Anthropology between academia and practice

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Summary

Anthropological skills and perspectives are of use in many professional contexts, and in a few industries, the value of anthropology is generally accepted: historic preservation, public health, and user experience research are prominent examples. As a result, a vibrant community of “practicing,” “professional,” “public,” and “applied” anthropologists has taken root in a variety of non-academic settings. The relationship between academia and professional practice is sometimes difficult, however, as some practitioners feel stigmatized or excluded by academics, while others inhabit professional spaces where academic anthropology is largely irrelevant.

While anthropologists often speak of a “divide” or “split” between academic and practicing anthropology, this view overlooks the fact that much work in the discipline maintains a presence both inside and outside of higher education institutions. Not only do anthropologists often form collaborative partnerships among members with diverse professional commitments, but individual anthropologists may simultaneously maintain both academic and non-academic affiliations, and they may move among professional spheres over the course of their career. If we are to reach a full understanding of the profession, we must move beyond a simplistic “academic / practitioner” dualism to consider these diverse professional contexts and work-life trajectories.

Keywords

career diversity, literature of practice, practicing anthropology, applied anthropology, public anthropology, professional anthropology, professional identity

Anthropology's employment divide

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics counts more anthropologists working outside of higher education than in it (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor 2017), and yet, anthropology is often understood to be an academic undertaking. Students are typically introduced to the discipline through undergraduate coursework, where professors are usually the only exemplars of anthropologists that students come to know. Without anthropologists in business, government and nonprofit (BGN) fields as role models, students often come to believe that they must either pursue graduate study and academic employment, or else abandon anthropology altogether for something that more transparently orients them toward a specific profession.

At the same time, anthropological skills and perspectives are valued by many employers. Indeed, in a few industries, such as historic preservation, public health, and user experience research, the value of anthropology is generally accepted. As a result, there has come to exist a vibrant community of "practicing," "professional," "public" and "applied" anthropologists working in a variety of BGN settings. While many anthropologists use these terms interchangeably, a number of attempts have been made to establish clear definitions. For example, Crain and Tashima (2013), founding partners of a consulting firm, consider themselves "professional anthropologists," and Borofsky (e.g. 2018) has written extensively on "public anthropology," which according to his definition includes work that "seeks to address broad public problems in public ways that lessen other people's suffering" (Borofsky 2018, 129) irrespective of the anthropologist's professional circumstances. I follow Marietta Baba in distinguishing between *practicing anthropology*, which takes place in diverse professional contexts, and *applied anthropology*, in which academic anthropologists address social problems;

she also identifies a liminal area in which “academic and practitioner interests are shared” (Baba 1994, 175).

The relationship between academia and professional practice is sometimes difficult, as some practitioners feel stigmatized or excluded by academics, while others inhabit professional spaces where academic anthropology is largely irrelevant. For example, Jean Schensul and colleagues write that these anthropologists “are not motivated to, nor supported to participate in the AAA and its traditional conference and publishing activities, which are often perceived to be irrelevant to their careers” (Schensul et al. 2017). Talking to these anthropologists, the strength of the discipline outside of higher education becomes clear, but its connection to academia can sometimes feel strained. As Riall Nolan put it, practitioners’ “work—and how they do their work—differ significantly from that of their university-based colleagues [but] some in the anthropological mainstream have had difficulty grasping the nature and extent of these differences” (Nolan 2013b, 23).

When anthropologists frame the relationship between academia and practice as a “divide” or “split,” however, they overlook the fact that much socially engaged anthropology maintains a presence in both higher education and BGN institutions. Not only do projects often involve teams with both academic and practice careers, but individual anthropologists may simultaneously maintain both academic and non-academic affiliations or move between professional spheres over the course of their career. If we are to reach a full understanding of the profession, we must account for these diverse contexts of practice.

Before considering this overlapping space between academic and BGN employment, it is worth considering another divide about which much more has been written: if we consider practicing-and-applied anthropology to be one subdiscipline that crosses institutional boundaries, we can discuss what separates it from other approaches that lack explicitly envisioned practical applications.

Theory versus application

In anthropology, the split between “theory” and “application” originates from the development of social anthropology in the 19th century as an applied social science supporting the European colonial powers, as well as the internal colonization of Native Americans by the United States. This research program developed prior to any university anthropology departments; “within the history of anthropology, application came first” (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and van Willigen 2006, 179). Because of the need to train colonial administrators, anthropology soon appeared as a training program in universities and became solidified as an academic discipline. As a result, there developed a stratified system in which “the top tier was devoted to the production of ‘pure’ knowledge, and an ‘Other’ tier was devoted to the production of applied knowledge for ‘other’ venues” (Baba 2005, 210–11).

By comparison, the theory-practice dichotomy is less salient outside the US and UK. In the Global South and other postcolonial settings, “many anthropologists and ethnographers … engage in what might be called ‘applied’ work—that is, they use anthropological and ethnographic knowledge and methods to address problems beyond those defined by an academic discipline” (Baba 2005, 206). Much of the work done by university-based anthropologists in these areas is designed either to defend cultural heritage or confront social issues in ways that often resemble what is called “applied anthropology” in the US. For these anthropologists, “the applied–academic distinction is largely irrelevant, because anthropological work by resident scholars is often driven by critical socioeconomic and structural issues, thus merging theory and engaged praxis” (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, and van Willigen 2006, 178). There is no reason to speak of *applied* anthropology when application is a normal unmarked component of all anthropologists' practice.

For instance, Mariza G. S. Peirano (1998) reviews the history of "anthropology at home," that is, field work conducted within the anthropologist's own culture or home country. She does not go so far as to take a "nativist" stance according to which only natives may judge the quality of an ethnography, but she does explore the different perspective that an anthropologist can offer when their home context has traditionally provided an object to anthropological study, in a way that helps to clarify why the "theoretical / applied" split is not as salient for these scholars. "Well before the current concerns with anthropology at home," she writes, "India offered the academic world long discussions on the study of 'one's own society'" (Peirano 1998, 115), while in Brazil, "social commitment is in fact a powerful component of social scientists' identity" (Peirano 1998, 116). In a contemporary example, the vision statement of the Center for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) in Mexico commits the center to "maintain critical attention both to global theoretical and methodological approaches, and to the social relevance of its activities"[1] (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social 2018). All of these approaches take anthropology's social relevance as a natural component of the discipline.

In the US, by contrast, Barbara Rylko-Bauer and colleagues (2006) claim that where applied anthropology does exist as a defined mode of practice, it is often criticized for its historical entanglement with colonialism. Responding to this perception, they provide a comprehensive historical overview in which they argue that because application is fundamental to the foundation and subsequent development of the discipline, applied anthropology cannot be evaluated separately from the rest of anthropology in this way. They respond to critics who claim that applied anthropology is insufficiently theoretical, too engaged in advocacy at the expense of scientific understanding, or complicit in the problematic actions of BGN clients. They show that each critique is based on an oversimplified view of applied anthropology that does not account for the diversity of fields and modes of application. Instead, they propose that application can point the way forward for a discipline that often struggles to articulate its relevance beyond the ivory tower.

Kathryn Kozaitis (2000) goes further in blurring the boundaries, pointing out that all anthropologists engage both in theorizing and in practicing. In particular, academic work does not consist purely of conducting research and building theory; teaching, writing grants, and serving on committees all require academic anthropologists to engage with practical concerns. For Kozaitis, the academy is itself a site of practice, in a way that is illustrated in Carolyn Behrman's (2011) evaluation of a service-learning project that she directed, and in Susan Blum's (2016) use of ethnographic insights to improve her own teaching practice. At the same time, we observe that collaboration, public outreach, and policy advocacy are becoming more a part of anthropology overall, as anthropologists with academic affiliations are commonly involved in "applied" work (Lamphere 2004).

Not only do academics engage in practice, as Kozaitis explores, but practitioners develop and extend theory, albeit in ways that respond to the exigencies of their diverse field sites and work contexts. For example, Maria Cury and Daniel Bird (2016), researchers at business consulting firm ReD Associates, find theory useful not only for engaging in rigorous ethnographic praxis (they understand the work they do for private clients in terms of "hermeneutics," drawing on Geertz and Heidegger), but also for translating their ethnographic observations into insights that their clients find useful (in a report for an appliances manufacturer, they used Goffman's "frontstage / backstage" framework to explain why people don't want washing machines in the kitchen). Moreover, the complex institutions in which anthropologists such as Cury and Bird work are quite different from the field sites in which the discipline first developed. As a result, it has fallen to applied anthropologists to develop theories of business organization (Hamada 2000) that may then feed back into the development of the field more generally.

Academia and practice

Given such a strong history of application in anthropology, it comes as no surprise that students of anthropology would put their training to work in a variety of professional settings. Practitioners trained at the master's level have always gone on to diverse careers (Fiske et al. 2010). For those with PhDs, practicing careers have been an increasingly urgent priority because of the ongoing crisis of precarity in academic employment, and the resulting higher profile of career diversity discussions has also attracted PhD anthropologists to BGN careers of which they might otherwise have remained unaware. Within academic anthropology, in parallel with the critiques to which Rylko-Bauer and colleagues respond, the last several decades have seen a growing number of departments that focus specifically on applied anthropology and on preparing their students for practicing careers. Consider the Consortium of Practicing and Applied Anthropology (COPAA), which defines itself as "an independent consortium of university departments and programs, practitioners and organizations that provide education and training in applied and practicing anthropology [whose] mission is to advance the education and training of students, faculty, and practitioners in applied anthropology" (https://www.copaainfo.org/about, accessed April 28, 2019). COPAA was founded in 2000 by a charter group of five master'sgranting and four applied PhD departments (Fiske et al. 2010, 2). Linda Bennett and Sunil Khanna summarize the landscape within which COPAA's work takes place:

> … we no longer anticipate that most alumni with graduate degrees in anthropology will enter full-time academic positions; this has been much the case since the mid-1980s. In preparation for careers outside of full-time academic employment, increasing numbers of students in both undergraduate and graduate programs are actively involved in community-based and engaged scholarly endeavors and—often as a result—acquire jobs. (Bennett and Khanna 2010, 648)

Since its founding, COPAA's membership has risen to over 30 departments, and those departments have granted an increasing share of anthropology degrees over the last several decades. Considering the departments that are currently members of COPAA (https://www.copaainfo.org/member-list, accessed April 30, 2019), Figure 1 shows that they granted 13% of anthropology bachelor's degrees and 23% of master's degrees between 2015–2017, up from 10% and 12% in 1987–1989 (see also Ginsberg 2017a).

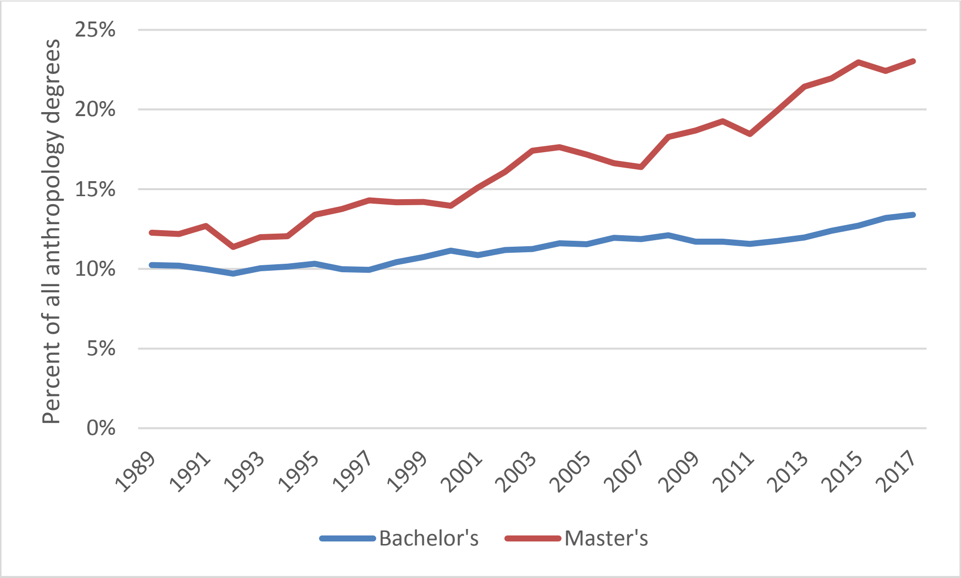

Figure 1: Share of anthropology degrees granted by 2019 COPAA members (three-year moving average). Source: NCES, IPEDS collection, Completion survey component, 1987–2016 (final) and 2017 (provisional).

Unfortunately, however, this message is not reaching everyone in the discipline. The only anthropologist role models for the undergraduate anthropology students participating in Amy Goldmacher's (2010) ethnography were their professors, leaving these students with the impression that the only use of an anthropology degree was to prepare for graduate study and an academic career. Riall Nolan (1998) writes that faculty are also often ignorant of practitioner careers, leaving them ill-equipped to advise the majority of their students who will find employment in the BGN sectors. Practitioners, for their part, often distance themselves from the academy, talking about their work in ways that highlight the differences between themselves and their professor colleagues. Behind this talk is a real difference in material concerns; as Nolan writes, work outside the academy is driven "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" (Nolan 2013b, 25; see also Singer 2000). When academic anthropologists fail to acknowledge these concerns, it presents a challenge for their students; in comparison with other social science disciplines, anthropology shows a “failure of PhD programs and dissertation advisors to help students master the practical skills and knowledge that would facilitate the transition from PhD student to practicing professional in the actually existing labor markets for PhD anthropologists” (Rudd et al. 2008, 25).

To some extent, this academic-centric perspective is the nature of the academy. When professors talk about the “jobs” that their PhD advisees find, “jobs” is often shorthand for “academic jobs”—a habit that is by no means limited to any one discipline (Cassuto 2017). In anthropology, efforts to correct this misperception have focused mainly on raising the profile of anthropologists who work in BGN settings. In the discipline of history, however, despite the smaller proportion of PhDs beyond academia (Rudd et al. 2008, 7), there has been a much more comprehensive effort to re-envision graduate training and the way we talk about it, which may provide an instructive example.

In 2011, the president and the executive director of the American Historical Association published an essay entitled “No More Plan B” (Grafton and Grossman 2011). They argued that postgraduate education should not only recognize the diverse careers that graduates find, but also counter the hierarchy that places academic jobs on top. Moreover, they emphasized that this understanding should be infused throughout history graduate programs from day one. A later essay (Grossman 2017) provides more detail about how this re-envisioning of graduate training might work in practice. This piece outlines a hypothetical orientation session for graduate students. The director of graduate studies explains that just as administrative experience is useful to future academics, pedagogy will be relevant in BGN careers, and that all students will benefit from a full range of educational and professionalization opportunities regardless of their professional aspirations. Notably, Grossman’s proposal entails the participation of historians from outside the academy to serve as role models and advisors who demonstrate the versatility of their history degrees. Rather than separating the discipline into academic and non-academic professions, this vision situates postgraduate education as a site of cross-sector collaboration in which PhD students are trained for diverse careers by representatives of diverse careers.

Working on the margin

Within anthropology, many professionals build productive, rewarding careers that are not easily classified as "academic" or "non-academic." Although the daily tasks, work products, and institutional structures that delimit an anthropology professor's work life are distinct from those of a government data analyst or industry researcher, more unites them as anthropologists than divides them across employment situations. As Bennett and Fiske observe,

> although full-time careers in academia and careers in predominantly practitioner arenas represent two different types of work, with varying demands, talents, and rewards, important areas of commonality exist between them. In short, we observe that the boundaries between academia and practice are not as dichotomous as many anthropologists seem to believe (Bennett and Fiske 2013, 331).

In fact, not only do anthropologists outside of university anthropology departments participate in higher education settings, but academic anthropologists also contribute to BGN work.

Practitioners in academia

As academic programs that focus on applied anthropology have become more prevalent, more attention has been paid to the diverse ways in which anthropologists may participate in higher education other than as professors of anthropology. One common role for anthropologists is as faculty members in other departments. In 2018, among members of the American

Anthropological Association (AAA) with anthropology PhDs and faculty jobs, only 68% had a primary appointment in anthropology (American Anthropological Association 2019). Anthropologists teach in humanities departments such as area studies and history, professional schools such as public health and education, and a long list of diverse social and natural science departments. In some cases, these departments may recognize applied work more than anthropology departments do. As Shirley Fiske wrote about her experience as an anthropologist teaching in a public administration program, “The school and faculty in public administration valued practice, and both practitioners and experience were continually integrated into the curricula, publications, and tenure and promotion process” (Bennett and Fiske 2013, 334; see also Fiske 2006). A background in anthropology also serves as preparation for a variety of non-faculty roles in higher education, such as administration (Wiedman 2013), museum work (McChesney 2018), academic librarianship (Lanclos and Asher 2016), and institutional research (Ginsberg 2017b).

Within anthropology departments, there has been a growing recognition that faculty members may have relevant professional experience in BGN work, and a push for this work to be considered in tenure and promotion decisions. This advocacy effort resulted in official statements from professional organizations such as the AAA and COPAA (American Anthropological Association 2017; Committee on Practicing, Applied and Public Interest Anthropology 2011; Khanna et al. 2008), and included a review of how practicing work was already being considered by self-identified applied departments (Bennett and Khanna 2010). These applied departments consider a broader definition of tenure and promotion work products such as technical reports, consulting work, service on community- or government-based committees, appointment to government agencies, public lectures, and testimony before federal or state legislatures. It is still the case that traditional academic work still guards its prestige; public engagement is typically considered “service” rather than “research,” and technical reports may need to be accompanied by peer-reviewed publications. Nevertheless, there seems to be a growing acceptance within academia of the diverse work products beyond scholarly teaching and publishing that may be produced in the course of a productive career in anthropology.

For practitioners who wish to engage with academic departments, many options are available beyond changing careers and joining the faculty. Bennett and Fiske (2013), as well as Brondo and colleagues (2015), list many academic functions where a BGN perspective is useful, such as mentoring students and finding internship or practicum placements for them, serving on committees, guest lecturing in classes, speaking at colloquia, and collaborating on research. Practitioners may be of particular service as adjunct instructors for practica and other courses that prepare students for professional careers. Often these connections are made through alumni networks; “faculty members acknowledge enthusiastically that educating students to enter the community as practitioner anthropologists depends on a close collaboration between academic faculty and alumni practitioners.” (Bennett and Fiske 2013, 334). And many practitioners value the opportunity to share their experience with students, bringing their professional perspective to bear on the training of future professionals.

Academics in practice

Just as there are numerous short-term roles for practitioners in academic departments, there are also opportunities for professors to contribute to practicing work. Government agencies such as the National Park Service often recruit academics for short-term consultancies (Talken-Spaulding 2015). Some academic anthropologists serve as professional expert witnesses in legal proceedings, as the courts have need of anthropological perspectives in multiple areas (Rosen

1977). Such work is not limited to forensic anthropology but has included areas such as Indigenous rights and land titles, racial discrimination, and minority religious practices. Other academic anthropologists may take on consulting work in evaluation research (Butler 2015, 161–62; Butler, Copeland-Carson, and Arsdale 2005).

The regular work practice of academic anthropologists also includes space for engagement with outside institutions, particularly under the rubric of applied anthropology. One common vehicle for this kind of work is through project-based instruction (Cohen 2017). In this program model, an academic applied anthropologist forms a partnership with a local institution or community group, which becomes a research site for their own work as well as providing research opportunities for students; in this way, research, teaching, and community engagement are all part of the same project. Anthropological methods of inquiry can even be applied to the operation of the university itself (Foster 2017), resulting in work that is not easily categorized as "academic" or "practicing"; while they may take place entirely within academic institutions, these interventions focus on understanding the problems that participants encounter in their daily lives in ways that lead to concrete solutions, a style of engagement that is more characteristic of applied anthropology.

Scholarly societies are another venue where anthropologists of all professional affiliations collaborate with one another on practical work. Associations provide a larger reach than an individual researcher can achieve on their own, and their reports and white papers can be published more quickly than peer-reviewed journal articles, so they have provided platforms for academic research to gain the attention of policymakers on critical issues such as Ebola (Abramowitz et al. 2014) and climate change (Fiske et al. 2014). Due to the importance of academia to the health of the discipline, societies also conduct research on higher education (e.g.

Smedley and Hutchinson 2012), sometimes involving cross-sector collaboration between anthropologists with academic and BGN affiliations (Wies and Ginsberg 2017).

The growing literature of practice

As we have seen, there are many opportunities for anthropological work to transcend the institutional boundaries that separate academia from other contexts of practice. Ultimately, however, if anthropologists are to design careers of this type, they will need examples to follow. As in the case of Goldmacher's (2010) undergraduates, who saw no way to pursue anthropology except through higher education, the problem is one of imagination and mentoring.

Programs do exist that make BGN anthropologists available as mentors, and thereby help students and career changers to find opportunities outside of academia. Some applied anthropology graduate programs include community-based internship or practicum requirements, and the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology has a long-standing mentoring program (Liebow and Jiwa 2005; see also AAA Mentoring Working Group 2014). Although these offerings provide invaluable support to participants as they explore diverse career options, they can still feed into the perception of a binary choice between academic and "other" careers. They are also labor-intensive, limiting their reach, and easily dismissed by those PhD students who do not see themselves as the target audience of career diversity programming.

What is called for is what Riall Nolan and colleagues (2018) call a "literature of practice," a written record of anthropologists' diverse careers and the process that has gone into designing them. Nolan has been developing this concept for over two decades, first with *Development Anthropology: Encounters in the Real World* (2001), and subsequently with *Anthropology in Practice: Building a Career Outside the Academy* (2003), *A Handbook of Practicing Anthropology* (2013a), and *Using Anthropology in the World: A Guide to Becoming* *an Anthropologist Practitioner* (2017). Videos such as those produced by the AAA (Altimare and Humphrey 2007; Arnold 1993; Smiley et al. 2006; Wang et al. 2019) offer one version of profiling anthropologists at work, but a more reflective approach entails personal essays of the sort collected by Christina Wasson (2006) in a *NAPA Bulletin* special issue, *Making History at the Frontier: Women Creating Careers as Practicing Anthropologists* (see also Nolan 2013a). Many of these essays touch on the career dynamics discussed here, such as movement from academia to industry (Butler 2006), teaching outside of anthropology departments (Fiske 2006), and working in the nonprofit sector while maintaining contact with higher education (Copeland-Carson 2006). As these accounts demonstrate, not only do anthropologists with BGN jobs maintain their connections to academic colleagues, but they sometimes list academic positions on their resume, or move into academic positions later in their careers.

As we advance and develop this literature of practice, more work needs to be done to create professional communities in which anthropologists from all professional contexts feel at home (Schensul et al. 2017). Among members of the American Anthropological Association, anthropologists in BGN sectors are underrepresented (Ginsberg 2016), largely because, as Schensul and colleagues pointed out, they see less relevance in the AAA’s core offerings of meetings and journals. The Association has long used its convening power to disseminate a literature of practice in the form of video compilations and *The Annals of Anthropological Practice,* and to connect current and aspiring practitioners through NAPA mentoring. Moving forward, these mentoring efforts will take on increasing importance as we consider our responsibility to educate future anthropologists in a world of increasingly precarious academic employment.

We began with the observation that BGN careers become invisible to the extent that students are not made aware of them. As applied anthropology has grown, practitioners have won the attention of colleagues and mentees, and the existence of diverse careers has become a more familiar idea, but we still risk framing the issue as a binary decision. It is not the case that PhD candidates, for example, reach a certain point in their professional lives at which they must choose once and for all to be either an academic or a practitioner. In fact, there is no shortage of counterexamples: faculty who partner with nonprofits, anthropologists in industry who maintain academic affiliations, former professors now working as federal contractors. Not only do students and career changers have options beyond the professoriate, but many of these options allow them to remain engaged with higher education.

Notes

1. "Mantiene una atención crítica tanto a los planteamientos teóricos y metodológicos globales, como a la pertinencia social de sus actividades."

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