Female Genital Cutting: Drawing Lines in the Ambiguous Divide Between Anthropology and Activism

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Anthropology as a discipline has become increasingly focused on public engagement and activism (see Goodale 2006). Nancy Scheper-Hughes famously called for a new form of “militant anthropology” that is politically committed, morally engaged and opposed to cultural relativism as moral relativism (1995:410,415). Less dramatically, Setha M. Low and Sally Engle Merry have argued for public engagement as an important component of an anthropological practice that respects the rights and dignity of all humans (2010:S204). As noted by Low and Merry, however, progressive human rights discourses hold some similarity to the “civilizing processes” of colonialism and the desire of anthropologists to avoid colonialist critiques can lead to self-censorship (2010:S213).

The theme of this year’s journal is “Traces, Tidemarks, and Legacies.” Cultural relativism is a legacy of anthropology that continues to impact the ways in which anthropologists conduct and think about fieldwork. Moreover, traces of cultural relativism potentially conflict with an activist approach to anthropology and its own legacy. Can a line be drawn in the sand between activism and relativism? What implications would this tidemark have for fieldwork? These issues of activism and cultural relativism were at the forefront of my mind when I embarked on my master’s degree fieldwork in the summer of 2010.

My fieldwork centered on the controversial practice of female genital cutting (FGC) among African immigrant populations living in London, England. In particular, my research examined how discourses of female genital cutting were constructed among women from FGC practicing communities and at a London-based NGO. In his W.H.R. Rivers prize essay, Daniel Gordon argues that the potential medical complications of female genital cutting challenge the validity of even considering the practice through the lens of cultural relativism (1991:4). Gordon’s prize-winning student essay is two decades old, but the topic of FGC continues to be seen by many anthropology students and others as the prima facie example of the limits of cultural relativism (Ntarangwi 2007:96). Nonetheless, even the “militant anthropologist” Nancy Scheper-Hughes contends that the issue of FGC is best left to be argued out by women from societies where it is practiced and not by anthropologists (1991:26). Female genital cutting is thus a topic where the tidemark between activism and relativism is particularly volatile. Would an activist approach against FGC improve my research or best serve my informants?

Some of my informants were deeply opposed to female genital cutting, while others regarded the practice positively. Indeed, FGC is not perpetrated by one group against another as a form of intentional harm, but rather, it may mark the passage into adulthood and group membership (Njambi 2004:295). It is mothers and grandmothers who often promote the practice’s continuation.
To advocate against FGC in my research would mean advocating against the values and beliefs of some of my informants. Based on this concern, I decided to avoid an activist approach to my fieldwork and instead took a stance that could be labelled as modified cultural relativism (see Brown 2008) or liberal pluralism (see Shweder 2009). This stance was culturally relativist in that the primary aim of my research was to understand the social and cultural context of FGC in London, while avoiding value judgments against my informants. However, this stance of relativism should not be confused with promoting the practice (Gosselin 2000:47; Boddy 1991:16).

I posit that this culturally relativist stance allowed me to critically examine the discourses surrounding female genital cutting I encountered in a way that may not have been possible, had I decided to incorporate activism into my research. Community advocacy at the London-based NGO where I conducted my fieldwork was intended to educate members of FGC practicing communities about the physical, psychological and religious implications of the practice. In general, the NGO volunteers and employees saw community members as lacking sufficient knowledge about FGC. The NGO’s advocacy acted to transform the practice in the minds of community members from the colloquially popular term “female circumcision” to the more politically and morally charged term “female genital mutilation.” If I had conducted my fieldwork in the NGO as an activist, rather than as an observer, I believe that it would have been more challenging for me to critically explore the usage and effects of this terminology by the NGO, community members and myself. An activist approach may therefore not always be appropriate, even for research topics that seem to lend themselves to activism. Fears of unreflexive activism can be a major concern, particularly for less experienced anthropology students.

Despite my best efforts to retain this relativism in the field, at one point, I was called upon to “take a stand” and discuss my personal opinions about female genital cutting. I attended a leadership-training day for female volunteers at the NGO aged nineteen to twenty-five from FGC practicing communities in London. In one group exercise, everyone was asked to stand on a line ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” depending on each individual’s opinion about a particular issue. The first issue raised was, ‘Should female genital mutilation be illegal in all countries?’ All of the volunteers participating in the event crammed together along the strongly agree end of the line. So many people strongly agreed that FGC should be illegal in all countries that many of the girls ended up spilling over into the neutral section of the line. I felt conflicted on where to stand, being of the opinion that criminal legislation against the practice is generally ineffective, but not wanting to stand alone on the disagree end of the line and potentially alienate everyone I hoped to engage with that day. I hesitantly stood the closest of anyone to disagree, but still very much in the neutral section of the line. I was called upon to explain why I did not agree, and I discussed my concern that making FGC illegal could push the practice further underground and so unnecessarily increase risk, especially if parents felt unable to bring their daughters for medical attention if required for fear of legal retribution.

One of the volunteers then turned to me and asked suddenly, ‘I want to know, are you opposed to it being illegal because you don’t think it’s serious enough?’ Her fellow volunteers nodded in agreement. Unsure of how best to answer the question, I reiterated my previously stated concerns and this seemed to settle the issue of my rather aberrant opinion to everyone’s satisfaction. Later in
the day, I conducted a focus group with a few of the NGO’s volunteers and this incident proved to be a fruitful point for further discussion. As noted by Michael Brown, it would be impossible to conduct fieldwork if anthropologists voiced dismay at every practice they disagreed with (2008:367). It can be difficult to determine when activism is appropriate and useful, and when it may actually hinder research. The tidemark between activism and relativism is continuously reshaped by decisions made in the field. The act of making those decisions is valuable and has the potential to enrich research.

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