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TEACHING TOOLS

Making the Familiar Strange

Reimagining the Typical Anthropology Student

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"This class is making me angry," Phylisha said in the final weeks of Introduction to Cultural Anthropology. The course was ending with a focus on social stratification, and we had been examining racial hierarchies, political and economic inequality, and the power relations behind global poverty. As we moved deeper into the course materials, Phylisha's anger at the systems she was learning about was well placed, but she was frustrated by an accompanying sense of helplessness. She expressed a concern I'd heard from many students before: So now that we know we're screwed, what can we do about it?

Like many anthropology instructors, I approach undergraduate teaching as a form of public anthropology. I know that most of the students in my introductory classes will not major in anthropology, and few will seek careers as practicing anthropologists. For many students, a single introductory course may be their only formal encounter with the field. But the lessons of anthropology are relevant well beyond the classroom, and undergraduate teaching offers an important opportunity to communicate the significance of anthropological research findings and to promote public conversations about contemporary social issues.

I have often participated in pedagogical discussions about the best ways to engage students in these broader conversations and to encourage them to apply an anthropological perspective to the world around them. The importance of understanding power and inequality are recurring themes: How do we encourage students to recognize the existence of social inequality and to critique the structures and processes that maintain it? To understand the long-term effects of imperialism and colonialism? To reflect on their own privilege? To see the world from the perspective of the marginalized? These are important questions, but as we strive to link anthropology to the everyday lives of students, we must remember to also ask: Whose lives are we imagining?

Too often, anthropology teaching techniques and materials (including common textbooks) assume a white, middle-class student audience. Learning about inequality, power or privilege, however, can be very different experiences for students near the bottom of the social hierarchy than for those closer to the top.

For the last several years, I taught in a community college in South Los Angeles. The areas surrounding the college have some of the highest poverty and unemployment rates in the city, but the predominately African American and Latina/o students arrive having absorbed the idea that hard work and education are the keys to upward mobility in America. They seek better career prospects, improved opportunities for their children, and the pride and confidence they hope will come from being the first in their families to earn a degree.

These students, I found, are natural social critics, and they do not need an anthropologist to help them recognize racial and class disparities. At the same time, they often express internalized individualistic explanations for inequality, blaming themselves, their families, and their communities for the poverty and suffering they experience. The anthropological analysis of broader systems of inequality can offer an important challenge to these explanations, but for many of my students, the process of connecting anthropological approaches to their own lives was often fraught with pain.

For example, early in the semester, my cultural anthropology course discussed sociolinguistics. I reiterated the course textbook's argument that, from a linguistic perspective, no one way of speaking is inherently better or worse than another, and dialects like African American Vernacular English are considered incorrect in popular culture not because they are deficient but because they are associated with stigmatized social groups. Students who were well aware of the stigma linked to some speech patterns and of the day-to-day burdens of code switching were nonetheless understandably distressed to read about studies that had identified their own way of speaking with a lack of intelligence and with illogical thought. For many students from marginalized social groups, the experience of seeing themselves from an outside perspective, so central to learning to think like an anthropologist, can be agonizing.


Throughout the course, I assigned reflective activities that asked students to connect a variety of other class themes to their own lives. Their responses highlighted the everyday violence of social inequality that they regularly encounter. When examining food patterns, students discussed the fact that the only options in their neighborhoods are fast-food restaurants and a substandard grocery store, and they can't afford the better quality food found

in wealthier areas. Experiences with ethnomedicine or alternative healing practices were linked to an inability to afford biomedical care, and students discussed economic patterns from the perspective of their undocumented family and friends. Students became frustrated with what they saw as inadequate sample kinship charts presented in the course textbook, and recognized their own families as those that are often called dysfunctional. They saw themselves in the people early anthropologists would have called primitive, connected our discussion of gender roles to the fact that most of the young men in their lives were dead or in jail and, in some of the most devastating essays I have read, analyzed rites of passage with stories about first experiences with neighborhood shootings and rape as a ritual of initiation into a gang.

Similar themes emerged when I asked students to complete mini-ethnographic research projects. Many students were excited by the opportunity to feel like a real anthropologist, and they applied their developing skills to an analysis of the social institutions that affect their lives. They used the methods of participant observation in crowded hospital emergency rooms, homeless shelters, police stations, the social services office, and the visiting areas (and occasionally as inmates) of prisons. Their studies often revealed relentless racism, the brutality of poverty, and the many small but constant humiliations involved in navigating these organizations.

Some students, having picked up on the classic anthropological focus on the Other, wanted to complete their ethnographic work somewhere as exotic as possible given the constraints of the assignment. Many identified the neighborhood of Beverly Hills or the shops on Rodeo Drive as especially foreign, but student ethnography in these sites ran up against the structures that maintain racial and class segregation in the United States. Black and Latina/o student anthropologists from South LA were often unable to enter Beverly Hills without risking harassment, arrest or other serious consequences.

Throughout these assignments, many students came to recognize the extent of their marginalization and the seeming intractability of the social structures that maintained it. From the perspectives of public anthropology and critical pedagogy, such recognition—and Phylisha's declaration that "this class is making me angry"—are important goals. But they also highlight significant questions about the way anthropology engages with a diverse public. Our classrooms are never homogenous, and as we discuss strategies for making anthropology relevant in students' lives or for connecting it to contemporary social problems, it is important to consider how these conversations may resonate with students from different backgrounds, in different social positions, or with often conflicting perspectives and interests. I'm not sure I ever answered Phylisha's question to her satisfaction, but if anthropology is to be used to challenge inequality and promote social change, her concerns must not go unheard.

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