

Public Policy as Empowerment through Anthropological Practice:  
Beyond the Research Paradigm

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Printed in Society for Applied Anthropology Newsletter  
February, 2010

<http://www.sfaa.net/newsletter/may10nl.pdf>

I have often been inspired in my applied practice by the work of Paulo Freire (1970). He experienced phenomenal success in his literacy programs in northeast Brazil because he grounded literacy in the routines of everyday life. Literacy was immediately relevant to his students because it came from their experiences and was used as a means of liberation—what Freire called the praxis—a process of reflection and action by which people became conscious of their world so that they could intentionally act upon it. Stated differently he distinguished “culture action for domestication (servitude)” and “cultural action for freedom (empowerment),” a critical distinction if one is to understand the stakes of our anthropological work. In my work and in training others, we use reflection as a central methodological practice, which is the process of holding up a mirror both within our teams and with the people we work with, as Clyde Kluckhohn put it so many years ago (1944). In reference to my mentor, Jim Kent, this conception is echoed in a quote contained in a book of tribute to John Steinbeck’s ability to describe social systems: “Jim Kent understood that once you can interact with your environment, you can then choose from your culture what you need to keep and what you can safely discard. If you cannot interact with your environment, and it is controlled by outsiders, then you will systematically lose your culture and lose your sense of place” (Larsh 1995: 62).

I begin my own reflection about public policy with that introduction because for me applied anthropology has always been about empowerment. In my organization, we define power as “the ability of an individual to predict, participate in and control changes in his or her environment without oppressing others” (Kent 1972: 100). Many definitions of power conceive of it as limited in supply—if I have power then you lose it, or we can “share” power. These conceptions imply strategies of mediation and consensus-building which I would argue have proven unwieldy to deal with many public policy challenges. Our definition says that it is individuals that are the action units of society, not groups, and that if individuals resolve the particular actionable issues that impede their ability to predict, participate in and control changes in their environment, empowerment is experienced that fosters sustainability of the whole. This approach allows progress in areas of policy conflict that to an outsider would appear intractable.

I define applied practice as the varied means used by anthropologists to facilitate social change by working within the existing social systems of a culturally-defined, geographically-based community. It is a process of facilitating reflection and action within everyday routines through which individuals become conscious of their environment so that they become empowered to act upon it for survival, caretaking and maintaining culture. While this definition may not capture all the realms in which applied anthropologists work, its place-based focus for my work is powerful and useful.

This conception may be viewed as a sweeping departure for applied anthropology but it is a departure only in the narrative, not in the substance, of our field. In the narrative, the anthropologist

engages in a research enterprise oriented to practical ends. When the research is complete, attention may shift to policy. The anthropologist begins a process of advocacy for (not with) the set of people under consideration, and becomes one lobbying voice among many voices clamoring for competing spots at the policy table. The paradigm seems to be that sound research persuasively presented will lead to better policy decisions. Alas, I believe most anthropologists will now agree, that assumption is misplaced and unrealistic.

My own answer as to why anthropologists are not more effective in the policy arena is because as a profession we have not placed empowerment as a central goal of applied work, and we have failed to develop an adequate theory of practice or a theory of applied social action.

Rylko-Bauer, Singer and Van Willigen (2006) make the case that applied anthropology is capable of bridging and integrating the diverse strands of the discipline. The key features of a reclaimed applied anthropology are civic engagement (which they believe is a requirement of academia in general), significant contributions to theory, and the development of a theory of practice. It is a theory of practice that is the point of departure for my thesis. The authors define a theory of practice as “a set of principles that predict or explain how knowledge generated by applied research is translated into action” (2006: 185). If applied anthropology is oriented to research directed to practical ends, then the definition is sufficient. But if the applied enterprise is defined more broadly, as I have certainly done, then research is a necessary but insufficient step of many that fosters empowerment and adaptive policy choices. The research paradigm is oriented to the production of “knowledge,” which then becomes a commodity that is marketed in the public policy supermarket. As Freire would say, knowledge is removed from the subject who becomes an object. The subject has been colonized and domesticated once again.

However, the narrative of applied anthropology, if I have not hopelessly mischaracterized it, is not the dominant force. It is in the substance of everyday practice, and the experiences it generates for the many hundreds of applied anthropologists in the field, that is the dominant force for learning in our profession. It is in this realm I believe these words must resonate. Even so, I must ask, why do applied and practicing anthropologists not write more about process? The ways in which we enter a community, develop relationships, and understand how a local community is currently functioning are crucial to our success. The stock and trade of the ethnographer is description of what is—what Steinbeck and Ricketts labeled “is thinking” in their many discussions in Doc’s lab. We want to know how residents communicate, who is highly regarded by others for their communication and caretaking, and the cultural mechanisms by which things get done. We know that such information is the “baseline” from which real change can occur, and further, that change from the “inside out” is more sustainable than change from the “outside in” (Kretzmann and McKnight 1997). Professionals may share experiences about process “anecdotally,” and we may write retrospectives about the process of fieldwork, but as a discipline, we do not seem to value, showcase and include in our theories and methods of practice the *process* of working within cultural systems of community to affect change. For people who experience success in applied work, defined as better conditions on the ground, and especially for the younger members of our profession, I believe these words make visible what is already there, a pronounced shift in applied practice beyond the research paradigm to a true practice.

The learning curve that I believe is going on in the field is beautifully expressed in a recent article by Colfer (2008). She describes a fairly familiar trajectory—entering the field with high energy and commitment, carrying assumptions that eventually are checked and modified, and slowly learning

through time how to work within the culture to foster change that is appropriate and effective. Over a 15-year period in an Indonesian setting related to forest management and indigenous culture, her assumption that providing better information to decision makers about local systems would lead to better decisions gave way to an understanding that decision makers were highly stressed, over-committed, aware of the competing and mutually-exclusive interests with which they had to contend, and were unlikely to read extended ethnographic accounts. She and her team wondered if rural people were “competent to participate in their own development,” a question that later seemed to her “naïve and arrogant” (2008: 274).

The challenge for Colfer and her team was “how to bring about a set of conditions we had identified as important for both sustainable forest management and human wellbeing...” (2008: 276). Here is exactly the legacy of the “applied anthropology as research” approach to our profession and its limitations for policy development. It is an “outside in” approach in which things are done “for” others and not “with” or “through.” As applied goals came into focus for Colfer, behavior on the ground began to look different than the research framework. She and her colleagues began to develop “adaptive collaborative management” approaches that reflected their emerging confidence that rural people did, indeed, have the competence to participate in their own development, and they began to develop approaches that integrated the concerns of local people and the concerns of governments and organizations.

The reason we do not write about process and a theory of action is that we are addicted to a research paradigm that is not sufficient to accomplish applied goals.

The implications are clear. Effective policy development is the outcome of effective community process, facilitated and expedited if possible by anthropological practice, citizens and existing organizations. If we as applied anthropologists are part of the daily routines of a community, and we can see the cultural mechanisms by which people solve their issues, then we can also begin to see, as Colfer did, the kind of change that makes sense. And as we reflect with people around us about conditions in the local social environment and residents become more aware of the local and global forces affecting their situation, they begin to take action on their own behalf, as they always have, except that, perhaps now, actions are a bit different, perhaps more effective, perhaps more widely shared.

This fostering of action, in our work, is a blend of “citizen issues” and “management concerns,” that represent the informal and formal systems of society, respectively. In almost all cases in which we work, responsible institutions conflate these two systems to the detriment of effective policy. The two arenas reflect different social environments. The informal system is cultural, present-time oriented, place-based, and people-centered. The formal system is technical, past-oriented, having the legal authority and funding responsibility, interest-based, and organization-centered. The first functions for survival, caretaking and cultural maintenance, and the second functions for political, economic or ideological control. Both are important but they are different. Effective, sustainable change occurs when there is cultural alignment between informal community systems and formal institutional systems, thus fostering the resilience of each.

Such a process always drives our work, although we get farther in some settings than others. In short-term settings, call it Phase One, we may foster change in day-to-day management, or in the projects of particular agencies. A youth agency designed to serve teen homelessness was unaware of informal networks of adults who were providing support to homeless teens through lodging, jobs,

clothing and food (Preister 1988). The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) assumed in a lead-poisoned superfund site that parents did not care about their children since they had not brought their children forward for medical examinations. It did not understand that residents had no language for explaining “testing for lead” and their views were reinforced by healthy 90 year-old residents in the Superfund site who had gardens all their lives. The health concern of EPA did not align with the environmental knowledge of the people on the site. Stabilizing the disruptive manner in which EPA entered the community was means to getting a fresh start to health considerations (Kent et.al. 1997).

In mid-term settings, Phase Two, we may foster change in programs and in the planning and management approaches of agencies. I managed a team that identified issues and opportunities associated with expanded oil and gas production in northwest New Mexico under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management. Because of the polarized, controversial nature of oil and gas development in the San Juan Basin at the time, it was expected that public meetings would not be a productive way to gauge citizen interests. Instead, the team entered the natural routines to identify informal networks, traditional patterns of communication, and citizen interests. We were able to foster significant reform in oil and gas industry operations. For example, a policy change was created whereby oil producers volunteered \$1000/acre for restoration work, half of which could be applied for by ranching surface-users for restoration work they valued. A number of ranchers became subcontractors to oil companies for the revegetation work and for other aspects of site restoration which were compatible with ranching interests. Their income sources were thereby diversified. These changes were accomplished working through the culture so that residents were active participants in the outcomes (Preister 2001).

In long-term settings, Phase Three, change is fostered in policy at the top of an organization or unit of government. Our for-profit company, James Kent Associates, has worked with the Bureau of Land Management for over 15 years in training programs and direct services, in probably two-thirds of their district offices, to develop and implement community-based planning and management approaches (Preister 2008). BLM purchased a 30-year lease of our Human Geographic Mapping System as a tool in matching management approaches to the culture (Kent 1999). From the broad training of BLM staff and the successes generated on the ground from many sources, including our organization, our BLM allies inserted community-based stewardship approaches into the planning handbook and guidelines at the national level which gives recognition to the significant paradigm shift happening within the agency today. Had we attempted such pronounced change formalistically—either legislatively or administratively through upper management levels, as many policy textbooks would have it, the effort would have collapsed internally. Instead, these changes were accomplished by working within and through the organizational culture of BLM, as well as the cultural systems of rural dwellers in the U.S. West. Positive policy changes followed a social movement for meaningful citizen participation in natural resource decision making.

The non-profit organization of which I am a part uses an applied theory of social action which we call Social Ecology that has been developed over the past 40 years. Social Ecology is the theory and practice of enhancing alignment between formal and informal societal interests to foster balance between the human and physical environments. I will leave for another time a further elaboration of this approach, but some sources are available presently (Preister and Kent 1997, 2001). In light of this discussion, it is worth noting as well that our organization, in conjunction with Southern Oregon University, hosts a yearly summer Field School in Social Ecology and Public Policy in Ashland, Oregon. This program is explicitly designed for graduate students and emerging

professionals in developing and using an applied theory of practice. Please check our website: [www.jkagroup.com/fieldschool](http://www.jkagroup.com/fieldschool).

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