Chip Colwell-Chanthaphonh's Commentary on "What We Have Here is a Failure to Collaborate"

Commentary On
What We Have Here is a Failure to Collaborate

It is ironic, perhaps, that anthropologists largely introduced the word “reciprocity” into the English vernacular and yet have done so little to put the word into their professional practice. Since the very beginning of the discipline, anthropologists have too often received much from the communities they work with while giving little back in return. The reasons for this history are many and complex, but include anthropology’s entanglement with colonialism, the misguided fear that community engagement means a lack of objectivity, and the oftentimes obscure scientific questions anthropologists pose and seek to answer. Dr. Heliotrope has been caught up in this web, and both she and the community she worked with are paying the price.

Reciprocity is “a mutual or cooperative interchange of favors or privileges” according to *The American Heritage Dictionary*. In a sense, nearly all ethnographic research involves some form of exchange. People — “informants” — simply would refuse to talk to anthropologists if they did not feel they were receiving something of value in return. Of course, the less anthropological informants have vested in the research, the less likely they are to be helpful and loquacious, not to mention honest. The recent controversy over Margaret Mead’s celebrated work in Samoa relates to the claim that the young anthropologist was fooled by adolescent girls who lied because they were embarrassed by all those questions about sex.

Dr. Heliotrope seems genuine in her desire to be an ethical scholar and a good person. It is unfortunate, then, that she has made some poor choices. At first, we sympathize with Dr. Heliotrope because it seems that she did make a good faith effort, after all, giving out medical supplies, thanking individuals in the acknowledgement section of her book, and giving public lectures. Is this not

enough? Must Dr. Heliotrope be in debt for the rest of her life to the community she studied a short time? It is important to remember too that it was Dr. Heliotrope's hard work — getting grants, conducting the research, and writing her dissertation and publications — that made her into one of the leading scholars of the Amazon.

What went wrong for Dr. Heliotrope in part was her weak sense of the principles that should guide the notion of compensation. First, she lacked a proper sense of proportionality: the benefits she personally received far outweighed the benefits the community and individuals within it received. While Dr. Heliotrope is not morally bound to give compensation to the community ad infinitum, she should have extended her contributions at least as far as her publications that directly pertain to her dissertation research. Not bringing free copies of her book was a poor choice indeed. (Although community members may not read it, at least they could see the pictures and know that Dr. Heliotrope is writing about them; and couldn't she bring a battery operated tape player and an audiotape of herself reading the book in the native language? The practical limitations of the problem should not be an excuse for her poor moral judgment.)

Second, Dr. Heliotrope lacked a clear sense of parity: the community apparently feels that she received the credit for their knowledge. The defense that she was taught to write using anonymous informants probably means little to the community. As an anthropologist, Dr. Heliotrope should recognize that ideas of proportionality and parity are culturally constructed. I wonder how she could be an expert in the local culture and not know that individuals would want to be recognized more explicitly for the knowledge they chose to share with the visiting anthropologist.

Third, Dr. Heliotrope lacked generosity: she gave the community a minimal amount and mostly in material goods. While she does not want to be foolishly generous (a flood of money into a small community could be disastrous), Dr. Heliotrope could have been more munificent, in particular paying for her work to be translated and sent to the isolated community. Dr. Heliotrope is generous with her time in the United States it seems, but the community does not see such efforts and it is apparent she does not tell them about this work since she has not maintained communication with the community through the years. So long as generosity is tempered with mindfulness, researchers can rarely go wrong in exercising this virtue.

If Dr. Heliotrope had taken a more unequivocally collaborative position, she also might have avoided some of the conflicts. Some collaborations are synergistic, involving close partnerships to develop research questions, methodologies, and analyses. Other collaborations are less formal and only involve one or two shared goals. Collaboration, in short, lies on a continuum; it is not an either/or proposition. A collaborative association would have allowed Dr. Heliotrope to have a better relationship with community members, where they were unambiguously a part of the entire research process and not merely the object of that research.

Part of the problem lies in Dr. Heliotrope's training and the expectations of her dissertation committee. However, the larger problem is that peculiar institution called academia, which deems grants (money) and publication (prestige) its core values. Not coincidentally, these two values reward individual researchers and educational organizations most generously, while offering little directly to research subjects. The subjects of social science research often bear the costs and receive little in return because researchers are rarely encouraged to research practical questions, write in non-professional publications, or bring in funding that goes directly to the communities they study. Until this bigger problem is addressed and fixed, academic researchers will inevitably have divided loyalties — to the people they research and the larger institution they serve.