Chapter 1

Introduction

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What is "practicing" anthropology, and how does it differ from academically based anthropology? What is the nature of the relationship between these two sides of the discipline? What has been their history together? These are the main questions addressed in this chapter by Riall Nolan, as a way of introducing the rest of this book, its rationale, and structure.

The Development of Practice in Anthropology

This is a book about what anthropologist practitioners do and how they do it. "Practice," as we use the term here, has a very specific meaning: it is anthropology done largely outside the university, by non-academic anthropologists.

"Applied," "action," or "engaged" anthropology – terms often used synonymously – can refer to virtually any extramural work done by university-based anthropologists. The "practitioner" distinction, however, is important because their work isn't an optional or part-time activity; they work as insiders, full-time. And the contexts in which they work, varied as they are, are all significantly different from university environments, particularly with respect to issues of security, support, and role definition.

Engagement and application have always been an integral part of anthropology, of course, and have had a large hand in shaping what the discipline has become (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 179). The history of practice, moreover, is by now well known (see, e.g., Chambers 1985, 1987; van Willigen 1986, 2002; Gwynne 2002;

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Nolan 2003; Ervin 2004; Kedia and van Willigen 2005). Up through World War II, much anthropology was both "engaged" and "applied." Following World War II, for a variety of reasons, academically based anthropologists rose to dominance, effectively redefining the limits and possibilities of the discipline. The application of anthropology became, for many, somewhat suspect.

At the same time, however, increasing numbers of anthropology graduates began to choose non-academic careers, and by the 1980s, this trend was clearly established. At that time, John van Willigen remarked:

> It appears unlikely that the large numbers of anthropologists entering the job market as practicing anthropologists now will take academic jobs in the future. They will not return because there will not be jobs for them, their salary expectations can not be met, and they just do not want to. (1986: 34)

As the trend continued, concern began to surface about the relationship between the growing body of independent practitioners and the academy.

Today, although we lack precise figures, there are probably more anthropologists working outside the academy than within it. The demand for the kinds of skills anthropologists possess is strong, and growing, and "practice" – as we have come to call it – is no longer a secondary or alternative career choice. Anthropology's constituency now includes a majority of people with little or no academic experience, and few ties to academia. Many of these people, furthermore, now consider the MA rather than the PhD to be their professional qualification.

Practitioners work across a wide variety of sectors, doing an enormous number of different things. They are planners, managers, policy-makers, project and program directors, advocates, and designers. To an increasing extent, they are also influential decision-makers within their organizations. Their work – and how they do their work – differ significantly from that of their university-based colleagues.

Why Is Practice Different?

Some in the traditional anthropological mainstream have had difficulty grasping the nature and extent of these differences. Some academicians, who work or consult regularly outside the university, see their applied work as little different from that done by practitioners. Overall, there has been a tendency to minimize – or even deny – differences in this respect. Others insist that all anthropology is really applied in one sense or another. Mullins, for example, says that "virtually all anthropology can claim some measure of practicing engagement somewhere along a continuum of political possibilities." Practice, for Mullins, "is research that consciously positions itself within public dialogue" (2011: 236, 235).

New names for the use of anthropology have appeared. And so we now have "public" anthropology, "engaged" anthropology, and even "activist" anthropology, together with exhortations for more collaboration, interdisciplinarity, and connection. One result of this has been to downplay or minimize practice. Naming, as

several writers have pointed out, is a way of creating distance (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 182). "New approaches," say these authors, "tend to be presented in opposition to existing ones." Merrill Singer, among others, has lamented this tendency on the part of the academy to invent new labels for what are essentially long-established practitioner activities, in the process "usurp[ing] the role of public work long played by an existing sector of our discipline" (2000: 7).

Other debates center on ethical concerns. Ethics in anthropology is a broad field, but ethical concerns with respect to practice have focused on issues such as informed consent, the ownership and use of information, and the appropriateness of work for large and powerful institutions (see Baba 1998: B5). Within the academy, discussion of the ethics of practice tends to be hampered by the relative lack of understanding of and experience with what practitioners actually do on a daily basis. Given that many if not most of the jobs done by practitioners don't actually have the word "anthropology" in the title, academics are prone to ask, "But it this really anthropology?" John van Willigen provides a clear and straightforward answer when he reminds us that there are really no such things as *anthropological* problems. There are client problems, and our job is to figure out how to use anthropology to address these (van Willigen 2002: xi–xii, 233).

Discussion within the disciplinary mainstream been preoccupied with such stuff in recent years, while one of the most fundamental aspects of anthropological application – its relation to a client base – has largely been neglected. And here, I think, we need to acknowledge a set of essential differences between anthropologists working within the academy and those working outside it. These differences are significant, both constraining and enabling how anthropology is done, how it is used, and to what effect.

We can begin with a fairly basic difference: where problems come from and how they're dealt with. Problems, for academic anthropologists, tend to be self-selected, generated and defined from within the discipline itself. In anthropological practice, however, problems usually come from the needs of external clients. These clients not only define problems, but they may also specify the criteria that solutions must satisfy.

Academic anthropologists often see themselves as providing "critical perspective" on issues or problems, whereas practitioners are expected to provide solutions. And the solutions often have the effect of changing lives, as well as minds. As one practitioner said, "we don't just stand outside and critique, but work inside to change, guide, and innovate" (Kitner 2011: 35). For practitioners, action and outcomes are assumed to be the top priority. What they work on is defined and prioritized within the overall social and political context, and not simply in terms of what the academy might think important. And whereas anthropologists – academics and practitioners alike – are very good at providing "thick description" of specific contexts and situations, practitioners must often simplify and prioritize these descriptions to turn them into policy.

Other differences between academia and practice are also important. These include aspects of structure, patterns of reward and constraint, and work style.

Structures

An anthropologist will have either a base in the university or a base in the world of practice, and where that base is located will determine important things about how they are seen, what they do, and how their work is judged. University-based anthropologists, however "exotic" they might appear to their academic colleagues, generally have little if any difficulty in defining and presenting themselves to others in the university. Practitioners, whose job title rarely includes the word "anthropologist," must make repeated decisions about how to represent themselves and what they do.

Structurally, academia is remarkably homogeneous. Although each of our many institutions of higher education can be said to be a distinctive culture unto itself, they are organized in very similar ways. There are a relatively small number of rungs on the academic ladder, and a fairly well-established set of rules and procedures for climbing up them. And there is fairly clear agreement across institutions as to what rights, roles, and responsibilities accompany these different ranks.

Outside the university, organizations are considerably more diverse in structure, mission, and mandate. Anthropologist practitioners occupy a very wide range of roles here, at a variety of different levels, and with a bewildering array of titles. Moreover, these organizations are themselves often changing, sometimes fairly quickly, in response to outside forces.

Rewards and constraints

In like manner, the pattern of rewards and constraints which shape jobs and careers, while relatively uniform within the academy, is again highly diverse and variable outside it. Academics, by and large, are rewarded (i.e., hired, tenured, and promoted) for a very limited number of things, principally teaching, research, publication, and service, and while each of these activities is highly complex and requires a great deal of skill, the path to success is clear. Judgments about how well or badly these things are done, moreover, are typically made by one's academic peers.

In contrast, practitioners generally work on a succession of projects or assignments, each requiring a somewhat different set of skills, approaches, and activities. Only some of these activities involve research. These assignments, moreover, are not usually chosen or created by practitioners themselves, but by the needs and requirements of the wider organization and its clients. And as a result, outcomes are judged by those clients, and not by peers. The consequences of these judgments are, of course, significant for future practitioner assignments and opportunities.

Work styles

Work styles also differ significantly between academics and practitioners. Academic anthropologists tend to do their work as individuals, beginning in graduate school, and extending through fieldwork, tenure, and beyond. Work assignments and dead-

lines are usually self-imposed, limited mainly by the academic calendar, funding deadlines for grants, and tenure and promotion reviews.

Practitioners, on the other hand, often work in multidisciplinary teams. Their work tends to be collaborative and highly result-oriented. Often, these results may not be individually attributed. Although their work is not devoid of theory, practitioners tend to be judged on the basis of what they can do, not simply on what they know. Time pressures, of course, can sometimes be intense.

A History of Missed Opportunities

Years ago, in a gloomy moment, one of my academic mentors remarked to me that "the history of higher education in the US is, to a large extent, a history of missed opportunities." This is nowhere more true for anthropology than in the history of the relationship between practitioners and their academic cousins. The details of this troubled and inconstant relationship are by now well known. What is striking about it is how unnecessary, for the most part, it has been.

This has been a tremendous missed opportunity. Today's practitioners are skilled, influential, and well networked. In their work, they test anthropology's theories, concepts, methods, and perspectives against the demands of society. They work collaboratively with other disciplines to do this, and they do much more than research: they are decision-makers and implementers. Slowly but surely, they are bringing anthropology into the workplace, and securing its position there.

To a large extent, most of this has been studiously ignored by the academy. Practitioner work is all but invisible to the discipline, its products lying for the most part outside the mainstream of academic literature. We do not even know with any degree of precision how many practitioners there are or what they do, for the simple reason that no one is counting. And as we all know, what gets counted *counts*.

As a result, the discipline is largely cut off from any nuanced understanding of how, why, and with what effect anthropology is actually being used outside the classroom. What's been lost includes an enormous amount of information and understanding about how significant issues and problems are constructed by different groups in society at large; and how and why solutions to these problems succeed or fail. Additionally, we have lost opportunities to both test and build theory by looking closely at instances of practice. And finally, of course, we have missed significant opportunities to build awareness about anthropology among the general public and, with awareness, influence.

There are clear signs that some of this, at least, is changing. In some respects, there isn't a moment to lose. Outside the academy, awareness is growing of the magnitude and importance of what are termed "grand challenges," and within the academy, disciplines like engineering and agriculture are beginning to reorganize themselves – often to the extent of major curriculum reform – to respond to these.

But in this global effort to bring creative thought and action to bear on some of our most pressing problems, anthropology as a discipline seems curiously absent.

Individual anthropologists, of course are not at all absent, and some – like Merrill Singer and Paul Farmer – have had a substantial impact on public thinking and awareness. But there is little programmatic discussion within the discipline regarding how we might direct our efforts more intentionally. We have what amounts to a knowledge management problem here, as well as a problem with getting what we are learning into the curriculum for our students.

Until quite recently, the discipline appears to have suffered from a form of "naive realism": the belief that the way one's own culture sees the world is the way the world really is. From this perspective, practitioners can appear as failed academics, ethically challenged rogues who peddle "anthropology lite."

Expecting practitioners to behave like academics seems oddly ethnocentric. One of the most frequently repeated criticisms of practice, for example, is that it is atheoretical. The evidence for this claim is generally taken to be the relative dearth of writing by practitioners in refereed journals. But expecting practitioners to generate peer-reviewed research as a way to legitimate what they do is to ignore the essential realities of their work. It calls to mind the classic Doonesbury strip where Jane Fonda urges her cleaning lady to do more exercise. If I can fit exercise into my busy schedule, Jane reasons, then surely the cleaning lady can. To which the woman replies, "Ms Fonda, you're as busy as you wanna be. I'm as busy as I gotta be."

Students today are more interested in practice careers than at any other time in my own 40-year experience within the discipline. But most of our institutions are still preparing them only for university careers. If anthropology is so useful in the world at large – as practitioners demonstrate on a daily basis – then why are most of us still not training our students to actually do this?

Fortunately, there are clear signs today that all of this is changing. We have seen, for example, the first comprehensive surveys of who practitioners are and what they do (Fiske et al. 2010). We now have a growing number of excellent applied Master's programs in the country, as well as several full PhD programs. More are undoubtedly on the way. The *American Anthropologist* has begun regular features involving practitioners and practice-based themes. And discussion has been ongoing for some time regarding the reform of tenure and promotion guidelines at universities, to support practice activities.

How This Book Is Structured

Any attempts to improve graduate training in anthropology and to prepare people for careers in practice must perforce include a better understanding of what practitioners actually do and how their professional lives are constructed (see Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006: 187). One of the most difficult things to do, however, is to bring practice – and practitioners – directly into the classroom. Structural incompatibilities alone make it difficult to involve practitioners in more than marginal ways in academic

programs. But it is possible to bring the experience of practice to students through the stories of practitioners themselves.

Hence this book, which is an attempt to describe – to some extent at least – the world in which practitioners live. Not all of the contributions here are from practitioners, of course, but the majority of them are. Several chapters are collaborations between a practitioner and an academically based anthropologist. My request to potential contributors was very simple: tell us what your professional situation looks like from your personal perspective, and through your own eyes.

Some contributors provided what are essentially autobiographical accounts; others attempted a more comprehensive description of their job or sector, often drawing on other literature and other professionals. Others gave us a case study. In each case, however, contributors were at pains to provide personal perspectives, as practitioners, of a particular aspect of practice.

The principal readership for this volume includes three groups of people. One of these, of course, is anthropology students interested in practice. The second group includes those faculty members teaching applied and practice-oriented courses, some of whom may also be interested in the possibility of becoming a practitioner at some stage. The third group comprises, of course, practitioners themselves, particularly those relatively new in their career.

The book is divided into four parts. The first, "The Practitioner Career Arc," includes chapters on practitioner training, what it's like to move out of academia, job-hunting and job success, career management, and coping with stress and failure. Part II, "Practitioner Bases," provides a series of accounts from practitioners about what it is like to work in various sectors. Included are four chapters from independent practitioners, as well as chapters on work in small and medium enterprises, NGOs, multilateral organizations, the corporate sector, the federal government, and the university sector. Part III, "Domains of Practice," looks at a series of important areas of practice. There are chapters on methods and approaches, health, international development, the military, marketing and advertising, design, the environment, and disaster and humanitarian work. Part IV, "Issues," takes up a number of key concerns for practitioners. Included here are chapters dealing with relations with the academy, professional communication, networking, and working with others. Also included are three detailed case studies, one dealing with ethics, one on the integration of medical and social data, and one on practitioner training.

In 1997 James Peacock wrote a provocative essay on the future of anthropology. The discipline, he said, would either flourish, stagnate, or disappear, depending on the choices that we made from now on. To avoid either stagnation or extinction, Peacock recommended that anthropology do three things: initiate projects which reach beyond the concerns of the academy; do more than merely provide critical analysis; and think and communicate beyond both the discipline and the academy (1997: 14).

Ironically – but very fortunately – practitioners have been doing these things for years. This book describes how some of them are doing that.

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