



Short report

The murky middle ground – When ethnographers engage public health



Kim Hopper ^{a,b,*}

^a Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research, 140 Old Orangeburg Rd. Orangeburg, NY 10962, USA

^b Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 W. 168th St., New York, NY 10032, USA

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ABSTRACT

This commentary revisits dilemmas of relevance that applied anthropology in the U.S. has long grappled with, no matter the rigor and depth of inquiry. Direct action, collaborative research and active public engagement offer proven alternatives for upping the participatory quotient, but they remain the exception. A third, more common, middle ground may be also discerned, sometimes involving the sort of “dirty work” that seems to lie outside of one’s professional remit. Commitment to such work, it turns out, is not simply a matter of character or disciplinary ethics, but of the terms and conditions of anthropological employment. Even without the “second shift” of going public with one’s findings, critically positioned research can keep problematic issues that might otherwise slip into the convenient silences of social and economic policy.

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What one might call the default move in ethnography is this: tell the otherwise lost or unheard story, one that aspires to be richly layered and colorfully peopled, and take its measure with our distinctive disciplinary metrics. The objective is manifold: documentary, comparative, theory-driving, critical thinking. The project may contain a recursive moral moment, a call to see ourselves “as a local example of the forms human life has locally taken, a case among cases, a world among worlds,” a move that makes for that “largeness of mind, without which objectivity is self-congratulation and tolerance a sham” (Geertz, 1983:16). It tends to remain housed, at least for the present, in the sprawling edifice that is the academic world. Its more numerous kindred variants – ethnography sorted, interrogated, parsed into competencies, and applied – seek to put that same toolkit to work during or following more focused inquiries. Weary veterans of anthropology’s second shift, their numbers notwithstanding, its practitioners invariably get lower billing. For all the anguish over its post-colonial prospects, anthropology’s recruiting call is still Malinowski’s magical: “imagine yourself suddenly set down ...” It’s not: Here’s a gnarly social problem; what would it take to change things for the better – in the medium, if not short-term?

Applied anthropology’s woes in this real world of “making a difference” are legendary and well-documented, occasioning fierce

(if perverse) pride and endless rehashing among its practitioners. Despite the occasional hard-won bid for relevance in the public sector, a thriving market in non-academic employment, a lively (often exactingly reflective) intellectual tradition, resurgent calls for “public outreach” (Borofsky, 2011), for “activists and academics [to] work together to build a more socially just world” (<http://www.american.edu/cas/anthropology/public/>), its professional status is still suspect, occasioning anxiety, overcompensation and career uncertainty (Baba, 1994; Hopper, 2002). The rare bravura defense aside (Rylko-Bauer, Singer, & van Willigen, 2006; Sanjek, 2004), its “transformative” potential is still a matter of small triumphs and large unfulfilled promise. The odd thing is: *its thoughtful practitioners know this* and have been reckoning with its consequences for some time.

Three exits exist: collaborative research with the once-were-subjects of inquiry, direct action pursuant to targeted inquiry, and public engagement with respect to one’s research findings and their implications in any number of non-academic venues. Instances of long-standing collaborative research, while still uncommon, boast impressive records of commitment and accomplishment (e.g., Schensul & Schensul, 1992). Direct action can range from aggressive attempts to prosecute “a preferential option for the poor” (e.g., Farmer, 2002), to translational performances (Conquergood’s (2009) record of inventive public health theatre), to frankly political campaigns that build directly upon the fruits of research (Vine, 2009). “Going public” with one’s findings can include speaking engagements at branch libraries, interviews with the press, appearing on local radio talk shows, and (these days)

* Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, 722 W. 168th St., New York, NY 10032, USA.

E-mail address: hopper@nki.rfmh.org.

blogging and web-based communiqués (Sanjek, 2004). In rare instances, it can mean a renaissance-like professional life distributed across ethnography, advocacy, public sector administration, institution building, editorial duties and ongoing mentorship of young scholars (Parker, 2012). The travails, both professional and personal, of those options merit consideration on their own. My concern here is with the murkier middle ground, where (at one end) theory-driven exemplars of critical medical anthropology ply their wares and (at the other) contract work (still harried by deadlines, barriers to access, ambiguous briefs and overly-directive patrons) struggles to flourish. What might they offer by way of useful “lessons in the challenges of engagement” (Rylko-Bauer et al., 2006: 186)? Is there a fresh harvest to be had, or will we simply rehearse the grievances of the past? Is there a distinctive “moral” dimension to this dilemma and how might it be productively framed?

This commentary, from well within the ranks of U.S. applied anthropology, is positioned in a kind of call-and-response with two recent stock takings of our troubled trade (Rylko-Bauer et al.’s 2006; Sanjek, 2004). Like them I see applied anthropology as the extension of comparative practical reason into issues of pressing public interest (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2001; Sayer, 2011) and ethnography as incomplete without explicit attention to its “aftermath.” Like them, I understand the future of anthropology to be bound up with its out-of-discipline real world engagements. And like them, I take the analysis of failed “application” to be vital to rigging the chances of success of future ones.

Ethnographic inquiry in public health routinely encounters any number of snares. I begin with two justly acclaimed efforts to take the measure of street homelessness.

Noisome bounds

What happens when ethnography does precisely what its charter equips and commits it to do, and does so with the technical expertise of sustained observation and argument equal to the passion that fuels the inquiry? When its artisans not only describe the action on the stage, but then go on to examine the production machinery behind it? When, world enough and time permitting, they plumb the depths of a shifting “background” state and are able to document the manifold ways in which unwitting subjects are recruited to do the work of unforgiving structure – and, in the process, furnish further evidence for the necessity of critical social analysis? When, in short, the anthropology flourishes and the so what? question is emblazoned on the end-papers?

Righteous Dopefiend (Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009) and *Hoboes, Hustlers and Backsliders* (Gowan, 2010) are both examples of well-theorized street ethnography with the gloves off: time-conscious, deeply embedded, a standing offer of ear and assistance, and unflinchingly observed. In each case, the anthropologists are there long enough, steadily enough, to see pet theories come to grief and promising exits crash. The first (RD) is especially strong in showing the micro-mechanisms whereby institutional realities seep into and shape the developing *lumpen* character of the street addict: stealthily, undetected as such, bundled without protest into an early core *habitus*, and corrosively on display as the victims’ tendency to “celebrate” the socially degraded stereotypes assigned to them. Slowly, in long “densely woven patterns of systematic inequality” (Powers & Faden, 2006), structure shapes the shifting field of external opportunity and assets; at the same time – insidiously, *collaboratively* – it sculpts the hearts and minds of those it disfavors, making them party to the damage and ensuring its perpetuation. *HHB*, too, is sociology with a bruised heart: an exploration of the discursive harmonies of the unsheltered life, the dialectic of livelihood and narrative as seasoned street denizens take moral account of the wreckage of their lives. All of them court

justification of some sort; some essay restorative efforts, cultivating “common ground and recognition” in ways they don’t yet have words for. This kind of penitential labor requires an accommodating polis and the same police-and-therapeutics apparatus that bedevils RD’s street denizens – “rabble management” – tends to scuttle the makeshift rehabilitation efforts recounted in *HHB*. Having no need for *lumpen* labor, so matter how arduously reclaimed, vagrancy control is content to “corral” and displace. What offends the eye suffices to move the civil hand without disturbing its conscience.

Where does that leave “application”? Documentary achievement notwithstanding, its audience is unspecified. In both cases the ugly/redemptive/elusive/lowering truth of the field dispatch turns out to be beside the point. A few actionable items aside (cost savings in revising emergency room practice toward street addicts, for example), the rigor and depth of the analysis *work against application*. Within the “silences” of U.S. public policy (Katzenbach 1986), intervention on the scale implied here simply isn’t imaginable. Nor is a weary citizenry, three decades and counting into the nation’s longest sustained period of homelessness, likely to heed the call to wade through dense thickets of scholarship and, newly awakened to urgency, prod its elected representatives. Studied in method and achingly restrained in delivery, documentary here is proffered as provocation, not guidance: an invitation to revisit the silences and rethink the rules, not fiddle with the distribution formula for scarce resources. But without a completing agenda of local follow-up, confronting the limits of witness (Hopper, 2002: Ch. 8), it remains a floating indictment. The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on.

Unwelcome light

Ethnography that hails from within the ranks of potential users faces a different set of problems. We can’t say we weren’t warned: a tribal elder, Alexander Leighton, working in harness over a half-century ago in the government’s Foreign Morale Analysis Division, set it down with memorable simplicity. The remark comes two pages after a bitterly documented (and, at the time, bravely dissenting) account of how the decision to drop the atomic bomb ignored the conclusions of the War Dept.’s own research division, which had shown that Japanese morale and determination to keep fighting had been seriously degraded. Leighton concludes with an extended riff on the gap between applied social science’s growing capabilities and the likelihood that they will be put to productive use. Hard-won evidence is regularly trumped by competing interests playing by different rules. Then, just to clinch the case, the infamous punch-line: “The administration uses social science the way a drunk uses a lamppost, for support rather than for illumination” (1949: 127–28).

Fast forward nearly half a century to another anthropologist, also recently retired from government service. Elliot Liebow is responding to a query from a discussant of *Tell Them Who I Am* (1993) at an ASA *festschrift* shortly before he died: why is it that the last chapter with recommendations for addressing homelessness has nothing to do with the preceding six richly documented chapters? “That’s easy,” he explained patiently, “I wrote it first.” Here, ethnography served as a binder or down payment, meant to establish Liebow’s bona fides – more elegant than a lamppost perhaps, but a good ways short of an evidence-based argument informing a set of policy or programmatic recommendations.

Both those reflections come from weary veterans on the inside and capture a hard truth. In most places with established research enterprises, “speaking truth to power” (Wildavsky, 1979) is less an exercise in audacity than it is one in frustration. “Applied” or “practicing” may be our moniker, but these are terms of aspiration

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