Notes From The Field: The Negotiation Of Boundaries: Anthropological Clichés, Witnessing And Honest Self-Work

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This article is about me. I start with this statement to clear the air, as this piece is precisely about the dangers inherent in eclipsing the self and forgetting about one's own needs during the fieldwork process. As much as it is about me, this article is also about the utility of boundaries and time as tools of anthropological activism and research.

During the Ph.D. Program in anthropology at the University of Arizona, I have fully embraced all that is related to participatory methodologies, engaged anthropology, and activist involvement. I have always believed in the importance of "giving back" to the community, challenging neat methodological distinctions between researcher and informant, and creating forums for reflection and grassroots development rather than imposing Western values on the cultural Other. I have sought to plant the seeds of social change together with my informants and friends in ways that build upon and reinforce their own understandings of dignity and well-being.

Having worked in the region of El Páramo in coastal Ecuador since the year 2000, I was in the anthropologically-enviable position of having already claimed ethnographic authority at my dissertation-research fieldsite. This allowed me to jump straight into full-fledged engagement upon arrival in the summer of 2007. Seven years earlier, I had volunteered for a conservation project at a biological reserve in the region. I was quickly enamored of the beauty of the tropical cloud forest, the adventure of traveling through knee-deep mud, and the solidarity of the rural campesinos. The next year, I returned to help establish a health and community-development project, with which I have been involved ever since. Since then, I have co-founded a non-governmental organization, fundraised incessantly to support it, selected and coordinated volunteers, conducted health-related research, and helped plan and evaluate health education and outreach programs for the El Páramo health center. In the region, I have developed deep friendships, earning four godchildren, a network of compadres, and the trust of men and women alike.

I felt very uncomfortable about assuming my new role as researcher when I returned to Ecuador two years ago to conduct dissertation research on the effects of human rights awareness on family relations and

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rates of violence. Though I wasn't fully aware of my own discomfort, I dealt with it by jumping wholeheartedly into participatory activities. The sheer number of activities in which I engaged is laughable in retrospect: health brigades, family planning projects, sexual education workshops, a community histories project, human rights advocacy, and collections of regional myths and legends. In short, I wore many hats; as a friend, comadre, NGO-director, volunteer coordinator, activist, health educator, and investigator.

At first, I thrived because of these multiple roles. I threw myself into these various activities while conducting my first set of interviews. I was confident that I no longer struggled with the posited distinctions between participation and observation. Yet, as I began to interview women who I did not know quite as well, I became increasingly uncomfortable about setting up formal interviews. It was awkward for me to demand one to three hours of a woman's time in a private setting with a running tape-recorder so I could interview her for an estudio antropológico, especially when she was otherwise accustomed to open, casual conversation with me on different terms. At first, I used a flexible guide to conduct loosely-structured interviews, in hopes that I would solicit free-flowing life narratives that would capture the ways that violence – in its various forms – shaped their lives and relationships. However, when responding to open format questions, women were much more likely to simplify the stories of their relationships, forcing me to interject questions and break the rhythm of their storytelling.

In time, I modified my interview format and adopted a more formal and structured approach. I created a thirty-page interview guide, divided into six sections, parts of which were based on a World Health Organization survey on gender-based violence so that I could compare El Páramo women's experiences of various forms of gender-based violence with those of other women worldwide (Ellsberg, et al. 2008; García-Moreno et al. 2005). I broke out a clipboard and used sections from the WHO survey in my interview and I unabashedly placed my recorder in its clip and began the oral consenting process. Women very rarely found the presence of a recorder problematic. Though this routine was somewhat awkward at first, my adoption of a more formalized ritual and format ultimately provided us both with the distance we needed. I felt relieved that the women would actually understand that I was collecting "data." I also sensed that they felt more comfortable fielding my numerous questions when the question–and–answer was made more explicit.

I use this as a straight-forward example to demonstrate how the cre-

ation of seemingly arbitrary boundaries can be helpful for both personal and professional reasons. As I began to interview women more regularly and I became even more integrated into daily life in the region, I started to forget about the importance of maintaining some emotional distance. In these instances, the use of seemingly-artificial boundaries and self-reflexive rituals may have helped me remain clear about my goals and the timeframe necessary to achieve these goals.

I could share any number of stories from my fieldwork to demonstrate the types of complicated positions in which I found myself. Surely, my stories are not unique. On one occasion, I was approached by a battered woman to help her file a police report against her aggressor. Despite the fact that I had been openly advocating women's use of legal services, in this instance I went against my gut instinct and decided not to help (at least, in a straight-forward way). This decision tore me up inside, especially when I learned that she never did file the report when she had every right to do so. However, if I had helped her, I would have broken my ties with most of the community. In this case, the woman's aggressor was not only my close friend; he was also one of the region's most respected men, a co-founder of the community, and one of the police-appointed "commissaries" – a local arbiter of justice.

Through this situation and many others, I eventually recognized the critical importance of both boundaries and time. By exercising a healthy dose of self-awareness, I grew to acknowledge my own personal and emotional limitations in instigating and participating in social change. In this particular example, I had to make a decision that held greater benefit in the long-term, even if it made me uncomfortable in the short-term. On many occasions, I had to learn to "let go" and practice what seemed like neutrality in cases where I felt instinctively compelled to intervene. If I had intervened, I would have jeopardized relationships and broken particular ties that were critical to processes of community-generated social change.

In some ways, I think this problem derives from a naive view of social change that still predominates in our discipline. Despite our theoretical work that may indicate otherwise, as activists we can be stubbornly earnest in our desire to help bring about change. In fact, such attempts – even if participatory and grassroots - can be counterproductive not only for the communities in which we work, but also for ourselves. As anthropologists, we have spent a lot of time discussing the falsity of anthropological accounts that posit a decisive rupture between past and present. I argue that we must also be wary of over-ambitiously (and dangerously) assum-

ing a break between present and future, as if our activist intentions were to bring about immediate change. The goals and expectations that we set should necessarily take into account the longue durée of social change, and should not conform to the one-year fieldwork schedule.

As many of us have learned through our fieldwork, listening and witnessing to stories of suffering can become acts of solidarity in and of themselves. Though I believe this, I never considered this to be enough, nor did I take seriously enough the self-care necessary to make this witnessing effective. The role of anthropologists as "witnessing professionals" and as elicitors of suffering-narratives has been discussed in a number of arenas, especially with regard to the proliferation of post-violence testimony in human rights work (Binford 1996; Das 2000; Farmer 2003; Feldman 2004; Feldman 2006; Howell 2004; McKinney 2007; Schaffer and Smith 2004). By framing our role as witnesses of history, anthropologists have also taken on an extremely important task, one that is laden with moral and political responsibility. As McKinney (2007) describes the act of listening and capturing "testimony" often becomes both a healing and a political act. In my interviews and conversations with battered women, I always tried to listen, absorb, sympathize (if not empathize), share, record, and analyze. I took very seriously the trust and confidence implicit in these acts of sharing. In response, I vowed to do something with their stories to mitigate my informants' suffering in one way or another.

Due to the political salience of testimony, McKinney (1997) warns that some clinicians begin to see themselves as "moral and political agents" in documenting history, even in constructing history by preventing future violence. They may inadvertently "demand" the telling of a politically-salient trauma narrative, one that interviewees may not want to tell, or one that overly-simplifies victimhood and oppression in order to create order out of chaos. Though I am not convinced that this warning was applicable in my case, I believe it raises a critical point that demands our consideration. After listening to the transcripts of my interviews, I recognize the ways that I "collected" the data and "listened" almost superficially, which perhaps was okay because I was recording each interview. I now know that I did this precisely because, at the time, I was unable to fully accept or address the depth of suffering and the complexity of violence captured in these testimonies.

In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman (1997) writes, "Trauma is contagious. In the role of witness to disaster or atrocity, the therapist at times is emotionally overwhelmed. She experiences to a lesser degree, the same terror, rage and despair as the patient (140)." To this description of

"*vicarious traumatization*," I would add an additional burden: that of one's self-expectation as "witnessing professional," or the guilt associated with not having experienced the same pain and suffering. Herman (1997) notes that *vicarious traumatization* can also lead to professionals' over-caring of the patient ("taking on the role of rescuer,"), over-attention to client's social needs (concrete, logistical needs), experiencing helplessnessness, or being overcome by rage or despair (McKinney 2007).

Intellectually, I did not resort to accepting caricatures of victims and oppressors in an attempt to simplify these stories. In fact, my research addresses the ways that wife battering cannot be explained solely through the lens of gender as power (as in "patriarchy" or "machismo"), which tends to set up these caricatures. I was, however, personally overwhelmed by the complexity of these stories, my inability to create and believe neatly-packaged narratives of victimhood, and my inclination to participate and get involved in too many arenas. I found myself willing to fight each battle to the fullest, whether it was helping to get water for the village, volunteering at a women's police station, helping a women's microcredit apply for external funding, or arranging for a victim of political violence to appear before a Truth Commission. I'm afraid I inadvertently raised expectations in the process – not only from my community members, but for myself. Though I understood the meaning of "choosing" one's battles, I refused to settle for this; at each moment each endeavor seemed of utmost importance. The end of my fieldwork period presented me with the greatest challenges – both personally and professionally. I experienced a series of tragedies in the field and witnessed deep suffering, in the face of which I could do nothing but recognize my humility and the futility of my attempts to change it. In truth, I was overwhelmed because I no longer had the emotional or physical resources to deal with these tragedies. Everyone looked to me for help, as I had taught them to do, but I had nothing left to give.

In sharing these reflections, I ask that we – as engaged anthropologists – begin to more candidly consider the politics of listening and representation by exploring the ways we might actually *use boundaries* to both professional and personal ends. For example, we can reflect on the ways that we sometimes inadvertently shape the narratives we hear because we need them to "fit" a story. We may do so to absolve ourselves of guilt, or to simplify to make things more emotionally palatable. Is this acceptable? When might it be? Anthropologists' engagement with social change is nothing new. Even so, anthropology graduate students are increasingly attracted to topics that merge critical reflection and practical applicability. It might

even be argued that many young anthropologists are less concerned with charges of bias in their attempts to merge academics and activism (Herzfeld 2001; Knauft 2006). In my opinion, anthropologists have not gone far enough with their activism. However, I also think it is time to develop clearer - albeit flexible - methodologies to practice better engagement for both intellectual and activist ends.

Perhaps we should consider incorporating tools from psychology into our work, not necessarily to further the self-reflexivity of the anthropologist, but to begin to practice the strategic establishment, blurring and erasure of boundaries necessary to self-care in the field. By this, I refer to negotiating the boundaries between self-as-anthropologist, self-as-activist, and self-as-friend/participant not solely for our own benefit, of course, but because our strategic self-work could bring about the most effective social change. The merging of activism and research, participation and observation, and friendship and investigation necessarily illuminates the slippery slope of research ethics and activist aims. Ideally, we learn to consistently navigate ethical dilemmas and exercise self-reflexive awareness of power and how it shapes our interactions in the field. Both Herman (1997) and McKinney (2007) talk about the importance of self-care for professionals, and we should take this advice to heart. Upon departing for fieldwork, my dissertation committee members suggested that I start a support-group in the field while engaging in research on violence. Though this proved nearly impossible, I recognize in retrospect that I did not take seriously enough the need to carve out time for proper self-care. Quite frankly, I ended up with "compassion fatigue" (or, in simpler terms, emotional exhaustion or burnout) (Stamm 1999). No matter how earnest, energetic, or passionate we are at the outset, "compassion fatigue" is a likely possibility for which we should more openly prepare themselves.

Anthropologists have spent a considerable amount of time discussing whether activism enriches or detracts from the anthropological enterprise. With this paper, I suggest that we begin to move beyond questions of "neutral" versus "engaged" anthropology. While we must continue reflecting upon the ways that activism enriches and is inseparable from our work as anthropologists, it is also time to reflect on the terms of this engagement and to further develop tools to practice *better advocacy and research*. In consideration of our methodological shortcomings and our personal and temporal limitations of engagement, we should pay greater attention to identifying the types of reflective processes that allow us to tack back-and-forth and maintain a productive tension between so-called neutrality and engagement. To this end, the development and negotiation of boundaries

can serve as methodologies of engagement, not of "anti-engagement."

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