The Unity of Theory and Practice in Anthropology: Rebuilding a Fractured Synthesis

Carole E. Hill and Marietta L. Baba, eds.

National Association for the Practice of Anthropology
A section of the American Anthropological Association
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Preface
Laura Nader

University professors in the United States are peculiar in the separation they make between theory and practice, between private and public careers, between their professional lives and their concerns as citizens. Pick any part of the world—Latin America, Europe, Asia, the Middle East—and the picture is different because intellectuals qua intellectuals are expected to participate in large questions, and they do so even if such activity lands them in prison.

It is interesting to note, however, that the U.S. situation was more like that elsewhere prior to our Civil War. It has been since the Civil War only that the dichotomies between theory and practice, with valorization of the abstract over the concrete, became part of U.S. university life. Indeed, the extraordinary documentation of how this process occurred is the work of a U.S. historian Mary Gunton in her prize-winning book Advocacy to Objectivity: A Crisis in the Professionalization of American Social Science, 1865–1905 (1975). The story she tells is one that covers a 40-year period. Her data were gathered principally from academic freedom cases in the social sciences, mainly in economics, but as a result of those cases the tone was set for all the social sciences. Gunton describes how censorship can be derived from ideology operating as a cultural system. She traces the emergence of the principles of impartiality or scientific objectivity, and their successful institutionalization since the turn of the century. The economists who were the target of academic freedom cases were wrestling with the social problems associated with industrialization. Controversies arose, radicalism moved to “permissible dissent.” Faculty were fired, demoted, blackballed. As George Gunton said of the University of Chicago, “Why should an institution pay a professor to teach social doctrines which are contrary to the consensus of opinions of the faculty, the supporters of the institution, and the general community?” (Gunton 1975:163).

Furner notes that, as professional cultures developed, professionals increasingly used a technical language that laypersons could not comprehend easily. Advocacy was replaced by distance and concrete social issues by abstractions, thereby producing the distinction between theoretical and applied social science. Furner concludes, “The academic professionals, having retreated to the security of technical expertise, left to journalists and politicians, the original mission—the comprehensive assessment of industrial society—that had fostered the professionalization of social science.” (1975:324).
It is imperative to read these essays in a historical and comparative context. Otherwise, we blame the victim and/or ignore the structural issues at work in the U.S. universities which are mainly related to the military-industrial complex that President Dwight Eisenhower spoke about. As we within the profession grapple with issues of theory and practice, let us also remember that applied scholarship has no monopoly on “goodness” (which is why some anthropologists don’t like applied) while poor theory may not lend their authors “aura” (and some say poor theory does little harm).

James Spradley and David McCurdy (1975) developed a taxonomy of uses of anthropology, in which applied anthropology was divided into four categories: adjustment anthropology, administrative anthropology, action anthropology, and advocate anthropology. In contrast, academic anthropology involved research, teaching, writing, and film making. Such a taxonomy makes it possible to differentiate “practices.” I myself would rate as positive all the academic uses of anthropology, while rating positive only two of the applied categories. We need to know how purely academic “academic” anthropologists really are and how purely applied “applied” anthropologists are. These essays are informative on this question and relate to the issue of how self-conscious are we when we move from one domain to another.

Perhaps because of a lack of self-consciousness about moving from one category to another, I may be permitted to argue for trading concern with category for competence: professional competence. It is ignorance of our own history that encourages academic professionals to sneer at advocacy (as if one does not advocate no matter what we do) or to think that theory cannot arise from some forms of applied work. The various rights movements of the 1960s generated new legal theories, feminist scholarship, and, more generally, theories of inequality. In applied work on environmental questions, such as the fisheries debates, anthropologists have been generating lively theory about what some call “tunnel vision” and what others call “market ideologists.” Although some may be equally qualified, who is more qualified to bring expertise to bear on questions relating to society as a whole, in language intelligible to the average citizen? These contributions argue for stronger engagement by the U.S. anthropologist. Such engagement will be ultimately successful if, as a profession, we see heuristic value in the multiple uses of anthropology as an enhancement of present-day efforts.

At different times in my anthropological work, I have been inspired to make use of anthropology by those who asked me to do so. The legal revolution that sought to overturn the status quo during the 1960s and the counterrevolution that moved in during the 1970s and 1980s required a critical analysis from a professional outside of law, someone who had a comparative sense. The work was and is extremely provocative and of great theoretical value. I even made a film about it. Now, was the work applied or
theoretical? I do not much care, because it was interesting and engaging.
The work I was invited to do on the Carnegie Council on Children had the
same result: a theoretical formulation ("the vertical slice") resulted from
recognition of the poverty-stricken manner in which mainly psychologists
were viewing the American family. The nuclear-energy work that I carried
out for the National Academy of Sciences again opened up a new arena
and exciting possibilities. Many of us are doing what these essays are
seeking from the profession. The real issue is one of developing a para-
digm that values ethical behavior, quality work, and competence: theory
for what it is—a cap, if you will, on the imagination of the anthropologist,
and the way to keep conformity in the universities at manageable levels.

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Spradley, James P., and David McCurdy
I. The Relationship of Theory and Practice

Strategic Issues for Rebuilding a Theory and Practice Synthesis

Carole E. Hill

Changing the Relationship of Research, Theory, and Practice

An examination of the relationship between theory and practice necessitates a critical examination of the origin and usefulness of theory inside and outside the academy. It also requires an examination of disciplinary responsibilities for generating and strengthening anthropological theory. Theory is "given" to practitioners (Angrosino 1997) for "testing." It is not "created" in applied settings. Recently, however, several practicing scholars have asserted that theory is generated in practice (i.e., Cernea 1991, 1995; Partridge 1987). There appear to be within anthropology two cultures that have divergent views on the generation and use of theory. At least four pertinent questions are at the center of this debate: (1) What kind of theory is generated by nonpracticing anthropologists that is helpful to the practice of anthropology? (2) What kind of theory is generated by practicing anthropologists that increases knowledge in academia? (3) Is the theoretical basis of anthropology strong enough to link theory and practice? And (4) why are theory and practice so antagonistic in anthropology?

Answers to these questions reveal a great deal about anthropological "habitus." The contributions to this volume candidly address these issues in both personal and conceptual ways. While this volume is not the first to be concerned about theory-practice relations, a cursory review of writings on these issues over the past three decades reveals that thinking about these issues is at a critical point. It is time that this thinking be brought to print for critical review from the discipline. Some of the essays in this volume were given in a symposium at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The intention of the symposium was to begin a dialogue, incite a riot, and/or just get anthropologists talking about what we feel is the most important issue of our times. That is also the goal of this volume. The contributions discuss highly controversial issues in the discipline and, at times, challenge the discipline's "sacred knowledge" or,
at the least, its "received knowledge." Our intention is not to be popular; rather, we hope to be provocative and maybe, just maybe, begin a process of synthesis between anthropology's two cultures of theory and practice.

It is important to point out, as Nader does in the preface, that many of the issues concerning theory and practice are peculiarly North American. Baba and Hill (1997) suggest that fractures in theory-practice relations predominately developed between the culture of academic anthropology and the culture of practicing anthropology in countries that were historically the colonizers rather than the colonized.

**Brief Review of Past Ideas**

A brief review of some of the ideas about theory-practice relations seems appropriate to provide a context for the present volume and to let the reader know that we are quite aware that we are not the first to tackle these issues. In 1969, George Foster suggested that applied anthropologists were viewed by academicians as contributing little to theory. He argued against this dichotomy by ascertaining that practitioners test theoretical knowledge because they work outside of traditional academic settings; they advance knowledge but not in the traditional sense of scientific discovery, making their theory different from that produced in academic culture. Earlier, Sol Tax (1952) suggested that the process involved in generating theoretical knowledge and generating solutions to practical problems should share equal status in action anthropology. Later, Tax, obviously identifying with the culture of practice, stated that "the first thing to make clear is that we are theoretical anthropologists" (1975:172). More recently, Rubinstein (1986) characterizes action anthropology as having both methodological and ethical notions, stating, "The methodological notion is that when working in applied settings (as well as when doing 'traditional' ethnographic research) we can—indeed ought to—be concerned with the creation, testing, and elaboration of basic theory" (1986:271).

Theory in practice was addressed by several authors in *Applied Anthropology in America* (Eddy and Partridge 1987). Part I of that volume is entitled "The Dialogue between Theory and Application," addressing how theory is used in applied settings. Like Foster, its authors assume that application is the testing of theory. Arensberg (1987), for example, argued that the practice of anthropology in industry continues to feedback into knowledge about organizational theory. Hill-Burnett (1987) demonstrates that applied research in educational settings demands flexibility of methods and theoretical perspectives which, she argues, leads to the formulation of new knowledge. Partridge (1987) ends the section with an essay on a theory of practice, using the writings of Bourdieu (discussed in some detail by Baba in this volume). Those articles, for the most part, fail to address the generation of theory in practice.
In the 1990s several articles appeared using contemporary theory as a basis for discussions of the theory-practice relationship. For example, following Partridge’s theory of practice, Warry (1992) examines the implications of praxis theory for applied anthropology, suggesting that the collaborative nature of praxis theory is critical for practicing anthropology and can heal the fracture. Johanssen (1992) proposes that certain aspects of postmodernism (particularly a self-reflexive and critical perspective), while relevant to applied anthropology, cannot foster theory development in practice. Singer (1994) suggests that the driving theoretical force for applied anthropology should be a community-centered nonimperialist praxis rather than postmodernism. Finally, Rappaport (1993) suggests developing an “engaged anthropology” for solving societies’s “troubles” by modifying Marcus and Fischer’s conception of cultural critique and, thereby, integrating the two cultures. He argues that anthropologists should attempt “to comprehend contemporary difficulties in anthropologically derived terms but would resemble applied anthropology in attempting to develop programs for correcting them” (1993:297).

Recently, Bennett (1996) suggests that the discipline of anthropology as a whole has generally failed to generate strong theory. In an article examining the ideological and conceptual aspects of applied anthropology, he asserts that anthropologists conduct their work, for the most part, through borrowing theory from other disciplines. If theory in anthropology has been diffused from other disciplines and most anthropologists assume that the theory used by practicing anthropologists is borrowed from academia, then it should come as no surprise that theory in applied anthropology is considered, at best, a distant cousin to the processes involved in theory development. Bennett’s argument places practicing anthropologists in the position of “borrowers of borrowers” of theory. Whether one agrees with Angrosino (1997) and Bennett or not, both scholars certainly raise important issues concerning the place of theory in practice and the place of theory in academia. The contributions to this volume build upon these past ideas in an attempt to synthesize and advance the discipline’s fractured social and cultural processes in theory-practice relations.

Review of Present Work

This volume continues the dialogue on theory and practice in the hope of demonstrating the truly dialectical nature between theory and practice and highlighting the necessity of narrowing the schism between academic and practicing anthropology. Most authors argue that theory is indeed generated in practice: applied settings provide an opportunity and a need for anthropologists to create new knowledge. There are several themes that integrate the essays in this volume. All address the need for uniting practicing and nonpracticing anthropologists in order to develop a theory of practice. This involves the unification of two cultures. Most give exam-
pies of the contributions that theory and practice make to each other and the methodological contributions practice makes to theory. Method is inextricably bound to theory, a point that should not be forgotten in any theory-practice discussion. Furthermore, methods are important for the testing of theories; it is one thing to sit in academia and developed logical models and another to test them. Practice can be viewed as a kind of ultimate test of theory through empirical research. One final theme solidifies this volume: The ethical issues that circumscribe practice are thorny problems that have yet to be sufficiently addressed in the discipline. They are endemic to all research and particularly to practice. As several contributors point out, ethics should not be a battle cry against practice. There is a difference between critiquing injustice and actively working toward rectifying injustice.

Section 1 addresses the general relationship of theory and practice. The essays explicitly call for a unity between the two. Baba discusses the intellectual foundation for the knowledge content of practice. She critiques several theories of practice, for the purpose of developing a paradigm that she feels closes the gap between the perception and use of knowledge generated by academic and nonacademic anthropologists. She suggests that an actualized theory of practice connecting applied work and theory in anthropology requires a reconceptualization of applied anthropology as a knowledge-generating activity that tests, refines, and builds theory. She takes applied anthropologists to task for participating in the fractured synthesis by stating 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 and then by structuring our work in ways that makes integration with theoretical anthropology difficult if not impossible” (pp. 18–19). Baba reminds us that our conceptualization of applied anthropology in America is culturally constructed and as such can be transformed toward a more mature practice. She leaves us to think about the underdevelopment of theory in anthropology and that the true meaning of praxis is a theory-practice synthesis.

Indeed, the concept most often linked to a reconceptualization of theory in practice is praxis. Partridge (1987) rekindled theory-action issues tracing the debate to Aristotle and, more recently, to Marx. After an insightful discussion of the situational reasons for the theory-practice fracture, Kozaitis argues for their interdependence (recoupling). Kozaitis declares that interdependence can be achieved through anthropological praxis. She uses a cultural assessment research and engagement (CARE) model to illustrate a synthesis of the components of anthropological praxis: intellectualism, pragmatism, and compassion. Kozaitis also suggests, like Peacock does later in this volume, that academic anthropologists are also practicing anthropologists. She states, “Academics are as much entrenched in practice as are extra-academics in the production of knowl-
edge. . . . The question, thus, is not whether academic anthropologists are practitioners, but why we deny being so" (pp. 47, 50).

Section 2 examines the contribution of practices to theory and vice versa, through specific empirical examples. What better place to begin than with the concept of culture. Angrosino states, "Throughout much of its history, applied anthropology has functioned on the basis of an implicitly positivist epistemology of culture: Culture was somehow out there; it inhered in data that could be collected, described, and analyzed, and it could be expressed in terms of testable hypotheses" (p. 68). He divides the culture concept between two alternative epistemologies: the substantivist, which defines culture as measurable and reinforces the "us vs. them" dichotomy, and the interactionist, which defines culture as a set of guidelines that emerge from people coping with their everyday lives and obfuscating behavioral boundaries. Angrosino uses his experiences as a practicing anthropologist in mental health settings to illustrate the superiority of a culture theory using an Interactionist epistemology for applied anthropology. We should not pretend that culture can be absolutely defined. Hamada uses a case study on total quality management in a multinational company to illustrate the contribution that practice makes to theory within the context of organizational transformation. She argues that old theoretical concepts are often unworkable in practice, particularly the multiple theoretical assumptions of the culture concept. She argues that new theory is being generated in studies of business organizations undergoing rapid global change. Applied anthropologists must assume that culture is emergent; theoretical models based on a positivistic perspective assuming that culture is composed of static categories are obsolete in a global society. Studies of organizations demand that practicing anthropologists construct new paradigms of collective cognition and action: new theories of culture.

Peacock suggests that practice includes anthropologists working in a myriad of tasks, including those in academia. He asserts that applied roles are not confined to 'practicing anthropology' in a narrow sense of applying the discipline but are, rather, expanded beyond the conventional confines of research and teaching in academic anthropology (p. 104). Using examples from his wide experiences in an academic setting, Peacock delineates the anthropological and nonanthropological theories that are used in his practical experiences. Like Bennett (1996), he feels that other disciplines make a major contribution to the theories used in practice. Furthermore, he strongly argues that practical experiences shape theory and that academia needs to develop "reflective practice" with anthropology standing "in a strategic position to build distinctive and rich practice-based theory, as well as theory-based practice" (p. 117). Little uses examples from development anthropology to illustrate how practice contributes to theory and vice versa. He discusses the unnecessary polarization between academic theorists and practitioners that reinforces the fracture within the discipline. Ironically, in the era of globalism and transnational capitalism,
Little contends that the critical questions about the nature of theory are left to nonanthropologists.

Section 3 contains two essays that explicitly call anthropologists to action for the purpose of unifying theory and practice. Moran reviews contributions the practice of environmental anthropology makes to theory development. He says that the relationship of theory to practice has plagued anthropology from its beginning. Moran presents these issues in an ecological perspective, narrating a personal account of his experiences as a academic theoretician and a practitioner. The critical issues related to the human dimensions of global change demand an integration of theory and practice. Moran states, "I think that human ecology, cultural ecology, and all other variants of anthropological study of human-environment relations provide a nexus between theory and practice that makes a separation of the two not only difficult but impractical" (p. 133).

Likewise, Barth speaks to the necessity of a connected theory and practice if anthropologists are to rebuild their status in public policy. He contends that theory in anthropology is flawed and that its most fundamental premises and concepts need considerable restructuring in order to incorporate practice. In the excerpts from two abridged articles, Barth suggests that all concepts are embedded in practice and can never be reduced to statistical modeling. Analysis, then, should emphasize generative models of processes, particularly of disordered systems and not of totalizing cultural models. He argues that anthropology is in a weakened position for providing disciplinary insights in global economic problems. He states, "We fail, because we are so afraid to seem simple-minded in front of each other that we avoid clear statements and clear thought, and obfuscate our foundational findings and insights, whereby we also end up speaking only to each other" (p. 154). He calls for a theoretical framework capable of analyzing complex social relations, complex organizations, and complex meanings. Just as important, anthropologists need to be able to deliver analyses that are convincing to those who are not already convinced of the utility of the discipline. In the interview initially published in the Anthropology Newsletter, Barth suggests that anthropologists need to be better trained in theory and method for policy work, for practicing the discipline. He states, "We cannot sit in a position of academic isolation and develop the fund of knowledge that is needed, as a manual or blueprint, and then go out and apply it by simply presenting a set of answers and solutions to a listening world. We must engage public opinion, policy makers, and government by inserting ourselves in the areas where policy and opinion are formed, and then develop and deploy anthropological insights, methods, and models where we are able to make them useful, compelling, and effective" (p. 161).

The final contribution, by Greenwood, reviews and critiques the individual articles and compares and contrasts their common points. Greenwood takes the contributions beyond anthropology; he firmly believes that,
if a synthesis of theory and practice happens, it will occur in a context larger than the discipline. His comments are insightful and provocative.

**Traditional and Applied Research Models**

An underlying force in this volume involves the differences between the traditional and applied research processes. The traditional research models in practicing and academic anthropology vary in terms of problem definition and outcome. The conventional differences can be seen in Table 1. Clearly, these models are not mutually exclusive, particularly in terms of the implicit or explicit use of the theory and methods of anthropology. The middle-range theories, borrowed or not from other disciplines, certainly guide all anthropological research in conceptualizing problems. Likewise, if research is considered anthropological, researchers select their specific techniques from the methodological toolkit developed in the discipline. Techniques used to collect, manage, and analyze data are very similar, although applied anthropologists tend to use more rapid assessment techniques than academics. These are the obvious overlaps in the models. The implications of these overlaps will be discussed later in this chapter.

Differences between these models facilitate an understanding of the disparity between applied and traditional anthropologists, as perceived by most anthropologists. The respective work of applied and traditional anthropologists is fundamentally different in some important ways. First, applied anthropologists participate in solving concrete human problems whether they are working in the fields of education, health, business, government, or nongovernmental organizations. While I contend that conceptualizing these problems always involves theory, this is not the main objective of applied research. The driving force of applied research is to collect data that will be used to solve human problems. The expected outcome, then, of such research is to alleviate human suffering or injustice or to redefine local, national, or international issues within the framework of cultural diversity. In doing this, applied anthropologists certainly incorporate fundamental epistemological underpinnings of the discipline into their work.

On the other hand, academic anthropologists not engaging in applied work have a different set of priorities involving dissimilar objectives and expected outcomes from those of applied work. Problem-solving practice research is not viewed as a legitimate part of the discipline. While academic research certainly can have applied implications and even be used to solve concrete human problems, its objective is usually stated in theoretical terms, not concrete ones. The primary outcome of such research is to increase and disseminate knowledge in the field. The final outcome is consequently the publication of research findings. This outcome is supported by academic structures that emphasize publishing as the major criterion for promotion and tenure. The variation in outcomes demands that applied anthropologists incorporate more steps in their research process.
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data are analyzed about a human problem, alternative solutions must be examined for solving the problem. I call this phase policy analysis since it involves using anthropological data to develop feasible solutions to the concrete problem that may be used to set policy and guide planning.

Once policy and/or local level solutions have been selected, a plan is devised to implement the solution. It is clear that applied anthropologists are involved in planning for change. They are change agents using research data to develop and implement interventions. Their job, however, is not finished. The final step is to evaluate the intervention in order to measure whether a problem has been solved or not or whether it has gotten worse. Evaluation involves using either-or qualitative and quantitative methods. The results of this process comprise, primarily, a written report and, secondarily, an academic journal article. These different models, as previously stated, are not mutually exclusive, especially in regard to those anthropologists who primarily work in academia but also practice anthropology.

Cernea has recently stated that “the task of generalizing empirical data resulting from applied research is not the charge of only those who define themselves as applied anthropologists. It is equally a task of those working in academic and theoretical anthropology and sociology. A vast volume of factual material is laid out in countless applied reports and studies and is readily available to those interested in extracting theory from empirical findings. No tribal taboo forbids the access of non-applied academic anthropologists to the empirical treasure reported in applied studies” (1996:348). He is challenging all anthropologists to participate in the generation and critique of all theory, not just theory generated in the traditional research model. Responding seriously to this challenge involves changes in the intellectual traditions in anthropology and in the culture of applied anthropology, in order to develop a unifying paradigm. Such changes involve the cultural categories, social actions, and emotional attachments which characterize the enculturation of both traditional and practicing anthropologists.

As many chapters in this volume suggest, an incorporation process will require changes in the way academic and nonacademic anthropologists perceive of theory and practice. Changes in the relationship between the two research models involve:

1. reflection upon the nature of anthropological theory and its applications to the 21st-century world,
2. critique of the history of the Western tradition in the discipline’s theory development (theoria),
3. reflection upon the structural constraints of the boundaries of traditional anthropology,
4. creation of conceptual strategies and structural mechanisms which integrate the work of theoreticians and practitioners, and