Author's Commentary on "What We Have Here is a Failure to Collaborate"

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What We Have Here is a Failure to Collaborate

Although Julie had the best intentions, she made a mistake common in many research situations. She should have taken more time to discuss her research with participant communities and individuals. The easiest way to do this is to design research to be collaborative. With this approach community members are also immersed in the research. It also opens opportunities to increase public outreach in the regions where Julie works, rather than limiting outreach to North American institutions and communities. Unfortunately, collaboration, immersion, and public outreach are difficult concepts to define and even harder to actualize.

Why didn't Julie know to do these things? Often students are not adequately prepared for including collaboration and public outreach as parts of fieldwork. Fieldwork is unpredictable, unfamiliar, and often uncomfortable. Taking the time to interact with people in a foreign community is extremely time consuming, often taking more time than the research itself.

Compensation is a difficult notion to reconcile, especially when one considers that Julie's career and reputation are strongly rooted in the information she collected during her PhD research in these communities. Adequate compensation is certainly important to consider in light of this. Although her fieldwork was short-term, she is gaining long-term benefits. Compensation should probably benefit the community for the long-term as well. There were probably things Julie could have done to meet long-term community needs. For example, as an anthropologist, she may have been able to offer her experience and training to meet local community goals of cultural preservation.

If Julie had discussed her project with the community more, she would know if a return visit was necessary. Although the resolution of problems, such as Julie's, are project specific, it is important to realize that cross-cultural research is undoubtedly

going to involve unfamiliarity and naiveté on the part of the researcher. This is especially true when individuals approach communities with personal goals in mind.

Julie should have at least translated her journal articles into Spanish for the community. A rough translation would be better than nothing at all. Even if she did not do that, she should have brought English copies of her publications. The act of sharing her work is just as important as the information itself.

Hopefully this case study invites discussion of these issues and some sharing of experience that may highlight the unfamiliar and unexpected considerations of fieldwork.