

Anthropology IN Practice

BUILDING
A CAREER
OUTSIDE THE
ACADEMY

RIALL W. NOLAN

ANTHROPOLOGY IN PRACTICE

Building a Career
Outside the Academy

Riall W. Nolan



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PREFACE

This is a book for anthropology students who would like to become practitioners. Since the 1980s, thousands of anthropology's most talented graduates have become practitioners, breaking new and exciting ground on many fronts. Pioneers in the application of disciplinary knowledge to contemporary problems, they work outside the academy in hundreds of diverse settings on a host of important problems.

The need for well-qualified practitioners can only grow in the coming years. Today, we interact daily with people whose existence we hardly suspected only a few short years ago. Some of our new neighbors in the global village are friendly, others less so. We must approach our relationships with all of them responsibly. One thing is now very clear: success in the twenty-first century will not depend primarily on economic or military power, but on the ability to manage cultural differences productively.

We must manage these differences in order to resolve an array of issues—poverty, the environment, health care, collective security—for which there will probably never be simple, uniform, and orthodox solutions. Solutions will only come through understanding cultural diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle, a task for which anthropology is ideally suited.

Anthropology's message is both simple and compelling: there are other minds in the world and they think as well as ours; but they often think very differently. Anthropology allows us to explore—and ultimately, to understand—other cultural realities. Anthropology shows us the rationale and pattern behind different ways of living and thinking.

And anthropological practice, in particular, shows us how to put that knowledge to productive use.

The irony of our times, however, is that while opportunities for anthropologist practitioners have never been more abundant, few anthropology graduates are trained specifically for the demands of practice. Teaching materials oriented toward practice that talk specifically about what practitioners do and how they do it are scarce. Few anthropology instructors have significant experience of practice, and practitioners themselves are largely absent from university training programs.

The result is that most anthropology graduates—unlike, say, their counterparts in business, medicine, law, or engineering—enter the job market underprepared for the challenges and opportunities that await them. Instead, with a few notable exceptions, anthropological training in the United States prepares students primarily for careers as academics.

This situation, in essence, was the impetus for this book: to provide anthropology students and recent graduates with a glimpse at the alternative to an academic career, together with some practical suggestions for carrying anthropology beyond the walls of the university and putting it to work in the world. What I've written here isn't intended to challenge traditional anthropological training, but to complement and enhance it. The overall goal is quite simple: to ensure that if you want to become a practicing anthropologist, you are as well prepared as possible.

This book is intended for three groups of people. The first is undergraduates who have become interested in anthropology and want to make use of it, but are wondering, as many do, what they can actually do with an anthropology degree. The second group is graduate students. They are somewhat more confident of their ability to use anthropology, but may be uncertain about the career prospects for someone outside of university employment. The third group is that of recent graduates who are interested in making the transition from academically based research and teaching to the world of practice.

A single book can't tell you everything you need to know about practice; the field is too complex and dynamic. What I've tried to do instead is to provide some broad guidance and perspective, gleaned from my own experience and that of others, on what you can do to prepare yourself for a career in practice and to succeed. I've tried to anticipate the kinds of framing decisions you'll need to make, in graduate

school and beyond, and to provide some simple guidelines for choice. Your own intelligence and energy will do the rest.

The book has six chapters and an appendix. Chapter 1, "Anthropological Practice," provides an overview of what practice is, looks at what distinguishes practitioners from academic anthropologists, and notes some current issues and controversies. Chapter 2, "Preparation for the Field," outlines how anthropology graduate students can prepare themselves for careers outside the university. Chapter 3, "Career Planning," discusses shaping your professional future, looking both at the strategic decisions to be made and at the information-gathering techniques that underlie these decisions. Chapter 4, "Getting In: Finding Your Job," takes you through the process of getting your first assignment as a practitioner. Chapter 5, "Work Survival: Organizations, Management, and Ethics," centers primarily on your first year at work, and discusses how to both survive and thrive. Chapter 6, "Making It Count: Advancing the Profession," looks broadly at how practitioners can advance their profession and their discipline, while at the same time contributing to wider society. The Appendix, "Resources for Further Learning," provides lists of helpful websites and publications relating to practice.

Through the work of practitioners, we are redefining the scope and content of anthropology for the twenty-first century. Practice draws on skills, knowledge, and approaches that range far beyond the traditional boundaries of anthropology, even as the processes and products of practice remain uniquely anthropological.

Globalization, like most social transformations, does not have pre-ordained outcomes. Instead, it presents us with opportunities as well as threats, together with a host of novel and compelling choices. To make those choices, the world does not really need more anthropologists—it needs anthropological practitioners, professionals capable of translating our discipline's considerable insights into useful ideas for building our collective future.

The first generation of anthropologist practitioners is already at work in the world. It is the next generation of practitioners who will secure anthropology's place in the great public forum. We owe it to them—and to our society—to begin preparing them for the important tasks that lie ahead.

This book is offered as a modest contribution toward that end.

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The training of future anthropologists is perhaps the single most important task facing the discipline today. Concerns about training and career preparation have engaged the interest and creativity of a large number of anthropologist practitioners and academics sympathetic to practice. Many of these people are my friends and colleagues and have helped me formulate many of the ideas that went into this project.

In particular, I would like to thank the following for their suggestions, encouragement, and advice: Mitch Allen, Susan Allen, Adele Anderson, Ann Ballenger, Linda Bennett, Dean Birkenkamp, Peter Castro, Michael Cernea, Noel Chrisman, L. Davis Clements, Lisa Colburn, Cathleen Crain, Ted Downing, Shirley Fiske, Emilia Gonzalez-Clements, David Gow, Susan Hamilton, Michael Horowitz, Rebekah Hudgins, Stan Hyland, Ann Jordan, Dolores Koenig, Eliot Lee, Terry Leonard, Laurie Price, Bill Roberts, Patricia Sachs, Ted Scudder, Jeanne Simonelli, Neil Tashima, Tim Wallace, Rob Winthrop, and John Young. Each of you, in different ways, has worked hard to put anthropology to work for the needs of society, and to encourage students to do the same.

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—R. W. N.

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ANTHROPOLOGICAL PRACTICE

This chapter provides an overview of anthropological practice. The first section looks at how the practice option developed within anthropology, and what the field of practice looks like today. The second section looks at how practitioners work, and what distinguishes them from other sorts of specialists. The third section looks in some detail at how anthropological practitioners and their academic colleagues differ from one another. Section four takes up several of the current controversies and issues concerning practice that engage the attention of both academics and practitioners. The chapter concludes with a section on the attributes of successful practitioners, and some myths about practice.

The Practice Option

Antecedents

There has always been an applied side to anthropology. Early British social anthropology, as we know, was highly practice-oriented. In the United States, the New Deal, and later World War II itself, provided anthropologists with many opportunities to use what they knew in government service.

Anthropological practice, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Anthropological practitioners are individuals (generally with either an M.A. or a Ph.D.) who make their living applying anthropology in nonuniversity settings. In 1968 only 25 percent of

new anthropology Ph.D.s in the United States took nonacademic positions. By 1995, however, it was estimated that more than 60 percent of M.A. and Ph.D. anthropologists were working outside the academy.¹

Today, there are thousands of practitioners, working in a wide variety of sectors, doing an enormous number of different types of jobs. Every year, between one-quarter and one-half of all new anthropology M.A.s or Ph.D.s enter nonuniversity employment, and the market is strong. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* noted:

Increasing globalization and racial and ethnic diversity are opening up new opportunities for cultural anthropologists in nongovernmental organizations, public-health organizations, and a variety of businesses, such as consulting, public-relations, and opinion-polling companies, to name but a few. Meanwhile an increasing number of Ph.D.s in the field are finding jobs in federal and state law-enforcement agencies, especially in forensic anthropology, and in private and government research laboratories as biological anthropologists.²

Within the academy, a small but growing literature focuses on practice and the training of practitioners. Outside the academy, organizations and networks that support practice have grown up, helped along by the Internet and the World Wide Web.

What is interesting is not that practice has grown, but that it took so long to appear. After all, it is not as if opportunities for extra-academic involvement were lacking in the United States or elsewhere during the latter half of the twentieth century. The Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) was founded in 1941, partly in response to these opportunities. Some of the best writing on the application of anthropology to problems of development and change dates from the period of the late 1940s to the early 1960s, when anthropologists were active both domestically and overseas as administrators, consultants, and trainers. Several significant projects in applied anthropology were done during this time, notably the Fox Project in the United States and the Vicos Project in Peru.

But anthropology graduates were slow to take advantage of this growth in opportunities. For one thing, U.S. universities were steadily expanding during the 1950s and 1960s. This provided academic jobs for anthropology graduates, inviting them to choose research and teaching over application, and to develop theory rather than practice.

Coupled with this academic expansion was the overall effect of the Vietnam War. Early involvements of anthropologists with defense- and intelligence-related programs triggered a firestorm of criticism from the academy and the professional associations. Anthropologists, by and large, opposed the war, and became increasingly reluctant to involve themselves in government-sponsored work. All of this produced a retreat from many aspects of applied work—especially if it involved the government.

Eventually, of course, university growth slowed. And although initially many anthropology graduates probably entered practice out of necessity, more and more of them began to choose nonacademic careers as the opportunities and rewards of practice became evident. In the mid-1980s, John van Willigen observed: “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.”³

His prediction proved accurate. Today, the concept of the anthropologist practitioner—a full-time professional working outside the university—is well established, and practice is no longer a secondary or alternative career for graduates. The demand for their services is strong, and continues to grow.

What accounts for the rapid growth of practice? Overproduction, for one thing. In the words of one observer, anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s was a “cat and rat farm,” able and willing to absorb its graduates back into the academy, even though substantial opportunities existed even then for nonacademic employment. University hiring eventually slowed, but the production of graduates did not.⁴

Beginning in the 1960s, the growth of both international and domestic development programs fuelled an enormous increase in the demand for what might be called “social knowledge.” Social-service agencies, schools, hospitals, and other organizations needed the kinds of information that anthropologists were well equipped to provide. As networks of practitioners began to form and practitioners began to appear regularly as presenters and discussants at the yearly meetings of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) and SfAA, more and more graduates found it both possible and attractive to consider nonacademic careers.

The growth of practice led to changes in the structure of the discipline. The journal *Practicing Anthropology* began publication in

1978. In the following year, the AAA passed the "Resolution in Support of Anthropologists Working Outside Academia," and began to include practitioners in their directory. The University of Kentucky began the Anthropology Documentation Project, collecting and cataloguing applied materials. In 1984, the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA) was formed.

Local practitioner organizations, or LPOs, began to spring up in major cities, in part because of a feeling that the large, academically dominated national organizations were not responsive enough to issues of practice.⁵ One of the first LPOs was the Society of Professional Anthropologists (SOPA), founded in 1973 in Tucson. The Washington Association of Practicing Anthropologists (WAPA) followed shortly thereafter. More recently, private-sector firms run by anthropologists have appeared, offering their services to the market.

A literature began to arise describing the activities of a very diverse group of practitioners working in a wide variety of contexts across the globe. Within this literature, several important themes emerged. One was the need for anthropologists to learn new things—and especially new ways of working—if they were to be professionally successful and effective outside the academy. Another was the need to refine and develop their guidelines for ethical practice. A third concerned the content and philosophy of training for anthropology students. A fourth was the link—or lack thereof—between practice as an activity in the field and anthropological theory building. And finally, concern began to surface concerning the relationship between the growing body of independent practitioners and the academy.

Distinctions

Practice is now a full-time occupation for thousands of anthropologists. But how exactly are practitioners different from other anthropologists?

In the anthropological literature, a great deal of discussion has taken place about who is a "practicing" anthropologist, and how exactly such roles can be defined. It is helpful to think of anthropologists with interests in the use of anthropology as falling into three fairly distinct categories: academic anthropologists, applied anthropologists, and practitioners.

Academic anthropologists are university-based anthropologists who may, from time to time, participate in applied activities—typically as short-term consultants or expert witnesses. For this type of more traditional anthropologist, application is interesting and important, but essentially peripheral.

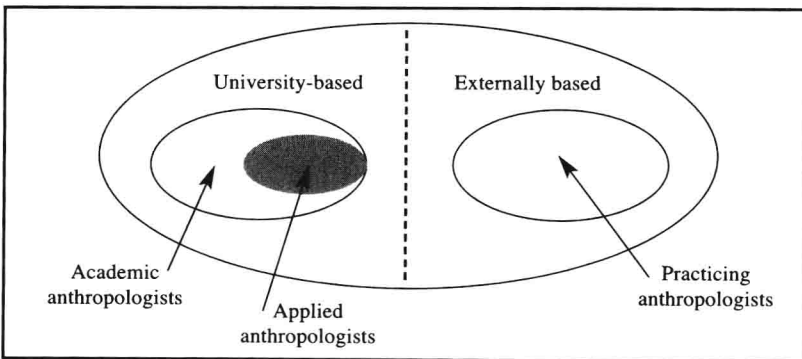
Applied anthropologists are also university-based anthropologists, but their interests center on applied areas, and their teaching, research, and extramural activities reflect these interests. Many do short-term consulting from home. A few have their own consulting business.

Anthropologist practitioners are people with advanced degrees in anthropology, but with no permanent or secure attachment to an academic institution. The application of anthropology is central to their work, but they may or may not have the title of “anthropologist.” They work independently, or for government, private, or non-profit organizations.

The essential distinction in this formulation is between anthropologists working from a university base and those who work outside the university. Within the university, applied anthropologists are in effect a subset of academic anthropologists (Figure 1.1).

This is not to say, of course, that anthropologists cannot move back and forth between practice and the academy over the course of their careers. But 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 what one does and

Figure 1.1 Different Types of Anthropology



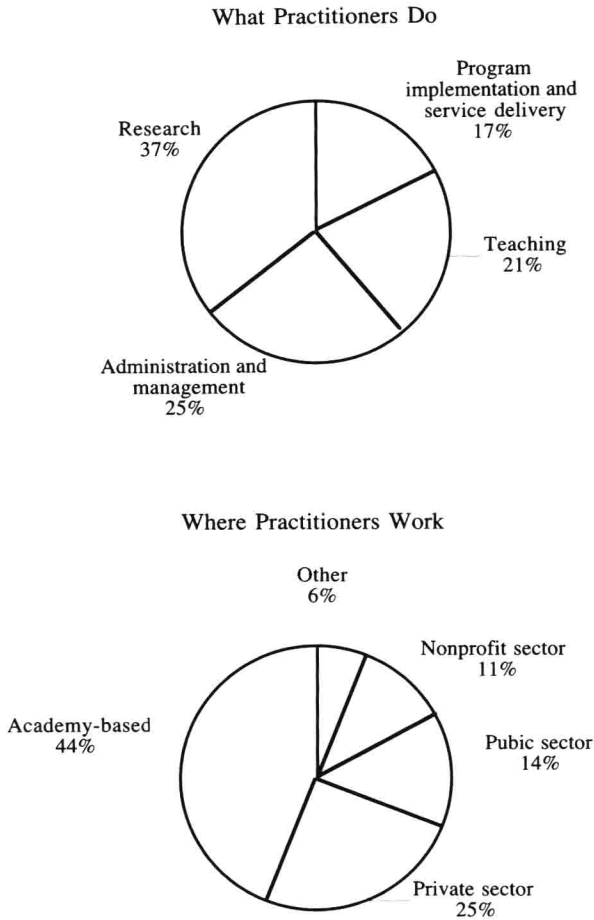
how one's work is judged. This can be seen more clearly in Table 1.1.

The Shape of the Field

What do practitioners actually do? Here we have very inadequate data, but some broad indicators. NAPA's 1990 membership survey looked at where practitioners worked and what they did (Figure 1.2). The NAPA survey included large numbers of people who were not,

Table 1.1 Differences Between Academic, Applied, and Practicing Anthropologists

	Place of Employment	Core Activities	Who Judges Results
Academic anthropologists	Academically employed.	Research, grant writing, publication, and teaching. Topics forming the core of one's work are often, although not always, centered on the traditional academic pursuits of ethnography and theory.	Inside the academy, evaluations are done by peers, tenure committees, and review boards. Outside the academy, evaluations are done by peer reviewers (for publications or grants) and members of professional bodies.
Applied anthropologists	Academically employed in most cases; operate as a temporary consultant outside the university, at times and in situations of their own choosing. The university is used as a base of operations and a refuge.	Similar to the above, but with the addition of activities performed on behalf of outside constituencies. These include training, consulting, advocacy, research, etc.	Results are ultimately judged by one's peers inside the academy. The assessments of outside constituents, although important in many cases, do not usually adversely affect one's career or job security.
Practicing anthropologists	Self-employed in many cases; employees of agencies and corporations in others.	Activities are widely varied, and change according to the assignment. They include research, management, evaluation, training, consulting, advocacy, etc.	Employers and clients judge results, usually according to their own standards. The results of evaluation have direct consequences for future jobs or assignments.

Figure 1.2 What Practitioners Do and Where They Work

Source: Adapted from Baba 1994; Fiske 1991.

strictly speaking, practitioners. This accounts for the high proportion of university-based respondents. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the number of practitioners in the private sector, which includes, by the way, people working as independent consultants.

These data, while crude, do indicate something of the shape of the field. Today's practitioners include people working in a wide