Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and Publications

Social and Cultural Sciences, Department of

9-2008

Navigating a Joint Doctoral Program in Social Work and Anthropology

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found that multiple approaches were used as competing means toward gaining authoritative voice in academic and practice communities. For example, the science of social work and the science of anthropology were defined differently according to where I was at the time. Rather than inhabiting a single, secure disciplinary identity, I learned how to move among approaches according to the expectations of my audience.

I also learned how this movement is itself a source of creativity and insight. The tension between positivist and interpretivist approaches, for example, kept me questioning assumptions I might otherwise take for granted. What counts as knowledge? What counts as evidence? Who decides, and on what grounds? These questions became central to my scholarship rather than obstacles to it.

Another challenge lay in managing expectations about professional identity and career trajectory. Social work is a practice profession oriented toward intervention and change, while anthropology is traditionally oriented toward understanding and critique. Bridging these orientations required negotiating not only intellectual differences but also differing assumptions about the purpose of research and the role of the scholar.

My experience suggests that interdisciplinary training is less about mastering two fields than about learning to navigate the spaces between them. This navigation is ongoing, and the skills it requires—flexibility, reflexivity, and comfort with ambiguity—are valuable well beyond graduate school.

struggled with seemingly forced choices in underlying assumptions of epistemology, methods and ethics, such as in understanding the relationship between scholars and clients or informants. Initially, trying to use both approaches seemed analogous to wearing special headphones that eliminate unwanted noise by playing equal and opposite frequencies. This then left the problem of sorting through the remaining silence.

Over time, I realized that social work and anthropology do not operate on equal and opposite frequencies as much as they are sibling rivals within the academy. Very similar battle lines of theory, method and ethics are drawn across the social sciences and social work. Binaries are constructed for the opposing sides: quantitative versus qualitative, engaged versus neutral, applied versus basic research. What varies by discipline and over time is the location of the battle lines. At times, divisions can also blur, as when Roy Rappaport argued for the application of ecological anthropology to the study and resolution of social problems in his lecture "The Anthropology of Trouble."

In Michigan's joint program, students are required to complete a dissertation under the supervision of a committee representing both disciplines. My efforts to draw out contradictions rather than commonalities between social work and anthropology initially perplexed my professors. The problem was that I had organized my dissertation around a basic tension between what I called "practical" and "critical" approaches to scholarship. It is a tension familiar to applied social scientists and similar to David Mosse's discussion of "managerial" and "critical" approaches in development work. In my experience, practitioners often treat the contradictions feeding this tension as an occupational hazard.

Discussions during my dissertation defense brought out important debate over the proper relationship between the ivory tower and the "real world" for producing good scholarship and scholarship that "does good." At the same time, my committee told me to either resolve the practical–critical tension or explain how the lack of resolution was analytically meaningful. My answer was to adapt Arjun Appadurai's analytic method from *The Social Life of Things*. I chose not to resolve the tensions I identified between practical and critical interpretations, but rather to use them to provide a productive way to understand the complex dynamics and contexts of global and domestic interventions to "do good." I argued in my dissertation that there is a social life of helping in which problems, interventions and solutions are created, debated and exchanged. This context is often obscured by a more common problem-solving lens in which interventions are evaluated as overall successes or failures. Addressing helping work in terms of negotiation and exchange raises critical questions of how and who defines helping, interventions and evaluation, as well as practical questions of how to interpret the process through which helping work not only persists but also expands through international networks. As it turned out, my challenge was not in resolving contradictions but understanding how tensions surface and are made significant in the context of helping work, as well as how they can be reinforced, challenged and changed over time.

Lessons from Both Points of View

The AAA theme this year—Inclusion, Collaboration and Engagement—raises very similar questions to those that are integral to Michigan's joint program, where I have benefited from a course of study that moves beyond traditional disciplinary limits. What I have gained from anthropology as a social work scholar and practitioner is the ability to ask questions that challenge helping professionals: Why do you think there are social problems demanding your intervention? How do you know that social work as a profession can solve individual and social problems? When is it more ethical to refrain from Intervention? How are unintended consequences integral rather than an occupational hazard of Intervention work? How does researcher engagement impact data collection and analysis, even when that engagement is mediated by hired assistants and telephone survey operators?

I must also consider the primary question from social work that challenges my work as an anthropologist: "So what?" While academics ponder ethics, epistemologies and practices of engagement, social work and other helping professionals have to make decisions given imperfect contexts. The client case is either kept open or closed; the project manager seeks continued funding despite failures and unintended consequences or moves to another project; the policy analyst strives to improve policy implementation or reframes and seeks alternative problem identification and implementation.

In negotiating competing loyalties within an interdisciplinary program, one simple answer is to choose sides. However, this can significantly diminish the potential benefits of an interdisciplinary education and can perpetuate a division of labor between the disciplines. With the fields of social work and anthropology, it can force a distinction between critical observers and engaged practitioners, both of whom may secretly or not so secretly claim to promote best practices. The most valuable part of my education has been examining tensions between observation and direct participation, and between critical inquiry and practical awareness. A single set of universal best practices may be elusive, but the tension between competing notions of best practices can itself be productive.

Alexandra Crampton received her PhD in social work and anthropology from the University of Michigan in 2007. She is a visiting postdoctoral researcher in the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School and a postdoctoral fellow at Boston University. Her research interests include the politics and practice of social intervention work and the impact of alternative dispute resolution on local understandings and practices of conflict resolution. She can be contacted at crampton@law.harvard.edu.