

## TOPIC STATEMENT ONE: APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY

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### INTRODUCTION

Applied anthropologists use anthropological methods to solve practical problems. More than 30 percent of anthropology PhD graduates since 1980 hold applied positions outside academia (Kedia and vanWilligen 2005). Some of these positions are with governmental organizations, some are with human resources departments in corporate firms, still others are in domains traditionally occupied by sociologists and psychologists like social work (Ervin 2005). In each of these fields, anthropologists bring unique insights to specialized problems using techniques such as ethnographic interviews and behavior observation. I focus here on three specific domains of applied anthropology: politics, human rights, and indigenous autonomy; social concerns in the post-industrial West; and forensic anthropology.

### POLITICS, HUMAN RIGHTS, INDIGENOUS AUTONOMY

Early anthropology *was* applied anthropology. European imperialism required an understanding of other cultures, which put early anthropologists in some demand. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it did not take long for these anthropologists to form separate camps, one working for imperialistic reasons, the other against. Opponents of imperialism established the Ethnological Society of London in 1843 and the Anthropological Society of London in 1863 (Ervin 2005). Shortly afterward, in 1879, the United States Congress established the Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) and named John Wesley Powell as Director. The primary goal of the BAE was to “ease [Native American] transition to the next stages of civilization and to rectify some of the problems that ‘civilized’ people had created during contacts” (Ervin 2005). The work of early

anthropologists both helped and hindered indigenous people, and from these early days onward, many anthropologists have practiced with the goal of influencing public policy.

Politics, human rights, and political autonomy are tightly integrated into the everyday lives of indigenous people and the notion that “all politics are local” is arguably more true for indigenous people more so than for those of us in the West. Unfortunately, it is common for those outside anthropology to view small-scale societies as apolitical or somehow dependent on the West. These paternalistic notions are the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialist attitudes. However, indigenous people are often marginalized within their home countries and wind up having little or no say in national affairs. This lack of political voice can leave them open to oppression, human rights violations, and even genocide. The Marsh Arabs of Iraq are a well-known example of a group who has been systematically marginalized politically, socially, and geographically. For them, decades of human rights abuses at the hands of Saddam Hussein’s regime culminated with the destruction of their homeland in the early 1990s - a retaliation for repeated acts of political dissent (Hiltermann 1993).

Where indigenous people live on land rich in natural resources, the threat of genocide or relocation is still very real. In South America, for example, logging and mining operations continually encroach on the land of the Yanomamö and other indigenous groups (Chagnon 1997). For many governments, the difficult reality is that the economic value of natural resources often outweighs the human or cultural value of the indigenous inhabitants, and even well-intentioned government actions can damage indigenous societies. Enormous public works projects like dams, oil fields, and nuclear power plants have wide-reaching effects that persist through time (Ervin 2005). This presents a dilemma. On one hand, public works projects provide electricity, income, and investment important for any country and its citizens. On the

other hand, these projects carry consequences for those who are displaced or otherwise affected by them. For example, the Canadian city of Inuvik existed on paper long before it did on the ground (Ervin 2005). It was designed in the 1960's, literally from the ground up, to be home to thousands of Canadian Inuit. The Canadian government had two primary motivations for developing Inuvik. First, relocating the widely-dispersed Inuit would leave their land open for mining and drilling (Ervin 2005). Second, the government believed the town would "civilize" the native inhabitants (Ervin 2005). Unfortunately, the government consulted neither the Inuit nor an anthropologist regarding the town or the plan to relocate thousands of people there. What resulted was the devastation of the long-standing social structure of the mostly Inuvialuit and Gwich'in inhabitants. Inuit men, unable to find paid work, lost their positions as trappers, hunters, and providers. Theft, spousal abuse, assault, and alcoholism, not big problems before, became commonplace (Ervin 2005). To this day, the violent crime rate is still extraordinarily high in Inuvik. In 2005, about 116 violent crimes occurred per 1000 people there (Canadian Bureau of Statistics Government of the Northwest Territories 2005), compared with about 21 per 1000 in the United States during the same period (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 2006).

Many governments have learned from failed social programs like Inuvik. Now more than ever, they systematically examine the ramifications of policy on indigenous social, economic, and political structures (Ervin 2005). This has not happened by chance - anthropologists and human rights advocates have made it so.

Contemporary anthropologists recognize they must provide services to those they study. In the field, it would be unethical to *not* give medical care and transport to someone in need. Moreover, many argue it is the duty of anthropologists to provide more ephemeral things, like advocacy and even political representation, for the groups they study. Anthropological advocacy

empowers indigenous people by bringing national and international attention to their needs and rights as well as by integrating them into local, state, and national politics. Anthropologists provide their greatest service to indigenous people by using a bottom-up approaches sensitive to local culture, as opposed top-down approaches sometimes used in other fields like economics (Ervin 2005).

Political and economic integration and self-determination are of little use if they are not sustained for generations. Bottom-up approaches can be especially useful because they consider sustainability from an internal, or emic, perspective. This is not to say the top-down approaches necessarily ignore sustainability, but they may take a more etic approach. The Dobe and Nyae Nyae Ju/'hoansi, for example, have benefitted from bottom-up methods. Although they continue to face difficulty finding an enduring economic and social niche, they have asserted the authority to make political and economic decisions. Their integration into national politics peaked in 1999 when Namibian President Nujoma appointed a Ju/'hoansi man, Kgau /O/oo, to National Parliament (Lee 2003).

Bottom-up approaches can have problems in their own rights, however. Native American populations of Utah, for example, are currently divided on whether allow traditional land to be used for nuclear waste storage. Doing so would bring a windfall to the tribes, but would desecrate soil viewed by many as sacred. Unlike a century ago, an issue such as this will likely be decided democratically from within rather than authoritatively from without.

## OTHER APPLICATIONS

People often think of anthropologists as people who study exotic cultures in far away places.

While this often the case, many anthropologists work closer to home. Anthropologists have been invaluable in designing and evaluating public policy measures that affect people closer to home.

Following World War II, the United States famously employed anthropologist Ruth Benedict to research how to best handle the restructuring of Japanese political structure. Benedict's work, popularized in her book *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, persuaded the United States not to do away with the position of Emperor of Japan following the war, so as not to unnecessarily disrupt society (Benedict 1946, Rylko-Bauer, van Willigen, and McElroy 1989). Benedict's work saved time, money, and possibly lives on both sides of the conflict.

Applied anthropologists have also made marks in medicine. A growing number of occupational therapists, for example, use applied methods in practice. At the root, occupational therapy proposes that work and play are central to people's health and wellbeing. Their primary goal of occupational therapy, then, is to get people reengaged in these activities as soon as is safely possible following an injury. Ethnographic methods are well suited for collecting information on patient needs, but they also help occupational therapists study one another and their practices; a number of studies at the University of Utah have done just this (*e.g.* Price and Miner 2007).

Applied anthropologists address diverse questions and “real world” problems, therefore it is not all that surprising that the field is not united under a single theoretical framework (Rylko-Bauer, van Willigen, and McElroy 1989). Indeed, biological anthropology is arguably the *only* branch of anthropology unified under one theoretical framework, the theory of evolution. Some recent applications of evolutionary theory to applied problems show that applied anthropology need not always be criticized as atheoretical.

## APPLIED EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY

Evolutionary anthropology is based on the idea that those of us alive today are the descendents of a relatively small founding population of people. This being the case, we should expect some degree of biological and behavioral continuity across all of humankind. This framework has successfully been applied to traditional anthropological topics such as politics and warfare, and being empirically and scientifically grounded, evolutionary theory has allowed us to better understand human behavior in ways traditional anthropological methods have failed to gain traction.

Unfortunately, evolutionary theory is not widely taught in the social sciences. This is an issue because applied evolutionary theory can provide insight where other theoretical frameworks fall short and unite common findings in sociology, criminology, psychology, economics, political science, behavioral biology, and anthropology. If the social sciences are ever to unify, evolutionary theory will be at the core. As it stands, many social scientists have resisted evolutionary theory on grounds that it is deterministic. Regardless, many anthropologists, economists, and psychologists have embraced it and used it to address applied questions. For example, psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson used an applied evolutionary approach to study child abuse. They observed that children who live with a stepparent are 70 times more likely to be killed and 40 times more likely to be neglected by a live-in parent than children who live with two genetically-related parents (Daly and Wilson 1980, Daly and Wilson 1988, Daly and Wilson 1981b). Evolutionary logic gave them the key to understand why. Briefly summarized, children who live with both genetic parents share a higher percentage of their genes with each caregiver and it is in everyone's genetic interests to invest in them. Stepchildren, by comparison, are only related to one live-in parent. From the unrelated

parent's perspective, stepchildren are a poor investment. The result is that people have less impetus to take care of stepchildren and are more likely to neglect, abuse, or even kill them (Daly and Wilson 1980, Daly and Wilson 1981a, Daly and Wilson 1985, Daly and Wilson 1996). By couching their research in evolutionary terms, Daly and Wilson turned what might have been a relatively ordinary sociological or criminological survey into something truly insightful. Their work shows how behavior can be primed by biology, but this does not mean such behaviors are immutable - the vast majority of stepchildren are not physically maltreated.

Scott Atran's work on suicide terrorism provides an interesting juxtaposition to Daly and Wilson's research on stepparents. Traditional explanations of suicide terrorism propose bombers are "brainwashed" or simply insane. Atran took the approach that suicide terrorism might be explained by "fictive" kin selection (Atran 2003a, Atran 2003b). The crux of this unintuitive hypothesis lies in the idea that suicide bombers, in their minds, blow themselves up to benefit their "brothers" and "sisters." Atran extends this idea, and his insight, by noting that the use and manipulation of "fictive kinship terms" is practiced not only by terrorist masterminds, but also by military and religious institutions to get people to do things that they normally would not (Atran 2003b, Atran 2004). This raises the question "Why do suicide terrorists invest in fictive kin, while stepparents do not?" The answer might be that suicide terrorists perceive few reproductive, social, and economic prospects. They therefore make the best of a bad job by participating in spectacular acts of martyrdom which benefit kin, both fictive and non-fictive. In step relationships, however, the chance of future reproduction is part an parcel of the union, so stepparents perceive high reproductive potential. Stepparents bias their investments toward future reproductive opportunities, with the cost falling to their stepchildren. Suicide attackers bias their investments toward current fictive and genetic kin, and away from their direct future

reproduction, with the costs falling to themselves.

After being held back for years by critics who claimed it was deterministic evolutionary theory is hitting a stride in addressing applied questions. In the future, it is likely to gain influence in all social sciences. The influence of evolution on human behavior is simply too great to ignore on the basis of what many see as political correctness.

## FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Forensic anthropology is a subdiscipline of biological anthropology. I include it under the heading of applied anthropology because it is, by definition (emphasis added), the “*application* of the science of physical anthropology to the legal process” (American Board of Forensic Anthropology 2007).

At universities nationwide, many undergraduate students are interested in forensic anthropology. This trend is no doubt influenced by the current popularity of fictional television shows focused on the subject (*e.g. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, CSI: Miami, CSI: New York, and Bones*). These shows are to forensics what *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is to archaeology – they do not reflect reality. It is important to teach incoming anthropology students what forensic anthropology is and what its practitioners do because they may have unrealistic and romanticized expectations of what the job entails.

Forensic anthropologists work for state, local, and federal government agencies as well as colleges and universities. Their work is useful to society and putting a murderer behind bars or exonerating someone wrongly convicted surely produces great personal satisfaction; but practicing forensic anthropology requires a great deal of study. Unlike their fictional television counterparts, forensic anthropologists spend the majority of their time in laboratories where they

analyze osteological evidence. This is because identifying the various trademarks of trauma is the key to determining the cause of a victim's death and identifying potential culprits. Analysis of ballistics, blood spatter, and DNA evidence is generally outside the realm of forensic anthropology and is instead conducted by specialists in other fields. Undergraduates interested in becoming forensic anthropologists must become versed in four-field anthropology and should also take courses in genetics, statistics, anatomy, physiology, biology and chemistry. Upon completing their Bachelor's degrees, they should then move on to graduate school with the intent of completing a PhD at a school offering a specialized forensic anthropology program (Forensic Anthropology Center: The University of Tennessee 2007).

## CONCLUSION

Since its inception, anthropology has had an applied dimension. Over the past 150 years, anthropologists have applied their methods to novel questions and explored new areas of interest as they have arisen. Early anthropologists were divided on how best to aid or dissuade colonialism. The remnants of this early divide are with us today, although we no longer address whether or not indigenous people should be conquered, assimilated, or pacified. Rather, we look at how to best incorporate the wants and needs of indigenous people into what is increasingly becoming a smaller, more integrated, world.

Applied anthropologists have also found a niche studying people in the West. Applying ethnographic and evolutionary theory has helped us better understand child abuse and medicine, and forensic anthropologists bring criminals to justice daily. The utility of anthropology is undeniable, as are the benefits its application brings to all cultures large and small.

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