

A look back as we move forward

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Biological Anthropology is commonly regarded as a paradigmatic example of interdisciplinary science, where topics spanning human biology and culture are studied in an evolutionary framework (Boaz and Wolfe, 1995; Kuper & Marks, 2011). Although the heterogeneity of the informational sources makes this task challenging, their integration should be regarded as a priority. The cross-fertilization of the various theoretical approaches is indeed the crucial step towards a thorough understanding of the evolutionary history of our species (Delisle, 2007).

However, the current panorama of anthropological research is not always in line with a holistic approach. This is especially true for Molecular Anthropology, a research sub-field whose progress is being fostered by recent technological developments in bio-medical research, namely continuous advances in sequencing techniques and increasing availability of bio-informatic tools. Potentially, Molecular Anthropology could provide a unique opportunity for crossing the classic boundaries between “Nature and Culture” integrating “next generation” techniques with cultural, or “bio-cultural”, knowledge (Pálsson, 2008; Destro Bisol *et al.*, 2010). Unfortunately, this is not the direction taken in numerous studies. Criticisms have been raised concerning some oversimplifications used by molecular anthropologists including archeological and ethnographic evidence and the use of heterogeneous criteria for human groups’ identification, mixing geography, linguistics, culture and history (Mitchell, 2010). However, the debate surrounding Molecular Anthropology may actually be the “tip of the iceberg”, reflected by broader issues in general anthropological studies. In fact, there is a critical and wider base need to reinforce the interdisciplinary interactions to develop “a truly comparative science of humankind throughout their history” (Kuper & Marks, 2011), although the situation varies from continental and regional schools of thought and sub-fields of research, (e.g. Nekaris *et al.*, 2011).

It is often claimed that by looking at the past we may help to understand our current condition and that we maybe better equipped to plan for the future. This paradigm fits the potential for anthropological research goals very well. A retrospective look via Anthropological perspectives gives us an opportunity to understand how its role in broad-based critical thinking in conjunction with other scientific branches (philosophy, medicine and genetics among others) has changed over time. By examining past research endeavors, we can realize that an interdisciplinary approach towards anthropological studies is an evident feature of this discipline during its conception as a field of research at the end of the 19th century. Among the various personalities who shaped theories and practice of anthropological research at its beginning, Franz Boas, the founder of Physical Anthropology in the United States, is probably the one who best embodies the search for an interdisciplinary approach to examining humankind.

Back to the need for strengthening the interdisciplinary approach towards Anthropological research, a historic overview may be of help in two ways. First, it provides a means to identify and discuss the scientific and social reasons for why the holistic message of our discipline has lost part of its appeal. Second,

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a retrospective look may reveal analogies between past and present controversies surrounding anthropological research, offering a basis to put forward new perspectives and modify current approaches.

For all of these reasons we have decided to launch the *ISItA historical corner*, a new JASs section of invited contributions designed to discuss topics concerning the history of Anthropology, with an emphasis on interdisciplinary based research. Coherently, with the international nature of the JASs, there are no limitations to issues regarding specific regional or continental schools.

Launching the *ISItA historical corner*, we decided it is important to pay attention to the life and work of Giuseppe Sergi (see the contribution by Alessandro Volpone in this issue). He was the founder of this Journal (originally named “Atti della Società Romana di Antropologia”) and the initiator (with Paolo Mantegazza) of Evolutionary Anthropology research in Italy. This alone would make him an important figure in Italian anthropological research, but he merits a special place in our historical section for another reason. Through his efforts to combine anthropological, psychological and educational research, he exerted an important influence on prominent personalities outside the anthropological field, such as the great educator Maria Montessori. In another article in this volume, Francesca Bigoni and Giulio Barsanti go further back in time, presenting a thought provoking reappraisal of the contributions of George Mivart to early studies in primate evolution and human phylogeny and the development of evolutionary based trees of life. Finally, Elena Kranioti and Robert Paine offer an assessment of how anthropology, archaeology, medical and dental sciences are interconnected via forensic work in Europe. This article highlights a current example of the interdisciplinary nature of biological anthropology as it is applied to serving the legal community and the public.

So it is with great pleasure that Editorial Board of JASs invites its readers to join with us in our present and future conversations concerning the unique position Biological Anthropology has in evaluating humankind past and present. After all, not many disciplines can provide the critical perspective towards understanding the cultural and biological origins of who we are and for who we will become.

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