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Reclaiming Applied Anthropology: Its Past, Present, and Future

ABSTRACT Growing concerns about anthropology's impact in both academia and the broader social arena have led to calls for more "public" and more relevant anthropology. In this article, we expand on these exhortations, by calling for systematic joining of critical social theory with application and pragmatic engagement with contemporary problems. We argue for the repositioning of applied anthropology as a vital component of the broader discipline and suggest that it should serve as a framework for constructing a more engaged anthropology. In revisiting disciplinary history and critiques of applied anthropology, we demonstrate the central role that application has played throughout anthropology's evolution, address common misconceptions that serve as barriers to disciplinary integration, examine the role of advocacy in relation to greater engagement as well as the relationship of theory to practice, and conclude with an assessment of the diverse work that is subsumed under the inclusive rubric of "anthropology in use." [Keywords: applied anthropology, engagement, history of anthropology, anthropological practice, advocacy]

OVER THE PAST DECADE, there has been increasing awareness within anthropology in general about the need for a more engaged role in both academia and the public arena, as well as calls for greater relevance with regard to addressing social problems and the structures that produce and maintain them. Much of this discussion has taken place within the academic milieu and has focused on new approaches (such as public anthropology) and other ways in which anthropologists can expand the impact of their ideas and connect with broader audiences (Basch et al. 1999; Borofsky 2000; Forman 1995).

A sizeable number of anthropologists have been turning their gaze toward pressing social issues. But writing with passion for a largely academic audience is not nearly enough. As James Peacock notes, "If the discipline is to gain recognition and a valuable identity, it must accomplish things; it must be active beyond its analytical strategy. Pragmatism and searching critique need not be mutually exclusive" (1997:12). We expand on this exhortation, by calling for a systematic joining of critical social theory with application and for pragmatic engagement with the contemporary problems of our social and physical worlds.

In this article, we argue for the repositioning of applied anthropology, by suggesting that it serve as one of the

frameworks for the discipline's goal of pragmatic engagement. In laying out our argument, we first address some of the myths and misconceptions surrounding application, by revisiting (and, thus, reclaiming) disciplinary history as well as demonstrating the complexity and diversity of work that falls under the broad rubric of applied anthropology. We conclude by assessing the current state of anthropological engagement, arguing that if anthropology is truly committed to more than just engaged rhetoric, then praxis and application must play a more central role within the discipline. The decoupling of theory from practice is a uniquely Western phenomenon. In many other parts of the world, in stark contrast, the applied-academic distinction is largely irrelevant, because anthropological work by resident scholars is often driven by critical socioeconomic and structural issues, thus merging theory and engaged praxis (Baba and Hill 1997; González 2004; Guerrón-Montero 2002).

We focus a substantial part of this article on the history of applied anthropology, to address still widely held misconceptions that stand as barriers to the reunification of anthropology. One example is expressed in the following passage, which appears in an otherwise thoughtful introduction to the issue of violence:

So called "applied anthropology" is especially tainted by history. Born as a stepchild of colonialism . . . it came of

age during the Cold War . . . only to find itself maturing into a partisan of neoliberal globalization in the name of a kinder, gentler cultural sensitivity and sometimes more openly as cost-effective market-based research. [Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004:7–8]

Although the authors offer a historically informed, pandisciplinary critique elsewhere in their introduction, in this particular passage they present a monolithic and essentializing view of application. It is one still shared by many within the general discipline. In this depiction, applied anthropology is singled out for its ties with colonialism, its questionable linkages with Cold War machinations, and its supposed complicity with those who create, rather than solve, social problems.

A different understanding of applied anthropology emerges from a closer look at its history, its role in shaping the discipline, and the current diversity of perspective and practice. We argue that contemporary applied anthropology cannot be simplistically assigned to a particular stance vis-à-vis dominant social systems, historical processes, or social classes. It is more accurately conceived as a complex and broad “anthropology in use,” united by the goal and practice of applying theories, concepts, and methods from anthropology to confront human problems that often contribute to profound social suffering.

Likewise, the genesis of applied anthropology cannot be so easily separated from the birth and evolution of the discipline as a whole. The term *applied anthropology* has been in use for more than a century;¹ it was associated with the creation of early academic departments of anthropology. It appeared, for example, in a 1906 article regarding the anthropology department at Oxford University, which was to play an important role in the general discipline’s development (Read 1906:56). One reading of the department’s origin is that it was initially set up as a kind of “applied training program” to meet the empire’s need for persons schooled in anthropology, with many early faculty members having returned to England after working for the colonial administration.

Thus, within the history of anthropology, application came first, serving as the impetus for some of the earliest academic departments, which were obviously shaped by colonial imperative but also motivated by a desire for systemic reforms (Ervin 2000:14). Contemporary theoretical anthropology was directly connected to and grew out of such application. Nevertheless, this linkage to colonialism is often presented as the singular heritage of applied anthropology, glossing over the fact that all of anthropology equally shares these problematic roots.

Of course, a fair and critical assessment should confront issues of ethics and power that shape disciplinary history, but it should do so in a way that presents a balanced and representative picture of applied anthropology. We believe that application should neither be positioned as anthropology’s scapegoat nor its savior; instead, it should be seen as a major and vital component of the broader discipline, reflecting what many—if not most—anthropologists are now

doing, and will continue to do, if the discipline is to survive and to thrive.

REVISITING HISTORY

Applied anthropology, rather than being peripherally situated, has played an essential role in laying the foundations for the general discipline’s infrastructure. Its contributions include the shaping of professional organization, evolution of disciplinary subfields, and establishment of ethical standards. Moreover, it has been a productive source of anthropological concepts, perspectives, and theory, an issue we will address later in this article.

Important learned societies arose out of associations that were primarily focused on application and social reform. For example, the development of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was linked to the already existing Anthropological Society of Washington (ASW), the original publisher of the *American Anthropologist* (AA). The ASW early on was involved in helping to organize applied research on social inequalities in the housing of the poor in Washington, D.C. (Schensul and Schensul 1978).

Major subfields of anthropology evolved out of applied research, including formative work in urban, nutritional, political, legal, agricultural, maritime, environmental, and educational anthropology. This is especially clear in the case of medical anthropology, which emerged out of applied work done in both public health and international development (Foster and Anderson 1978). Much current medical anthropology continues to be applied in nature or have clear policy applications, partly because the subject matter so often deals with pressing human problems that demand pragmatic engagement. Another important development in disciplinary structure was the establishment in 1949 of the first professional code of ethics in anthropology by the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA), just eight years after its founding. Again, applied anthropology took the lead: The AAA did not put forth its first ethics statement until 20 years later.

Thus, from its historical beginnings, application played a key role in shaping the foundation of academic anthropology. In revisiting disciplinary history, we aim to demonstrate both how closely application intersected with academia and the ways in which the evolution of applied anthropology diverged from that of the rest of the discipline.

The Handmaiden Era: Colonial Roots

The idea of applying anthropology’s methods and knowledge to social problems and public policy dates to the mid–19th century. An honest accounting of anthropology’s checkered history must recognize the role of colonial subsidy (van Willigen 2002; Willis 1974), and one could even make the case that, without it, there would be no discipline of anthropology. Ethnology played an important role in the colonial administrative experience of many countries, whose governments and information needs helped

to support academic departments and basic research. The British, in particular, made extensive use of anthropologists, most commonly as staff researchers. There is little evidence, however, that anthropologists served in positions with line authority or policy-making capacity.

A pertinent illustration of what applied anthropologists typically did in these settings can be found in P. H. Gulliver's (1985) short autobiographical account of his experiences working as a "government sociologist" in Tanganyika in the 1960s. This was a staff position that entailed a series of research projects concerning administrative issues. Most were done at the request of his supervising officials, but Gulliver himself also proposed research ideas and had substantial control over projects and data, which he later used for academic publication. The resulting written reports, some of them confidential, were primarily distributed narrowly within the agency. Gulliver argues that some had impact, whereas others were ignored, and it is clear that his contribution was only one among many inputs into decision making. He also provided expert opinion in areas such as urban social surveys and land use issues.

This was a common pattern for applied work throughout the colonial era, which often led to the flow of data across academic and applied boundaries. Review of the acknowledgments of some classic ethnographies shows that they were initially done essentially as applied reports, funded by government agencies to inform administrators. Examples include *Pagan Tribes of the Nilotic Sudan* (Seligman and Seligman 1932), *The People of India* (Risley 1908), and *The Nuba* (Nadel 1947).

Ethnology also played a pivotal role in U.S. colonial experience. The Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) was set up in 1879 as a policy research arm of the federal government to provide research services in support of congressional decisions related to "Native Americans" (Powell 1881). Its director, W. J. McGee, proposed that the organization focus on what he called "applied ethnology" (Hinsley 1976). As was the case for Gulliver's work, BAE efforts were sometimes requested by administrators and other times done at the ethnographer's initiative. The BAE saw its role as providing scientifically high-quality, largely descriptive research reports to policy makers, and it generally avoided controversial studies that might threaten its funding or authority (Hinsley 1979). Like their colleagues in British colonial administration, anthropologists' employment was justified through its applied potential, but their administrative ties to the users of this research were weaker than was the case for their British counterparts.

The critique of applied anthropology derives a great deal of its impact from analysis of such work, which was done by anthropologists who served in capacities that, in one way or another, supported colonialist and imperialist structures (Asad 1973; Gough 1968; Hymes 1974). However, the early histories of applied and nonapplied anthropology are largely the same history, because the borders between them were blurred. Many anthropologists switched

between academic and applied roles, and application and theory informed each other.

More recently, this radical critique has been extended to the broader discipline, by demonstrating that ideologies linked to exploitation, oppression, and genocide—such as imperialism, nationalism, racism, eugenics, and social Darwinism—also helped to shape research and discourse in archaeology, as well as biological and physical anthropology (Arnold 2002; Schafft 2004; Thomas 2000). Thus, the problematic association between anthropology and structures of inequality and oppression was a discipline-wide phenomenon. In fact, one can argue that "the history of anthropology, both basic and applied, is the history of the power relationships between anthropologists and the people studied" (van Willigen 2002:43). For better or worse, anthropologists collectively approached the colonial era with a two-pronged strategy. They seized on opportunities to prove the value of their fledgling discipline while putting their awareness of the fundamental importance of culture to good use in trying to protect the traditions and rights of subjugated peoples—albeit within an overarching colonial structure. Those who worked during this era faced issues regarding power, ethics, and professionalism that continue to be relevant today. The social, cultural, and epistemological contexts may have changed, but similar barriers—bureaucratic, fiscal, political, and legal—to affecting change in social policies and translating ethnography into effective and ethical action continue to challenge contemporary applied anthropologists.²

From New Deal to the Postwar Era

The involvement of anthropologists in application grew throughout the Depression and the New Deal, reaching a climax during the World War II years. Margaret Mead (1977) estimated that during this period, 95 percent of U.S. anthropologists were engaged in the war effort. Although the numbers were in the hundreds rather than thousands, nevertheless much applied work was done during the war. Some of these efforts, in retrospect, were seen as problematic and further complicated conceptual boundaries between academic and applied anthropology. One example was the Committee for National Morale, set up in 1939 to maintain public confidence during the war. Similarly, the Committee on Food Habits, which included Mead as a member, was responsible for improving nutrition, which was seen as influencing good morale. Anthropologists were also employed by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), a precursor of the CIA. Among these was Gregory Bateson, who, along with others, would later reassess the role he had played in military propaganda work, in part because he felt betrayed by the government's mistreatment of indigenous peoples encountered by the OSS (Price 1998).

Perhaps the most problematic wartime effort, which led to a great deal of subsequent self-criticism, was the involvement of anthropologists in the administration of Japanese American relocation camps (Wax 1971). They largely served

as “community analysts” operating somewhat outside of camp administration, doing research and writing reports with the goal of having the camps work better and preventing even worse outcomes. Although some of them were able to lessen the suffering of camp inmates, these anthropologists later came under extensive criticism, which subsequently fed into the more generalized critique of applied anthropology.

Era of Diverted Gaze

The time just after World War II marks the start of a shift in the relationships between anthropologists and those with whom they did research. Liberation of former European colonies both reduced the isolation of many cultural groups and decreased power differentials between anthropologists and the communities they studied. Indigenous peoples were increasingly in a position to talk back and to contest for power. These changes ushered in the “postmodern era.”

It was also during this period of the “peasant wars of the twentieth century” (Wolf 1969) and other indigenous struggles that some of the greatest tainting of applied anthropology occurred. Perhaps most notable was research during the Vietnam War, such as that conducted on the hill tribes of northern Thailand, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Defense and other entities (Jones 1971; van Willigen 2002).³ Despite anthropology’s fairly limited involvement, these experiences, along with the aforementioned World War II efforts, were often cited in subsequent antiapplied discourse, contributing to the hostility toward application found in many U.S. anthropology departments.

The aftermath of the Vietnam War served as a catalyst for even more fundamental questioning of accepted dominant structures and ideologies. For theoretical anthropologists, there emerged a “crisis of representation,” and much mainstream nonapplied research was critiqued as essentializing. Styles of ethnographic publication changed. Anthropology became more self-conscious, with ethnographers acknowledging their own participation in the scenes and actions they depicted (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Studies of “cultures” and “tribes” gave way to studies of “ethnic groups,” then of “communities” and “problems.” This “diverted gaze” away from describing particular cultures was in response to new questions about the ability of anthropologists to represent other peoples; instead, efforts were made to let them “speak for themselves.”

There were also critiques aimed at the cultural particularism and relativism that had shaped much of the earlier traditional ethnographic work, pointing to what Linda Green (1999:57) also refers to as “anthropology’s diverted gaze” (which she uses in the sense of critical political economy). At issue was the extent to which ethnographers focused on microlevel sociocultural patterns while overlooking the harsh realities and consequences of social inequality, oppression, racism, violence, and suffering, which

were endemic to many of the places where anthropologists had been working (Farmer 2003).

Era of Action and Advocacy

Applied anthropology was subject to the same forces, with significant rethinking of the applied anthropologist’s role, but the adaptation was quite different—“perhaps even diametrically opposed” (van Willigen 2002:43). Rather than focusing on ethnography as reflexive “cultural critique” (Marcus and Fischer 1986), applied anthropologists increasingly “work[ed] with those studied in a collaborative or participatory mode” so that the community or group became transformed “from object to be known to a subject that can control” (van Willigen 2002:43). In many cases, this involved some level of advocacy and a commitment to confront differences in the distribution of resources, statuses, and power.

This reassessment actually preceded the crisis in the larger discipline by several decades, with the initial major shift in orientation occurring in applied anthropology during the late 1940s and early 1950s. What emerged was a radically different anthropology, involving clearly expressed values, acted on by anthropologists who collaborated directly with communities to achieve community-directed change. Among the best-known examples of such value-explicit approaches are action anthropology (Tax 1958) and research and development anthropology (Holmberg 1958). In both cases, theory was integrated with advocacy and community development. Sol Tax and Allan Holmberg both spoke of having two mutually supportive goals: increasing scientific knowledge and improving community welfare.

Tax emphasized the idea of self-determination, with the role of the action anthropologist being to assist in providing communities with “genuine alternatives from which the people involved can freely choose” while avoiding “imposing our values” (Tax 1960:416). Action anthropologists asserted that research and action could not be done through working with power-holding agencies, which in their specific initial context meant the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Similarly, research and development anthropologists spoke of the “devolution of power” to communities. This was a core theme in the prototypical project at Hacienda Vicos in Peru, where applied anthropologists assumed the powerful role of hacienda patron only temporarily before relinquishing it to the community. The project was grounded in the belief that successful development needed to address structural and systemic conditions that exploited Andean peasants. “From the onset, one of the special concerns of the project was human rights” (Doughty 1987:148).

The upshot of the project at Vicos was revolutionary community change, for the applied anthropology done there resulted in the ownership of the means of production being placed in the hands of the community (Dobyns et al. 1971). Clearly, this was radical applied social science. The Vicos project was significant in extending roles and expanding the place of advocacy in applied anthropology. It was

widely criticized within anthropology, however, for many of the same reasons that are still invoked by those who are uncomfortable with advocacy and intervention.

Although both approaches had relatively circumscribed impact on the discipline, they laid the groundwork for subsequent approaches that also emerged from explicit concerns with issues of power and advocacy. Collaborative research (Schensul and Schensul 1992) and cultural brokerage (Weidman 1976), two quite different approaches both developed in the 1970s, attempted to redefine the anthropologist's role vis-à-vis communities so as to further egalitarian power relations within the research process and in relation to larger social structures.

This trend became even more apparent in later "participatory action" and "community-based" approaches that appeared across much of applied social science (Greenwood and Levin 1998). From this fertile soil, there emerged a number of enduring organizations with strong ties to anthropology and the collaborative participatory tradition. Several of these focus on improving the health and well-being of poor and oppressed populations, such as the Hispanic Health Council and the Institute for Community Research in Hartford, Connecticut, and Partners in Health in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In all three cases, advocacy with—rather than for—subordinated groups is central to their mission, as is empowerment and the use of research in community development. Newer organizations shaped by similar perspectives are also evolving, among them the Florida Institute for Community Studies (Tampa) and the Family and Community Research Center (Miami).

This long history of value-explicit work belies efforts to squeeze the considerable diversity of applied anthropology into some narrow sidelined space. In fact, more recent applied approaches have actually been far more critical of overt or even passive collusion with structures that contribute to oppression and injustice than had been the case for much of the work in basic anthropology (e.g., Baer et al. 2004; Castro and Singer 2004; Johnston and Downing 2004; Singer 2006a).⁴

REVISITING CRITIQUES

Clearly, many alternative ways of doing applied anthropology have evolved over time. However, this array of labeled approaches may cause some confusion, perhaps even helping to explain why critics often assume a narrowness and homogeneity that ignores the breadth and diversity of current application. This trend dates to the 1950s. Originators of innovative approaches began giving discrete names (such as "collaborative research," "cultural brokerage," and "action anthropology") to their orientations, often following a predictable rhetorical strategy that contrasted their brand of applied research with a more narrowly defined "applied anthropology," so as to make the new approach more distinctive.

Naming has also occurred outside the formal applied anthropology structure. Davydd Greenwood's work on "ac-

tion research" has influenced practitioners from many disciplines (Greenwood and Levin 1998). He presents his approach as distinct from applied anthropology, when, in reality, "collaborative research" is very similar to action research, sharing an orientation toward social reform and change, as introduced through highly collaborative and democratic consortia of community agencies, educational institutions, local governments, and other stakeholders (LeCompte et al. 1999; Stull and Schensul 1987).

This common pattern of rhetorical othering is driven by several factors. First, naming affords a way of separating from problematic historical events, such as the uses of anthropology in colonial administration. Second, there are concerns relating to intellectual property issues. Third, "branding" allows originators to make more visible what otherwise might just be perceived as idiosyncratic.

Finally, naming provides a means for creating distance vis-à-vis the lower prestige accorded to the practical as contrasted with the theoretical, a long-standing problem in U.S. anthropology (Baba 1994). As Kim Hopper (an advocate for the legal rights of the homeless) notes, "Working under contract . . . stigmatizes the hired hand" (2002:199). Although the resulting array of labels reflects the diversity of application, it has also hindered the development of a shared tradition of anthropological practice, because new approaches tend to be presented in opposition to existing ones, rather than as part of continuous disciplinary evolution.

External critiques of applied anthropology, such as the common assertion that it is "atheoretical," tend toward vague generalities rather than concrete analysis of specific examples. Blanket condemnation is often justified by the contention that those who work "within the system"—be it biomedicine, business, government, or international development—are supporting structures of hegemony and nothing more. Such assessment of the "dangers" and flaws of application is coupled with an assumption regarding the "purity" of academic pursuits.

We argue, instead, for a more balanced perspective, that recognizes the following: (1) the complexity in both context and nature of applied work, (2) the problematic transformations of academia that challenge claims to intellectual independence, (3) the extent to which concerns with social justice and advocacy permeate applied anthropology, and (4) the intersection of theory and practice.

Reassessing Purity and Danger

In rejecting a monolithic conception of applied anthropology, we recognize that diversity exists in practice and perspective and that this can lead to debates regarding questions of epistemology, methods, ethics, and social responsibility. Informed reflection and critique from within on such issues is important to applied anthropology's growth and development, and the same can be said of external critique, when it is balanced and informed.

For example, in his critical review of secret research and covert activities by anthropologists in general, David Price

focuses on certain aspects of applied anthropology in his assessment as to why the SfAA and then the AAA shifted away from explicit condemnation of covert activities in their ethics statements:⁵

As some “applied anthropologists” move from classroom employment to working in governmental and industrial settings, statements condemning spying have made increasing numbers of practitioners uncomfortable—and this discomfort suggests much about the nature of *some* applied anthropological work. [Price 2000:27, emphasis added]

However, he goes on to note, as do we, that

activities encompassed under the heading of applied anthropology are *extremely diverse*, ranging from heartfelt and underpaid activist-based research for NGOs around the world [all the way] to production of secret ethnographies and time-allocation studies of industrial and blue-collar workplaces for the private consumption of management. [Price 2000:27, emphasis added]

In other words, in some arenas application may be problematic but in many other cases practitioners find spaces within structures that are open to beneficial input. If carried out with a critical eye rather than accepting structures of inequality as a given, this provides an opportunity for meeting Laura Nader’s (1969) challenge to “study up.” In the process, practitioners can gain insights into policies and programs often only accessible to those willing to go “inside.”

The question of whether one should work as outside critic or inside ameliorator within arenas of policy and power remains a fundamental dilemma in anthropology. The former affords more rhetorical freedom but rarely results in significant social change. The insider role, in contrast, has limitations and risks (such as co-optation), but it does offer some opportunities for positive social impact. As Carole Hill points out, “Ethics should not be a battle cry against practice. There is a difference between critiquing injustice and actively working toward rectifying injustice” (2000:4). Ultimately each individual case must be judged on its own merits and in light of our shared ethical standards and socially informed analytic frameworks.

Those working in academic settings often see their research as intellectually independent from such outside forces. However, this is a chimera, for the ongoing restructuring of academic institutions within the context of a global economy has created complex and problematic links between the academy and industry (Washburn 2005). Speaking from the Canadian experience, Janice Newson notes the significant transformation that has occurred over the past two decades

in the *raison d’être* of the university: from existing in the world as a publicly funded institution oriented toward creating and disseminating knowledge as a public resource—social knowledge—into an institution which, although continuing to be supported by public funds, is increasingly oriented toward a privatized conception of knowledge—market knowledge. [1998]

In the current context of global connections and not-always-visible linkages between individuals, institutions, businesses, and governments, it behooves all of us in anthropology to be aware of the costs and consequences of our allegiances. Hans Baer strikes a cautionary tone, noting that “the university is in the process of becoming more and more of an appendage of the corporate economy rather than a relatively autonomous space within which critical thinking can occur” (2001:50). Applied anthropologists, by definition, are aware of who they are working with or for, so they may have more opportunity (and perhaps more responsibility) to be especially sensitive to various ethical dilemmas such as the exercising by funders of undue influence or even outright efforts to control the products of corporate-sponsored research (Singer 2000a, 2004).

The Role of Advocacy in Anthropology

Perhaps the most telling example of where applied anthropology stands today in relation to active engagement with social issues is the theme that was chosen for the SfAA’s 2004 annual meeting: “Social Science and Advocacy.” A majority of presenters discussed the degree to which social advocacy is incorporated as either integral part or consequence of their research and writing. Many emphasized the centrality of advocacy in their work with disempowered or oppressed groups and communities or in work on behalf of those silenced by corporate, dictatorial, or military control of public communication venues.

This work builds on a growing body of anthropological literature that supports advocacy as an important component of anthropology in use (Hopper 2003; Johnston 2001; Nagengast and Vélez-Ibáñez 2004). As Alexander Ervin notes, “Advocacy ultimately covers much of the scope of contemporary applied anthropology, especially in its relationship to policy” (2000:123).

Not everyone concurs about the appropriateness of this work. Among the strongest proponents of the academic critique are Kirsten Hastrup and Peter Elass, who go so far as to say that “we should never forget that a commitment to improving the world is no substitute for understanding it” (1990:307). We would argue that the reverse should be said as well. Others focus on the risks involved to those being “advocated for” and the ethics of professionally benefiting from such actions (Napier 2004). Undoubtedly, political and ethical problems arise when anthropologists actively take sides on issues within complex communities (Johnston 2001). Effective engagement requires flexibility, awareness of the complexities of sociopolitical contexts, and excellence in research, because the stakes are often higher than in the case of research for its own sake. There is always a risk that those in power will use findings against, rather than for, intended beneficiaries of anthropological work.

A related issue raised by advocacy, and one of critical relevance to the entire discipline, concerns the problematics of speaking on behalf of others. Applied anthropologists are sensitive to the politics of representation. At the same

time, they are more apt to work collaboratively with target populations and may even be hired by such communities precisely for the purposes of advocating on their behalf. Advocacy work in such contexts takes place with rather than for communities who often are struggling against unequal power distributions that put them at severe disadvantage.

Those who argue for the complete separation of advocacy from research often present this as an either-or issue. For example, Roy D'Andrade conceptualizes this debate in terms of either doing anthropology based on an objective model of the world (grounded in science and concerned with understanding how things work) or on a moral model (incorporating advocacy and a concern with what is good, what is bad, and who is to blame). There seems to be no middle ground, for he argues that the two models cannot be blended "if one wants to find out about the world" (1995:405). Related arguments focus on the belief that collaborative models undermine methodological rigor and that advocacy conflicts with the objectivity and detachment that some feel is a hallmark of good research (Gross and Plattner 2002).

Most of these debates occur outside the context of applied anthropology and therefore overlook the numerous examples of methodologically sound, problem-focused research that incorporates some level of community collaboration and advocacy (Farmer 2003; Greenwood and Levin 1998; LeCompte et al. 1999; Singer and Weeks 2005). Narrow, dichotomizing critiques overlook the diversity and complexity of what falls under the rubric of advocacy (often conflating it with overt activism) and falsely assume that it precludes quality research and good science. In fact, advocacy of some sort is always present in anthropological work; even deciding against action in an arena of social contestation in and of itself constitutes a stance. Especially in settings of gross injustice and inequality, neutrality is, in fact, a kind of partisanship on behalf of the status quo (Singer 1994).

A more useful way of conceptualizing advocacy is to envision it along a continuum (Singer 1990). At one end, we find anthropological research in service of broad disciplinary goals such as deepening human understanding or expanding knowledge. Toward the center is the notion that anthropological knowledge can be of value in human social life, even if specific applications are not identified. One can also talk of advocacy for anthropology, something most of us do regularly at universities, other places of employment, with students, and with funders. Further along this continuum is general advocacy, widespread among anthropologists, for subordinated populations, ranging from teaching about the dangers of ethnocentrism to writing articles exposing social inequalities and structural violence. Such work may incorporate what Priscilla Weeks describes as advocacy "hidden under the mantle of scientific neutrality" (1999:1), or it may involve research that focuses on "uncovering competing cultural models, thus promoting dialogue among diverse social groups . . . in contrast to advocating for a particular social group" (1999:2). More overt kinds of ad-

vocacy include testifying or supplying data to policy- and law makers; in some contexts, this includes even advocating for the rights of oppressed groups who face risks doing so themselves. Finally, at the other end of the continuum we have direct use of anthropology in the service of the Other, that may involve participating in direct action and promoting rights and needs of specific groups in conflicted situations. An example is Barbara Rose Johnston's (2005) research, commissioned by communities that were adversely affected by the building of the Chixoy Dam in Guatemala. In her reports, she documents the development history of the dam, its significant long-term impact on these communities, and suggests recommendations and a plan for reparations.

All positions along this continuum involve some kind of advocacy, although the beneficiaries differ. It seems ironic, and more than a little self-serving, to legitimize advocacy for the compendium of knowledge or promotion of anthropology while questioning its appropriateness for the very groups who give of their time, knowledge, and other resources so that we in our individual careers and as a discipline might benefit.

The Atheoretical Critique

Topmost on the list of ongoing critiques of applied anthropology is the assertion that it is atheoretical. This derives partly from the perception that applied documents, such as project reports and evaluations, often focus on hard data, well-defined methods, and concise policy recommendations of use to decision makers; not surprisingly, theory used in such research is often hidden. Although grand or even medium-range theories may play lesser roles in some applied research, there is ample evidence (in case study collections such as Eddy and Partridge 1987; Hill and Baba 2000; Wulff and Fiske 1987) that theory both shapes and is informed by application. For example, in his classic review article, Allan Hoben (1982:350) convincingly demonstrates how theoretical insights produced by anthropologists in development influenced conceptual models of developing communities, economic rationality, and local knowledge used by planners and other disciplines while at the same time leading to revision of these same conceptions in anthropology.

Practitioners use theoretical and conceptual frameworks from anthropology and other disciplines to shape their questions, design methodology, and link knowledge with policy, program development, or action. Theory commonly guides applied research, to one degree or another. One example is the growing body of critical work focusing on sociocultural and structural factors that shape unequal distribution of essential resources and how this becomes embodied differentially as illness and disease (Castro and Singer 2004; Farmer 2003; Singer 2006a, 2006b; Whiteford and Manderson 2000; Whiteford and Whiteford 2005).

Usually overlooked in this debate are the basic parallels that exist between domains of theory production and of

policy and action. Applied anthropologists use essentially the same epistemological processes except that the referent is different. In application the primary concern is with effectiveness (van Willigen 1984). Although recommendations within applied reports are rooted in truth uncovered through research, truth qua truth is not the issue; instead, it is effectiveness, formatted in an implied proposition like “If you want to accomplish this, you should do this.” If theorizing means positing a causal link between domains, then application is inherently theoretical.

Applied work has also helped to shape theory in anthropology, by opening new fields of research and contributing to the revision of theories, especially in the areas of intercultural relations, social change, development, and organizational culture (Baba 2000; Little 2000). A recent example is work done on the multiple health problems of drug users that led to the formation of syndemics theory (Singer and Clair 2003; Stall et al. 2003), which has begun to impact theory in both anthropology and public health.

In fact, practice, rather than being peripheral, “can be viewed as a kind of ultimate test of theory through empirical research” (Hill 2000:4; Schensul 1985). However, some have rightly argued that the links between theory, methods, and practice need to be made more explicit within applied anthropology and that this requires “a realization that comparative analysis and practice is possible” (Little 2000:127).

The cumulative experience of practice has significant potential for theory building, but this has not been fully realized in anthropology for a variety of reasons (Baba 1994; Bennett 1996). Some of these concern the ambivalence toward practice within academia. However, applied anthropologists “bear some responsibility... we conduct individualized case studies that build vertically, but... do not demand synthesis as part of our practice,” which would link derived generalizations back to theory (Baba 2000:34).

Other reasons relate to constraints surrounding application and to its interdisciplinary nature. Presenting results of applied research to a wider audience requires writing about it in academic venues. For many practitioners the rewards for such efforts are unclear, appropriate outlets are limited, and external publishing may be restricted by the parameters of their contracts or demands of their job (Greider 1993).

There are important consequences for the discipline as a whole when substantial segments of creative work done in anthropology are inaccessible (Baba 1994). John van Willigen (1991:19) notes that “much authentic anthropological knowledge is scattered throughout journals from a broad array of disciplines, and in the fugitive literature of technical and contract reports,” thereby having less impact on shaping the discipline’s core content. Integrating such knowledge into the core should be a priority for academically based applied anthropologists. At a minimum, this requires synthesizing findings of applied research within and across specific domains, developing generalizations that are linked to the larger body of anthropological theory, and pre-

senting such work to a broader audience of anthropologists (Hill and Baba 2000).

Finally, applied anthropologists talk of a theory of practice, by which we mean a set of principles that predict or explain how knowledge generated by applied research is translated into action. This can refer to factors that guide effective use of such knowledge, whether in interventions, decision making, or policy development (Rylko-Bauer and van Willigen 1993). William Partridge (1987:229), in turn, expands on the Aristotelian notion of “praxis,” by suggesting a theory of practice that “demands... engagement of anthropologists in the world of pragmatic, practical human activity” with the “mutually instrumental” goals of advancing knowledge and of being politically and ethically effective. Partridge links this to the notion of “an *ethics of action*... based in commitment to socially responsible science.” This requires, in turn, “a commitment beyond narrow professionalism to take action once analysis indicates a course of action” (Partridge 1987:230–231). This is not simply a call for scholarly engagement with serious social problems, something that increasing numbers of anthropologists are already doing. The notion of an “ethics of action” pushes us further—towards active involvement in pragmatically addressing the problems we help to illuminate.

ANTHROPOLOGY’S SEARCH FOR RELEVANCE

For applied anthropologists, the commitment to action is a given; the challenge lies in continuing to find ways of acting more effectively and ethically while linking the specificity of local problem solving to larger sociopolitical contexts. Theory-driven anthropology, by contrast, faces a different dilemma: finding ways of navigating the boundaries between theory, research, and action. This requires shifting disciplinary focus towards “current problems, as they are defined within the context of the larger social order” and away from problems defined solely “within the context of our discipline” (Baba 1994:175).

Awareness of a need for such a shift is evident in recent calls for greater “engagement” and “relevance.” A number of anthropologists have taken on a myriad of social issues, in some cases critically examining the criteria regarding both calls for and definitions of “relevance” (Mazzarella 2002). Nevertheless, much of the collective academic response to this dilemma has focused on development of new models, distinct from applied anthropology and complete with new labels such as “public interest anthropology” or “public anthropology.” These exist more as sets of ideas or frameworks than tested strategies for action. A stated goal is to “re-frame and reinvigorate the discipline” (Borofsky 2000:9)—even “reinvent anthropology” (Sanday 2003)—so as to increase its public voice. One way of achieving this is through the role of anthropologist as public intellectual.⁶ A recent example is *Why America’s Top Pundits Are Wrong: Anthropologists Talk Back* (Besteman and Gusterson 2004). Although a valid response to the dilemma of relevance, this approach has limitations, because by definition, the circle of public

intellectuals is a small, select group. Where does that leave the rest of the discipline?

Roger Sanjek notes that only a few of us will end up as guests on television or radio talk shows or on the pages of the *New York Times*; however, “between such high-profile venues and the study or classroom we find a vast territory” (2004:452). He lists numerous strategies for public engagement, including publishing in nonacademic venues, testifying at government hearings and commissions, consulting for organizations, acting as an expert witness, and “being prepared to assume various ‘anthropologist no longer’ roles . . . including working in private firms, NGOs, or government agencies as well as in citizen activism, electoral campaigns, or political administrations” (Sanjek 2004:453). Sanjek integrates strategies and actions that clearly encompass work done in both academic and applied settings; his vision complements our own perspective on the directions in which anthropology should be going.

In assessing the current state of anthropology, Louise Lamphere (2004:432) sees movement toward a convergence of goals and research interests amongst those committed to greater engagement, which she rightly perceives as including “meaningful collaboration, outreach, and policy work as part of the very definition of anthropology.” She begins, however, with a caveat: “It is crucial that we avoid struggling over terms and definitions, such as the differences between applied and practicing anthropology, on the one hand, and public interest anthropology or policy-oriented anthropology, on the other.” She suggests that instead of debating “which *approach* is best,” we take a more inclusive view (Lamphere 2004:432, emphasis added).

We applaud efforts that counter fragmentation, promote collaboration, and, thus, bring anthropologists together in common cause for making a difference. But applied anthropology is more than simply just another approach. For better or for worse, applied anthropologists have been engaging in what is now fashionably called “engagement”—for decades. Glossing over the meaning of these “terms and definitions” contributes to misrepresentation and erasure of the extensive experience and body of knowledge and practice that has come to define *applied anthropology*, and it places the general discipline at risk for rediscovering the wheel in its quest for greater engagement.

Recent movements toward a more public anthropology have done a useful service for the general discipline, helping to pull it back from the edge of the postmodern chasm and pushing it toward more critical sociocultural analyses. To the question of how one puts anthropology to use, both Robert Borofsky and Peggy Reeves Sanday, champions of public anthropology, answer: Engage with issues in the public sphere, speak out, write against policies and practices that promote injustice, and reframe “public discourse” on critical social issues. We concur and point to the long tradition of such work in applied anthropology.

But should this be the end point for anthropological engagement? The time has arrived for the broader discipline to ask some of the same questions that have both guided and

plagued applied anthropology for decades. How do we operationalize the goals of addressing and ameliorating social problems? How do we translate knowledge successfully into pragmatic action? Which strategies actually work? These are questions that structure the core of applied anthropology.

REPOSITIONING APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

If pragmatic engagement becomes the realized goal of anthropology, then relevance will surely follow. But this requires a willingness to take stands on pressing human issues, to be ethically and politically subjective while methodologically objective, and to accept advocacy (however it is being defined) as part of a disciplinary framework that already values theory and research excellence. Finally, pragmatic engagement requires a willingness to not only shape public discourse but also offer evidence-based solutions to social problems.

Applied anthropology, in its totality, has been doing this for decades with varying degrees of success. In this sense, it is arguably ahead of the rest of the discipline. For this reason, we propose that applied anthropology serve as a framework for pragmatic engagement. In this vein, examples of limited success or unintended consequences, instead of serving as arguments against application, can more productively be viewed as lessons in the challenges of engagement.

The relationship between policy, research, and action continues to be a focus of reflection and analysis within applied anthropology. Expansion of this effort will contribute positively to the larger ongoing dialogue about the relevance of anthropology. Decades of applied experience, both good and bad, wait to be tapped by those for whom the call to engagement is a recent one. At the same time, applied anthropology can benefit from theoretical insights emerging out of a more engaged discipline.

Applied anthropology, these days, encompasses great diversity in domains of application, methods, theoretical framings, roles and arenas of research and work. If one accounts for all that applied anthropologists do in their effort to address social problems, “from A for ‘aging’ to Z for ‘zoos,’” then the list is very long and rapidly growing (Singer 2000b:6). There is also great diversity in arenas of action. Contrary to the perception in some circles, most applied anthropologists do not work for large development bureaucracies. They work in communities, for cultural or tribal groups, public institutions, government agencies, departments of public health and education, nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations, international policy bodies, as well as private entities such as unions, social movements, and, increasingly of late, corporations. A growing number also serve in state and federal policy positions, and some even in elected public office. Much of this work is squarely concerned with “the public interest.”

As was the case at various times in history, application continues to serve as a foundation for academic anthropology by providing employment beyond the ivory tower

for an ever-increasing proportion of graduates (Baba 1994). However, the number of programs that prepare students for jobs outside of the university is still limited, despite the fact that less than half of anthropology Ph.D.s end up in traditional teaching positions (Price 2001; Schensul et al. 2003). Addressing shortfalls and revamping graduate education is arguably one of the most critical and responsible ways in which anthropology can increase its relevance. Lamphere (2004) suggests that graduate curricula expand to incorporate collaboration, outreach, and policy studies. We would add that an understanding of what applied anthropologists actually do should also be a part of such efforts. “Community service-learning” has been proposed as another means of providing experience and training for engagement with salient social issues (Keene and Colligan 2004). Again, applied anthropology can serve as a model, because internships, a form of service-based learning, have long been an integral component of applied training programs.

MEANINGFUL CONVERGENCE: PUTTING ANTHROPOLOGY TO USE

Just as all of anthropology shares a common, and at times problematic, history, so too are we facing a common future. In this article, we have argued that anthropology, throughout its history, has been put to use in one way or another. And this will be even more true in the coming years. The challenge lies in ensuring anthropology’s continuing evolution as a relevant discipline, grounded in strong scholarship and defensible professional ethics, and guided by concrete strategies for social engagement.

Anthropological practice has been conceptualized as the “fifth subdiscipline” (Baba 1994), but it has the potential to become the bridging discipline—linking the diversity that exists within anthropology as a whole with the realities of an increasingly complex world. In fact, we envision the discipline in general in terms of a continuum of practice. From this perspective, discrete categories such as “applied” or “theoretical” have no real meaning, because placement on this continuum would depend not on how work gets labeled but, rather, on some measure of the extent of action integrated with theory.

In conclusion, we argue for an inclusive conceptualization of applied anthropology as “anthropology in use,” which more accurately reflects disciplinary reality. It is probably not far from the truth to say that most anthropologists either have done or are doing some form of applied work within their anthropological careers—whether they call it “applied” or not is another matter.

The lines between applied and academic anthropology are far less visible or meaningful today than at any time in the past 50 years. And as Hill notes, traditional and applied anthropologists share “a common ground . . . the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the discipline” (2000:12). As we head into the rapidly changing social landscape of this new century, practice is not an option for anthropology if it is to survive. Practice is part of the disci-

pline’s destiny and needs to be at the center of discussions about anthropology’s future.

Critiques grounded in labeling and othering or those based on dismissal of large portions of anthropologically informed work and erasure of disciplinary history are counterproductive, because they overlook significant areas of creative accomplishment. A meaningful convergence of methodologically sound, critical, reflexive, and engaged anthropology—a convergence that builds on and learns from the extensive past experiences of putting anthropology to use—will free us up to focus on differences that actually do matter in the real world: the compelling divides that separate those who have from those who have not, those who are honored from those who are stigmatized, those wielding disproportionate power from those with limited agency and voice, and those who are central from those who are marginalized.

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NOTES

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1. The earliest known use of the term *applied anthropology*, according to John Bodley (1990:183), was to classify a paper by Sir Bartle Frere, read at a 1881 meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute, which contained a justification based on evolutionary theory for the subordination of indigenous people.
2. We acknowledge Peter Castro for this point about historical continuity within applied anthropology. Barriers to successful application and impact in the contemporary context are discussed in Fetterman 1993; van Willigen et al. 1989; and Wulff and Fiske 1987.
3. Perhaps the most talked-about example is Project Camelot, which was highly problematic and controversial but actually involved only one part-time anthropologist. The ramifications from such Vietnam War-era clandestine activities were significant (see Beals et al. 1967; Horowitz 1967; Wax 1978).
4. Scheper-Hughes (1995) has called for placing ethics and activism at the forefront of engagement. Her recent work on global trafficking in human organs, which involves outreach and activism as well as research, is an example of “anthropology in use.” She has come under criticism from colleagues who argued that “there was no place in anthropology for frank political engagements,” chastising her for “taking a political and a moral (rather than a theoretical position) [*sic*] on my subject” (Scheper-Hughes 2004:35–36).
5. The SFAA Ethics Committee claimed that “authorized spying,” to use Price’s rhetoric, was actually dealing with research that had to be kept secret out of recognition of proprietary interests. Much applied research is owned by the contractor. A case in point was work done for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to plan low-income housing. Making the results of such research public prematurely would result in windfall profits accruing to private sector developers, which would reduce the availability of housing to the poor. A member of the ethics committee who worked for HUD said that to do his job he would have been in conflict with the earlier ethics statement.

6. See <http://www.publicanthropology.org>, accessed on October 4, 2005.

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