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BRIEF REPORT



New Teaching in Participatory Methods for Practicing Anthropology

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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists are moving away from viewing anthropology as a solitary affair towards collaborative research, which values knowledge co-production with community members from research design to data analysis and write-up. By including the people who know most about the field site, participatory research seeks to confront power imbalances and advance social change. Building the capacity of students to fully engage with community partners is critical and requires hands-on training with methods that promote community participation. Yet, issues such as time constraints, insufficient institutional support, and the lack of formal training hinder the use and teaching of participatory research methods. Anthropologists can take advantage of the renewed enthusiasm for using participatory techniques, seen as instrumental for fostering social justice, to help tackle these barriers and promote new teaching in participatory methods in the field of Anthropology.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Ethnographic training has traditionally promoted solitary research. This model is now less dominant. Participatory research – which decenters the researcher as the only knowledge producer and involves community participation from research design, data collection, data analysis, and beyond – is increasingly the norm. There are many issues with promoting participatory methods, but there is also increased interest in using these methods to build mutually beneficial relationships and boost social justice. Anthropologists can build from the growing interest in participatory methods to advance new teaching in participatory methods.

KEYWORDS

Participatory methods;
teaching anthropology;
social change

Traditionally, learning to do ethnography was a solitary affair. Individual students were expected to design their inductive projects in which grounded observations built new theories to expand academic knowledge. This model of ethnographic training is now less dominant, and participatory research—which engages collaborators and/or community members in the co-production of the research design, data collection, and/or data analysis process—is increasingly the norm, especially in applied anthropology.

The concept of participatory research in anthropology was introduced by Sol Tax through action anthropology in the 1950s. Action

anthropology itself was inspired by action research—which emerged in the 1940s out of the field of psychology with Kurt Lewin—to promote the cooperation between social scientists (“facilitators”) and communities to produce new knowledge and address social issues. Global South scholars’ concerns about unequal power relations led to the emergence of participatory research in the 1950–60s in Latin America under the influence of Paulo Freire. A few years later in 1977, drawing on the intellectual traditions of Western and non-Western theorists, Orlando Fals Borda drew on both the concepts of action research and participatory research to introduce

participatory action research (PAR) worldwide. Since then, PAR and related participatory methods, such as community-based participatory research (CBPR), have been more widely used by researchers, including anthropologists, and communities to stimulate social change. Here, we reflect on what is new in teaching participatory forms of ethnographic methods, why it matters, current challenges, and ways forward.

What is ‘new’ about teaching in participatory methods and why it matters

In theory, a core principle of participatory research is the inclusion at every stage of the research process—from design to data analysis and write-up—of the people who know most about the field site and/or have significant lived experience of the problem at hand. Teaching participatory methods allows students to co-create science with community partners traditionally cast as “subjects” of research rather than “participants.” Decentering the position of the researcher as the only knowledge producer, integrating interdisciplinary approaches, and incorporating new technologies and media (e.g., GIS, asset mapping, story mapping, films, and photographs) are supporting shifts in how research gets done. Building the capacity of students to fully engage with community partners involves providing them with hands-on experience with methods that welcome community participation (e.g., participatory mapping, photovoice, participatory filmmaking, digital story mapping, and Talanoa Dialogue). Mastering methods like these helps students work individually and collaboratively (Radonic et al. 2023; Van Blerk et al. 2023; Catalani et al. 2012; Broesch et al. 2020; Gruber 2016; Vairoletti 2016)

The same skills needed for leading participatory research also apply to how we train students. Participation demands that we demystify research and make it accessible to all. This means improving how we communicate about research, working with partners to define the research questions, and making project designs responsive to community input and critique. Student-centered pedagogies allow us to draw on the strengths of the knowledge students bring to the classroom while guiding them in practicing participatory methods.

Current challenges and the way forward

The benefits of conducting ethnography in ways that anticipate and encourage community participation and center the role and agency of participants are becoming widely acknowledged. Challenges to teaching those methods include a lack of anthropologists formally trained in those methods; insufficient institutional and financial support to cover the true costs of participatory research including labor; the time it takes to build relationships for long-term engagement with communities; the pressure to publish as junior scholars not aligning with the pace for true community engagement; and a continuing view in the field that participatory approaches lack scientific rigor. In addition, participatory researchers often host and organize events, workshops, and meetings where research design and the collection and analysis of project data (and plans for sharing results) are negotiated with the community. Facilitating participatory, well-organized, and productive meetings is an essential skill, and training students for this skill is a complex task.

As they face these challenges, anthropologists have the benefit of renewed external interest in participatory methods as a tool for social justice and positive societal change. The principles of Indigenous methodologies, for example, are increasingly incorporated in curricula, influencing students’ growing expectation that ethical research, including consent to do research, requires community participation. This, in turn, raises students’ awareness of their positionality as researchers to encourage less exploitative community-engaged research (especially with marginalized communities) and mutually beneficial, long-lasting relationships with the community that translate into meaningful action and real-world change.

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Amber Wutich is an ASU President's Professor, Director of the Center for Global Health, and 2023 MacArthur Fellow. An expert on water insecurity, Wutich directs the Global Ethnohydrology Study, a cross-cultural study of water knowledge and management in 20+ countries. Her two decades of community-based fieldwork explore how people respond, individually and collectively, to extremely water-scarce conditions. An ethnographer and methodologist, Wutich has authored 200+ papers and chapters, co-authored 6 books, edits the journal *Field Methods*, and directs the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program.

H. Russell Bernard, Ph. D., is director of the Institute for Social Science Research at Arizona State University and Professor emeritus of anthropology of the University of Florida. He is a cultural anthropologist specializing in technology and social change, language death, and social network analysis. Bernard has taught or done research at universities in the U.S., Greece, Japan and Germany. Since 1987, he has participated in National Science Foundation-sponsored summer courses on research methods and design. Bernard was the 2003 recipient of the Franz Boas Award from the American Anthropological Association and is a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

Krista Harper is a cultural anthropologist with specializations in Europe (Hungary and Portugal), urban environmental and social movements, and qualitative research methods. In her book, *Participatory Digital and Visual Research in the Social Sciences* (Routledge, 2015), Harper and coauthor explore innovative uses of digital and visual methodologies to involve community members in data collection and analysis and to communicate findings to policy-makers and the public.

Alyssa Crittenden is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is an interdisciplinary scholar with a background in mixed methods and expertise in anthropology and human biology. Her research explores the relationship between behavior, reproduction, and the environment (ecological, political, and social) with an

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Melissa Beresford is an assistant professor of anthropology at San José State University and a faculty affiliate in the Center for Global Health at Arizona State University. Her research examines how humans use social and institutional arrangements adapt to water insecurity. She is also a methodologist and conducts research to advance social science research methods and research methods training. She is the Director of the Community of Practice for the NSF Cultural Anthropology Methods Program (CAMP).

Lucero Radonic is an environmental anthropologist working on water governance and environmental change in Latin America and the United States. Lucero incorporates qualitative and quantitative methods and is always excited to work with partners in the public and private sectors to co-develop participatory approaches for environmental research and programming. She is an Associate Professor in the Anthropology Department at Northern Arizona University, United States.

Alexandra Brewis is a Regents Professor and President's Professor at Arizona State University, where she teaches anthropology and global health.

Dr. John Luque is Professor in the College of Pharmacy & Pharmaceutical Sciences, Institute of Public Health at Florida A&M University. He is a medical anthropologist and cancer education researcher. He received his PhD at the University of South Florida in applied anthropology. His research program aims to develop community-based interventions to impact health disparities in high risk, medically underserved, or racial/ethnic minority populations. He currently serves as President of the American Association for Cancer Education. Overall, he has published over 85 scientific papers and book chapters.

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Charlayne Mitchell is an assistant professor of instruction in the Global Health Studies program and an affiliate of the Anthropology Department. As an interdisciplinary critical social scientist, Mitchell's research interests are in Black Americans in the United States and are centered on the intersections and parallels of race, gender, and class and how these social divisions affect health. Mitchell is particularly attentive to how narratives can inform research and pedagogical (instructional and curriculum design) praxes in ways that assist in redefining and rebuilding what health looks like for certain bodies. Mitchell's ongoing work

includes curriculum development focusing on nutrition, new approaches to qualitative research health for 'Othered' bodies, and research projects centering on decolonizing research methods, water insecurity, and increasing Black health equity using community-engaged and community-based approaches.

Anais Roque is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at The Ohio State University. Her current research interests include disaster response, environmental justice, household food, water, and energy insecurity, and community-based research. She is a JPB Environmental Health Fellow. Her work has been published in journals such as *Risk, Hazards & Crisis in Public Policy*, and *Water International*.

Cindi SturtzSreetharan is a Professor at Arizona State University. To date, her interests have centered on a language-in-interaction approach to the construction of masculinity; specifically, most of her work has focused on how Japanese men use language as a resource for creating, maintaining, or refuting a masculine identity. More recently she has turned her attention to the intersection of language, the body, and medicine. Her current work investigates metabolic syndrome in Japan. She is currently investigating the everyday language of weight stigma in the US and in Japan. This project attends to the way that mundane interactions around language create moments of acute attention to the size, shape, and expression of body sizes as well as discipline of the body.

Teniel Rhiney, PhD student in Anthropology and Elevate Fellow at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research investigates social equity in the transition to renewable energy in marginalized communities and the epistemological implications of traditional knowledge systems on public perception and awareness of climate change and renewable energy.

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