ANTHROPOLOGY, ACTUALLY — "THAT! THAT IS WHAT I WANT TO DO." JENNIFER CARROLL [1]

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Jennifer J. Carroll completed her PhD in anthropology in 2015, and this spring her first book, *Narkomania, Drugs, HIV, and Citizenship in Ukraine* [3], is out through Cornell University Press. Jennifer is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Elon University and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Medicine at Brown University.

WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO ANTHROPOLOGY?

20 years ago, when I was nearing the end of high school, I had one passion that dominated all others: physics. It was my favorite class in high school. I took every AP and extension course I could get my hands on. Even in grade school, I was enamored by the fields of physics and astronomy. I would fake sick sometimes to get on AOL and study star life. I still remember the look on my 8th grade science teacher’s face when I explained the Doppler shift to our class and described the entire proton-proton chain (the process whereby hydrogen atoms collide to produce helium atoms, which keeps stars "burning") from rote. By the time I got to college, I was so disappointed to realize that the text book we were using for the 300-level astrophysics class was one I had read and mastered in the 6th grade.

It would take me more than a decade to realize this, but intense, interpersonal, systemic misogyny at my first undergraduate university essentially destroyed any imagination I had of pursuing a career in physics. I was the only woman in my program of 20. I left with the impression that people who self-selected into this field were just weird and unpleasant. In fact, they were just weird and unpleasant to me. I transferred schools after one year in this program and, at my new college, began receiving a more classically liberal arts education. I took history (I was ok at it), philosophy (I was terrible at it), multivariate differential equations (kicked ass in that class, at least), and cultural anthropology. I liked our discussions in my introductory seminar, so I took more electives in anthropology after that. I took a course on Polynesian myth and another on contemporary gender studies and then another on post-structuralist theory. I left these classrooms feeling so invigorated. I felt like these courses were challenging the same part of my brain that calculated rotational inertia and coefficients of friction: there were patterns and differentials and systems of meaning waiting to be unearthed. But instead of seeking that thrill in a basement lab mixing kings water under a ventilated hood, I was out in the world seeing people, talking to people, caring about people. I switched majors and never looked back.

I had no idea what I wanted to do with a BA in anthropology, but I knew that anthropology was helping me be a better me: a person who cares too much and thinks too much and is good at seeing and communicating the Big Picture … I should probably put that on my business cards. Or maybe not. It’s a frighteningly accurate description, though.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR FIELD OF STUDY/RESEARCH TO A FRIEND WHO IS NOT AN ANTHROPOLOGIST?

I often tell people that I study “addiction” as a cultural construct. This means that even though there are very real biological and psychological realities — and very real lived experiences! — tied up in problematic substance use, our society rarely views "addiction" in those terms. We are steeped in narratives about personal responsibility, individual choice, justified consequences, and the nature of human will that affect
how we understand what "addiction" is and how we, as individuals or as a society, respond to people experiencing it. I spend a lot of time studying how different members of society perceive and respond to "addiction" and a lot of time learning from people who are engaged in substance use or the various social worlds of "addiction." I try to leverage my work to help make space for those individuals who are marginalized by our cultural constructions of "addiction" and assist where I can to protect the spaces they make for themselves.

WHAT DREW YOU TO YOUR TOPIC?
I first became interested in harm reduction while volunteering at a youth shelter in Portland, Oregon called OutsideIn. It was (and is) an incredible organization that offers essential services in a way that is smart, compassionate, and small-d democratic. I spent a few years during and after college working in their kitchen. After I graduated, I developed a curiosity about the syringe exchange they were running out of the community clinic on the first floor. I requested to transfer jobs and, after a few trainings and interviews, started spending an hour or so a week helping to operate the exchange.

It’s no exaggeration to say that my mind was blown. I had never heard of harm reduction before. I had never thought about individual health outcomes in this way. I had never confronted many of the stereotypes and unsound judgements I had been carrying with me about drugs and the individuals who choose to use them. I’m still humbled by the degree to which the staff and participants of that program welcomed me and helped me learn. I became deeply passionate about this job, and sought out more connections in this harm reduction world. My planned "year off" between college and grad school quickly mushroomed into many years. I still had dreams of pursuing an advanced degree, but I didn't really know what I wanted to pursue or how that intersected with these new things I was doing and learning.

Then, in 2006, I attended a harm reduction conference on methamphetamine use in Salt Lake City, UT. The keynote speaker, a woman named Patricia Case (a researcher at Harvard and fellow anthropologist — and now a good friend and colleague) gave a keynote speech called, "The Social Career of Methamphetamine." She talked about the semiotics of drugs and medications. She talked about the racialization of problematic drug use. She talked about the ways in which patriarchal gender roles were complicit in the patterns of methamphetamine-related harm visible today. She cited Foucault and Goffman. I remember, very viscerally, standing in the back of that hotel ballroom, soaking up the images on her slides and thinking to myself, "That! That is what I want to do. I want to be Dr. Case when I grow up."

I still have the slides from that presentation on my computer. I have never deleted them. I keep them around as a reminder of what inspired me. Since then, I have had the opportunity to tell Trish Case this story. We only met as peers in 2017. I think she was flattered, if a little embarrassed. :)

HOW DO YOU USE YOUR DEGREE IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE?
So many ways. At the university where I teach, that training has made me a better teacher to my students. In my work with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), where I was working full-time until August, I brought skills in qualitative research and human-centered scholarship into public health discussions — something that all my colleagues there were very receptive to and wanted to have but didn't possess the specific training to generate on their own. In my collaboration with the CDC/HIDTA Opioid Response Strategy (a public health/public safety partnership for opioid overdose prevention), I use my credentials to gain legitimacy with law enforcement leadership. In this space, I am "Dr. Carroll, subject matter expert." Now that I have a faculty position and letterhead with my name on it, I use that clout to assist others wherever I can: writing letters of recommendation for students; offering testimony for various policy initiatives; writing in support of local organizations; providing reference letters to help contingent faculty move onto the tenure track. My training has been invaluable, but the PhD, itself, has been equally (if not more) instrumental in helping me put that training into action. The training made me the scholar that I am, but the PhD is what often gets me through the door.

HOW DOES YOUR DEGREE IMPACT YOUR LIFE OUTSIDE OF YOUR CAREER?
Let's be honest. Being a female academic is not easy. Being a queer academic is not easy. And I have things much better than my trans and non-binary colleagues and my POC colleagues who are also trying to succeed in this world with the brains and bodies they were born with that are even more politicized than my own. For me, personally, these challenges have been in the front of my field of vision for years. They have had some very real negative impacts on my life. For example, I have relocated across the country (or to a different country) 5 times in the last 6 years. Cultivating lasting friendships in the context of that kind of professional transience can be hard. Cultivating lasting romantic relationships can be downright impossible. And while this
isn't true for everyone, there are a lot of people (mostly men, but not all) who are deeply uncomfortable in a 
romantic partnership with a woman who is more educated or more successful than they are. Academia can be 
lonely, and academic life can lead to many disappointments that feel deeply personal.

Nevertheless, if I had the chance, I wouldn't take back a single choice I've made about this career path. I know 
something about the world. I speak 5 languages. I have lived long-term in 3 different countries. I am able to 
learn and apply new things very quickly. I am equipped with the intellectual and analytical skills to make 
significant impacts in my community. I have the opportunity to teach, which is tiring but incredible. I have 
access to resources through my university position that I can help those around me gain access to. I can help 
local 501(c)(3)s get grants to improve their programs. I can flout my credentials to gain access to leaders at 
the state or national level and offer assistance, perspective, and education. I have an amazing life, and 
though there have been trade-offs, the benefits I've gained from my education and the mentorship I received 
at UW and elsewhere outweigh anything the world could throw at me.

WHAT'S NEXT?

I just finished publishing a book, and I was hoping to take a break after that, but I have been really 
unsuccessful at putting on the breaks. There really is no rest for the weary huh? :) As Steve Goodreau once 
(jokingly) said to me, "academia isn't the problem; we are the problem!" I am finishing up my first year at Elon 
University, where I am a tenure-track faculty member in the department of Sociology and Anthropology. I'm 
still working with the CDC part-time as a consultant with their Opioid Response Strategy. I just co-wrote a 
grant with a state-wide harm reduction that was funded to study how best to scale up syringe access and 
treatment referral services for people who use drugs in rural areas of North Carolina. I'm embarking on a 
new project exploring the cultural logics behind drug-induced homicide laws among criminal justice 
professionals.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE A STUDENT TODAY ABOUT A CAREER IN ANTHROPOLOGY?

Do what you like. The discipline is changing rapidly, and there's no telling what characteristics will define the 
job market or the scholarly terrain when you emerge from grad school with your PhD in hand. If you want to 
earn a concurrent MPA because you think it will make you more competitive on the job market, do it! If you 
want to spend your free time working in direct services with homeless youth (instead of, say, writing your 
dissertation on a faster timeline), do it! It's impossible to predict what will benefit you in the future, so you 
might as well pursue things that you are passionate about right now. Many of the most successful and 
satisfied early-career anthropologists I know are those who pursued passions while gaining their academic 
credentials. It's what makes them unique and valuable as anthropologists — and what keeps them happy!

And pursuing those passions outside of the academy will open so many doors you never expected to be open 
to you. I know many anthropologists who are smart and satisfied and having real impact in so many areas of 
the world: in the classroom, in laboratories, in federal agencies, in high schools, in public health departments, 
at Mozilla and Google, in international development, in policy, in law. Lots of anthropologists will be happy in 
a university position, but a lot of us won't. Don't close doors on yourself by deciding that you will NEVER end 
up in this place or that place when you graduate; instead, open yourself to even more opportunities than you 
previously thought possible. Learn how to talk about your skills to non-anthropologists. Learn where the 
people are who do the practical work in the world that you love doing. Find the non-academic list-servs and 
job sites where those openings are posted. Even if you leave grad school with a bit of insecurity about your 
abilities as a scholar (we all do, don't we?!), I promise you that your skills are real and hard-earned and deeply 
desired by the salary-paying world out there.

Also, shoot for a post-doc when you graduate. I know that post-docs might seem like "the job you take when 
you don't get offered a REAL job," but that's an outright lie that we tell ourselves. Don't lie to yourself. Post-
docs are amazing, and you will never have that kind of self-directed free time to do what you like ever again.
