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USING OUR FIELD EXPERIENCES TO BUILD THEORIES OF APPLIED SOCIAL CHANGE—WHY DO WE NOT DO MORE?

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ABSTRACT

The dominant narrative in academic applied anthropology is that we conduct research to solve practical human problems. The dominant practice in the field, however, seems to be that we do research but also engage with people to facilitate change to improve local conditions. In professional practice, I work within existing cultural systems of communication and support to facilitate change through Freire's dialectic of reflection and action. In applied settings with many variable conditions that affect outcome, it remains important to generalize from our practice to develop theories of applied social change so that we learn as we go and our profession is advanced. I outline some theoretical features of my own work and issue a call for dialogue on this challenge within our profession.

The Problem

Why do applied and practicing anthropologists not write more about the process of our work? The ways in which we enter a community, develop relationships, and understand how a local community is currently functioning are crucial to our success. We want to know how residents relate to each other and the outside world, who is highly valued by others for their communication and caretaking, how people organize for survival, and the beliefs, traditions, practices, and stories that embody the culture. We want to know these things so that we can facilitate change that makes sense for local residents, whether it is improving health care, dealing with the impacts of a power line, or fostering economic development.

These practical requirements of fieldwork reflect implicit models of social change that anthropologists use to generate successful outcomes on the ground. As a discipline, however, we do not seem to value and display our theories and methods of practice of working within cultural systems of communities to affect change.

I believe this reluctance stems from our adherence to a traditional research paradigm—born, developed, and reinforced in an academic milieu in which research projects are the stock and trade of the discipline. Although the bulk of employment in anthropology is, and has been for at least four decades, situated within applied settings, status within the field, and dominance of our associations, still resides in academically-based settings. Adherence to a research paradigm is consistent with the dominant narrative of our discipline, that we do research to "generate knowledge" (which is often information, not knowledge) and, secondarily, apply the results to a human problem. The primary purpose is knowledge generation while application becomes a secondary process. The research is the action, and reporting out on that is the knowledge generated from the action. The separation of knowledge and action is the critical flaw in the traditional approach, allowing the anthropologist to remain "pure," but with a cost of limited effectiveness in affecting change.

Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and VanWilligan define a theory of practice as "a set of principles that predict or explain how knowledge generated by applied research is translated into action" (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and VanWilligan 2006:185). That conception is not adequate to describe the non-research functions that we engage, specifically, working within existing cultural systems of communication and support to facilitate change. Pretending that we operate solely within a research framework limits our effectiveness in the policy arena as well. It harkens to an outdated model of applied anthropology which suggests that if applied research is well-done, persuasively presented, and injected into the right setting, the subsequent decisions and policies will be responsive to local interests. In this conception, knowledge is first "produced" and then marketed, while the social processes by which people manage their own environments remain unelucidated (Preister 2004). We may be in a situation in which the dominant narrative revealed by this definition does not reflect the real-world experience of anthropologists in their everyday work. While research is an important component of effective social change initiatives, it is not sufficient to produce sustainable, empowered change in local communities. Research cannot get us to an effective action methodology. Rather, it is discovery of informal community systems and the existing cultural mechanisms by which absorption and engagement are handled that establishes conditions for sustainable, facilitated action.

It is my observation that this dominant narrative misses much of what is really going on in the field, and the more common ways in which applied anthropologists actually conduct themselves. In addition to the many research operations we may perform, many of us are engaged to facilitate change, improve local conditions, manage impacts, and create resilient institutions and communities. The purpose is to strengthen individual and community life in a manner that does not put other people at a disadvantage. The "knowledge generated" in this context is not then applied as a secondary process, as with a more traditional approach, but it is "process knowledge" of how people function currently and how to work within these existing systems to affect change. It is knowledge born of interaction and attention to process. Descriptive articles in *Practicing Anthropology* are replete with excellent understanding of these basic points, yet the translation of these experiences into theories of applied social change with which to guide our field is not forthcoming. Nolan (2013) reinforces this point that has long been proffered in applied anthropology—the rich vein of applied work, often termed "fugitive literature," never makes it into the mainstream of our discipline because the exigencies of applied practice do not lend themselves to routine publishing.

The learning curve 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 through the culture to foster action that is appropriate and effective. In an Indonesian setting related to forest management and indigenous culture over a 15-year period, her assumption that providing better information (not knowledge) 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" (Colfer 2008:274).

The challenge for Colfer and her team was "how to bring about a set of conditions *we [the anthropologists] had identified* as important for both sustainable forest management and human wellbeing. . . ." (Colfer 2008:276, emphasis added). Here exactly is 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" or "to" others and not "with" or "through" them. 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. This understanding was the product of their interaction, not of their research. They began to develop approaches that integrated the issues of local people and the concerns of governments and other organizations.

There is little in the literature that takes learning, such as Colfer's, and draws the theoretical and methodological implications from it. Instead, it seems to be the case, that each of us is doomed to learn Colfer's lessons for ourselves in our own locales, without comparing notes or learning from others. For theories of applied social change oriented to empowerment, engagement and participation, Action Anthropology as espoused by Sol Tax in the 1950s, and as still employed by second and third generation practitioners, comes closest to offering a way forward. Stapp's (2012) edited volume speaks powerfully of the tenets of action anthropology and their continued relevance in today's settings. However, the need to go beyond the colonial context of Tax's contribution and to develop theories and methods of a universal professional practice remains.

Social Ecology as One Response

In my applied practice, my colleagues and I have engaged in continuous theory building over the years, as well as methodological refinement, based on our experiences in engaging various social change projects. These projects have ranged from natural resource management, to economic growth, energy development, innovative governance, urban redevelopment, poverty reduction, health care, educational reform and human service delivery. We have served many people in varied and unique geographical settings. I will treat Social Ecology as a starting point for the conversation I want to stimulate with practitioners. I define applied practice as:

> the varied means used by anthropologists to foster social change by working within the existing social systems of a culturally-defined, geographically-based local community. It is a process of facilitating reflection and action within everyday routines through which individuals become conscious of their environment so that they can empower themselves to act upon it for survival, caretaking and maintaining culture. (Preister 2010:25)

While this definition may not capture all the realms in which anthropology is applied, its place-based focus for my work is powerful and useful.

Reflection and action are the dialectic concepts proposed by Paolo Freire (1970) in his theory of education. Education that is colonizing and dehumanizing he called the "banking" theory of education—students are empty and the teacher fills them with knowledge, a process of oppression in Freire's view. Instead, Freire proposed a praxis theory of education. As people reflect on and become conscious of their conditions, they became aware of possible actions that would improve their situation. They practice such actions, reflect, and the process continues. Years ago, when my teacher, James A. Kent, was interviewed, he said 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" (cited in Larsh 1995:62). While Schön (1983) has offered valuable insights to anthropologists and other professionals about the reflective process of the professional, my interest has been the value of reflection by individuals in their place-based settings about their situation, past changes in their environment, what would make life better and options for the future.

From my perspective, the central question related to the development of theories of applied social change at the present time is:

> In situations of intentional social change, in which a new project, program, or policy is initiated by our government or corporate client, what are the theoretical and methodological means by which practicing anthropologists work to optimize the social, economic, and ecological benefits of the change initiative with individuals in place-based communities?

Notice that this statement narrows the scope of the term "social change" to settings in which a government or corporation initiates a project (e.g., a water development project), a program (e.g., a stewardship contracting program of the U.S. Forest Service), or a policy (e.g., a national policy with a variety of measures designed to limit greenhouse gases). The constraints of the definition allow a focus on social change that is empirical, time-bound, and manageable.

In my organization, the Center for Social Ecology and Public Policy (CSEPP), located in Ashland, Oregon, we have developed a theory and methodology over the years that we call Social Ecology (Preister and Kent 1997). Social Ecology is defined as a reflective process of individuals becoming conscious of their environment to foster actions that optimize benefits of intentional change in order to sustain bio-social ecological systems through the integration of informal and formal cultural systems. Our work is guided by the following five principles, which we believe are the building blocks for creating sustainable, positive programs in applied social change.

- **Principle One—Individual power is essential for maintaining the productivity of the human environment.** Power is the ability of the individual to understand, participate in, predict, and control his or her environment (Kent 1972:100). Individual power, even in communal societies, is essential to maintain a vigorous community and a healthy relationship among citizens, industry, and government. In our work, we identify "citizen issues"—statements an individual makes that can be acted upon—and we encourage our clients to resolve them in order to meet their own objectives but also to strengthen community life. When individuals are able to resolve their issues they are empowered (Preister and Kent 1997).

- **Principle Two—People everywhere develop an attachment to a geographic place characterized by a set of natural boundaries created by physical, biological, social, cultural, and economic systems (a *<u>bio-social</u>* ecosystem)**. Human-geographic boundaries that reflect this attachment are natural management boundaries. These "natural borders" reflect the ways in which people actually relate with and use their landscape, so their use fosters effective public engagement and greater efficiency and effectiveness in government or corporate programs. In a recent publication, we showed how human geographic mapping can be applied to climate change policy at different geographic scales to mobilize people for change (Kent and Preister 2010). The Bureau of Land Management in eastern Washington, which manages about a half million acres spread out over the eastern two-thirds of the state, used our human geographic units as planning units and to organize its public involvement program (Preister, Malone, Darsow 2010). Fig. 1 shows two scales of human geography, the Social Resource Unit (SRU), a regional unit, and the Human Resource Unit (HRU), a smaller scale unit generally the size of a county. An HRU is derived from the use of seven Cultural Descriptors: settlement patterns, publics, informal networks, work routines, support services, leisure time activities, and geographic features (Kent and Preister 1999). An SRU is the aggregation of HRUs based on river basins or geological province.

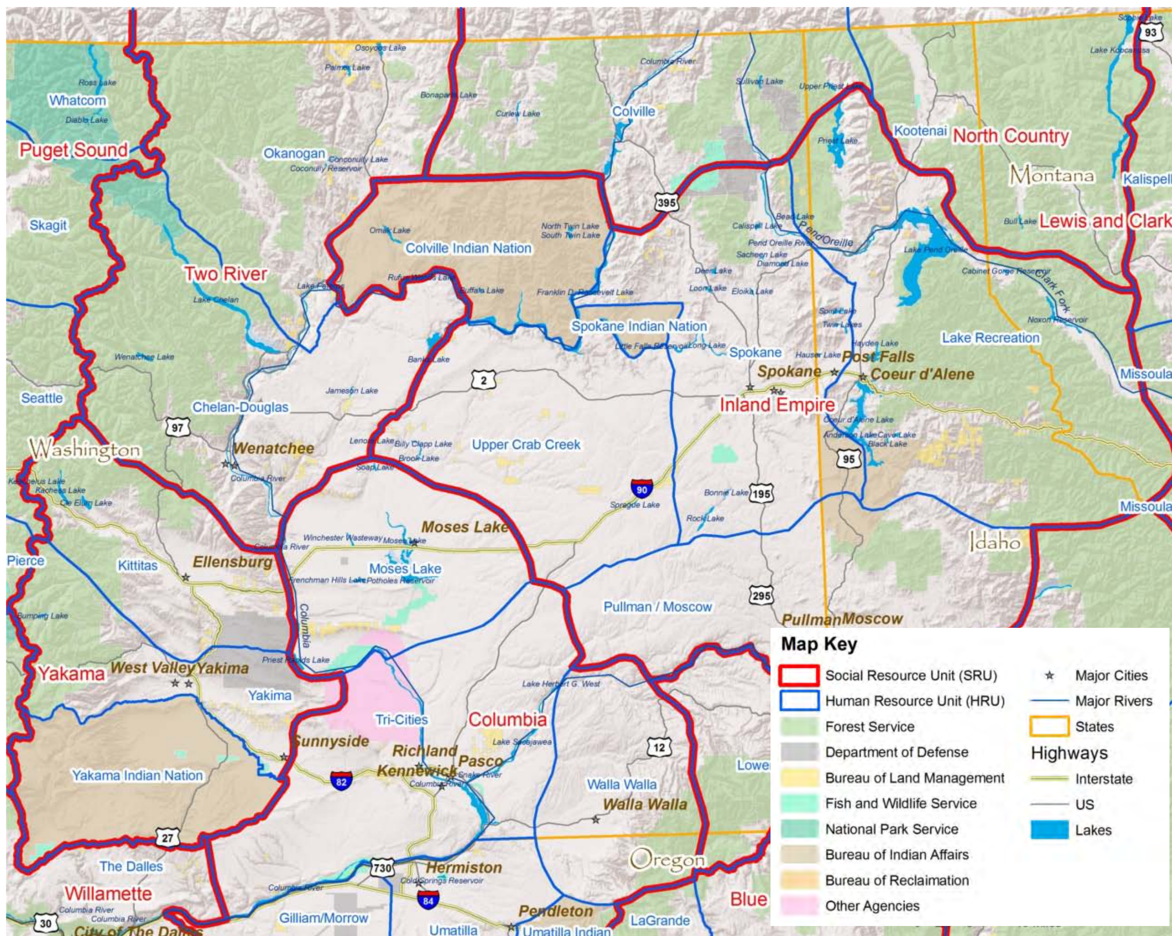

Fig. 1. The Social Resource Units (SRUs, in bold) and the Human Resource Units (HRUs, in black) of Eastern Washington state. ©2014 James Kent Associates.

- **Principle Three—Unique beliefs, traditions, and stories tie people to a specific place, to the land, and to social/kinship networks.** Informal networks and caretaking systems form the social capital by which communities sustain themselves. Once we are grounded in these informal systems, it becomes more difficult for outside interest groups or more extreme voices to dominate the discourse. The incentive for our clients to do "the right thing" in fostering community benefit is that they are less subject to the vagaries of political processes. The formal processes become more routine and less charged if the interests of people in the grass roots have been addressed. For example, large segments in Hawaii have been opposed to development. Local people have been subject to high taxes, high land and housing prices, low wages, and visitor impacts. They have become skilled at fighting development and have formed organizations to lobby for their interests. When we were hired by a developer to identify issues and facilitate their resolution as a means to build public support, had we gone in and announced a series of meetings to get residents' best ideas for responsive development proposals, we would have been attacked; the situation would have polarized; and it would have been difficult to have normal conversations about the topic. Instead, as anthropologists do, we first operated through participant observation, frequenting the gathering places and getting into the routines of daily life. As we identified ourselves and our purpose, we kept asking, "How would development be done here in a way that would make a difference for you?" Over time, people's reactions changed from suspicious to skeptical to positive. They knew we worked for the "bad guy" but they saw us every day, they came to know that we were "okay" and they began to see they could influence the process. What began as a private beach club (anathema to Hawaiians) and a high-end development became instead a pedestrian village, with live-work units by which Hawaiians could get their own store front, a range of all housing costs that anyone could buy into, a pedestrian orientation, and practical shops for everyday people, not just the high-end shops. These were all elements that local people had identified for us. As the formal review process began, we watched as opposition people one by one peeled away from the monolithic opposition groups they were a part of; strong support for the project was the outcome.

- **Principle Four—Since humans and nature rely on shared landscapes, the current status of "productive harmony" must be described** (the balance of physical/social environments as called for by the National Environmental Policy Act [NEPA]) (Preister and Kent 2001). A descriptive approach focused simply on "what is" (what John Steinbeck called "is thinking" [Larsh 1995]) is a beginning point of any successful change initiative—"How does this community work?" The best opportunities for adaptive change are through the cultural alignment of the informal and formal systems operating in place-based communities. For example, our firm contracted with Washoe County, Nevada, to develop an Issue Management program in the 1990s. Community fieldwork revealed widespread issues about potholes in the roads, and further, that people thought a gas tax would be all right to fix the potholes. When county planners heard our report, they began making a list of all the things a gas tax could pay for. When we countered and said the "social license to operate" was only for a gas tax for potholes, they ended up agreeing and the action went forward. Had they promoted an aggressive gas tax to pay for other county business, they would not have had support (James Kent Associates 2002). In our experience, initiatives deriving from only the informal or only the formal levels of society do not work very well. It is when informal (horizontal, oriented to caretaking, survival and cultural values) and formal (vertical, oriented to political, economic and ideological control) systems are in alignment that long-term sustainable action is achieved.

- **Principle Five. Social Ecology is not only a scientific enterprise of ethnographic description (which we term for our clients the Discovery Process™—"What's out there?") but an action methodology (which we term Human Geographic Issue Management Systems™—"What do I do with it?") that builds citizen and institutional capacity for creating and enhancing healthy environments.** When change programs work well, both informal and formal systems become more resilient. The ability of local people to care for themselves and their families are enhanced by the action, and formal organizations such as a government unit or corporate has stronger support, lower costs, and more legitimacy.

Broadening the Dialogue

If our shared goal is to "optimize the benefits of change," then surely ongoing dialogue about what works and does not work in the various contexts of our applied settings is in order. The variable contexts we experience include the length of the project, the nature of our client (government, corporate, community), the legal framework within which decisions are made, auxiliary resources that may be brought to bear, the history of empowerment/disempowerment embedded within the local culture, and the intrusion or absorption of outside forces. The experiential nature of theory building in the context of applied social change projects comes from the heart of reflection and professional dialogue.

The bright spot of the dilemma in our field described in this brief paper is the wide range of settings in which applied anthropologists are working in today. Such extensive and intensive applied work should allow us to practice new ways of understanding and new ways to facilitate responsive action in emerging projects, programs and policies.

The challenges of the twenty-first century should propel the applied anthropology profession to broaden and deepen its skills set so that we continue to be useful. The megacities developing in the southern hemisphere, the importance of limiting and accommodating climate change, the integration of ecological and economic factors in promoting better human conditions, the ongoing legacies of racism and classism—these all invite our participation and contribution. No matter where one looks on the planet, the commingling of populations, the confrontations of in-groups and out-groups, and the contrasting cultural perspectives brought to bear on any human problem can be observed.

The trends in society that are being manifested in new forms of citizen engagement worldwide has set in motion the need for anthropologists to step forward in a new context to be first-hand participants in this trend. It is essential that we redefine our anthropological profession in terms of the reality that we face in today's world. People, on a universal scale, are demanding participation in the ecosystems in which they live, prediction of the events that affect their lives and control over their immediate environment to improve their lives.

Conclusion

Our profession of practicing, applied and action anthropology would benefit from a concerted focus on theories and methods guiding our engagement with place-based communities and with their attendant organizations. Many of our colleagues go beyond research operations to actively engage, facilitate and encourage needed change by working within these existing cultural systems of adaptation.

We must first recognize that applied anthropology is more than just research for knowledge sake. As professional agents of social change, we first describe and then work within existing cultural systems of adaptation and survival operating in place-based communities. Such recognition does not mean we are social workers, as Gross and Plattner (2002) would have us believe. Our cultural perspective, methods and desired outcomes go well beyond the social work mission.

We must also be clear about our goals, and then we should be active in developing the abstractions necessary to develop general theories about the process of applied social change. Even for trained professionals, such abstraction does not always come easily, nor is it supported in the marketplace within which we operate. Nevertheless, this is the means by which we can move beyond *ad hoc* "stories from the field," or approaches tied to specific individuals, and create a truly universal profession that will attract students interested in a defined career track that has meaning and direction. As a profession, we must continue to practice and to teach the next generation in anthropology techniques that serve the trajectory of our society. To survive and prosper in an exciting twenty-first century paradigm is our mission. The arch of civilization consistently moves toward social justice and so must we.

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