The ASA’s Network of Applied Anthropologists (Apply) held a panel session at the ASA’s decennial conference in Edinburgh, June 2014. Entitled ‘Facing Outwards: Anthropology Beyond Academia’, the panel welcomed papers that addressed anthropological work and co-work outside conventional academic anthropology. The session was convened by Mary Adams (Kings College London) and Rachael Gooberman-Hill (University of Bristol), and three presenters provided an engaged audience with examples of their work. The presentations fuelled discussion about relationships in research and practice and the translation of anthropological ideas for non-anthropological audiences.

Joseph (Joe) Long described his work as researcher in residence at Scottish Autism. He talked about how he worked to foster practitioner research and build a community of practice that identified and recognised the knowledge already held by practitioners. Anthropological approaches enabled him to engender participatory approaches and to work with their expertise, for instance their knowledge of service provision for people with autism. Joe also spoke of the need to articulate the value of ethnography and qualitative research, a sentiment that resonates with my own role in applied health research in which clarity about the benefit of particular approaches can be key to ensuring their acceptability in multidisciplinary setting.

The second speaker was Roxana Morosanu, who is in the final stages of her PhD at Loughborough University. She presented some of her work in a larger project within which she conducted video-tours of homes in the U.K. The larger project was about home energy consumption, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC). Roxana showed engaging footage of one of the tours, focusing on the importance of ‘serendipitous discovery’ in the process and the importance of rapport. In the discussion, Roxana explained how her work was able to highlight to engineers that home energy consumption needed to be considered in light of whether members of the household were using their home as a workspace, or whether they were working outside the home. It was good to have a reminder of the privilege that participants so often afford to fieldworkers, allowing us into their homes and discussing lives behind closed doors. Roxana reflected that the encounters that take place in engaged research are not necessarily all that different to those that take place in research that is not explicitly labelled as ‘applied’.

In the final talk Zemirah (Zem) Moffat, of Insightful Moves, described her role as a professional declutterer, in which she helps people to remove unwanted, and perhaps overwhelming, ‘clutter’ from their homes. She talked of the tools she uses to enable people to achieve the decluttering that they desire, and of the need to tailor her approach to individuals and the importance of personal motivation: the decluttering process can only be driven by the individual themselves and trust between her and clients is paramount to her work. Zem draws on her ethnographic and filmmaking training, asking people what they think of representations and helping them to keep what is ‘most important to their senses of self’.

Taken as a whole, the panel enabled the audience to think about the value of anthropological approaches when engaged beyond academia. We were encouraged to think about the role of participation, expertise of participants and the way in which research and practice so often rely on trust and partnership. The panel session also enabled us to think about how anthropological approaches could make a difference, whether to practice, to energy research or to individuals’ lives. Speakers provided three different examples, but each showed with great clarity how anthropology has a strong presence outside the academy.