

Community-Based Ethnography

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In this age of research accountability, community-based ethnography is positioned to move from the periphery of the discipline of anthropology to the center. With increased recognition of its importance, this subdiscipline has gained greater depth and breadth giving rise to critical questions such as: How do we collaborate with interlocutors to acquire an understanding of their everyday struggles for justice? What forms should such collaboration take given the intricate and entangled connections between the local and the global? How do we take into account the politics of community organizations? How do we negotiate the power dynamics in the field? In terms of a response, community-based ethnographers have put forward praxis-oriented and innovative methodologies complemented with case studies. Following a historical overview, this entry foregrounds three thematic challenges that community-based ethnography addresses. First, it engages with critiques about possibilities and problems in working with and representing the “other” who has traditionally been part of the colonized world; second, it endeavors to illustrate that its commitment to social change and activism is not devoid of praxis; third, it seeks to gain increasing recognition in the global arena intricately connected with the local. The entry concludes by delineating a paradigmatic shift between action-based and theory-oriented anthropology, outlining community-based ethnography’s efforts to solidify advocacy as a legitimate approach to social analysis.

Historical overview

Community-based ethnography has been an integral part of the discipline of anthropology since its inception in the early part of the twentieth century. Its early contributions have been problematic as it largely, and at times inadvertently, served the imperialistic project of studying the colonized world for the purpose of governance. Over the years, its focus has shifted toward exploring sociopolitical issues identified through immersion in the lives of the subject populations. While community-based ethnography has experienced tension with theory-based academics, this tension is negotiated and resolved at a time when the need for activist and advocacy work is great as a result of endemic violence, global capitalism, and displacement of populations, among other developments. At no time in history has social inequality and social injustice assumed so much importance on a scale that is vast and global. Through methods such as participant observation and active listening, community-based ethnographers seek to work collaboratively with subjects and organizations across the board, locally and globally.

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea2267

But they go beyond seeking to understand the human experience of inequality and injustice and how these can be remedied through collaborative work.

At the same time, community-based ethnographers are not unmindful that collaboration across territorial, cultural, and social boundaries is problematic in a research situation, where the issue of power is invariably at work, requiring vigilance and ongoing negotiation. They are well aware that they largely work with underprivileged populations and constituencies, thus exacerbating the power inequalities inherent in research. Despite these challenges, community-based ethnography's value is recognized both in the global North, where marginalization of constituencies is not an unknown phenomenon, and the global South, where advocacy and activist work is the norm as opposed to academic anthropology.

Representing the other

Anthropology as a whole has shifted from being a discipline practiced exclusively by Westerners researching people in faraway and "exotic" places and become a discipline whose practitioners include those very "others." Additionally, anthropology has come to appreciate that its interlocutors are producers of context-specific knowledge that the practitioners of the discipline must acknowledge.

As such, community-based ethnography has responded to internal and external critiques of the discipline and has championed the need for a greater interrogation of the workings of power and knowledge production. Given their commitment to activist and grassroots-level work, not unconnected to global trends, community-based ethnographers have sought to reverse the representation of research subjects as the other through a rethinking of methods and representation. Their starting point is to unlearn their status as "academics," assumed to have access to privileged knowledge unavailable to the subjects of research, and to recognize the expertise of research subjects. This unlearning destabilizes the implicit hierarchy of the researcher–researched relationship, opening the door to collaborative and mutually beneficial research relationships.

In a collaborative research relationship, subjects who were previously "under study" participate as co-researchers, active in defining the issues relevant to them and in shaping the final product through review and input at various stages of the research process. Collaboration can represent the shared interests of the anthropologist and the participant group or the group's interest can even be primary to that of the anthropologist, who may allow the group to set the agenda. The result of collaboration is not an "authoritative" account of the other but a multivocal account in which the other is a coproducer of ethnographic knowledge.

Community-based ethnography challenges the power structure of traditional anthropological knowledge production but it does not exist outside of this structure. Like its parent discipline, it nevertheless remains the product of Western colonial discourse and power, inheriting numerous unexamined epistemological assumptions. For this reason, community-based ethnographers engage in self-reflexivity and subject their own methods to critical interrogation. They are mindful of the questions raised by feminist anthropology and subaltern scholars concerning the representation of

the other and the extent to which the other is produced through representation and discourse. Ultimately, the dilemma is that if community-based ethnographers did not advocate for their participants, would not the latter be further marginalized through the inaction of the anthropologist?

The response on the part of community-based ethnographers is to put forward context-specific practices that do not compromise the aspirations of their subjects. They recognize that their work is not free from tensions but they also recognize that these tensions can be potentially productive, as their occurrence gives rise to important questions such as how do we explore alternative ways of being and generate knowledge of social and political relevance in today's world? Localized methodologies and genres—such as stories, memory work, performances, and visual representations—highlight the process entailed in disseminating knowledge while simultaneously conducting action-based projects that aim at furthering the causes that are meaningful to the discipline's interlocutors.

Praxis-based activist work

Cognizant of the importance of their work in this day and age, community-based ethnographers explicitly connect the explanatory power of their documentation to praxis. In collaboration with community organizers, they are committed to producing work that is action- and solution-oriented, that can be used to address societal issues rather than merely explaining them. They are not only researchers but also researcher-activists.

The activist work of community-based ethnography can take multiple and diverse forms; there is no clear or exhaustive blueprint for what constitutes engagement. Some ethnographers may become involved in social justice activism on a grassroots or international level. Others may adopt the role of “social critics,” putting anthropological theory and methods to work at uncovering the structures of inequality that affect the everyday lives of marginalized communities. Whatever the form of engagement, action-oriented ethnography is sensitive to the political context of fieldwork.

In their activist work, community-based ethnographers seek to reach a broad range of audiences beyond the academy and to disseminate their work through a diversity of research products beyond traditional academic output. The communities with whom they work are positioned as beneficiaries of the research, such that research output is often designed to be of practical use to the community committed to advancing social justice endeavors. And, looking outward, community-based ethnographers recognize the importance of taking a socially visible position in order to inform and influence public discourse.

The public dissemination of collaboratively produced anthropological knowledge foregrounds questions of language and form. Community-based ethnographers take care to write in a language that is widely accessible, free from the jargon that can needlessly confine research to exclusively academic audiences. They also go beyond traditional academic forms such as journal articles, book chapters, and conference presentations so as to include more accessible or publicly appealing formats such as journalism, radio, blogs, pamphlets, and community-specific reports.

While communicating with the public involves putting their work in accessible language, community-based ethnographers also find themselves communicating with various organizations and institutions implicated in the social justice aspirations of their field communities. This requires anthropologists to become conversant with multiple field languages in areas such as economics, allopathic/biomedicine, science, or business. The question here is not one of accessibility but of “translation.” The concerns of the participant community must be translated into a form that can be heard by various stakeholders across the board without diluting the voices of the interlocutors.

Community-based ethnographers do not take their role as activists or social critics for granted. They are self-reflexive and self-critical, questioning the right or obligation of anthropologists to intervene in and work toward progressive change in the lives of others or to voice criticism that generally concerns places in which they do not live. Intervention is often justified by recourse to universal principles of justice and ethical responsibilities to act in the face of human suffering or inequality; yet community-based ethnographers are also aware of the tension produced by this position. Not only does it inch close to the “civilizing” arguments made by imperialist anthropologists of generations past, it also posits a kind of universalism that sits uncomfortably with the anthropologist’s attention to cultural specificity and local particularity.

In response to this tension, community-based ethnographers have drawn attention to the importance of critically interrogating their decisions to engage with certain issues and not others in order to ensure that “taking a side” will reflect the ethical grounding of the discipline. They recognize that they have an obligation to influence the trajectory of how their work is used and to produce work that can serve directly in the struggle for social justice. In sum, in their role as activists or advocates, community-based ethnographers emphasize the importance of working collaboratively from within local contexts rather than imposing their critique from the outside.

Recognition in the global arena

Community-based ethnographers emphasize the interconnection between local and global arenas. They recognize that many localized social justice issues are manifestations of broader global issues. For example, the issues of resource scarcity, environmental degradation, human rights, HIV/AIDS, or economic restructuring reverberate around the globe and they are often felt most acutely by those in the global South. Taking a global perspective on local issues locates the social criticism of community-based ethnographers in a broader context, highlighting the widespread human costs of global inequality and the importance of social justice activism in today’s interconnected world. For example, community-based ethnographers have taken a global perspective concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the struggle to make drugs affordable and accessible all over the world. In this regard, transnationally linked protest groups have been instrumental in demanding action on a global scale.

Community-based ethnographers seek to maintain a strong public presence which allows them the platform to place the issues they research on national and international agendas. They have been central in documenting the effects of higher-level policies on

the lives of marginalized people and collaboratively building localized solutions to globalized issues.

With increasing recognition in the global arena, community-based ethnographers are able to serve as liaisons between communities and governments or institutions. They have been instrumental in recommending policy initiatives that represent the interests of local communities.

While community-based ethnographers recognize the importance of their advocacy work, they are also aware of the power relations that dictate whose voice can be heard in international fora. They are aware that their global advocacy work to a certain extent reproduces the hierarchies that they attempt to mitigate through their research methodologies. In response to this, they emphasize the importance of collaboration in order to ensure that the issues attended to on the international level are not divorced from their local articulations. Although the anthropologist's voice is heard, the principle of the coproduction of knowledge works to instill a single voice with multiple others.

A paradigmatic shift

Although active engagement has been part of anthropology since the inception of the discipline, community-based ethnography nevertheless represents a paradigmatic shift between action-based and theory-oriented anthropology. Community-based ethnographers are active in arguing for the valorization and recognition of their work within anthropology, where it is impeded by various institutional, intellectual, and organizational barriers, including university hiring and tenure rules, publication criteria, and funding agency regulations.

The main points of contention separating the two paradigms concern the related issues of the scientific merit of activist work and the divided loyalties of researcher-activists. Regarding the first matter, the issue is not that community-based ethnographers renounce a detached, neutral, or objective worldview and instead take an explicitly political stance, since anthropologists of all stripes have long emphasized the partiality and situatedness of their own perspectives. The issue is, rather, that collaboration involves a relinquishing of control and a sharing of authority and authorship that formerly belonged to the academics alone. Principles such as shared expertise and the coproduction of knowledge challenge not only the methodological but also the epistemological assumptions of the discipline, calling into question the role of the anthropologist-as-expert and the scientific merit of collaboratively produced knowledge.

Regarding the second point, the divided loyalties of the ethnographer, the concern is that researcher-activists are not primarily occupied with academic obligations but are also deeply invested in political struggles and that these two loyalties may come into conflict with one another. The practical issues of action-based work may be incongruous with the theoretical issues of anthropology. While theory-based anthropology maintains that the task of the discipline is to interpret or explain the social world, action-based ethnographers are committed to simultaneously effecting change in the world.

Community-based ethnographers have pointed out that while academia and activism are often considered to be separate, even disparate, endeavors, they blend into one another in practice. Activism and advocacy are not contrary to anthropological practice but are a logical step furthering the rapport and reciprocity that mark field relationships and make ethnography possible. In defense of their approach, researcher-activists have emphasized the consequences of ethnographic detachment, arguing that social injustice and human suffering call for action by those in a position to help and that anthropologists are not exempt from this ethical requirement because of their academic commitments.

Yet as the merits of community-based ethnography become increasingly recognized, it is important that nonactivist anthropology is not recast as uncritical or self-interested. Some arenas call for activist or collaborative research but it is not possible or even desirable in all research settings. For example, community-based research requires certain types of interlocutors who are socially and politically engaged in their local communities. Additionally, it generally involves working with groups with whom the anthropologist morally agrees and would be inappropriate for research among morally dissimilar groups.

Conclusion

With increasing recognition, community-based ethnography is poised to occupy a more central role within anthropology in future years despite the tension between action- and theory-based academia. For its attention to the interconnection between global and local issues, its emphasis on praxis, and its critical engagement with questions of the representation of the “other,” community-based ethnography offers important insights that can contribute to the discipline as a whole. And for its critical rethinking of methods and writing, community-based ethnography emphasizes the spirit of self-reflexivity that keeps anthropology responsive and accountable to its interlocutors.

SEE ALSO: Action Anthropology; Activism; Applied Anthropology; Capability Approach; Empowerment and Community Participation; Ethnographic Engagement; Ethnography; Globalization; Glocalization; Multimodality; Nationalism; Praxis; Reflexivity; Slums and Shanty Towns; Theater, Anthropology and

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