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BRIEF REPORT



Facilitating Exchanges Between Applied & Academic Anthropologists: Working Together on Methods Innovations

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ABSTRACT

In light of rapid changes to our climate, inequities in access to health care, political unrest, and regional conflicts, anthropologists are tasked with adjusting our research questions and methods to meet these challenges. Due to the nature of their work, practicing anthropologists have long embraced flexible and adaptive methods in response to industry and client needs. However, there is an unmet need to properly document these methodological shifts, and to facilitate better communication between academic and applied anthropologists. Anthropology broadly needs academic journals to center detailed methodological descriptions in their publication standards. Academic anthropologists would benefit from clearly identifying engaged stakeholders and intended audiences. Prioritizing the translation of methodological expertise across professional spaces will help to improve synergies between practicing and academic anthropologists.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Communities around the world are facing an ever-shifting set of challenges ranging from climate change to regional conflicts. Anthropologists understand the changing landscape surrounding our research and have identified a growing need for innovation, fluidity, instruction, and communication regarding our methods. Practicing anthropologists have long shifted their methods in response to client needs and demands. However, academic anthropology has not prioritized the formal publication and dissemination of these methods, and thus there are few opportunities to advance communication and exchange of methodological innovation between academic and practicing anthropologists. In this brief communication, we call for the prioritization of communicating methodological expertise across professional spaces to help to improve synergies between practicing and academic anthropologists.

KEYWORDS

methods; innovation; applied anthropology; academic anthropology; academic publishing

Globally, communities are adapting to a range of new challenges: climate change, limited health care and health inequalities, and regional conflicts in the shadow of international wars, to name a few. All of these demand changes in our research questions—both to meet public need and our funders' priorities. Accordingly, there is an urgent need for methodological innovation within anthropology. Such innovation can be a platform, too, for increased communication between academic and applied anthropologists.

To build a stronger future for anthropology, Nolan and Briody (2023) propose stronger cross-fertilization between applied and academic

anthropology. Based on a survey of practitioners, they document widespread concern about career under-preparation for non-academic posts; they propose that curriculum innovation around methods training is the necessary step forward, in particular methods linked to problem solving (Nolan and Briody 2023). Similarly, a survey of members American Anthropological Association identified perceived gaps in the current methods curriculum. Many of those gaps—like training in reflexivity and in IRB processes—were related to effective and ethical field practices in increasingly complex and challenging settings (Ruth et al. 2022). Here, we expand on this discussion about

needed methods innovation by drawing on our observations and experiences.

Applied anthropology has long been a hotbed for methodological innovation. Flexibility and responsiveness to external pressures, changing relationships with partnering communities, and shifting needs of stakeholders and publics requires innovation in anthropological methods. Practicing anthropologists have shifted conventional methodological approaches to meet industry requirements and client needs. Many of these changes, including rapid ethnography, greater commitments to team-based research, and engagement with community partners have also been adopted in academic research to much success. Yet, there is an unmet need to document these methods within anthropology—and to facilitate more exchange between academic and applied anthropologists to advance more methods innovations.

In many of the academic journals where anthropologists publish, methods are relegated to a brief mention with little to no specificity. This limits anthropologists' access to timely, usable information about how to work with new methods. Historically, this was due to the cost of publishing and distributing printed journals. Academic journals today are almost entirely online, and many publishers have removed the page limits they had to enforce in order to stay solvent. Incorporating methods as a substantial and central part of manuscripts—even if they have to be submitted as [supplementary materials](#)—will encourage editors and reviewers to prioritize this part of the research process. Investing in thorough explanations of methodologies enables progress because it facilitates transparency, reproducibility, innovation, and translation both inside and outside of the academy.

Academic and practicing anthropologists have much to gain from an exchange of ideas about methodological innovations. When innovating and translating methods, practicing and academic scholars should first identify and prioritize their intended audience. We recognize, for example, the often higher stakes and more immediate impacts for researchers in policymaking, industry, and government or non-government organizations, as compared to academia. EPIC, a non-profit organization committed to the promotion

of ethnographic methods across disciplines and professional spaces, provides a powerful platform for rapid development and translation of methodological innovations between academic and applied anthropologists. In the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program, too, we provide such a space for Ph.D. students as they learn and innovate with new methods.

Prioritizing the translation of methodological expertise across professional spaces will help to improve synergies between practicing and academic anthropologists. We all benefit from building on the methodological innovations made in professional spaces. Increased exchanges around methods help us deliver on our responsibility to diverse communities, and increasing public engagement with crucial anthropological contributions to contemporary challenges.

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