

APPLIED AND PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY

Riall Nolan

Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, U.S.A.

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Summary

This chapter outlines the history of applied and practicing anthropology – that is, anthropology put to use outside the university for a variety of practical purposes. We distinguish at the outset those academically-based anthropologists engaged in application (“applied anthropologists”) from anthropologists based outside the academy, but also engaged in application (“practicing anthropologists”). The terms “applied” and “practicing” do not denote different types of activities, but rather different sets of working circumstances, which are important for understanding how and why contemporary anthropology appears as it does.

Historically, application was always an integral part of the discipline, but events following World War II allowed academically-based anthropology to become the dominant voice of the discipline. Subsequent developments led to the increasing marginalization of application and practice by the academy, a rift which to some extent continues today. Despite this, an increasing number of anthropology graduates have chosen non-academic careers in recent decades, with the result that there are now more practitioners than academics, working effectively in a wide variety of fields.

Despite this, however, there is still little communication between the practitioner community and the academic community, which raises a number of key issues for the future of the discipline. At a time when academic possibilities for anthropologists seem to be shrinking, non-academic options are rapidly expanding. This has the potential to both revitalize and extend the discipline.

1. Introduction

“Applied anthropology” refers to the use of anthropology outside the academy. Application has always been an important part of the discipline, and the story of applied anthropology is both complex and instructive. This essay will look at how application in anthropology began, how it changed, and what these changes may mean for the discipline as a whole. Special attention will be paid to the experience of anthropology with international development work, as one of the more significant domains of application.

1.1. Types of Anthropologists

To begin, it will be useful to distinguish three different categories of anthropologists: *academic* anthropologists; *applied* anthropologists; and anthropologist *practitioners*.

Academically-based anthropologists, most of whom have full-time university jobs and PhDs, engage in the traditional pursuits of teaching, research and publication. Their primary mission is an intellectual one, that of generating knowledge through traditional scholarly activity.

Applied anthropologists are also university-based PhDs. They, too, engage in research, teaching and publication, but they tend, in their work, to focus on the application of anthropological research and knowledge to concrete problems. They may, for example, spend a considerable portion of their time working on outside projects, while retaining their university positions.

Anthropologist practitioners, with either a Master’s or a PhD, are not normally based within a university. Instead, they work for outside bodies or clients, where they put their anthropological skills and knowledge to use on a wide variety of issues and problems. We can represent these divisions in the following way:

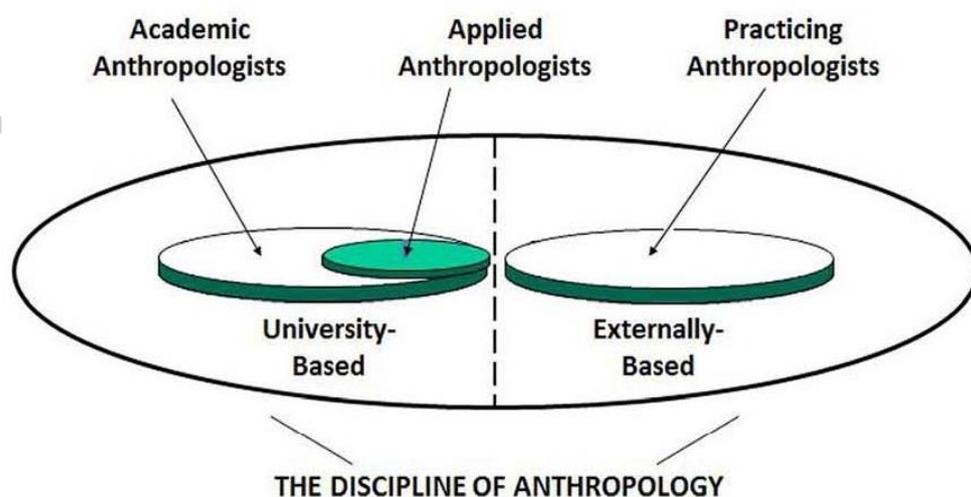


Figure 1. Academic, Applied and Practicing Anthropology (from Nolan 2003:5)

Here, “application” will refer to any type of anthropological work done on real-world, practical problems, while “practice” will refer specifically to anthropology done outside the academy, by non-academics. Applied anthropologists, like practicing anthropologists, work on real-world problems. But they do so from a university base, whereas practicing anthropologists are either self-employed (often as consultants) or full-time employees of outside organizations.

1.2. How is Practice Different?

Is the distinction between “applied anthropology” (carried out by university academics), and “practice” (done by non-academic anthropologists), really an important one? Some writers have argued that *all* anthropology is to some extent applied, and that even university teaching is a form of practice. Johnston (2008: 172) considers “practicing” anthropology as a common dimension of all anthropological work that has a problem focus, whether inside or outside the academy. Checker’s (2009:162) definition of practicing anthropology as “*work that travels outside of academic realms to inform public discourse on a specific topic*” is broader still, and would seem to include almost anything done by anthropologists.

For many practitioners, however, the distinctions are important, pointing as they do to a key difference in circumstance – the base of support from which one’s anthropology is “done.” The security and support available to most applied anthropologists holding university positions is far greater than that enjoyed by practitioners, who are very much part of the civilian workforce. This simple fact influences a great deal about how practitioners approach their work, the kinds of things they do, and their relationships with others.

How, then, is practice different? We can note three of the most important areas of difference here.

- Practitioners are employed – and are successful – not just because of what they know, but because of what they can do with what they know. Practitioners rarely work on problems “for their own sake” or “to advance the frontiers of knowledge.” They work for clients, on problems defined, for the most part, by the needs of those clients. Their work is intended to produce results, not academic publications, and often the results they achieve have significant consequences for other people’s lives.
- Practitioners, unlike many academics, almost never work alone, but in collaboration with other specialists. Their work, their methods, their opinions and their results are subject to scrutiny and review by others, and they are generally expected to “co-think” with their colleagues in order to generate workable solutions.
- Practitioners are engaged with their work in ways that academics are generally not. As Partridge (1985:144) observed, practitioners are participants, not spectators, in the work they do. They rarely have the option of retreat into a tenured position; they generally have to live with the results they create, and take to responsibility for them.

We will return again to these three points in more detail later on in this essay.

1.3. International Development as a Domain of Practice

One area that has attracted the attention and energy of practitioners and applied anthropologists alike has been that of international development, and Section 5 of this essay will look at this in more detail. Anthropology's encounter with development has been one of the most interesting examples of how the discipline has interacted with the world, revealing both anthropology's usefulness as well as its limitations.

2. Beginnings

2.1. Practice as the Discipline's Foundation

Practice and application have a far deeper and stronger history within anthropology than is usually acknowledged within the academy (van Willigen 2009: 392-393; Rylko-Bauer et al 2006: 180). Van Willigen suggests that practice is in fact the foundation of the discipline:

"Critical understanding of disciplinary history shows that application and practice has historic precedents within anthropology. That is, the basic discipline is based on there being an anthropology of application and practice. Clearly, anthropology emerged from the need for both policy research and training in applied anthropology, not the other way around. The first academic departments and research organizations were motivated, justified, and organized on the basis of the need for application. Practical application of anthropology occurred without there developing a foundation "pure" discipline." (van Willigen 2009:392-393)

There are a number of excellent analyses of the development of application and practice in the United States (e.g., Fiske and Chambers 1996; Brondo and Bennett 2012; Eddy and Partridge 1987), and in Britain (Grillo and Rew 1985).

The first ethnological societies were established in Paris in 1839 and London in 1844 (Howard 1986: 24), and by the late 1870s, anthropology was beginning to emerge as a discipline. The term "applied anthropology" was apparently used for the first time in 1881 at a meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006:187n1).

2.2. The Colonial Connection

Much is made of early anthropology's connection with colonial administration, for anthropologists were active in most European colonies in the early years of the twentieth century, preceding the establishment of the first university departments of anthropology.

"... Within the history of anthropology, application came first, serving as the conditions for some of the earliest academic departments, which were obviously shaped by colonial imperative but also motivated by a desire for systemic reforms." (Rylko-Bauer et al, 2006: 179)

Anthropologists carried out field investigations which documented daily life in exotic societies, while at the same time providing colonial authorities with information and insight as they went about the work of governing. Indeed, many of the classics of ethnography were written during this time. Some anthropologists wrote about culture contact and change. Others investigated specific topics such as land tenure, labor relations, and native legal systems, and used this knowledge to train administrators, serve as expert witnesses, and advise authorities. Although their degree of association with, and collaboration with, colonial authorities varied considerably, they were all there with the permission of the imperial power, and hence could be considered as part of the colonial superstructure.

The exact role of anthropology in colonial administration, and the degree to which this association has tainted the discipline, has been at times a topic for heated debate (e.g. Gough 1968). In these debates, academic anthropologists would often point to this colonial connection as proof of applied anthropology's "original sin" – a view others regard as partial if not disingenuous:

" . . . this linkage to colonialism is often presented as the single heritage of applied anthropology, glossing over the fact that all of anthropology equally shares these problematic roots." (Rylko-Bauer et al: 2006: 179)

That such characterizations have not been applied to other disciplines – e.g., medicine, engineering, or law – all of which were far more central to the colonial enterprise – is rather interesting.

There is also considerable debate about how effective anthropology actually was as a "tool" of imperialism. If indeed many anthropologists were involved in aspects of colonial administration, the relationship was not always a smooth one; colonial administrators often ignored what anthropologists had to say, or were at times actually hostile to them. Strathern (1985: 171) asks:

"If anthropology really was the intellectual means whereby domination was achieved in the colonial era, why was it not valued much more by colonial administrators?"

In any event, there is no doubt that anthropology was, in a very real sense, a product of colonial expansion. But there is equally no doubt that the work of anthropologists during this time helped pave the way for the end of the colonial era, and is probably more responsible than most other disciplines for having changed European views of "the other" during the twentieth century.

In the United States, anthropology initially began in similar ways, with attention to Native Americans. Later on, the Depression, and the opportunities afforded by New Deal programs, also engaged many anthropologists, who looked at issues of class, economic hardship, and racism. Susser comments:

"In the 1930s, US anthropologists were also searching for ways to address issues of social justice emerging from the great depression, and many US anthropologists worked for transformative changes. Among others who might more easily be recognized

as activist anthropologists, Ruth Benedict studied race relations in the US South, and, on the basis of this work, published, with Gene Weltfish, a pamphlet on human rights and race that was distributed internationally."(Susser 2010: S230)

Much of this work, however, seems to have passed unnoticed within the academy. Silverman (2007:525) believes that this is because many of the researchers involved were, in her terms, "marginal figures in the discipline" (i.e., without academic appointments).

3. World War II and Its Aftermath

A group of the anthropologists who had been active in applied work in the 1930s began an informal association in the later years of that decade, which was to result in the formal inception of the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) in 1941. Conceived as a multi-disciplinary association, its aim was to encourage the application of social science to diverse aspects of society. Shortly thereafter, Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into what would become World War II.

3.1. Anthropology during the War

The conflict mobilized well over half of all US anthropologists into some form of work in support of the war effort. (Eggan, cited in Price 2002: 16). Anthropologists did a wide variety of things during and immediately after the war. These included intelligence activity (see Price, 1998, 2002, 2008 and 2011 for an exhaustive analysis), work in the notorious internment camps for Japanese-Americans under the War Relocation Authority (Suzuki 1981; Starn 1986), training for administrators for newly recaptured Japanese held territories, and studies of culture and personality. Ruth Benedict's *Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, (1946) perhaps the best known of these studies, was one example of a research project which had a clear importance for the conduct – and the aftermath — of the war.

After the war, two important developments occurred which would have major impacts on anthropology. The first was the rapid expansion of the university system in the US, and with it, increased government funding for research. The second was the growth of international development activities, providing non-academic opportunities for many anthropologists.

3.2. The Postwar Growth of Anthropology

As Silverman (2007:525-6) notes, the growth in anthropological opportunity – academic and non-academic alike – was linked to the "new internationalism" of the United States after the Second World War, where knowledge of developing areas was seen as a strategic priority, and where grants and contracts were available to anthropologists for research in those areas. Interest and focus within anthropology shifted away from the United States to faraway places, and academic anthropology, by and large, established itself within the academy as a discipline primarily interested in remote, non-Western areas.

Academic growth was rapid and extensive. Shankman and Ehlers (2000: 296) point out that whereas in 1950 there were only 20 PhD programs in anthropology in North America, by 1975, there were 87. At the same time, several very interesting long-term experiments in applied anthropology were also taking place, led by anthropologists from the academy. Among them were the Vicos project in Peru (Dobyns et al, 1971), and the Fox Project (Tax 1960) in the United States.

By the mid-1960s, there was a general sense that the discipline was growing increasingly useful, increasingly connected to significant human problems across the globe, and increasingly listened to when it spoke in public forums. Spokespersons like Margaret Mead helped convey the impression of a discipline with things to say, things which connected with the concerns of people here and abroad.

4. The Great Divide

4.1. Anthropology Turns Inward

But along with the tremendous growth of academic possibilities, and the security that academic posts offered, also came a generalized “retreat into the academic world” for many anthropologists (Spicer 1976:337). Within the academy, distance began to grow between those who theorized and those who sought to apply theory. By the late 1960s, when anthropology could be said to have secured its place within the academy, the commitment and interest in applied activities which had characterized earlier decades was fast disappearing, as departments turned inward. Partridge notes:

“. . . almost all energies were [now] thrown into the proliferation of theoretical taxa. . . . The profession as a whole became increasingly oriented to the college and university setting, academic rather than practical matters, and teaching 18 to 24-year-old Americans as the only career of bona fide anthropologists. This institutional setting in which abstract anthropology thrived failed to demand a theory of practice from the discipline, by which anthropology could emerge as a politically effective and ethically relevant social science in other institutions of the modern world.” (Partridge 1985: 139-141)

By this time, the universities were full of relatively recent hires, anthropology had established itself as a rigorous, robust academic discipline, and was finding its voice. And what it now began saying with that voice, loud and clear, to its students and recent graduates was that work for corporations, governments and indeed almost any organization which set out to “change” people was probably a bad idea. The earlier notion of service characteristic of much early anthropology (including that done under colonialism) was now criticized and marginalized by the academy, and only academics were seen, by some, as “true” anthropologists. It was as if, as Pels notes drily, “*one were to exclude general practitioners from the medical or legal profession because they are practitioners.*” (Pels 1999:102)

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Biographical Sketch

Riall Nolan is Professor of Anthropology at Purdue University, where he was also Associate Provost and Dean of International Programs from 2003-2009. Nolan received his doctorate in Social Anthropology from Sussex University in 1975, and worked as a development anthropologist in North and West Africa, Asia, and the Southwest Pacific. In addition to volunteer work at the grass-roots level, he has worked for bilateral and multilateral development organizations, and a variety of NGOs and development consulting firms.

His main interests are in the application of anthropology, and the training of anthropologists for non-academic work. He has taught and/or done research at several universities and colleges, including the University of Papua New Guinea, the University of California at Berkeley, Georgia State University, The School for International Training, the University of Pittsburgh, the University of Cincinnati, Purdue University and Cambridge University in the UK.

Today, he teaches courses on the application of anthropology to global issues, as well as courses on international development, work and learning in cross-cultural environments, and how anthropology can be used outside the classroom. His most recent publication is the *Handbook of Practicing Anthropology* (Wiley/Blackwell 2013), which he edited. He speaks and consults frequently on issues of international development, international education, cross-cultural adaptation, and applied anthropology.