

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE “FOUR-FIELD APPROACH” IN US HIGHER
EDUCATION: A HISTORICAL-STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. This article analyzes the historical formation of the “Four-Field Approach”—a distinguishing feature of American anthropology—and its process of institutionalization within United States universities. It explores how the model, advanced by Franz Boas and his students in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, transformed anthropology from a practice of museum-based description into a fundamental academic discipline.

Relying on the works of G.W. Stocking Jr. and R. Darnell, the study examines why biological, cultural, linguistic, and archaeological sub-disciplines were unified under a single departmental umbrella in the US, contrasting this with the fragmented specialization characteristic of European and subsequently Soviet schools. The article argues that this holistic structure was not merely theoretical but a strategic institutional requirement that defined the professional identity of the American anthropologist.

Keywords: Four-Field Approach, Franz Boas, institutionalization, American Anthropology, academic standards, holistic approach, professionalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the final quarter of the 19th century, while Western scientific interest in the study of humanity was intensifying, “Anthropology” had not yet crystallized into a unified and independent academic discipline. In the scientific traditions of Europe and Tsarist Russia (and later the Soviet Union), the fields studying humanity developed in a fragmented manner: physical structure was studied within medical and biological faculties, ancient cultures and excavations within history faculties, and language within philology departments.

However, by the early 20th century in the United States, a fundamentally new and unique scientific paradigm emerged: the “Four-Field Approach.”

This approach presented anthropology as an integration of four independent yet interconnected fields: Physical Anthropology (now often Biological Anthropology), Archaeology, Linguistic Anthropology, and Cultural Anthropology (or Ethnology).

This was not merely a theoretical construct but served as the organizational basis for the first anthropology departments established at major American universities, notably Columbia, California (Berkeley), and Chicago.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that for decades, anthropology in Uzbekistan and the post-Soviet space has been understood primarily as “physical anthropology” (craniometry and racial studies).

Examining the institutional roots of the US “holistic” experience serves to broaden the understanding of modern anthropology as a comprehensive socio-humanitarian science.

The purpose of this article is to analyze, based on historical sources, how this model was introduced into the US higher education system through the efforts of Franz Boas and his students, and how this process influenced the professionalization of the discipline.

2. METHODS

This research primarily utilizes historical-genetic and comparative-analytical methods:

- The historical-genetic method is used to trace the migration of anthropology in the US from museums to universities and to identify the causal factors behind the emergence of the “Four-Field Approach.”
- The comparative-analytical method is employed to highlight the structural differences between the European model of specialization and the American holistic model.

The theoretical foundation of the research draws upon fundamental works on the history of American anthropology, specifically George W. Stocking Jr.’s “Race, Culture, and Evolution” [1], Regna Darnell’s “Invisible Genealogies” [2], and Alfred Kroeber’s “Anthropology” [3]. These sources are invaluable as they illuminate the process of institutionalization through primary documents, curriculum development histories, and the professional correspondence of the era.

3. RESULTS

3.1. From Museum to University: The Shift in Academic Space

In the late 19th century, American anthropology was concentrated primarily around government-funded expeditions and museums (such as the Bureau of American Ethnology – BAE – under the Smithsonian Institution). Anthropology of this period was largely focused on “collection and description” of material culture, lacking rigorous academic standards or a unified theoretical framework. As Regna Darnell notes, the “professionalization” of the discipline began with its migration from museum display cases to university lecture halls [Darnell, 2001: 35]

This turning point is directly linked to the appointment of Franz Boas as a professor at Columbia University in 1896 and the official establishment of an independent Department of Anthropology in 1899. Prior to Boas, practitioners often identified as geologists, physicians, or explorers. The new program at Columbia created the status of the “Professional Anthropologist.”

To achieve this status, a student was required to study human history not unilaterally, but from four distinct perspectives simultaneously. This shift marked the transition from anthropology as a hobby or curatorial practice to anthropology as an analytical science.

3.2. Pragmatic and Theoretical Foundations of the “Four-Field Model”

Why exactly four fields? George Stocking’s analysis suggests that this model arose not initially from a grand theoretical whim, but from a pragmatic necessity unique to the American context [Stocking, 1968: 198]. The primary object of study for American anthropologists was the Native American population.

To comprehensively study the disappearing cultures of North America, a researcher was required to possess a diverse set of skills:

- Study excavations to determine origins (Archaeology);
- Analyze physical appearance and racial characteristics (Physical Anthropology);
- Understand the language to communicate and record oral traditions (Linguistics);
- Comprehend social structures, religion, and customs (Cultural Anthropology).

Franz Boas scientifically substantiated that these four directions could not exist in isolation. He argued that to fully grasp the concept of “culture,” data from biology and linguistics were indispensable. Consequently, the curriculum at Columbia University unified these four directions into a single discipline. This contrasted sharply with European university specialization and subsequently became the calling card of “Americanist Anthropology.”

3.3. Alfred Kroeber and the Standardization of the Model

The model created by Boas was codified and turned into a national standard by his most prolific student, Alfred Kroeber, through textbooks and teaching manuals. Kroeber’s seminal textbook “Anthropology” (published in 1923 and revised in 1948) represented the “legalization” of this model. As Kroeber stated: “Anthropology is the meeting point of the natural sciences and the humanities. We study man simultaneously as an animal (a biological species) and as a creator of culture” [Kroeber, 1948: 4].

The institutional significance of this approach was that new departments opening across US universities (such as Chicago, Berkeley, and Yale) adopted this specific “Four-Field” structure as a blueprint. Consequently, it became mandatory for any student defending a doctoral dissertation (PhD), regardless of their specific specialization, to pass comprehensive exams in all four fields. This created a system that produced not narrowly focused “craniometrists” or “archaeologists,” but “General Anthropologists” with a broad, holistic worldview.

3.4. Edward Sapir and the Integration of the Linguistic Direction

The contribution of another of Franz Boas’s students, Edward Sapir, was incomparable in consolidating the “Four-Field Model.” While in the European tradition linguistics (philology) was often limited to the study of historical texts and Indo-European roots, in American anthropology, Sapir integrated language into the system as the key to culture.

Operating at the University of Chicago and later at Yale, Sapir made it mandatory for anthropology students to study not only skeletal structures or artifacts but also the grammar and phonetics of indigenous languages.

As Regna Darnell notes in her research, “Sapir made linguistics an integral part of anthropology because language is the mirror of human thought” [Darnell, 2001: 89]. This approach later formed the basis for the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posited that language shapes perception, further distancing American anthropology from biological determinism.

By embedding linguistics within the anthropology department, the US model ensured that culture was understood as a cognitive system, not just a collection of material objects.

3.5. The American Anthropological Association (AAA) and Professional Standards

The process of institutionalization was solidified not only through universities but also through professional organizations. Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) adopted the “Four-Field Approach” as a unified standard on a national scale.

According to George Stocking, the AAA’s flagship journal, *American Anthropologist*, required authors to provide not merely narrowly focused data but broad anthropological analysis.

A physical anthropologist submitting a paper on cranial measurements was expected to contextualize findings within a broader cultural or environmental framework.

This policy resulted in the cultivation of “General Anthropologists”—scholars capable of navigating all four sub-disciplines—rather than isolated specialists. This organizational enforcement ensured the internal cohesion of the discipline during its formative years.

4. DISCUSSION

The analysis of historical data indicates that the “Four-Field Model” in the US was not simply a curriculum design but a profound ideological and methodological choice. Comparing this model with the European and traditional Soviet schools highlights its distinct advantages.

Firstly, the Issue of the “Holistic” Approach.

In Soviet science, the study of humanity was fragmented: physical anthropology was considered part of biology, while ethnography was part of history. This created a disconnect between the biological nature of humans and their social lives. The American “Four-Field Model” removed this barrier. For instance, students of Alfred Kroeber demonstrated that cranial shape (physical anthropology) could be influenced by diet and environment (cultural anthropology). Such complex conclusions were attainable only because the four fields were united under one departmental roof.

Secondly, Immunity Against Scientific Racism.

The greatest error of 19th-century anthropology (particularly in Europe) was the attempt to explain human behavior through race and blood (biological determinism). In the US, the teaching of physical anthropology alongside culture and linguistics prevented this error. Students scientifically grasped that the differences between human groups lay not in “blood” but in “culture” and “language.” This institutional structure provided a safeguard against the misuse of biological data.

Thirdly, The Effect of the Shift from Museum to Academy.

Our research shows that the migration of the discipline from museums to universities transformed it from a “descriptive” science into an “analytical” one. While a museum preserves an artifact, a university department uses it to investigate social problems. This shift ensured that American anthropology became a leading social science by the mid-20th century, focused on problem-solving rather than mere collection.

5. CONCLUSION

The historical-institutional analysis conducted in this article leads to the following conclusions:

Institutional Revolution: The “Four-Field Approach,” introduced by Franz Boas and his school, transformed anthropology from a collection of scattered disciplines into a unified and independent academic profession. Starting at Columbia University, this model became the standard for the entire US higher education system in the first half of the 20th century.

Breaking Stereotypes: This model practically demonstrated that anthropology consists of more than just “bone studies” or excavations. It established the necessity of studying humanity simultaneously through biological, linguistic, historical, and cultural lenses.

Modern Relevance: For the development of anthropology in Uzbekistan, adopting this “holistic” US experience is highly advisable.

Teaching anthropology not merely as a sub-branch of biology or history, but as a comprehensive social science, serves to address many modern sociological issues.

Anthropology is the science that encompasses humanity's past, present, and future in all its dimensions, and history has confirmed that the "Four-Field Approach" is the most effective instrument for this task.

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