

USING ANTHROPOLOGY IN POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

Kirk L. Gray

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The Rand Corporation
Santa Monica, California 90406

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For just over four years, I have been employed by The Rand Corporation to monitor community reaction and unanticipated by-products of one phase of the Experimental Housing Allowance Program (EHAP) funded by the Office of Policy Development and Research, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Based on site in Brown County, Wisconsin, I have been part of a large multidisciplinary team investigating the effects of direct cash assistance to low- and moderate-income households on the marketplace. The Housing Assistance Supply Experiment (HASE) is the largest of three HUD experiments to test the feasibility of housing allowances as a component of national housing policy.

To give you some idea of scale, HASE employs approximately 400 professional researchers and managers, fields 10,000 to 12,000 survey instruments annually, with an estimated 36 million answers, and disburses housing allowances averaging about \$70 monthly to more than 7,000 households in two experimental sites--Brown County, Wisconsin, and St. Joseph County, Indiana.

*Presented at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Central States Anthropological Society, South Bend, Indiana, 24 March 1978.

The planned five-year monitoring period should allow the local housing markets to adapt fully to a permanent increase in resources for housing consumption, barring other disturbances. In the two experimental sites, Rand conducted extensive baseline surveys that gathered systematic data on preprogram conditions in the local market and community. Subsequent annual surveys of homeowners, tenants, and owners of rental properties, providing information on the changes induced by the experiment, are incorporated into the research agenda. In addition, information on client characteristics and behavior is confidentially recorded on data tapes kept by the Housing Allowance Office, the administering agency of the program, and used to relay information about the effects of allowances on that population.

To supplement the data gathered by the annual surveys and to give program managers timely information relevant to the successful administration of the program, Rand placed a full-time "resident observer" at each site. The observer's assignment is "to gather informal [information] about community reactions to the allowance program and to provide early warnings of possible difficulties." The original design document envisioned that the resident observer would "spend much of his time on the street and attending meetings of civic and other local interest groups, reading local newspapers, and following events in City Hall."*

As designed, the duties of the resident observer included many traditional activities of the applied anthropologist. Much of the anthropologist's methodology centers on rapport building--which involves

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spending time "on the street and attending meetings." In turn, virtually any hardworking anthropologist seeks out local history and opinion through newspapers and all other available local sources of public and not-so-public opinion. The observer's position--and, indeed, most policy research positions--are unique in the guarantee of technical support and professional interdependence, as well as the provision of focus, thus resolving important dilemmas that hamper traditional anthropological studies.

The role of each researcher is dwarfed by the size of the experimental endeavor; collectively, however, individual responsibilities are intermeshed to produce reliable and credible answers to broad research questions: How do mortgage lenders, insurance companies, and real estate brokers respond to an allowance program? What mix of price increases and housing improvements results from a housing allowance program? What factors influence the decision of allowance recipients to move or to stay? How are households not receiving housing allowances--particularly those whose incomes are within or just above the range of eligibility--affected by the program?* Rand's research team consists of professionals from many disciplines with skills enabling them to respond accurately to such interdependent questions. My participation as the only anthropologist on the team is worth examining here, for it presents certain challenges not inherent in traditional anthropology.

Much of the policy research being conducted across the country today uses a small on-site staff of researchers and a home office where the

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bulk of the analysis is performed. For the Housing Assistance Supply Experiment, Rand has two small site staffs (one in each experimental community) that are responsible for the day-to-day management of the experiment and monitoring relevant community reaction. The majority of the HASE researchers, working at Rand's headquarters in California, are from disciplines dissimilar to anthropology--economics, statistics, policy analysis, management science, survey research. In addition, those disciplines share a track record considerably longer than that of anthropology in policy-relevant research.

The site staffs employ professionals with skills necessary for daily management, continuous monitoring, and limited analysis. In Brown County, for instance, the site staff consists of a Ph.D. policy analyst/political scientist, a B.A. urban planner, an executive assistant, and myself, an M.A. anthropologist. By the nature of my role, I am one of only a handful of professional researchers who have continuous contact with the experimental community and, as such, I am often required to draw inferences that affect the HASE research effort, program management, and administration, and that may affect the eventual decisionmaking process. Those inferences, the result of continuous in-the-field monitoring, are reported in formal, regular research documents disseminated to Rand project personnel to stimulate discussion about community reactions to the allowance program as well as to merely document such reactions.

Quarterly research reports, generally entailing at least 40 pages of description and analysis of community and allowance program relationships, represent one of my significant new skills. Because most of the

researchers who will eventually make the policy recommendations are not on site, it is important that the research reports be written in a style that simply, concisely, and effectively communicates complex ideas and unusual situations encountered on site to aid researchers who have little other site contact. I learned quickly that I had to drop the jargon we use in our journals and graduate school banter. The concept of a culture core, while impressive at martini time, means nothing to an economist accustomed to dealing with marketplace theories of income distribution, unless it is described in a mutually understood language.

Unlike the traditional ethnography where the anthropologist can work with few encumbrances other than those imposed by the community being studied, the anthropologist in a policy research endeavor such as the Experimental Housing Allowance Program must develop what I will term a *sense of client*. To whom is the research responsible, and for what purposes will the data be used? What are the policymakers' specific objectives in conducting the research? How can the anthropologist use his special skills to become a viable part of the policymaking process? Although the accumulation of general knowledge about a given subject customary in traditional ethnography is interesting, if it does not meaningfully relate to specific research questions, you are not fulfilling your contractual obligations.

Policy research is undertaken with the idea that its results will help a decisionmaker choose between alternative courses of action to accomplish planned social change. Such a goal differs from that of traditional or basic social science, which seeks only to explain a

phenomenon with little foresight as to its application to public policy.

My personal identification as an anthropologist did much to communicate to other researchers on the team exactly what an anthropologist is: a social scientist. Many considered me something of an oddity, coming from a discipline perceived as composed of scantily clad professionals who could often be found squatting naked by campfires chanting. Others wondered exactly what an anthropologist could do in an intensive policy research situation. Part of their curiosity was due to the relative novelty of the resident observer position in social experimentation, designed as it was to capture information on unanticipated by-products of the housing allowance program. What exactly was an "unanticipated by-product"? How could an anthropologist, someone with little model-building training and marketplace experience, recognize an unanticipated by-product if he or she saw one?

Essentially, those questions could be answered only by actions, not arguments. The construction of a sound methodology, disciplined work in the field, accurate reporting of observations, and hard data--these all did much to remove the other researchers' initial curiosity about an anthropologist, and also proved the importance and foresight of the general design's inclusion of a resident observer.

The use of anthropology in a setting like the housing allowance experiment now seems natural to many. Why? What caused the about-face in policy-relevant research to include and seek out anthropologists as members of the research team?

The main reason seems to be the realization by both anthropologists and nonanthropologist professionals that anthropology is

purposefully adopting systems theory--a principal asset it shares with other disciplines more accustomed to policy-relevant research. Policy-makers generally agree that our society's most crucial problems, such as inadequate housing, involve large and complex systems. It is also clear that interdisciplinary methods must be used to develop a logical framework for designing complicated systems. Our methods are different and should be used to answer questions perplexing to other disciplines; and, by focusing on a specific subject, our techniques can be as rigorous and refined as those of our policy-research predecessors. Unfortunately, we've often saddled ourselves with the supposition that *we* have the answers and if *they* would only put the anthropologists in the decision-making process, all would be well. The problem is, of course, that our views are closely tied to our own particular referents--which we haven't made particularly clear.

Empirical systems are complex; indeed, it is difficult to know what their true systematic nature is. It is not surprising that we argue by analogy from systems that we know or think we know, to systems that bewilder us. Thus primitive man encounters a strange world of trees, animals, and other objects that clearly have some relationship to him but are mysterious and unfathomable. He is conscious of himself, however, so it is not surprising that he extends himself to the inanimate world, populating it with spirits. As he learns he can placate other men by suitable symbolism, he reasons that he can similarly placate the spirits of trees, rocks, and animals. The ambiguity of all systems long prevents him from learning that this method is ultimately disappointing.* Policy research, including systems theory, is team research at the highest

*Kenneth E. Boulding, "General Systems as a Point of View," in M. D. Mesarovic (ed.), *Views on General Systems Theory*, Wiley, New York, 1964, p. 30.

level in order to avoid such disappointments.

Two of the most pertinent and persistent questions I am asked at the annual meetings and in correspondence with graduate students at various universities are: "How did you get your job?" and "How does one find a job applying anthropology?" Few corporations, large or small, public or private, actively recruit anthropologists as they do engineering and other "hard science" majors.

To a great extent, the fault lies with ourselves as a discipline. We've long spurned nonacademic and nonuniversity employment as research analysts, with the misguided idea that academic employment in a declining student population would be able to satiate both our job hunger and our psychological needs as professionals. Perhaps we were relying on continued growth of the college population or some dramatic early death rate of those in professorial positions to constantly open employment for upcoming academically trained graduate students. Whatever the reasons, recent symposiums, discussions, and articles seem to be coming to grips with the law of supply and demand for the first time.

To place that proverbial first foot in the door, however, we must learn to be entrepreneurs of the first order. Leaving employment up to chance--such as depending on connections acquired at the annual meetings or the connections of professors, mentors, friends, and parents to secure positions in which one can use his training--is irresponsible on the part of the university departments, professors, and anthropology as a profession. It is also suicidal for the newly trained anthropologist seeking employment. Few graduate students with whom I am acquainted know

the first thing about prospective employers or available positions. Their ignorance is partly due to our lack of emphasis on learning from other disciplines the techniques and skills requisite to the professional, nonacademic job market and policy research world.

What lessons can we learn from the policy research field that would help us gain employment? First, academic anthropologists have different goals than other disciplines more involved in contract research. Academic anthropologists suffer a dilemma of focus because they concentrate on unfocused social scientific work with broad and abstract goals. Non-academics such as economists and policy analysts are more client-oriented. In a policy-relevant research setting, the practical and often immediate needs of a client take precedence over those of a professorial or eclectic theoretical orientation.

Second, academic programs, especially those in anthropology, tend to encourage independence over cooperation. Nonacademic research settings, such as the Experimental Housing Allowance Program, require great cooperation. More than anything else, policy research is team research.

Third, we need to sharpen up our communication skills. Too many of us make Talcott Parsons seem laconic. Regular research reports are an important aspect of the policy research setting and, because of the enormous time constraints, it is imperative to learn to use the regular report as a vehicle in one's favor. It is critical to the research effort that the reports be both timely and cogent.

Finally--alluding again to all three of the points about anthropology and general systems theory--we're going to have to learn to get along

with other disciplines, many of whom are far more advanced in participating in policy-relevant research.

Applying anthropology is really just a matter of doing it. In projects like the housing allowance program, the anthropologist is but one member of the research team investigating many facets of a general problem. Our ability to present a holistic view enables us to contribute mightily in policy-relevant research. Researchers far from the experimental site often spend so much time looking at individual trees that it is a real pleasure and necessity to have at least an occasional look at the forest.

The notion of keeping a person or persons trained in observational research (and with a grasp of quantifiable techniques) in a responsible position as part of a large interdisciplinary research team is becoming more and more common. In turn, anthropologists often graduate from such monitoring positions to increasingly responsible positions in corporations and government as senior analysts or program managers. That shift in employment patterns will significantly affect anthropological education and training as well as current ideas about appropriate applications of anthropology. Although it has a short history, the active application of anthropology has come far towards gaining acceptance of anthropology as an effective social science with practical uses for policymakers. Application plus innovative training programs will open new avenues of employment for future generations of anthropologists--an objective to which all of us have till now only paid lip service.

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