

STRESS, SURVIVAL, AND SUCCESS IN ACADEMIA

2.0: LESSONS FROM WORKING INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE ACADEMY

By Courtney Hughes Rinker and Sheena Nahm

As graduate students writing our dissertations between 2009 and 2010 at the University of California Irvine, we began to feel the first ripples of a shrinking job market for tenure-track academic positions in anthropology. There were questions, in hushed whispers as well as anxious and frantic outbursts, about how long the recession would last, whether we should “wait and see” before graduating, or apply now and just cast a wider net in terms of schools and searches. The 2009 Anthropology Faculty Job Market Report opens up with, “AAA has been increasingly concerned with the academic job market. Anecdotal evidence suggests that faculty lines are being lost and searches cancelled” (Terry-Sharp 2009). Given uncertainty, we both chose the latter option and had the good fortune to find employment in academic institutions—Courtney Hughes Rinker at the Arlington Innovation Center for Health Research (Virginia Tech) and Sheena Nahm at the Norman Lear Center (University of California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism). Interestingly enough, neither of us entered these institutions through the traditional route of the tenure-track position. Although our jobs were quite unique and different from each other, they both were in research centers focused on contracts and grants and were not solely situated in the realm of cultural anthropology, the field in which we are trained. Since then, we both went on to publish, teach, work in applied fields, and often engage with academic and nonacademic interlocutors.

Through this experience, we began to reflect on what it means to be a cultural

anthropologist contributing to dialogues in a changing world that often has been referred to as “Academia 2.0” amongst our colleagues.¹ In this article, we address two questions: What skills do we have from doing academic fieldwork that can be applied to the non-academic world? and What is it from our work in applied research that helped us transition back to academia? In particular, we examine the impact of living both inside and outside of academia in the current climate and offer strategies and skills for a cultural anthropologist negotiating the job market.

Working in a Liminal State: Being Inside and Outside of Academia Today

While it is more present in our daily conversations and in our anxiety-ridden cover letters, Academia 2.0 calls into question whether there was ever an inside or outside of academia. Philip D. Young writes, “Is it possible to combine a career as an academic anthropologist with that of a practitioner? The short answer is yes, but some types of anthropology are easier to combine than others, and you need to carefully consider this in making your choices” (2008:56). The topic of preparation (or lack thereof) of graduate students for viability in a job market not limited to academia has gained momentum, as seen by the multitude of columns and career advice-related questions posted through higher education media. Over a decade ago, Peter Fiske wrote, “On average, scientists write more professional documents and speak in public more often than other professionals. So it is natural that we consider communication one of our discipline’s strong suits” but added that “academia also favors careful and deliberative communication over

communication that may be quicker but is less accurate. As a result, young scientists learn to be careful and conservative in what they say and to speak up ONLY when they can speak as a true expert on a subject” (1999:para 4). Although Fiske was speaking to scholars primarily situated in the biological sciences, he was calling for academics in general to consider informal communication strategies, or what bosses outside of academia have called “your elevator pitch,” a description of your work in the limited time you have with someone on the go. How is this possible when dissertations written on hundreds of pages seem like not nearly enough space to capture the complexities of a topic? And yet, the world outside of academia has pressed both of us to develop our “informal” communication skills as well as to understand the impact of “good-enough” explanations.

The “good-enough” was a horrific thought for idealistic graduate students dedicating their lives to the pursuit of knowledge, and yet, living outside of academia gave us a deeper appreciation for what many of our interlocutors face: the understanding that the work is not done and yet still must be articulated and submitted for scrutiny. It also pushed us to be able to code-switch, staying faithful to the core of our messages but understanding the power of using certain “languages” strategically.

What is striking is that the lessons learned while traveling “outside” of academia were and are the same lessons that translated into better scholarship “inside” of academia. For instance, while at Virginia Tech, Hughes Rinker worked on a project that examined how to better integrate end-of-life care into family medicine in a rural Appalachian town. While applicable

and understandable to health care professionals, her work was theoretically informed by the Trajectory Model by Corbin and Strauss (1992). While working with a national nonprofit organization, Nahm also found herself revisiting major theoretical contributions of anthropologists—specifically the concept of “situated learning” and “community of practice” as described by Lave and Wenger (1991). Both of us published articles based on research projects we worked on the year after graduating with our Ph.D.s and prior to our re-entering academic institutions as professors. Nahm eventually went to work for a nonprofit organization in addition to teaching and researching and discovered a knack for managing budgets, facilitating interdisciplinary task forces, conducting community outreach, and presenting to diverse audiences. In fact, these skills were merely outgrowths of seeds germinated in the experiences of participant-observation during fieldwork; they were simply nurtured and brought to the forefront out of necessity. In our return to academia, we discovered that multi-tasking and quick timelines were feasible and completing required service work, such as sitting on committees and advising students, was easier to manage on top of our teaching and research. In addition, interdisciplinary collaborations necessary for grants and publications came more easily—not simply in theory, but in practice.

Making the Transition from CV to Resume

When new anthropology Ph.D.s read a job ad that states, “Please send a one page resume and cover letter,” their blood pressure rises and their heart beats a little faster, at least that is what happened to us. Is it even possible to cut down a multi-page curriculum vitae (CV) to a one-page document that is comprehensible? Our fear came from the fact that we felt the interviewers would not get a sense of our accomplishments and what we could bring as anthropologists to their organization. Kim Thompson and Terren Ilana

Wein (2004) write of the CV, “It is an all-encompassing portrait of who you are intellectually and should include everything you’ve been involved with academically since starting graduate school. But send a document like that to an employer outside of academe and it will most likely end up in the ‘toss’ pile.” As academics, our CV, in a way, defines us, and to transform it into a brief snapshot of our education, experience, and skills is difficult emotionally and physically. Moreover, coming from the Ivory Tower, we may believe that we do not have enough “real-world” experience or the proper skill sets to even compete in the non-academic job market, but, “the important thing at this stage is not to let your past experiences actually get in the way of your future ones” (Thompson and Wein 2004).

While Hughes Rinker was writing her dissertation, she faced a slim job market and personal dilemma. Her partner, who is a non-academic, was based in Washington D.C. After two years of a long distance relationship while she was finishing her fieldwork on reproductive healthcare among working-class women in Morocco and writing in California, they decided it was time to settle in the same zip code. This limited her job opportunities and she decided it was best to apply for research and non-academic positions in the Washington area even though she intended to also apply for tenure-track positions. Through a job search engine, she found a position of “Postdoctoral Associate in Health Services Research” at Virginia Tech—National Capital Region. The posting read, “The successful candidate must have a doctorate degree in a field suitable for interdisciplinary health systems research.... Interested applicants are requested to send a resume and a letter of application.” As a medical anthropologist, she believed that she could be a fit for what the center wanted, but the problem was, how does she get this across in a resume? She remembered some advice from her undergraduate English professor: tailor. She had to prioritize what would be important from a CV for this particular position: Is her teaching assistantship

or are conference presentations more important? Should she list publications or special skills instead? How does she include the ethnographic research she conducted in Morocco?

She began by making a mental map of the requirements for the position and then fit her experiences during graduate school into each category. Making the most of these experiences is important given that she would most likely be competing with individuals who had worked in applied fields after receiving their Ph.D. For instance, the advertisement mentioned, “experience working in a clinical environment is desired,” and she clearly had that from conducting research in reproductive health clinics in Rabat, Morocco for almost two years. She decided the best way to emphasize her experiences relevant to the position was to divide the resume into two main parts, “Research and Experience” and “Public Health Experience.” The first included main points from her dissertation fieldwork, thus demonstrating she had worked in a clinical environment, and as a graduate research assistant at the University of California Irvine, while the second included the internship at an NGO in Rabat as part of her fieldwork and a certificate in Global Population and Reproduction she earned from the University of Michigan, which showed she had knowledge of the field. Given the space constraints of a resume, it was imperative that she highlighted the theoretical and methodological training and experience, as well as the interdisciplinarity of her work that would make her stand out from other candidates.

Similarly, Nahm found herself reconfiguring elements of her academic cover letters and CV in order to apply to positions at nonprofit organizations. In addition to the strategic mapping, packaging, and re-articulation of abilities used by Hughes Rinker, Nahm also found that anthropological analyses had trained her to see connections between seemingly disparate ideas and skills. This sensibility was especially useful during interviews whenever a potential employer would question how anthropology fit with their own work. Instead of narrowing down to

a country or group that she had experience studying, Nahm emphasized key lessons about social dynamics. For example, at the first nonprofit organization where she worked, she emphasized how her dissertation on child play therapy in Korea and the United States showed the impact of media on social stigma surrounding pediatric mental health issues. At her second job with another nonprofit organization, she emphasized the experience child therapists and families had depending on which services were and were not covered by insurance. Through this lesson, Nahm emphasized her ability to analyze media impact and policy, respectively. These strategies helped to illustrate how ethnographic experience in graduate school could be seen as equivalent work experience with regards to topics and skills that were most relevant to potential employers.

Back Translating

Linda Bennett and Sunil K. Khanna write, "Anthropology in the United States manifests a history of being a multifaceted discipline with regard to training, career opportunities, and practice" (2010:648). Upon graduation, students can take their careers in several different directions both inside and outside of the academy. While the previous section dealt with how to make anthropological training in graduate school relevant to non-academic positions, here we think through what working in applied fields has given us for our professional pursuits in the university. Young reminds us that combining an academic and applied career can be challenging because it depends upon how your department "[defines] 'research' and where you publish your work" (2008:56-57), and doing this could be detrimental to a junior faculty member's career. But, working in applied fields before entering academia provided us with the ability to explain our work in terms that the public can understand and appreciate, to make our ethnographic work relevant across academic disciplines, and to collaborate with scholars from different fields.

When Hughes Rinker was a postdoc at Virginia Tech and working with a large health care organization, she worked on developing two projects that would ultimately result in providers in a rural area offering patients higher quality care. She was tasked with communicating the purpose and methods of the projects to medical providers and various members of the organization's administration. When one administrator called her ethnographic project "softer" than medical research, she knew she had to convey anthropology's importance in a language that could be easily understood by non-academics and non-anthropologists. She emphasized that as an anthropologist she could help the organization see what was not obvious to providers and staff, as anthropologists like to look for connections and discrepancies that are not always visible to the naked eye. She would be able to provide them with the "why" in addition to the "how." Why do patients make particular choices when it comes to their health? Why do they do one thing and not another? However, she had to learn how to remove the academic jargon from her speech and to talk about "practical" solutions to the critical problems the organization was facing.

So when she was asked to give a job talk for her current position in a way that could be understood by a mixed audience (faculty from inside and outside the department, graduate and undergraduate students, and some staff), she was not particularly panicked because of the experience she had working with the health care organization where it was common for her to sit with doctors, nurses, economists, and statisticians around the same table talking about the theories, methods, and the significance of the projects. She learned how to discuss her work in an interesting way that is understandable and yet retains the complexity and theoretical importance of the research. One way she did this was by learning the vocabulary of those she was working with on the projects, which meant adopting acronyms the medical providers used and reading articles

on relevant topics by scholars from disciplines represented in the projects on which she was working. We suggest the communication skills that we refined in our work "outside" of academia helped us to gain confidence in sharing insights from our projects with diverse audience and writing grants that would be read by those from different backgrounds.

Conversely, our experience teaching college students, researching, and writing articles and book manuscripts allows us to feel confident when conducting outreach and facilitating meetings with community leaders, funders, and policymakers. In her various roles at nonprofit organizations, Nahm has facilitated meetings and given presentations alongside professionals who represent the tops of their fields. Although public speaking was not something she gravitated to earlier in her career, she now finds herself comfortable in leadership and communication roles. When colleagues ask whether she took special training classes for communication and public speaking, she often reminds them that expensive workshops or private lessons could never compare with teaching college students who demand engagement at all times and will make it evident when articulation falls short of clear command of the content. Teaching and presenting regularly at academic conferences prepares academics for success in nonacademic worlds by forcing us to be articulate and concise; these activities benefit us just as much as navigating interdisciplinary documents and discussions in nonacademic words enhances our scholarly capacity as academics.

Conclusion

Between graduating from doctoral programs and our present employment, we have lived with one foot "inside" academia and one foot "outside" of it, but as we hope this article has shown, we were always-already dual citizens. Living in the borderlands has helped us think outside the box theoretically and methodologically and given us skills to promote a public anthropology that can

speak to the relevance of the discipline in the United States and abroad. As academics, our future research projects may not be labeled as “applied” per se, but this does not mean they cannot be used to address critical social and political issues. Our endeavors as more applied researchers and as academics have converged at more than just a few points in time, and skills we gained from each trajectory have translated nicely between them. It is our hope that anthropologists in the future, particularly freshly minted Ph.D.s, will not be so scared of the academic/applied divide and will see that it is possible to successfully exist in a liminal state between the two.

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Notes

¹See *Considering Academia 2.0, Writing, & the Community College* at <http://www.cayuga-cc.edu/blogs/bower/?p=72> and *Research as a Second Language: Writing, Representation, and the Crisis of Organization Science* at <http://secondlanguage.blogspot.com/2010/03/academia-20.html>.

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