

COMMENTARY

Transforming Teaching Towards Empowered Learning: What #MeToo Taught Us About Anthropology

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Abstract

This article calls for revisiting how we teach anthropology in light of three mutually reinforcing “moments” – the #MeToo Movement, the development of the American Anthropological Association’s first Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Policy, and shifting student expectations regarding personal safety and wellbeing. By thinking anthropologically about anthropology, against a backdrop of larger questions for the discipline as a whole, we single out the consequences of the “lone anthropologist” trope as it reproduces idealized notions of fieldwork in ways that limit access to the discipline. We suggest ten practical strategies for changing normative pedagogies as a way to increase benefits and reduce harms as we work to minimize risk for sexual violence while preserving the benefits of immersive fieldwork. We conclude by exploring how the classroom itself is feeding back into transforming cultures and institutional structures.

Keywords: *sexual violence, #MeToo, fieldwork, pedagogy*

Introduction

Contemporary anthropological pedagogy must reckon with how sexual violence in the field, lab, and workplace shapes the discipline.¹ This work begins in the undergraduate classroom, where both students and faculty increasingly insist that the reality of sexual violence needs to be central to how the discipline is taught. Changes in classroom expectations were accelerated by the #MeToo movement and institutional shifts in how sexual violence is managed. While sexual violence has been a long-standing and seemingly intractable problem on college campuses (Sanday 2007), events over the last decade have raised the profile of this issue and the ways institutions respond – and fail to respond – to the concerns expressed by sexual violence survivors and their allies

¹ We use the term “sexual violence” to encompass both sexual assault and sexual harassment.

(Krakauer 2015). By way of background, in 2010, there was nothing resembling today's Title IX office on US college campuses (Brown 2019). A 2011 directive from the Office of Civil Rights, known as the "Dear Colleague" letter, was a key catalyst for change. The letter invoked Title IX, which had primarily been applied to equity in athletics, to warn colleges to do better in handling sexual misconduct cases or risk losing federal funding. Title IX-compelled prevention work has made students more aware of the ways sexual violence shapes their access to learning.

In anthropology, Clancy et al. (2014) published a data-rich study that added to the growing body of literature on the ways that sexual harassment and sexual assault shape individual experiences in field schools, field sites, labs, classrooms, and the workplace (see also di Leonardo 1981, 2018; Lamphere 2009; Lewin and Silverstein 2016; Moreno 1995; Nelson et al. 2017; Wright 2003). Addressing academia more broadly, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) published a report that summarizes recent research on the "influence of sexual harassment in academia on the career advancement of women in the scientific, technical, and medical workforce" (NAS 2018, 17) and recommends profound changes in the academy. But how do these macro-level considerations shape our teaching?

Positioning Ourselves in Changing Pedagogy

Anthropology, across its sub-disciplines, tends to be a learning-by-doing and learning-by-emulation endeavor. This training begins in the undergraduate setting. While anthropology is not united under one methodological umbrella, the NAS (2018, 65) report documents higher risk for sexual violence across the methodological spectrum where anthropological training occurs: environments that are isolating, have demonstrated institutional tolerance for sexual harassment, are shaped by hierarchical relationships, have dependent relationship between faculty and their trainees, and are male-dominated.

In this essay, we single out the exoticized notion of the lone anthropologist working in isolation in a cultural setting very "foreign" and different from their own as both a normative rite of passage in the discipline and a setting for increased risk for sexual violence.

To situate ourselves in this conversation, we are both long-standing faculty in anthropology departments at liberal arts colleges and have collectively taught for 40+ years, teaching at all levels from introductory courses to research methods to upper-level courses. Our institutions promote experiential learning through study away, independent research, internships, and engaged classroom learning, and we remain connected to many of our students as mentors after they graduate. Today, we find ourselves grappling with differences between what we were taught about anthropology and how we want to teach anthropology while taking into account these new imperatives.

Our interests converged through our roles as inaugural Gender Equity seats on the American Anthropological Association's Members Programmatic Advocacy and Advisory Committee (MPAAC). In this role, we served as co-leads for a working group that developed the first American Anthropological Association (AAA) Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault Policy in 2018 (AAA 2018, hereafter referred to as the AAA Policy).² Through our collaboration on this project, we reflected on how the issues we were addressing in the AAA Policy were mirrored in changing student engagement and expectations.

In our classrooms, students increasingly question normative descriptions of fieldwork from an identity-based (e.g., gender, race, sexuality, ability) perspective, asking about their own safety and well-being in field settings but also about the assumptions implied in the ideal type of the lone fieldworker (Pollard 2009). Our students began to speak about sexual violence as a systemic issue and not just episodic negative occurrences by students who had experienced sexual violence in study away, internship, or field study programs. Focused on individual experiences, we were limited in the ways we could speak to those individual experiences due to privacy concerns. Students increasingly shared their discomfort with negative experiences that were viewed as being in a "grey zone" where, instead of an incident of sexual assault, students faced harassment or the perceived threat of sexual violence. Students ask questions about who can access the fieldwork experience and whether fieldwork assumes particularly abled or gendered bodies at particular moments during the life course (Vieth 2018).

In sum, students were pushing us to engage with critiques of the privileged position that underlies assumptions about an idealized lone fieldworker who engages in immersive fieldwork experiences. At the same time, a new generation of anthropologists has raised awareness of the racialized and gendered nature of who was "allowed" historically to do the kinds of fieldwork that are now at issue.³

By seeing fieldwork and training experiences through this lens, we understood that our own approaches to fieldwork are governed by assumptions about what constitutes the desired or ideal field experience. We recognized that we were replicating the ways we had been trained without necessarily critically examining how those practices limited access and without considering other promising practices for engaging in the fieldwork of anthropology. This perspective prompted us to rethink how we teach methods and ask ourselves more systematically how well we were equipped to uphold the training side of practices described in the AAA Policy for our undergraduate students. For example, we now begin by foregrounding that all bodies do not experience fieldwork in the same way

² Institutional leadership prior to the adoption of the AAA Policy includes the former Committee on Gender Equity in Anthropology's panels at the annual meeting on "Gender Justice" (2012), "Gender Equity" (2013), and "Getting Anthropology Closer to Zero: Collaborating to Reduce Sexual Harassment in Anthropology" (2014) and surveys in 2005, 2007, 2009, and 2016 (Brondo et al. 2009; Howell 1990; Wasson et al. 2008; Wies et al. 2014).

³ See, for example, *The New Ethnographer*, <https://thenewethnographer.org/>.

(Mullins 2000) and by recognizing that this difference is an asset to diversifying the anthropological toolkit. While immersive fieldwork methodologies offer particular advantages and distinct ways of understanding the world, we recognize that decentering the “lone fieldworker in faraway locales” model as the highest-prestige ideal type of fieldwork allows space for the inclusion of field research methods that have historically been sidelined, such as participatory action research (Mullins 2000) and the intermingling of ethnography and memoir (Behar 1996). Moreover, addressing sexual violence prevention and intervention in course design and departmental curricula makes fieldwork safer and more inclusive for all.

In the following sections, we turn our attention to promising practices for rethinking how we teach anthropology in the #MeToo era. We discuss in more detail how we are changing our own pedagogical practices, our reasons for doing so, and how these classroom-level changes are in turn feeding back into larger conversations about transforming institutional structures and cultures within anthropology. While our work may have relevance for other populations, our primary concern here is with the neophyte “traditional student” undergraduate researcher.

The Change That Needs to Happen

Teaching introductory courses, methods, and theory differently is a first step to counter institutional tolerance of sexual violence. Incorporating pedagogies that enable reflection on how sexual violence shapes learning in anthropology is an act of inclusion that recognizes the multiplicity of constraints learners face in their training to think anthropologically. Here, we summarize our own efforts to make our classrooms more inclusive and responsive to the changing context in which we all teach. We break this down into ten key takeaways:

1. The AAA Policy on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault (AAA 2018) establishes normative expectations for anthropological research, work, and training. Understanding and then sharing the AAA Policy with students is foundational to longer-term changes that will make engaged learning experiences safer for all. Attending to and mitigating sexual violence risks, e.g., by instructing students not to enter a stranger’s home to conduct interviews, is really a best practice that benefits all students.
2. Assign content that directly addresses anthropologists’ struggles with sexual violence to render this issue (and its intersection with other forms of discrimination) visible to students. Importantly, this content should blend fieldwork experiences with non-fieldwork experiences (e.g., di Leonardo (1981) on street harassment in the US) to underscore that practices associated with fieldwork are also good practices “at home.” See references for additional suggestions to extend this discussion, e.g. Johnson 2016, Moreno 1995, and Williams 2009.

3. Create classroom space to discuss and reflect on sexual violence and its intersectionalities in order to reconceptualize fieldwork. Doing so will de-center the lone fieldworker model and create room for multiple approaches to ethnographic data collection.
4. Think about who makes up the “cannon” assigned in methods and introductory courses. Move beyond gender to shape student understanding of intersectional discrimination. This entails exploring how race as well as sexualities, religion, and other marginalized identities shape experiences. Doing this work requires an engagement with and questioning of citational politics – as movements like #CiteBlackWomen have already suggested – that are embedded in undergraduate core curricula. See, for example, Harrison et al. 2018 and Buelle et al. 2019.
5. Work through case studies in the classroom to develop “muscle memory” that enables students to envision future responses to potentially challenging situations. Doing this with supports allows for more informed planning for fieldwork. Case studies can be drawn from published narratives such as “Towards a Fugitive Anthropology” (Berry et al. 2017), “I Had No Power to Say That’s Not Ok” (Clancy 2013), “The Self at Stake” (Johnson 2016), “Doing Fieldwork after Henrietta Schmerler” (Steffen 2017), and “Don’t Ride the Bus!” (Williams 2009).
6. Speak frankly about the delicacy and nuance of fieldwork relationships and what bargaining power looks like when recruiting study participants. This practice, already in use for teaching ethics, encourages students to think in advance about what constitutes crossing a line and to “trust their gut” if something doesn’t feel “right.”
7. For field schools, field sites, or study abroad, teach students to carefully review reporting policies and sexual harassment and assault protocols and supports for students.
8. Discuss the concept of “situational awareness” and practice/role play to develop this competency.
9. Draft contingency plans in collaboration with students that pay focused attention to sexual violence risks and include a communication plan using practice guidelines⁴ as an essential preparatory exercise prior to fieldwork, study away, or field schools.

⁴ #metooanthro.org provides student- and faculty-facing guides to the development of safety plans (see Walter and Bergstrom 2019).

10. Communicate institutional supports for students, including:

- a. Trainings on Title IX, Green Dot Training, and/or anti-harassment/anti-assault training offered by the institution or at disciplinary association meetings and webinars.
- b. University or college-wide and departmental contact people (such as Title IX officers or Ombudspersons).
- c. Existing support protocols from the discipline or the institution (such as protocols developed by service-learning or study abroad offices).

In the section that follows, we turn to how these changes in pedagogical practice have the potential to transform cultural and institutional structures within anthropology.

How might classroom changes transform culture and institutional structures?

Changes in the classroom feed back into transforming culture and institutional structures in a number of ways: change from below comes from work with new student cohorts; change from above comes by setting normative expectations through the AAA Policy; and change from the side comes as anthropologists advocate for change within institutional structures that shape students' educational experiences.

Change is incremental. Shifting norms among undergraduate students, the most junior members of the discipline, have deep potential to transform the discipline. While we don't suggest that change stops here, working with undergraduates is an effective means of enacting comprehensive change over time.

The AAA Policy provides anthropologists with a heavy-hitting tool to advocate for change in the classroom and in mentoring relationships. The AAA Policy sets normative expectations for the discipline. Departments that omit the Policy from training materials (e.g., departmental ethics guidelines and/or AAA's Principles of Professional Responsibility) would be failing to adhere to disciplinary expectations.

Change from the side can be seen in anthropologists' efforts to shape institutional policies and priorities that govern students' fieldwork experiences. Preparing for, but also managing, situations when sexual violence is a potential threat or takes place may require advocating on behalf of students within our own departments, institutions, funding agencies, and in study abroad programs. Lobbying institutional stakeholders to ensure congruence with sexual violence prevention best practices can be a powerful way to prevent sexual violence.

One example of changing norms can be seen in Fulbright's recent shift to include a section on its website indicating that it will provide "a compassionate and supportive

response to all Fulbright grantees in crisis.”⁵ It goes on to specify that it will offer compassion, safety, and support to “victims of physical or sexual assault” and that it will work closely with affected individuals regarding the continuation of the award. These developments have important implications for the discipline of anthropology as a whole, but for our classrooms in particular, as we regularly work with undergraduate students designing their Fulbright projects (usually during their senior year) and as mentors when they are conducting research. Instead of a student having to choose between remaining in a situation in which they feel unsafe and having to give up a prestigious research opportunity, this shift provides a “third way” to creatively problem solve in a way that wasn’t necessarily available to previous cohorts of scholars.

While there has been a steady effort to document and combat sexual violence within anthropology for a long time, we have witnessed a marked shift in recent years in both the visibility and urgency of this issue among students, faculty, and practicing scholars. This shift has been accompanied by a more purposeful wave of institutional responses. Importantly, this is not an issue that is limited to anthropology; it is experienced across disciplines, particularly throughout the sciences (NAS 2018). As ethnographic fieldwork continues to gain traction in other disciplines (e.g., political science and public health), anthropology is poised to position itself as a leader in its engagement with the specter of sexual violence and new field research pedagogy. Individual narratives of sexual violence documented in anthropology are both narratives of individual pain and narratives of structural vulnerabilities that are sustained by idealized notions of fieldwork (Demian 2018). Accordingly, transforming teaching to develop empowered learners that proactively engage with questions of sexual violence situates the anthropological classroom as a site of critical engagement that challenges normative prescriptions for anthropological field research along the matrices of access, power, and inequality.

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⁵ Fulbright US Student Program, Safe and Secure, <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/current-fulbrighters/staying-safe-and-secure>.

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