matters, and the green economy, she reckons, promises one route out of crisis.

In short, promoting resilient, happy and sustainable communities is a key task for anthropologists in Ireland in 2014. Ⓦ