

## Theories of Practice in Anthropology: A Critical Appraisal

Marietta L. Baba

Applied physics is engineering, and applied anthropology is social work.

—A. L. Kroeber<sup>1</sup>

Applied research is viewed by a majority of anthropologists as less profound, less scientifically valid, and hence less worthy of applause than research seen as having no immediate practical ends. [Foster 1969:131]

Applied endeavor in anthropology is typically viewed as lacking in intellectual rigor, ethically suspect, unimaginative, bereft of theoretical sophistication. [Chambers 1987:309]

Through the years anthropologists have engaged in criticism of applied anthropology, [the first being] that applied anthropology has *no theory of its own* and that it borrows only superficial ideas from academic or scholarly anthropology or other disciplines. [Bennett 1996:S30, emphasis in the original]

### Some Anomalies

To sample from reflections on the intellectual status of applied anthropology over the past half-century is to be reminded that the knowledge content of practice still is not appreciated or valued inside our discipline. Reading the potent ideas and arguments for a theory of practice found in the literature of applied anthropology,<sup>2</sup> and then realizing that applied knowledge does not contribute significantly to the emergent theoretical core of the discipline, gives one the cold understanding that practitioners have not yet succeeded in establishing practice as a mature arm within anthropology. The maturation of practice in a discipline means that lessons learned in application are seized upon by theorists as a means to sharpen their understanding and to gain fresh insights into new and old phenomena (see Bastide 1971; Foster 1969). This is the way it is in medicine, psychology, the natural sciences, and even economics.

Unfortunately, it is not this way in anthropology. Applied anthropologists continue to do research and publish (often in isolation from one another), but as Bennett (1996) forcefully demonstrates, our discoveries seem to have little or no impact on the intellectual direction of anthropology. There is a profound disconnect between applied work and theory, with both theorists and applied anthropologists often failing to understand the importance of applied knowledge as a foundation for theoretical development. Sometimes it seems as if the only value that applied work is

accorded inside anthropology is that of a pedestrian marker identifying locations where graduates might find employment.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the employment of large numbers of graduates outside the academy drives the point home. Despite the inevitability of their nonacademic destinations, most graduates of traditional departments are not required to study applied anthropology. Colleagues in those departments argue that there is no "fifth subdiscipline," only the original four (Bennett 1996). Students may wander into practice by happenstance, but there is no need to train in this area. The implication is that there is nothing of anthropological value to be learned in the no-man's-land of application.

That the knowledge content of applied\* work appears to have value only to nonanthropologists is ironic, but it may be an outcome that we ourselves helped to engineer. Definitions of applied anthropology found in the works cited above suggest that the practical endeavor is something that exists primarily to serve others. For instance,

Applied anthropology is the phrase commonly used by professional anthropologists to describe their professional activities in programs that have as their primary goal changes in human behavior . . . *rather than the development of social and cultural theory.* [Foster 1969:54, emphasis added]

Applied anthropology [is] the field of inquiry concerned with the relationships between anthropological knowledge and the uses of that knowledge *in the world beyond anthropology.* [Chambers 1987:309, emphasis added]

The term 'applied anthropology' . . . refer(s) mainly to the employment of anthropologists by organizations involved in inducing change or enhancing human welfare. . . . *The goal is not to produce general theory but to solve problems.* [Bennett 1996:S25, S28, emphasis added]

These definitions imply that we practitioners view our work as beneficial primarily to those outside the discipline and of lesser importance inside anthropology. (In fact, our role inside anthropology is not mentioned in these definitions.) This perspective reflects a limited theoretical framework that interferes with the potential contributions of applied anthropology. If we conceive of our own work in this way, it is small wonder that the knowledge we gain seldom is repatriated to the academic home of the discipline.<sup>4</sup>

The premise of this essay is that an actualized theory of practice in anthropology requires quite a different conception of the applied endeavor. If we embraced seriously such a theory, we would turn these definitions inside out and point them directly at anthropology. While the knowledge of application still would be gained through an interaction between anthropology and action outside the discipline, the greatest knowledge value would be realized when the lessons learned came back home again.

It is my contention that applied anthropologists in America have participated in a process that alienates our knowledge from the discipline, first by defining our practice as basically external to anthropology, then by

structuring our work in ways that makes integration with theoretical anthropology difficult if not impossible, and finally by refusing to take seriously our own arguments about the theoretical significance of practice (i.e., seriously enough to actualize them).

In this chapter, I explore several distinctive theories of practice that have emerged within anthropology and examine their implementation and interactions over time. Our review will suggest that theory and practice are connected in ways that are poorly understood and possibly even obfuscated, either consciously or unconsciously, within the discipline. An argument for the interdependence of theory and practice will be advanced, an argument that points toward a future course for applied and practicing anthropology that is different from the path that has been taken in the latter part of the 20th century. All of this will remind us that our conceptualization of applied anthropology in America is culturally constructed, an aspect of our disciplinary subculture that can be subjected to cultural criticism.

### What Is a Theory of Practice, and Why Do We Need One?

In the West there is broad acceptance of the idea that a discipline (a formal body of knowledge) should have some utility within its social context. The positivist movement that gave rise to the traditions of modern science was founded on the premise that systematic knowledge of the objective universe would bring benefits to humanity (Copleston 1993). A discipline's members who are responsible for the instrumental or functional utility of a discipline's knowledge base are called practitioners. They exist in virtually every modern field of inquiry (e.g., psychology, political science, economics, even history and philosophy). Usually, in such disciplines there are systems of ideas that connect the discipline, and society, to its practice.

In economics, for example, there is a system of ideas that suggests that society wants to know how to allocate scarce resources efficiently, that economics provides knowledge to enable this allocation, and that practitioners should be deployed to support the allocation process at the micro and macro levels. Similarly, in psychology, there are both widely accepted notions about the social problems that derive from abnormal psychological processes and specific theoretical constructs that validate the efficacy of psychotherapy in ameliorating these problems. A *theory of practice* is a set of ideas that explains and legitimates the role of practice inside and outside the discipline. A theory of practice answers questions such as: What is the *use value* of the discipline, and to whom? Upon what foundation does this value reside? How can this value be further developed and implemented? Answers to these questions are valuable in the following ways:

*Defining the Interdependence of Theory and Practice.* A theory of practice explains the necessary relationships that exist between theoretical knowl-