A HANDBOOK OF PRACTICING ANTHROPOLOGY

EDITED BY RIALL W. NOLAN

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Preface and Acknowledgments

There has never been a better time to be a practicing anthropologist, as across the globe, people work together to confront and address our societal and environmental challenges at a variety of levels and in a variety of ways. Anthropology has much to contribute to these efforts, but until a few decades ago, I think it's fair to say that our discipline sometimes took a somewhat off-hand and haphazard approach to issues of application.

Fortunately, this is no longer the case. Anthropology outside the university is now the fastest-growing – and arguably most exciting – facet of our discipline, bringing theory and practice together in new and exciting ways. More and more of our graduates now choose practice, and more and more of our academic programs are gearing up to help develop these practitioners. Essential to this undertaking is the inclusion of practitioner voices in our disciplinary conversations about what anthropology is and what it is becoming. This book is a modest contribution to that effort.

My intention here was not to provide a survey of the literature and theory relating to practice, but instead to bring together insider accounts from experienced professionals, accounts of what it's like to be them. I wanted them to tell us, from their perspective, what they do and how they do it; what they see as major issues and opportunities in their work, and how they address these. Consider this, if you like, an attempt to provide an emic perspective on practice, and one which connects our discipline and its concerns to wider structures, interests, and issues.

No book of this size and scope can be created without the efforts of many different people. My thanks and appreciation

go out to my original small group of “sages,” with whom I consulted at the outset and who helped me with ideas, encouragement, warnings, and advice. Later, I received helpful suggestions from many other practitioners as the project proceeded, regarding possible authors, topics, and approaches. And throughout, I was encouraged and supported by the editors at Wiley-Blackwell, in particular Rosalie Robertson, Julia Kirk, and Jennifer Bray.

But most of all, my thanks go to our authors, most of whom are engaged in full-time practice, and who gave generously of their precious time and energy to make this book possible. They did not write their chapters for the purposes of promotion or tenure. Nor did they do it for the money. They did it, as I learned, because they are passionate about their work, because they understand how integral anthropology is to what they do, and because they want to tell that story to others.

I am proud to claim them as friends and colleagues. I am impressed with the skill and dedication with which they approach their work, and I am equally impressed with their accomplishments. I think you will be too.

Riall Nolan
Lafayette, IN
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Riall W. Nolan

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; 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.