

Advancing Applied Anthropology

Strategies and Game Plans

By Robert A. Hackenberg

Setting a Course for “Greater Relevance”

This is the first edition of what will become a regular feature of this journal. Each contribution, whether of mine or an invited guest, addresses our primary goal—the advancement of applied anthropology. Our intention is to stimulate fresh thinking and invite dialogue. We have chosen “Strategies and Game Plans” as an initial subtitle. The selection invokes an evolutionary analogy (Smith 1982) rather than a sports metaphor.

Our aim is to suggest a perspective on the formulation of applied projects that exploits options for coping competitively, and hence surviving, within an ever more complex and often less hospitable working environment. Our reasons will be elaborated throughout the rest of this piece, which begins with some exclusionary premises.

In recent issues of the newsletter issued by the American Anthropological Association, prominent members contribute statements intended to affirm the “relevance” of our discipline. We hasten to applaud this enterprise. If applied projects fail the test of relevance we may be destined for a quiet demise. Marietta Baba (1994), in her recent reflections on the status of our “fifth subdiscipline,” observes that we already incur the judgement of theoretical poverty and institutional marginality from our colleagues and critics alike.

Perhaps we could join the search for greater relevance by pointing out fundamental disorders in our parent discipline. Indeed, our first thought was to follow a well-worn path with a discussion of concepts and models that might advance the cause. But that choice skirts the edge of the cauldron labeled “philosophy of science,” if you can read it through the smoke. Since Popper and Feyerabend are gone, we’ll wait until Richard Rorty, among others, tells us what we may safely think about that. From our own camp we have Laura Nader’s (1996) collection of essays. And, of course, Marvin Harris (1999).

If not concepts and models, how about methods?

What We Don’t Need Any More Of: “How To Do It” Instruction Books

There is no need to add to the spate of publications offering reviews, critiques, assessments, and advice on meth-

ods and techniques already at hand. It surpasses mere overkill and threatens to inundate us all. Qualitative research methods (QRM) have become our chosen instrument for investigation, analysis, prescription, and evaluation. And, at last count, the Sage series produced under that title since 1986 exceeded 46 volumes. The most recent, by my count, was Stewart (1998). Last year’s Sage QRM output was at least five titles.

Sage editors show mercy by restricting the size of the QRM volumes—most weigh in at 100 pages, more or less. But they compensate for this parsimony with their handbook series. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) produced an encyclopedic treatment of the subject, squeezing 643 pages between covers. Not to be outdone, Bickman and Rog (1998) gave similar comprehensive coverage to applied research methods in 580 pages.

To permit our parent discipline to compete effectively in this league, Russ Bernard (1994) expanded his coverage of methods in anthropology to 585 pages in a second edition for Sage. References to the Sage series on quantitative methods, focus groups, and evaluation procedures could be added. The methodology market is glutted with one important exception to be addressed below: rapid appraisal.

What We Need Most Urgently: Strategies and Game Plans

Let us assume that we know how to DO applied anthropology. Many of us believe that our research already provides a range of appropriate solutions which are tested, cost-effective, culturally sensitive, and responsive to priorities advanced by the prospective beneficiaries, e.g., community oriented primary care for health, and site-and-services models for housing (Hackenberg and Hackenberg 1999).

What we lack is the network of vertical linkages that will trigger the actions required to implement those solutions. There is an ironic paradox here. By minimizing the social distance between ourselves and our subjects in order to permit them to speak for themselves through us, we maximize the distance between ourselves and the agents capable of effective intervention and implementation of change.

Consider for a moment the social positions of ourselves and our clients. My employers on three continents over 40 years have been sets of powerless persons and the underfunded and overworked agencies responsible for their governance and care. Neither the target groups nor their administrators occupy the prestige positions at which policies

are promoted and appropriations are disbursed. And the last applied anthropologist who rose to the policy-making level may have been Philleo Nash (Chicago PhD, President of SfAA, Lieutenant Governor of Wisconsin, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs) a half-century ago.

A caricature of applied anthropology at the edge of Century XXI, drawn by a skilled cartoonist, might show one of our members clinging to a lower rung of the academic ladder in a college department while another, who has already lost his grip, takes up a hopeful position, resume in hand, on the front steps of the World Bank. Both are marginal and neither commands much attention from decision makers.

Like SfAA President John Young in his recent *Newsletter* essays, my concern is with improving our position outside the academy. For it is on that landscape that we must establish our claim to wider recognition and higher levels of prestige. I do not believe that performance and publication of significant research alone will reach that goal. Our print outlets, including this one, seldom reach the power elite.¹ And if they did, our message would often appear to be arcane, indecisive when it presents “both sides,” and almost always verbose.²

Strategies

We can achieve advancement for applied anthropology first by devising appropriate strategies. In a few lines, my thought here is to formulate subjects for investigation that already command attention and engage resources in the public arena. Problem recognition has already been conferred upon them. Policy options embodying opposing views and alternative solutions are being debated.

Our task is to examine them, to select among them, and then to advocate our choice. Cases of this sort abound and future articles in this space will consider selected examples. For guidance we have one of the final essays by Roy Rappaport (1994), who assumed the role of an applied anthropologist to write on “Disorders of Our Own.”

He makes the important distinction between applied projects concerned only with executing policy decisions of others, *versus* applied projects which are directed at guiding a choice between policy alternatives themselves. He calls the former task “trouble shooting,” but the latter is a contribution to policy making and perhaps to the advancement of our science.

Devising appropriate strategies to exploit these opportunities is a subject to be considered, with input from the membership, in this space. To begin, we may assume that each case must combine concern for empowerment and priority-setting by an impacted group with identification and description of the critical determinants of its situation. It must link substantial policy analysis with knowledge of the factors that influence decision making by the power brokers and how we reach them with our arguments.

Let us consider, and if necessary debate, the proposition that applied strategies should observe the following guidelines (or be prepared to argue for exceptions):

1. They must be timely. The proposal writing, review, and revision cycle prior to engaging in data collection must be condensed or bypassed.
2. They must be concise. Rapid appraisal methods, not presently in general use, must be devised, tested, and standardized. For starters, see Finan (1996) and Perez (1997).
3. They must present an easily apprehended argument, buttressed with supporting references and like-minded experts and authorities. Once again brevity is essential. Effective rhetoric is required. Comprehensive coverage dulls the edges of our logic and detracts from its impact.
4. The arguments should be grounded in value positions which, in themselves, are uncontested by the public at large, e.g., gender equity, minority rights, and environmental justice.
5. They must be partisan. The purpose of the strategy is to secure policy advantages for our clients. Other positions will be presented with equal partisanship by their advocates.
6. They must have a substantial public constituency. If it doesn't pre-exist, the applied project must undertake the uphill struggle to create it.

Strategies observing these guidelines share more attributes with a legal brief, perhaps, than with a scientific paper or journal article. But this has become a contentious world of special interests, each championed by its advocates. And, while we seek advantages, we must do so within the limits imposed by professional ethics.

Game Plan

The proliferation of regulatory actions taken by agencies at every level from the United Nations and NAFTA to each city council and county board of supervisors provides an infinite array of targets. For each embodies a policy decision and many of them directly impact one or more of our constituents. If we choose to enter the policy arena, our first requirement is a strategy. But once constructed, it is of little use without an appropriate game plan. In the language of note 1 above, “We must get it to Rogers’ desk.”

The game plan is framed in terms of the social terrain that must be successfully negotiated before reaching the level at which decisions are made and key persons are influenced. In fortunate circumstances, this may be accomplished by tapping into an existing network. Your university may be located in the district of a Representative who holds a seat on a key Congressional committee. A staff member may be recruited and convinced of the importance of the policy option you wish to have considered.

Alternatively, you may seek to capture the attention of widely recognized public interest groups who are represented in Washington or New York, or in your state legislature, by lobbyists. Obtaining coverage in the media—especially print media which are widely syndicated—may provide the dual function of creating a constituency for your position and also influencing decision makers.³

Examples of cases where strategies linked with game plans have been formulated and presented are solicited for future columns. I will close with a reference to what appears to be a conspicuous success for which Ted Downing, former SfAA President, is largely responsible (see Downing 1998). The situation has become known by the persons and agencies involved as the Pehuenche-IFC-ENDESA case. Full references will be found in Hackenberg and Hackenberg (1999).

This investigation of the displacement of a Chilean ethnic group by a dam-and-reservoir project, funded by the International Finance Corporation, employed a rapid appraisal strategy. It was linked with an effective follow-up game plan to bring a positive policy alternative to the attention of the World Bank and the international community. It has triggered re-examination of the Pehuenche case, and broader rethinking of resettlement and environmental impact policies by multilateral agencies.

Consider this column a trial formulation. A pencil sketch that must be elaborated into a GIS image if the "advancement of applied anthropology" is to become more than an ambitious caption. The positions presented here can be elaborated or discarded and replaced with others which you may contribute. Comments should be directed to <hackenbr@spot.colorado.edu>. Correspondence will reach me at Anthropology, CB 233, University of Colorado, Boulder CO, 80309.

Notes

¹In 1975 I chaired a research seminar sponsored by the Asia Society. It consisted of 15 research papers on *Population and Development in Southeast Asia* prepared by experts. My concern was to get them published. But Irene Taeuber, the famous Princeton demographer who organized the session, had a different agenda. She used the material to prepare a position paper on regional population control policies for use by Secretary of State William Rogers. She assured us that she "could get our recommendations to Rogers' desk." And from there into the decision matrix.

It took me 25 years to recognize that *she* was the applied person with a game plan to address the problem and I was the academic with a strategy to add a few lines to my CV.

²At Davao Research and Planning Foundation (Davao City, Philippines) much of our research was financed by a private financial group, Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP). They were generous and my reports took the form of bulky monographs documenting population and economic trends. My good friend and PBSP Board Chairman, Alfonso Ybanez, refused to distribute these to the members. Al insisted that the attention span of a Filipino CEO was three pages, *maximum*. After that we dealt in executive summaries.

³My understanding of this was serendipitous, as usual. In 1992, the *Denver Post* astonished us with an offer to send a senior writer and photographer to the Tohono O'odham Indian Reservation (Southern Arizona) to do a story on our work with the Tribal Health Department on diabetes prevention. It was featured on the front page of the Sunday edition of July 27, under the rather lurid headline, "Tribe Combats a Killer." The widely distributed reprints generated more concern (and resources) to address the problem than all our reports in journals and presentations at professional meetings.

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