COMING OF AGE IN POLICY-RELEVANT RESEARCH

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For a long time now, anthropologists have been squatting naked around campfires chanting that we should be influencing decisionmakers and affecting public policy. Although such activity is probably therapeutic, it does little to promote anthropology as an equal partner in policy analysis. Today I want to tell you something about the relationship of anthropology to policy-relevant research, based on my experiences during the past three-and-a-half years as an anthropologist with The Rand Corporation—working on the largest social policy experiment ever undertaken by the U.S. government.

Policy research is team research. It involves cooperation and certain adjustments among researchers in a rigorous interdisciplinary setting. For the anthropologist, weaned in our campfire heritage, policy research requires adjustments that affect both the profession and its methodologies. In public policy research, anthropology is not the decisive input, much less the whole study, as in traditional ethnography. If anthropology as a discipline is to come of age in policy-relevant research and be included on a par with other disciplines that are currently more active in policy research, we must modify our professional outlook and research methods. What are some of the adjustments we must make to become a full-fledged systems science in the policy research field? In other words, how do we catch up? How do we make use of what we have to offer?

Since September 1973, I have been one of two anthropologists on a team of analysts assessing whether a national program of direct financial assistance of low-income households is a feasible and desirable way to help them to secure decent housing in a suitable living environment of

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their choice, and, if so, to help determine the best terms and conditions for such assistance and the most efficient and appropriate methods for administering a nationwide program. The experimental housing allowance program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). To give you some idea of scale, the program employs approximately 400 professional researchers and managers; fields 10 to 12 thousand survey instruments annually, receiving an estimated 36 million answers; and disburses allowances of varying amounts to more than 7,000 households in two sites. That my role as a research analyst and anthropologist has been complex is an understatement.

Perhaps the greatest difference between doing research in a policy formation project and traditional ethnography is that policy research is mission-oriented. It is concerned with the evaluation of policies and programs--to see if they work, why they do or do not work, and whether they are cost-effective, improve over time, or should be incorporated into larger programs. Because policy research, such as HUD’s experimental housing allowance program, is mission-oriented, it has constraints and imposes rigor uncharacteristic of traditional ethnographies and anthropological research. By including anthropologists as equals with other researchers in the multidisciplinary analysis team, the Housing Assistance Supply Experiment marks a significant departure from traditional policy analysis. Policy analysis usually relies heavily on economists, systems theorists, statisticians, and so forth. That I was included from the outset as an equal partner in the research is to the credit of The Rand Corporation, which has long been noted for innovative methods for examining contemporary problems.

What then is different about policy research, and why must the anthropologist adjust his traditional training to fit in this new and unfamiliar territory? I would like to take the next few minutes to examine some factors that affect our coming of age in policy-relevant research.

- **Focus:** Policy research eliminates the dilemma of focus that hampers traditional ethnography. The clusters of questions are already present, the need-to-know is there, and the
research team includes professionals whose collective analytic ability can elicit reliable answers to the research questions.

- **Timeliness:** Policy research is need-to-know research. The anthropologist must respond to the mission orientation of the research. The purpose is not a contribution to general knowledge in the literature—that is a by-product. Rather, the purpose is a contribution to the formation of a social policy based on and shaped by the research. In a policy situation, we're not after every potsherd, only those that tell us something relevant about the issues at hand—thus, the need to swiftly separate the trivial from the significant. Often, on-site managers need information quickly to be able to head off potential trouble situations. In turn, researchers need information that contributes directly to the research agenda and can be integrated into the on-going analysis. As part of a policy-relevant research team, the anthropologist must devise a serviceable methodology that can adjust to changes in priority promptly yet remain dependable.

- **Integration:** To effectively participate in interdisciplinary research, the anthropologist must familiarize himself with the other disciplines used to analyze the research results. He must acquire the ability to understand the conceptual models of other disciplines, to communicate with persons in those disciplines, and to integrate his work with theirs. What tracks are the economists on—how can I use my methodology to ascertain anomalies in their research results? What data do the surveys yield about a given phenomenon that the observational data do not? How do the numbers link up with the observational data? All are questions that the anthropologist must consider as he goes about his work in the policy research setting.

- **Research Arena:** In the few policy research programs that have included an anthropologist as part of the team, the community and populations to be studied had been selected before he was hired. Thus, the questions about the community to which the
decisionmakers wanted answers had already been formulated. The anthropologist's unique contribution is the ability to extrapolate information about the characteristics of the selected community compared with others. For example, to what degree do the responses of a population to a given stimulus depend on local circumstances? The research team must be able to isolate the anomalistic responses from those that are relatively unaffected by the peculiarities of the site or its populations. In the experimental housing allowance program, Rand is testing the housing market response in two sites, so the research team can compare two separate populations and sets of circumstances. The annual surveys pinpoint certain information about each site, but the resident anthropologist acts as an independent observer. Thus, the anthropologist has much to contribute even though the communities are not necessarily of his choosing.

- Communication: One major adjustment I had to make as a member of a large research team seeking answers to policy-relevant questions was in my writing and communication style. Because most of the researchers were located 2,000 miles away, it was important that the data which I had to communicate be articulated coherently in a style that others unfamiliar with our specialized language could interpret easily and accurately. I had to explain complex concepts effectively and succinctly without the shorthand we customarily use in our journals and graduate school banter. The anthropologist in a policy research situation must often draw causal inferences that will affect the research results, and, ultimately, the decision-making process. It is imperative that the anthropologist not only spot anomalistic factors and identify emerging patterns relevant to the research agenda, but that he also codify them and lay them out to the research team and program administrators so they can decide whether to incorporate the pattern in the research design or in the final statement of results.
• Reporting: Part of the communication process involved in a policy research situation is the interim report—something not part of the traditional ethnographic baggage the anthropologist brings with him. Such a situation entails well-established formats for communication among researchers working on the same agenda, although minor idiosyncratic modifications in format are acceptable. The quarterly report became a vital part of my communication system. The development of regular quarterly reports (supplemented by research memos) alleviated the awesome and occasionally tedious task of communicating research ideas and hard data gleaned from fieldwork. The reports have both kept me in touch with other researchers off-site and made them aware of the environment in which the data were gleaned. Statisticians, economists, survey analysts, and program managers must spend prodigious amounts of time analyzing the individual trees, often to the detriment of visualizing the entire forest in which the research is being conducted. The quarterly reports serve as an excellent way to present the complete picture of the community and program concisely. Because the research team is working with such a tremendous volume of data, most individuals have rigorous time constraints—and little tolerance for reports with scattered ideas and prose that would make Talcott Parsons seem lucid.

The reports perform one other service. Because they have been written as "working notes," they provide a forum for testing the methodology against the findings. I can relate information to the research team at Rand, and, at the same time, discuss the methodology used to glean and examine the data. In more than one instance, the program budget has been adjusted to provide support for the methodology—a concrete statement of the value and relevance of the fieldwork and findings, as well as the cogency of the reports.

• Concept of Client: Unlike traditional ethnography where the anthropologist can work with few encumbrances other than those
imposed by the community that is being studied, the anthropologist in a policy research endeavor must develop a sense of client. By whom are the data to be used and for what purposes? What are the policymakers' specific objectives in conducting the research? How can the anthropologist use his special skills to become an integral part of the policymaking process? A client who pays your salary and specifies the research objectives can significantly constrain your normal approach. Although the accumulation of general knowledge about a given subject customary in traditional ethnography is interesting, if it does not meaningfully relate to the specific research questions, you are not fulfilling your contractual obligations. To become an equal partner in the policy research process, the anthropologist must surrender part of his autonomy.

- Interface Between Home Office and Site: Much of the policy-relevant research going on in the country utilizes a small on-site staff of researchers, and a home office where the bulk of the analysis is conducted. In the experimental housing allowance program, Rand has two small site staffs (one in each research community) who are responsible for the informal day-to-day management and monitoring of the allowance program in the community. Reports are published and disseminated by the home office. Because of the great geographical separation, the site anthropologist must accept the responsibility for his portions of the research—"he is essentially "a lone ranger," collecting relevant information to supplement the survey data. Some potential problems that can arise involve the timeliness of reports and research mentioned earlier and the effective communication of results. Steady and clear lines of communication of ideas, priorities, and results are imperative in large-scale policy research situations where the site is separate from the main data bank.
Anthropology is a systems theory—a principal asset it shares with other disciplines more accustomed to policy-relevant research. The major goal of policy analysis is to provide reliable and credible answers to a set of problems. Public policy research is designed to understand the relationships between such factors as supply responsiveness and the behavior of market intermediaries in a housing allowance experiment. What interrelationships may affect responses to such stimuli as housing allowances? What changes, if any, occur over time? Do different groups within the relevant populations respond differently to a given stimulus, causing an "average" response to conceal important information? How do local circumstances affect the answers to such questions?

The latter point brings up a story that is told back in Wisconsin about a successful high school basketball coach. During practice for the state tournament, the coach was approached by one of his players, who asked, "Coach, why is the basketball round?" Not wanting to disrupt practice, but sensing the player's perplexity, the coach took the kid aside and responded, "Son, you've asked me two fundamentally different questions. The first is: 'Why?"' Now, many of the great minds of the ages have pondered this question—Aristotle, Kant, Kroeber, to name just a few—and they have as yet been unsuccessful in answering it; so how do you expect me, a simple high school basketball coach, to know the answer? As for your second question, 'Is the basketball round?"—yes."

In policy-relevant research, the shape of the community is already determined. The objective of the research is to discover what that shape means—why things happen as they do. We have long been a social science, developing theories and measures that give meaning to a data set, and we have done some social reporting—though rarely in media other than our journals, where we safely keep much of what we've learned to ourselves by use of a language that is virtually unintelligible to those on the social advising end of the policy research spectrum.

Organizations involved in contemporary research, such as The Rand Corporation, hire professionals from many disciplines—economists, survey analysts, statisticians, sociologists, political scientists, and,
to a limited extent, but on an equal basis, anthropologists. Rand has recognized that anthropologists offer special techniques that can provide valuable input in policy-relevant research, but only after making the necessary adjustments discussed earlier—timeliness, adaptation to interim reporting, improved communication skills, development of a sense of client, and integration with other disciplines.

For a science which has grown up studying adaptation of others to given stimuli, the successful application of anthropology to policy-relevant research means that we adapt to what has been unfamiliar territory. When we make that adaptation, we can truly say that anthropology has come of age in policy-relevant research. What successful adaptation means in terms of employment opportunities for anthropologists, and the application of our research to the policy formation process, cannot be overestimated.