



Revolution as a care plan: Ethnography, nursing and somatic solidarity in Honduras



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 12 July 2013

Keywords:

Honduras
Nursing
Violence
Solidarity
Ethnography
Social change
Resistance

ABSTRACT

While diagnosis is not within the biomedical scope of a nurse's work, assessment—an inherently ethnographic exercise—is. In Honduras, as in the United States, nurses' proximity with patients, in terms of both time spent at the bedside and shared class identification (embodied as habitus), mean that nurses are often more effective than physicians in assessment and healing. Following the 2009 coup that brought a violently repressive regime to power in Honduras, subjectivation as citizen healers brought many nurses to assess patient health as a function of neoliberal and political violence. This assessment framed radical struggle that required nurses to block political violence with their own bodies as being a necessary part of patient care. Similarly, as ethnographer, I came to share with nurses and other Hondurans certain violent processes of subjectivation (albeit from a privileged subject position) that strengthened my solidarity with them as well as my deeply embodied investment in their care plan of organizing for radical social change. This paper examines the politicizing impact of the 2009 coup on Honduran auxiliary and professional nurses and the ways in which nurse assessment and ethnographic analysis can overlap and combine in somatic and political solidarity with patients and others resisting state and political violence through their bodies.

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Introduction

The role of the ethnographer working toward social change is akin to that of a movement or union organizer. Anthropologists who teach or write engage in organizing their students or readers toward a particular interpretation of the world that leads to certain actions (or inactions). Conversely, the work of the organizer requires a profound cultural understanding of the people organizing together (or “being organized”), and often incorporates the sorts of pedagogy and writing employed by critical medical anthropologists. Participant-observation is at the core of the ethnographic method, and for anthropologists working self-consciously toward social change, that participation—especially when studying people self-consciously engaged in social change themselves—requires more than speaking the language or disinterestedly learning to outwardly perform the habitus of the Other in the field. It is, rather, a holistic, thoughtful and intentionally *embodied* participation in society with solidarity at its core.

For the ethnographer and organizer, critical analysis is indispensable to radical praxis. This is both because an accurate

assessment of empirical data makes for more effective organizing and because our ethical duty extends beyond the culture(s) being studied (especially when studying up). Joining a struggle as a medical anthropologist does not mean “going native,” especially if the model at hand is to become a soldier in an unthinking cause, but rather becoming what Sartre called a “radical companion of the masses.” (1974, 227) Today we are afforded many models of radically engaged fieldwork that employ political economic analysis of neoliberal capitalism to work toward anti-hierarchical models of ethnographic *compañerismo* (being a companion in struggle), (Graeber, 2009; Juris, 2008; Scheper-Hughes, 1995) themselves building on the work radically engaged intellectuals of previous generations (Basaglia, Scheper-Hughes, Lovell & Shtob, 1987; Fanon, 1963; Powdermaker, 1966).

My objective for this paper is twofold: First, I will describe and analyze the impact of an abrupt breach in the social contract on the everyday and everynight work (Rankin & Campbell, 2009; Smith 1992) of Honduran public sector nurses, through which many of them came to re-assess their caring work as part and parcel of a struggle for democracy and justice. Numerous scholars have examined whether, how, and under what circumstances nurses develop empathy with their patients; what care means to nurses and how they enact it; how nurses are emotionally affected by the stress imposed by the organization of hospital work; speed-up and

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intensification of nurses' work under neoliberal restructuring; the undervaluation of nurses' contributions; and the conditions under which nurses become militant; all within a context of neoliberal restructuring. (DeMoro, 2000; Gass & Vladeck, 2004; Gordon, 2005; Kowalchuk, 2011; Lopez 2006; McGibbon, Peter & Gallop 2010; Mesa Melgarejo & Romero Ballen 2011; Rankin & Campbell, 2009; Smith-Nonini, 2010; Weinberg, 2003) My work builds on these studies by introducing and exploring the phenomenon of somatic solidarity that many nurses in Honduras developed with their patients through shared embodiment of and resistance to the 2009 military coup in that country and of regime violence safeguarding the coup's neoliberal agenda. This somatic solidarity has reinforced the interlinkage of nurses' own well-being with that of their patients.

Secondly, I aim to provide an example of radical ethnographic praxis based in my own participant observation work among Honduran nurses following the 2009 coup. Through my doctoral research with nurses and others in Honduras at a time when most of my interlocutors were not engaged in self-conscious political struggle (1997–2004), it became clear to me that my primary identification as anthropologist required of me a commitment to ethnography as radical change both in Honduras and the United States (an economic and military occupying force in Honduras). My three years of post-doctoral work as an educator/organizer with the California Nurses Association/National Nurses United (CNA/NNU) (2004–2007) made clear the inverse: that my identification as organizer required I engage nurses ethnographically, working to achieve a dispositional solidarity in order to more successfully comprehend their struggle and organize with them for social change.

Since 2009, I have worked alongside nurses and other members of the vast Honduran Resistance movement (capitalized in Honduras to differentiate the movement from other expressions of resistance) that arose in response to the coup that took place that year. The coup and its prolonged aftermath have exacerbated the violence of pre-existing forms of neoliberal governance that concentrate wealth (and with it, access to health and healthcare) into a few hands, but the Resistance movement helped to expose that violence, interrupting the symbolic violence and misidentification that characterize hegemonic understandings of health. Working with Nurses in Resistance provided me an opportunity to think and strategize anew—as medical anthropologist and *compañera*—about the collaborative and revolutionary potentials of ethnographic work.

Methods

This study is part of a much larger ethnographic project. Between 2009 and 2012 I made 10 trips totaling 6 months to Honduras (building on ongoing fieldwork since 1997), with ethical approval obtained by American University's Institutional Review Board. I wrote thousands of pages of fieldnotes, many of which I have published on my blog, *quotha.net*, with the aim of making my ethnographic work more public and accountable to its subjects. In addition to dozens of interviews with Resistance members, I carried out extensive fieldwork with nurses I met through my large network of friends and colleagues in Honduras, as well as through seminars I offered and snowball sampling. I carried out six formal group interviews (ranging from three to fifteen people) and three individual interviews with public-sector professional nurses (approximately equivalent to registered nurses in the U.S.) and auxiliary nurses (approximately equivalent to licensed professional and vocational nurses in the U.S.) during that period. These took place at workplaces, union halls, malls—the privatized gathering spaces that have largely replaced “public” venues in

Honduras—and in still-public plazas. Three of those interviews were audiotaped and transcribed; the others I recorded by hand, in accordance with my interviewees' preference.

I also participated in several Resistance marches with Nurses in Resistance, and carried out participant-observation fieldwork with nurses. In 2010 I gave five separate workshops presenting a political economic analysis of health and examples of cross-cultural organizing, for Honduran healthcare workers in Resistance, including professional and auxiliary nurses and doctors. These took place in hospitals, union buildings and NGO offices. I also taught five formal presentations to registered nurses and nursing students at CNA/NNU conventions and union headquarters in the United States, focusing on the political economy of post-coup health and nurse leadership in Honduras. Additionally, I have given invited lectures on the same topics to nursing students in the DC metropolitan region. The interactive and problem-posing design of my presentations has made them a rich Freirean source for ethnographic data as well as an organizing tool.

Following the coup, gaining ethnographic access to the subjects who mattered the most to me—the Hondurans I had been living among and writing about for a dozen years—required actively demonstrating solidarity with their cause. Many subjects of anthropological inquiry are well aware of the similarities and all-too-frequent overlap between anthropology and espionage. (Boas, 1919; González, 2009; Nader, 1997; Price, 2000) In a Honduran context that included U.S. military occupation and support for the usurping coup regime, gringo researchers who did not engage in active and unflagging public solidarity were (and still often are) swiftly accused of being CIA operatives, and were shunned in online fora and bodily excluded from spaces of resistance. More importantly, the ethical imperative to act in solidarity with Hondurans resisting a U.S.-backed coup regime derived from my own ethnographic analysis (Frank 2011; Pine 2010b).

As a critical medical anthropologist who understands neoliberal violence in its myriad forms as destructive to health, my “participation” has meant collaborating to protect the bodily and broader metaphorical health of the *pueblo* (to borrow the Spanish term encompassing the English-language concepts of people, community and nation) in the United States and in Honduras by fighting for democracy, justice, and freedom from State violence. This commitment has extended for me beyond the professional requirements of teaching, writing and service to incorporate (and embody) solidarity. From my home in Washington, DC, I dedicated myself to the ethnographic work of translation (Maranhão & Streck, 2003). In particular, I spent several hours per day during the six months following the coup translating the critically ethnographic articles published by filmmaker, journalist, and lawyer Oscar Estrada (Estrada, 2013; Estrada, forthcoming). My ethnographic methodology has also incorporated disseminating original and translated primary sources and articles; at other times it has meant issuing press releases, giving interviews, and writing articles myself (e.g., Pine 2009a, 2009c, 2009d, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e, 2010f, 2011b, Pine & Vivar 2010, 2011; Vivar & Pine 2010); at yet other times it has meant organizing protests to put pressure on the agents of violence in Washington and elsewhere. In participant-observing revolutionary struggle, I have taken cues from other recent ethnographies of organized movements (e.g., Ganz, 2010) and from Honduran Nurses in Resistance, who have themselves articulated to me parallel conclusions about the ethics of their work based on patient health assessments during periods of acute state and neoliberal violence. To maintain healthy bodies and a healthy society—they tell me—we must disassemble structures of violence and remove from power those responsible for killing and maiming our bodies and our democracies.

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