

Action Anthropology: Essay on Action Anthropology

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Abstract (italiano)

L'Action Anthropology ha che fare intimamente con i problemi antropologici e gli "Antropologi d'Azione" esercitano i loro studi in un contesto di Azione concreta.

In tali studi, la distinzione tra la ricerca pura e la ricerca applicata generalmente scompare. L'antropologo accetta un problema come il proprio e procede perseguendo con metodo, attraverso tentativi ed errori.

Il metodo di azione dell'Action Anthropology è quindi totalmente un metodo clinico o sperimentale. Gli "Antropologi d'Azione" raramente, dunque, si reputano semplici osservatori. Essi riconoscono la propria responsabilità nel cercare di risolvere i problemi umani.

Pertanto, si attaccano sui problemi finché non vengono risolti. Con la metodologia del "tentare di risolvere", gli "Antropologi d'Azione" possono generare nuove teorie e arrivare a nuove scoperte, accettabili per l'Antropologia generale.

Secondo E.J. Jay (1987), gli Antropologi Applicati sono esperti sulla cultura che studiano. Quindi sulla base delle loro conoscenze sono in grado di formulare raccomandazioni appropriate per l'amministrazione.

Ma tali raccomandazioni non possono sempre cento per cento appropriate.

Infatti, è impossibile per un Antropologo conoscere ogni minuto le cose che avvengono in una società, a volte diversa dalla sua, per quanto egli possa essere strettamente associata ad essa. Così le sue raccomandazioni sono passibili di un certo grado di errore: la previsione completa e precisa del comportamento umano non è sempre possibile. Dunque, a questo proposito, gli Antropologi d'Azione cercano continuamente di dimostrare le prestazioni ideali e il loro dovere non si esaurisce solamente con la formulazione di raccomandazioni concrete. Essi rimangono sempre associati ad un progetto fino a che l'obiettivo sia raggiunto.

Come il Programma di Azione prosegue gli Antropologi rivedono le loro previsioni e i loro giudizi, consigliando di agire in base alle reazioni dei gruppi che sono destinatari delle Azioni che vengono intraprese.

Sol Tax proposed the term 'action anthropology' in 1958 through his paper 'Values in Action' published in the journal 'Human Organization', Vol. 17, No. 1. Though it is an offshoot development from applied anthropology, it does not stop with the humanistic study as an applied anthropologist does with the natives and minority peoples.

Rather, the action anthropologists involve themselves intimately with anthropological problems and pursue their studies in a context of action. In such a study, the distinction between the pure research and the applied research generally disappears. The anthropologist accepts a problem as his own and proceeds through trial and error method.

In a first exposure he may not be successful, but he never feels disappointed or frustrated. Also he is not in the habit of blaming others. Rather he rectifies his own strategy and procedures; carries on the same task with fresh vigor. He does not forget to follow up the whole from time to time.

The method of action anthropology is thus wholly clinical or experimental. Action anthropologists seldom keep themselves as mere observers or catalyzes. They recognize their own responsibility in solving human problems. Therefore, they stick on the problems until they are solved. By the way of solving action anthropologists may generate new theories and findings, acceptable to the general anthropology.

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Action anthropology as a new method of research did not appear in the imagination of Paul Broca. In modern anthropology, the 'action anthropology' and 'applied anthropology' are the parallel developments belonging to two different schools of thought.

According to E.J. Jay (1987), applied anthropologists are the experts on the culture, which they study. So on the basis of their knowledge they are able to make proper recommendations for administration. But those recommendations may not always be 100 percent true.

Because, it is impossible for an anthropologist to know every minute thing of a society, other than his own, no matter how closely he is associated with it. So his recommendations are liable to a certain degree of errors; complete and accurate prediction of human behaviour is not always possible.

In this respect, action anthropologists can show the ideal performance, as their duty does not end with formulation of concrete recommendations. They remain constantly associated with a project until and unless the goal is achieved. As a program of action proceeds, the anthropologists revise their judgement and recommend for further action according to the reactions of the recipient groups.

The difference between the applied and action anthropology lies in the modes of approach. In the words of L.R. Peattie (1987), "Applied anthropology tries to move back and forth between value-interest and disinterested consideration of relevant fact" while "Anthropology in action is suspended between these two poles and swings between them".

Both the applied anthropology and the action anthropology depend on 'value infused observation' and therefore bear practical utility. When an applied anthropologist feels the urge for a course of prolonged action to solve a problem, action anthropology is initiated. But in reality, the scope of action anthropology is quite limited. In the notion of Sol Tax (1964) "Action anthropology requires the intellectual and the political independence that one associates with a pure researcher, it depends upon university and foundation connections and support rather than those of a client or government. But also requires that the anthropologist leave his ivory tower and that without losing his objectivity he enters into some world of affairs which becomes for the time being his laboratory".

The field for the application of anthropological knowledge was widened at the beginning of twentieth century according to the circumstances of global welfare. The efforts of the anthropologists have become mature and effective, as a steady development is evident in the resources of the discipline. The availability of data has increased, methods have been refined and above all the number of anthropologists and their potentialities for research has been enhanced a lot.

Acculturation studies and culture-contact studies are now closely linked with applied anthropology. They have attempted to resolve the contradictions between traditional socio-cultural pattern and the needs of economic and technological development.

New inventions of science and changes in old technology tend to disturb the equilibrium between the individuals and the groups. Applied knowledge of anthropology shows its usefulness in controlling the change variables.

Moreover, this knowledge has proved itself worthy in successful manipulation of human beings to achieve some particular end. Despite the humanitarian motivation of human welfare, some of the anthropologists had rejected the applied outlook.

They restrained themselves from the applied field because of the problems of ethics. As a social doctor they could not negate the responsibility of bringing about a beneficial change and at the same time could not surpass the limitation of anticipating the end result of a change.

As a result, they suffered from a phobia— whether their scheme would really yield any benefit to the target group or not. The question of ethics appeared as a great gulf and the anthropologists did not find a moral support when a plan turned unsuccessful.

Nevertheless, the use of the professional skill of anthropologists was quite legitimate in studying the processes of culture change in action programmes or in introducing the advanced programmes on health, agriculture, education, etc.

For the benefit of developing countries, a society for applied anthropology was formed in 1949 who formulated the codes of professional ethics to guide the confused anthropologists. The British social anthropologists working on the problems of colonial administration in Africa and other parts of the British Empire shared these ethical views with their American colleagues.

In 1963, the codes were again revitalized. As a matter of fact, the large number of anthropologists who happily accepted the long-term and short-term assignments after the end of Second World War and hoped to deliver effective technical assistance, were found to shrink abruptly.

A growing frustration was noticed among the anthropologists regarding the war in Vietnam, which could not be controlled despite the anthropologists had enough potentiality. Consequently, in 1970's American Anthropological Association had to face repeated agitation, acquisition and denial on a massive scale.

But the old-fashioned codes were ultimately replaced by the newly developed keen sense of the anthropologists. The enlightened anthropologists themselves got a broadened understanding of the ethical dimension. They continue in their judgement, which is based on the sensitivity to the human sufferings, but comply with the cultural situation.

The activity shows a peculiar blending of science with humanities. Many renowned anthropologists namely, F. Boas, B. Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe Brown, R. Redfield, S. Tax, S.F. Nadel, G.M. Foster, M.J. Herskovits, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, A.L. Kroeber, C. Kluckhohn, R. Linton, D.G. Mandelbaum, E. Sapir, L.A. White, etc. devoted their attention in applied field.