

## CRISIS IN TRAINING AND EMPLOYMENT:

REFLECTIONS ON A FIELDWORK EXPERIENCE<sup>1</sup>

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The following discussion is limited to a few comments concerning academic training and preparation for both fieldwork and professional employment. The issues raised will then be related to the context of my own recent fieldwork experience, and a few suggestions for improvement will be made.

The principle point to be stressed is that there seems to be an ever-increasing gap in the interim between training, fieldwork, and achievement of a professional status, either in academia or elsewhere. This may be partially due to a problem-oriented emphasis in anthropology, but it is also related to the changing face of academic and non-academic employment opportunities.

Whether their interests are in human biology, archeology, or ethnology, most students preparing for fieldwork are preoccupied with the delineation of a "legitimate" research problem. That is, most anthropologists search for and define a specific problem during the course of preparation for their fieldwork and later analysis. The importance of this mode of inquiry cannot be denied, as it is a necessary precondition for attaining more sophisticated methodology, data collection and analyses. For as we all know, science does not progress simply by the uncritical compilation of data: synthesis, abstraction and generalizations are necessary to achieve higher level laws and principles. However, we cannot forget the need to question critically the nature and kinds of problems we are dealing with today.

One of the reasons that our discipline is presently not very marketable is that we are overconcerned with problems generated by our own colleagues. We should ask, "Whose problems and what issues are we attempting to find solutions to?" Are we simply concerned with those problems and issues that are at any one time in vogue in the profession, or can we deal with issues of the present world, and social problems that are of concern to the group being studied, and of our own society? Rather than asking our students and researchers to find the ultimate cause, for example, of patrilateral parallel cousin marriage, or to quantify the exact carrying capacity of a prehistoric Great Basin hunting and gathering group, we must also direct our anthropological skills to seeking solutions to such problems as health, inflation, political repression, standards of living, and a host of other issues that affect the group we are studying, and

within our own society as well. By no means is this a new issue in anthropology, but it often becomes of only secondary importance in the realities of professional training.

The point is that there is often a great gap between problems, as defined by current debates in the discipline, and those of the people we are studying; and institutions, communities and events in our own society to which anthropology should be able to contribute more effectively. There is a growing crisis in anthropology, which is not unlike that of the crisis in medicine: greater reductionism (in anthropology, specialization) which is no longer appropriate for scientific tasks and social responsibility (Engel 1977). This creates a "tunnel vision," as Gardner (1977) describes it, which prevents problem solving outside the anthropologist's specialty.

Few can dispute that there is also a crisis in the academic employment of anthropologists. This crisis is related to overspecialization and the problem orientation of mainstream anthropology. In what they viewed as an "optimistic assessment of the future for academic employment" D'Andrade et al. (1975:772) calculated that after 1982 more than two-thirds of all Ph.D.'s in anthropology will have to find employment outside of the academic world, and they will be able to use very little of the training they received in graduate programs. It is recognized, however, that this situation is not unique to the field of anthropology. In many fields Ph.D.'s are being produced at a rate far above those required as college and university teachers. Wolfle and Kidd note that only about a quarter of the new doctorates of the 1970's will be needed in their respective academic departments, and the projected annual production of 50,000 new doctorates in the 1980's requires "sustained, long-range, carefully planned programs" for their utilization in "major social, health and environmental problems that beset mankind" (1971:790).

The question is: are graduate students currently being prepared to become marketable in such non-traditional areas of employment? Can the discipline "twist," as Landgraf (1977) expressed it, and adjust itself to such imminent realities? Anthropologists may soon be reaching a point at which they are specializing themselves outside of a job market by achieving their Ph.D. status via solutions to esoteric problems, but without knowing how to contribute something useful, innovative, and marketable. There are those who would argue that it is ethically and morally wrong to judge and make the kind of decisions that are demanded in today's world of international trade, commerce, development, administration, politics, etc. But perhaps it is just as wrong ethically to remain neutral and passive in such issues. And as Jansen states, "If it limits its own scope, anthropology cannot remain a viable science" (1973:328).

So, how do these issues relate to my own fieldwork experience?

My dissertation research was in Iran from September, 1976, to May, 1978. Prior to my arrival in Iran, I was preparing for a village demographic study, hoping to pursue the issue of the domestic

mode of production in relation to recent land reform. However, having previously lived in Iran, I knew that a research grant simply would not be sufficient to support my family there. But I also knew that, once there, I would be able to obtain employment in which I could pursue research, probably in a village setting.

Within a month I was employed by the Village Health Worker (VHW) project, administered by the Department of Community Medicine at Pahlavi University in the southern city of Shiraz. My official job title was Administrative and Research Assistant, and the responsibilities were as varied as such a title implies.

The VHW project is designed to provide basic health care for a number of villages about 40 miles outside the city of Shiraz. The project recruits villagers to serve as VHWs, after an intensive training program. I selected a village in which a VHW was assigned, and continued my research for 16 months, spending three and sometimes four days a week in the community.

Essentially, I had two research sites: both the village and the Department. This provided a broad perspective on the processes and problems involved in health care delivery--a perspective which would not have been as clear had I lived only in the village. I also felt that both my research and work addressed problems and issues considered relevant and important by both the innovating institution and the target population to which health services were directed.

However, during the course of my research, I occasionally had second thoughts about such a fieldwork situation. After all, dividing time between the city and the village simply does not fit stereotypes of an anthropologist totally "immersed" in his or her community. But in reflecting upon the experience, I believe there were certain advantages of such an approach. The villagers associated me with the VHW project and almost immediately accepted my presence there. There was no need to obtain a research permit or an arbitrarily assigned counterpart Iranian investigator, nor was there a time limit of three months placed on my fieldwork--all of which are logistic barriers for most anthropologists doing research in Iran without local institutional affiliation. Furthermore, most of the time spent in the field was productive. That is, the depression or lack of motivation that periodically overcomes fieldworkers who spend long, uninterrupted periods at their site simply was not experienced because of the weekly retreat to the city (or, on the other hand, the weekly retreat to the village!).

In retrospect, my academic preparation for fieldwork was somewhat peripheral to needs encountered in the field: i.e., those needs of the Department and my own revised research interests. I was associated with an innovative project closely monitored nationally and internationally which became a model for developing a viable health care delivery system in many areas of rural Iran. Although the Department's faculty and some of the VHW's staff

recognized certain advantages of having an anthropologist's perspective in field and administrative decisions, the situations and problems for which they sought advice had little resemblance to problems discussed in anthropological seminars back in the U.S.A. Although training in anthropology was useful, such additional skills as cost-effective analysis, public relations, national and regional planning, and curriculum development would have been useful. I found that I was inadequately prepared to make more of a contribution to the Department's planning and administrative activities, problems which took some time to overcome. And I seriously doubt if this inadequacy is unique only to this situation: whether one is working in marketing, administration or public programs, certain skills beyond those of an anthropologist are necessary to perform on an equal basis with colleagues from other disciplines. If anthropologists are to compete successfully in the job market outside academia--and it looks like this is the future direction they will have to go--their training and professional preparation will have to include skills that are marketable and in demand by employers.

Inadequate preparation for today's job market is not necessarily the fault of faculty and advisors; rather, it is more a result of academic anthropology's concern with problems as defined by current issues in the field situation. This is not to imply that all of anthropology is irrelevant and incapable of dealing with real human issues; but with increasing specialization, there is an inherent danger that our concern with theoretical and often esoteric problems is simply one of our greatest barriers to relevancy and productive employment at the present time.

In conclusion, a few potential solutions may be suggested:

1. We should critically examine and reformulate the kinds of questions and models we are dealing with in terms of current issues and human problems.
2. It is imperative that students be informed of the employment crisis in academic anthropology before they make a decision to pursue anthropology as a profession. Courses, or portions of courses, should communicate the employment issue, and departments should develop avenues by which their graduates can become marketable outside academia.
3. Students should be encouraged (required?) to take courses in such areas as administration, public policy, trade, marketing, etc. in order to acquire skills that are marketable. A person armed only with the solution of a problem he has reached in research and the writing of his dissertation is not really prepared to become an executive in the World Bank, a policy-maker in the World Health Organization, or a social services administrator for a local city government.
4. We must overcome the stigma that academic positions in "status" colleges and universities are the only legitimate places of

employment for anthropologists. I can think of few disciplines whose professionals are as concentrated in academia as are anthropologists.

5. A combined employment-research position may serve as a viable means by which to finance fieldwork for graduate students in these lean times. It can also provide a practical experience, while at the same time generating more insights into the total forces of the research situation. This is especially true if the situation resembles mine, where the employer is somehow connected to or working with the research population.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southwestern Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Santa Barbara, March 29-31, 1979.

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