Introduction: Transferring Anthropological Skills to Applied Health Research

Rachael Gooberman-Hill, Isabel de Salis and Jónína Einarsdóttir

This issue of *Anthropology in Action* examines the relationship between conventional anthropological methods and those used by anthropologists working in applied health research. Three of the articles were originally presented at a workshop at the 2006 conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, while a fourth (Poehlman) addresses related themes and sits well alongside those from the workshop.

The ambivalent relation between applied (including activist) anthropology and academic (so-called ‘pure’ or conventional) anthropology has been well documented. The academic versus applied division can be traced back at least half a century (Baba and Hill 2006; Pink 2006; Sillitoe 2006). Additionally, contrasts between ‘centre’ versus ‘periphery’ and ‘pure’ versus ‘interdisciplinary’ have emerged more recently.

In their edited volume *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*, Ribeiro and Escobar refer to the academic ‘centre’ of anthropology, identified by Gupta and Ferguson (1997), as ‘hegemonic’ or ‘dominant’ anthropology. This anthropology, Ribeiro and Escobar argue, consists of ‘the set of discursive formation and institutional practices associated with the normalization of academic anthropology chiefly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France’ (2006:7). Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have also highlighted the devaluation of applied and activist anthropology within the conventional ‘hegemonic’ tradition, and argue that the history of anthropological theory is mainly or only concerned with anthropology as ‘pure’ and as practiced in the United States, Britain, and France. This ‘pure’ anthropology belongs to the academic ‘centre’ while other traditions belong to the ‘periphery’ (see Gerholm 1995).

The divide between ‘pure’ anthropology and interdisciplinary approaches is slowly revealing itself. Bunzl (2005) gives a historical account of mainstream American anthropology during the last forty years. He confirms that ‘radical demands to transform anthropology into an applied science on behalf of the disenfranchised never came to dominate the discipline’ (ibid: 190). Bunzl also pays attention to ‘transdisciplinary invocations’, pointing out that in *Writing Culture*, Clifford had argued that ‘to do something interdisciplinary it’s not enough to choose a “subject” (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one’ (Bunzl 2005: 192). Whether this has ever been achieved is perhaps subject to debate.

However, in spite of the potential for tensions, several authors have highlighted a blurring of boundaries between applied and conventional anthropology as well as between disciplines. For instance, Baba and Hill maintain that ‘evidence supports the view that anthropology in the United States is evolving toward a model of practice that tends to blur distinctions between “pure” and applied, as well as one that creates new forms of the disci-
pline with synergistic combinations of theory and practice in anthropology and cognate disciplines’ (Baba and Hill 2006: 200). Furthermore, Rylko-Bauer, Singer and van Willigen (2006: 184) highlight that many fields of specialisation within anthropology have roots in applied research. For instance, applied work has contributed to the existence of medical anthropology, a subfield of anthropology that has influenced theory building in anthropology and public health.

While multidisciplinarity tends to be celebrated, and boundaries may be blurred, this synergy is not without problems. Sillitoe laments that ‘it is difficult now to distinguish between much anthropological and sociological work, except on the grounds that practitioners of the former may be sympathetic to cross-cultural comparison and have some familiarity with non-Western ethnographic classics’ (Sillitoe 2007: 150). Sillitoe, who is a fierce advocate of applied anthropology, calls for a common definition of anthropology and argues: ‘if we wish to think about applied anthropology as opposed to applied social studies, we have to specify the difference’ (ibid.: 150).

Recent writing has therefore stressed the dynamic, unfolding relationships between categories such as centre and periphery, conventional and applied, ‘pure’ anthropology and multidisciplinarity. As anthropologists increasingly engage in applied research that includes collaboration, activism and multidisciplinarity, their experiences have the potential to shed light on the relationships between these categories. Does this engagement imply that the recognised antagonism between applied/activist and conventional anthropology is fading away? Are we entering the era of true interdisciplinarity?

This volume addresses the questions and issues raised above. All four articles describe the process of transferring anthropological skills to applied health research. In the first article, Harris discusses the application of anthropological skills and approaches in a Health Services Research (HSR) project in the U.K. The second and third articles (Heckler and Russell; Poehlman) both address the conduct of participatory or collaborative research, the former in the U.K. and the latter in Malawi. Finally, in the fourth article, Bukovčan describes how she became an activist as well as an anthropologist during her research into complementary and alternative medicine in Croatia. All authors deal explicitly with methodological issues in ethnographic or qualitative health research.

Harris looks at the challenges and issues arising when anthropologists have to adapt the ways they collect, analyse and report their work in order to fit in with the prevailing norms of multidisciplinary health research. Her article discusses methodological issues as well as underlying conceptual differences between anthropology and other disciplines. Harris includes personal as well as professional experience to reflect on the methodological and conceptual differences between anthropology and health research, as well as her journey as an anthropologist from conventional to multidisciplinary, applied work. Whereas current anthropological training encourages reflexivity, exploring the impact of personal experience on research is not necessarily a normal part of the research process in multidisciplinary projects. Harris shows how anthropological emphasis on reflexivity may bring greater insight into the processes and findings of multidisciplinary health research.

Heckler and Russell also reflect on working in applied health research in the U.K., describing the detail of a collaborative project that took place within a tobacco control office in north-east England. The authors argue that the standard model for collaborative research presupposes differences—for instance of power, education and culture—between researchers and participants. However, in their project there were no such obvious differentials beforehand, and challenges included the possibility that some participants could assume ‘undue influence’ over the research project. To manage this situation, the authors partially reinstated the boundaries between object and subject that were
originally dissolved as part of the collaborative model. Maintaining a plurality of voices has meant a new form of integrative and collaborative paradigm.

The third article, by Poehlman, also addresses the detail of collaborative approaches. Poehlman focuses on the development of multidisciplinary methods incorporating ethnography and statistics in order to evaluate community workshops about HIV/AIDS in Malawi. Like Heckler and Russell, he also questions the participatory paradigm: his findings show that consensus is not necessarily an outcome of community participatory workshops. Both of these articles therefore show how approaches that are widely used in applied research are subject to question and require deeper investigation.

Finally, we return to the role of the researcher in Bukovčan’s article as she describes how her anthropological methods led her to become an activist. Bukovčan investigated the use of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in post-communist Croatia. Her research explored people’s attitudes towards illness, health, well-being and suffering as well as the factors that determined the choice of therapies and healers. Bukovčan observed the shift from a monolithic, state-controlled medicine dominated by biomedical discourse within which choice was absent, to pluralism. In this new arena, medical practice was outside state control and all forms of private practice—including CAM—could be chosen and bought. However, Bukovčan argues that there is a paradox between the visibility of CAM and its recent popularity in present day Croatia, and the secrecy that surrounds use of CAM. While attending to the silence surrounding the use of CAM in a relatively hostile society, Bukovčan was propelled from a position of observing ethnographer to that of listening therapist and social activist as well. She argues that through the process of understanding and interpreting sensitive cultural practices anthropologists are uniquely placed to actively protect the rights of people to whom they owe their science.

All the articles in this volume reflect a project or process involved with effecting change. Participatory research aims to develop ‘knowledge for action’ (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995: 1667), and all the authors describe change of some sort. This change includes altered understanding or application of existing paradigms as well as shifts in the way that role in research is conceptualised. Research role is key here, and it can be argued that anthropology’s conventional emphasis on reflexivity and questioning rather than the acceptance of existing categories or paradigms makes anthropologists particularly well placed to influence the course, outcome and potential impact of applied research. Lambert and McKevitt (2002) have already argued that anthropology and anthropologists are well placed to question categories in health research, and the articles in this volume attest to this.

The articles published here reflect increasingly blurred boundaries between applied and academic anthropology as well as a trend towards multidisciplinarity. The authors report on their experience of adapting their methodologies and practices to an applied field and collaboration with other disciplines. They build on their former skills and retain an anthropological identity while maintaining a degree of flexibility and broadness of vision in order to incorporate new concepts and approaches. The authors refuse to allow the former antagonism between applied/activist and conventional anthropology to define their position, and those who take part in multidisciplinary research hold on to their reflexive stance.

Rachael Gooberman-Hill is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bristol and is an academic visitor at the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, University of Oxford. Her email is: R.Gooberman-Hill@bristol.ac.uk

Isabel de Salis is Research Associate at the University of Bristol. Her email is: isabel.desalis@bristol.ac.uk
Jónína Einarsdóttir is Professor in Anthropology at the University of Iceland. Her email is je@hi.is

Note

1. Interestingly, Paul Nhwi (2006) points out in the same volume that the Pan African Anthropological Association, established in 1989, did so under the banner of applied anthropology; and that the discipline should be used to resolve problems and improve conditions of life.

References


