Commentary

The Future of Socially Engaged Anthropology: A Student Perspective

Robin Lewis Brown
American University

Abstract
Many anthropologists have begun to shy away from disengaged textual analysis and extreme relativism, which were common in the discipline’s earlier years. Instead, many have turned increasingly to issues of social justice and activism. These anthropologists must walk a fine line, respecting the agency of their interlocutors while remaining an assisting force in their struggles. In this article, I examine what socially engaged anthropology looks like to an undergraduate anthropology student. I comparatively examine the subfields of applied and public anthropology and consider the implications of such socially engaged scholarship for the broader discipline of anthropology. I also consider the relevance of these subfields to the newest generation of engaged anthropologists. In particular, I discuss public anthropology’s power to allow anthropologists to advocate for, while not drowning out the voices of, their interlocutors. In my own work, I have struggled to reconcile not just my own privileged position with the position of my interlocutors, but also my hesitance to impose my own viewpoints on them with my desire to perform effective social activism. I ultimately find that the most effective way to perform useful solidarity work as a student anthropologist is to negotiate solutions by directly confronting any differences of privilege that may exist between researcher and interlocutor.

Keywords: Public Anthropology, collaborative ethnography, Anacostia River

Introduction
The history of anthropology is often seen as rooted in the histories of colonial powers. Anthropologists have practiced forms of scientific investigation that today would be considered pseudo-science in order to justify the exploitation of groups they identified as intellectually, culturally, or biologically “inferior” to their own societies in accordance with a linear developmental model (Tylor 1889:1-25, Morgan 1877). More recently, some anthropologists have failed to recognize the agency of people in colonized societies by overemphasizing the power of colonial rulers in shaping their organization and thinking (Ranger 1983:211-263; Spear 2003:3-27). This legacy requires contemporary anthropologists to tackle questions of position and privilege as they venture out into the field. Based on my experience as a student anthropologist, I find that the question of how to address human rights issues is one of great concern to other students. I argue that students interested in solidarity and collaboration should be armed with the tools to negotiate privilege. I also argue that public anthropology may offer them a chance to most effectively put these passions to work toward bettering the lives of others.

Making Anthropological Research Useful to Interlocutors
In this brief commentary, I set out to explore how student anthropologists can use public anthropology to assist in the struggles of their interlocutors while still acknowledging the agency of these individuals. With their focus on social issues, the subfields of public anthropology and applied anthropology have taken center stage in debates over how to answer the question of what effective and ethical advocacy and activism will consist of in the future (Lassiter 2005: 83;
Low 2010: S203-S226.). While the line between the two remains blurry, the subfield of public anthropology has been growing rapidly over the last decade. Many practitioners seek to distinguish public anthropology from applied anthropology in order to emphasize its ability to transcend conventional frameworks that have been long established within the discipline of anthropology and also to highlight its ability to move anthropological knowledge outside of the discipline (Borofsky 2007: 1; Purcell 2000: 30). Public anthropology can be defined as anthropology that works outside the discipline or works to change the discipline in order to solve practical problems relating to human rights. There is a particular emphasis on making anthropological knowledge and research widely available and understandable to non- anthropologists (McGranahan 2006: 255-256; Besteman 2008: 62).

Applied anthropology, conversely, can be defined generally as anthropology in practice. It is anthropology that puts its methods and theories to use to solve human problems (Rylko-Bauer 2006: 179; Bennett 1996: 25; Van Willigen 2002: 8). According to Robert Borofsky, “public anthropology shares applied’s concern with developing solutions to concrete problems” (2007:1). However, Borofsky also asserts that many traditional anthropological methods and theories act as “hegemonic constructions” and that anthropologists have the opportunity, “by making them public, to subvert their power to frame particular problems” (Borofsky 2007:1). In other words, simply making anthropological knowledge public and useful helps to upend any top down researcher—subject power dynamics that may exist and helps to make anthropological findings more useful to interlocutors.

Anthropologists encounter power relations of all kinds. There is not always a uni-directional power relationship between researcher and interlocutor. In fact, the assumption that the anthropologist always holds more power than the interlocutor is one primary reason that public anthropology is a useful concept. Public anthropology reminds us to keep in mind our interlocutors’ abilities to advocate and fight for themselves. Borofsky’s critique of applied anthropology is not that it does not address power relations, but that it does not always acknowledge the interlocutors’ abilities to find solutions to their own problems. This is not to say that applied anthropology does not engage with questions of power and privilege or that it does not engage in community-based research, the results of which are made available to interlocutors. However, an important implication of public anthropology’s particular emphasis on making anthropological research public is that this maximizes the ability of interlocutors to use this information to lobby for themselves, instead of having only anthropologists determine what kind of solutions can be drawn from the research and applied to interlocutors’ lives. Borofsky states “I have not seen applied anthropologists taking the lead in publicly addressing divergent views of a problem, seeking to publicly, effectively converse back-and-forth with others, who differ from themselves, so that democratically-organized citizens can decide for themselves what actions to take” (Checker 2010:5-6). Anthropological research is an important tool that is most powerful when those whom the research concerns are able to put it to their own use.

**Overcoming Limitations of Activist Anthropology**

Much activism by anthropologists would not be possible if constrained by traditional anthropological models like relativism. For example, when an anthropologist commits to not judging another culture based on her own norms, she can run the risk of turning a blind eye to human rights abuses. Philippe Bourgois claims that relativism “forbids engaged research and—when taken to its logical conclusion—denies absolute assertions including those of universal human rights” (1990:43-54). As a student activist anthropologist, this concern resonates with me. Because of their dedication to human rights work—dedication that prioritizes the demands of their interlocutors—I look to public anthropologists like David Vine, who in conjunction with his multi-sited research among both the Chagossian people and policy-makers in the United States
and United Kingdom, has spent a decade lobbying for the rights of the Chagossians to return to their home island of Diego Garcia (Vine 2009). I also look to Paul Farmer for his fundamental belief in the right of all people to have access to basic health care and for his ability to make his work as widely available as possible to promote this cause (1999:1486-96). For student activist anthropologists like myself, these anthropologists are inspirational because they are willing to work outside the discipline’s traditional realms in order to perform the most effective solidarity work.

For me and for many of my peers, public anthropology means something hopeful yet attainable. It is something that does not stand in opposition to applied anthropology but can be seen as an advancement of it. By coming as close as we can to witnessing the first hand experiences of our interlocutors’ lives, anthropologists hold a special ability to observe the structural realities of people’s lives and to examine how high-level policy plays out on the ground. Public anthropology allows us to turn this information around, passing it on to our interlocutors to help them engage in powerful self-advocacy. This also means moving our work out of the strict field of academia and making scholarship accessible to those for whom it would be most useful. The implications of this kind of anthropological practice means moving highly valuable information into the public realm, whether by utilizing and publishing the voices of interlocutors, by changing the medium in which research is presented, or by engaging in more traditional modes of social activism in which anthropologists challenge the limits of cultural relativism. Public anthropology relies on the reflexivity of researchers who, like Farmer and Vine, face their own positions, privileges, and biases explicitly in their scholarship, while seeking ways to join interlocutors in solidarity either in spite of or because of these factors. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, for example, has taken the stance that postmodern critiques of anthropological methods\(^1\) do little to help the lives of suffering interlocutors. Instead she argues that, “seeing, listening, touching, recording, can be, if done with care and sensitivity, acts of solidarity” and that “not to look, not to touch, not to record can be the hostile act, an act of indifference and turning away” (1995:418).

Public Anthropology in Practice

In 2010, I worked on a small project of collaborative ethnography, which forced me to engage with serious methodological questions that are central to solidarity work: How do I negotiate differences of privilege? Have I benefited from the very neoliberal policies that produced structural barriers for my interlocutors?\(^2\) How do I “help” while avoiding promoting only my own ideas and values? As a part of the Community Voice Project, which was developed by Larry Kirkman and Nina Shapiro-Perl, I worked with the Anacostia Museum in Southeast Washington, D.C. to collect and video record stories of residents living near the historically neglected Anacostia River. In order to conduct collaborative ethnography, the aim of this project was for students to listen to community members’ stories and, with them, compile personal documents and family photographs that assist in the completion of the narratives for multi-media presentations exhibited at the museum.

The project was designed so that each student worked with a member of the Anacostia community who was in some way engaged with environmental efforts around the waterway. By deciding to make these videos, participants were able to perform a powerful form of self-

---

\(^1\) Such critiques, according to Scheper-Hughes, tend to paint the anthropologist as an inherently exploitative power taking advantage of the interlocutor (1995:417).

\(^2\) My use of the phrase “neoliberal policies” here refers to policies that widen the gap between the rich and the poor via deregulation and otherwise systematically disadvantage residents of Southeast D.C. (primarily through a lack of social support).
advocacy in an engaging form (personal narrative) with a highly accessible medium (video on
the internet). The intent was to explore, broadly, the importance of the river on these residents’
lived experiences in this economically disadvantaged area. The Anacostia River itself is a highly
politically and racially charged space that serves as a metaphor for the historic neglect of the
lower eastern side of the city. The littered, sewage-filled waterway that runs past economically
disadvantaged areas of the city, inhabited primarily by African American individuals, contrasts
sharply with the cleaner Potomac that runs through some of the whitest and wealthiest areas of

My community partner, a man I will call Derek, worked at a nonprofit organization in
Southeast D.C. dedicated to community improvement and the restoration of the river. He wrote
a five minute narrative script outlining the importance of the river to him as well as the
satisfaction he found through committing himself to environmental preservation of the waterway.
The script he brought me was beautifully composed and full of powerful symbolism. He
described the pressure of needing to provide for his family while being trapped in an unfulfilling
job and the joy he felt when he daringly left that job to work for a nonprofit in environmental
protection. He wrote:

A battle began to rage within me. Should I let my fears hold me hostage, or should I let
the hope of a more rewarding future guide me. Something bigger was calling me and it
was a call of purpose, but it wasn’t entirely clear. I decided to walk away from my
comfort zone and take a leap of faith.

I raised questions and concerns about the structure and content of his narrative as it evolved,
and I used my knowledge of video editing software to synthesize all of the elements that he
created.

Though we collaborated, the decisions were always his: what images and sounds to use, how
long each should last, and how they should align with the narrative. In many ways, the two of us
could not have been more different. We live on opposite ends of the city and he was 16 years
older than I. Because of my own position of privilege, my physical distance from the social
conditions in which my interlocutor lived, and the fact that I was a great deal younger than him, I
felt uncomfortable helping to shape the narrative he was putting forward. Through the process
of collaboration though, I found the best practice was honest negotiation and acknowledgement
of our differences, as well as our similarities. Derek spoke openly and vividly about the dire
social and environmental conditions in his community, even as he commiserated with me over
the stress of exams because he had recently gone back to school to get a university degree.

Ultimately, as a student anthropologist, I was able to use my own privilege in
constructive ways that benefited my interlocutor and opened up new avenues for advocacy. In
turn, the project bolstered my confidence in my ability to successfully participate in a meeting of
minds between divergent cultures, and helping Derek with his narrative strengthened my own
storytelling skills. My connection to American University gave me access to the Smithsonian
Anacostia Community Museum, which agreed to display his story and the stories of the
residents other students were working with. The project gave my interlocutor and others whose
stories are rarely told a venue to advocate for themselves in their own voices. They were able to
present to the public, in their own style and voice, their own stories of environmental and
human rights concerns in our nation’s capital. Projects like this, in which students learn to work
with, rather than for, community members to help them publicly tell their own story (as they
conceive of it) are examples of public anthropology in action. In this way, students like myself
can learn the importance of prioritizing their interlocutors’ needs and desires.
Acknowledging and respecting the agency of our interlocutors is paramount in this kind of engaged study. I attempted to do this by making sure Derek always felt that the story was his to tell and that I was there as a tool for him should he need me. This is ultimately what public anthropology and collaborative ethnography have to offer: the chance for us to help advocate for our interlocutors in ways that are helpful and meaningful to them. However, we must directly engage with differences of position and privilege in order to put all combined resources to work toward social good.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the many professors in the American University anthropology department who have provided me with immeasurable guidance and mentorship over the past years and who shown me the importance of engaged scholarship. In particular, I want to thank Professor Emily Steinmetz for taking the time to provide her invaluable guidance on this project despite her busy schedule. I also want to thank Dr. Nina Shapiro-Perl for giving her students the opportunity to work collaboratively in the community. I wish to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the man I refer to as Derek in this piece for opening his life up to me and for his dedication to the short film we made together. Finally, I wish to thank Jessica Hardin for her meticulous editing and continued encouragement.

Author Biography: Robin Brown is an undergraduate anthropology student at American University in Washington, D.C. She is interested in public and collaborative anthropology relating to political economy and health and labor rights in Latin America. She intends to further her education with a master’s degree after she graduates this year.
References
Bennett, John W.

Besteman, Catherine

Borofsky, Robert

Bourgois, Philippe

Checker, Melissa

Farmer, Paul

Lassiter, Luke Eric

Low, Setha M.

McGranahan, Carole

Morgan, Lewis Henry

Purcell, T. W.

Ranger, Terence
Rylko-Bauer, Barbara  

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy  

Spear, Thomas  

Tylor, Edward  

Van Willigen, John  

Vine, David  

Williams, Brett  