

COMMENTARY

Anthropology in the World: Studying Current Events of 2020 through the Lens of Structural Violence and Embodiment

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Abstract

Although the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for faculty and students alike, it was also a catalyst for new collaborations. Our faculty-student project capitalized on what the pandemic publicly exposed: the fact that human health and culture are inextricably intertwined. We write this commentary as an anthropology professor and student who developed a Directed Independent Study focused on salient social and biological phenomena of 2020 while also adapting pedagogical and methodological approaches given the circumstantial constraints. By applying an anthropological lens to current events of 2020, we operationalized anthropological theories – like structural violence and embodiment – that are typically distant abstractions to students.

***Keywords:** COVID-19; Embodiment; Structural Violence; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*

Introduction

2020 was a year like no other. Most people were acutely aware of living through a historical moment and “unprecedented” was a word we heard time and again to describe the multitude of challenges the year ushered in. The world faced a global pandemic, the scale of which exceeded any global health emergency for more than a century; COVID-19 infections, illness, and deaths reached alarming rates. Meanwhile, the United States was confronted with shocking images of police brutality against African American citizens that, while not new, fueled outrage and protest. The injustice of these violent acts reinvigorated the Black Lives Matter movement and prompted calls for social justice. When *The Washington Post* asked readers to describe the year in their own words, the results captured the many emotions and events we experienced either directly or by watching them unfold through media outlets. A variety of descriptors included emotional states, like “exhausting;” “heartbreaking;” “surreal;” and “a year of missing.” Others recalled the struggles endured by COVID-19 patients and care workers: “stifling;” “nightmare;” and “suffocating.” Some documented the ubiquitous presence of technology we relied upon during social distancing: “You’re on mute,” for example, recalls a common Zoom meeting

refrain. Finally, *Post* readers captured the year using George Floyd's now-infamous last words at the hands of Minneapolis police officers: "I can't breathe" (Goren et al. 2020).

We write this commentary as an anthropology professor (Pfister) and student (Encinosa) who developed a Directed Independent Study (DIS) focused on salient social and biological phenomena of 2020 while also adapting pedagogical and methodological approaches given the circumstantial constraints. Social distancing measures, recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2021), sent educators, students, and families scrambling to shift to remote instruction and work. Although the COVID-19 virus did not shrivel in the summer heat as some projected, face-to-face experiential learning opportunities, like participant observation and fieldwork – hallmark methods for anthropological inquiry – did. Nonetheless, the unique landscape of 2020 also presented ample opportunity to study real-time social phenomena. Through the development of a project we call, "Embodied Injustices: COVID-19, Race, and Epigenetics," we became acutely aware that "pandemics often serve as revelatory agents that shed light on social fault lines, leadership failings, and structural inequities" (Primiano et al. 2020, 47). This short commentary discusses the development of this project from 1) an anthropological theoretical lens that explores structural violence, embodiment, and the operationalization of these theories through epigenetics and 2) the lens of pedagogical strategies and current trends in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

The Process

A core academic exercise in anthropology is to illuminate the interrelatedness of two seemingly divergent concepts (science and belief, for example). Jonathan Marks (2017) presents this aspect of anthropology as the "science of mediation" and Pfister's teaching is guided by the pursuit of this intellectual dialogue. In each of her courses, Pfister encourages students to find nuanced connections between concepts that inform our understanding of what it means to be human. Most fundamental are the inseparable roles of biology and culture in the study of humans as a species. This commentary illuminates how our Directed Independent Study (DIS) project explores the intriguing intersection of culture and biology as they relate to human health and illness during the time of COVID-19. The project reveals the way anthropological investigation renders phenomena that appear on the surface to be distinct, even contradictory, as interdependent. We discuss Encinosa's project, "Embodied Injustices: COVID-19, Race, and Epigenetics" to underscore a) how this project embodies anthropology as a "science of mediation," especially in mediating the link between culture and biology and b) how applying anthropological theory to current events brought ideas like "embodiment" from the realm of abstraction to operationalization. Both approaches facilitated our understanding of the relevance of anthropological theory and methods for studying human health.

Most undergraduate students think of biological phenomena as innate, deterministic, and objective while viewing human culture as more superfluous, malleable, and subjective.

However, Encinosa, a dual major in biology and international studies, was developing a sophisticated understanding of how socio-political factors impact biology and health. After auditing Pfister's *Health, Illness, and Culture* class in Spring 2020, Encinosa developed a keen interest in structural violence, a medical anthropological concept developed most prominently in anthropology by Farmer (2004). Anthropologists use structural violence to investigate "systematic ways in which social structures harm or otherwise disadvantage individuals" (Burtle 2013). Encinosa and Pfister worked together to develop two consecutive DIS courses to explore how the concept of structural violence is used across a variety of topics in Encinosa's interest areas. She read ambitiously and developed a robust review of the literature during our coursework in the summer of 2020. As we worked remotely and quarantined during the COVID-19 global pandemic, the social and epidemiological events that will forever be etched in the collective American memory unfolded around us. Minority groups in America disproportionately fell ill and died from the novel coronavirus. The killing of George Floyd at the hands of Minnesota police officers ushered in unprecedented protests and calls for racial equity and an end to police brutality. During weekly meetings, we discussed how these events so clearly evidenced the concept of structural violence in the United States.

Although structural violence is a well-studied topic among medical anthropologists, the concept can seem vague or inaccessible to students. Encinosa developed her interest in structural violence after reading about research exploring the challenges faced by rural Haitian women and migrant farmworkers (Farmer 2003; Holmes 2014). She, like many undergraduate students, had little direct experience with these populations or anthropological field methods. Yet, the events of 2020 thrust forward obvious examples of how American social structures threaten the health and well-being of familiar groups. For example, low-income food supply workers were disproportionately affected. Neighborhood grocery clerks dominate the ranks of essential workers who were hit hard by the coronavirus. In our home state of Florida, migrant farmworkers faced such alarming conditions that Doctors without Borders responded while the governor blamed the farmworkers for the state's outbreak (Chang et al. 2020). Pfister and Encinosa were astounded to see concepts used in anthropology classrooms – like generational trauma and social marginalization – used with increasing frequency in local and national news stories.

Pfister and Encinosa brought these current events back into their "virtual classroom" for analysis. They began an iterative process of applying anthropological theory and perspectives to real-world events. Soon, embodiment emerged as a theoretical underpinning relevant to understanding how cultural phenomena (i.e., stress or poverty) affect biology (i.e., greater risk of infection and worse health outcomes). Embodiment, like structural violence, can be difficult for researchers to operationalize. However, Encinosa's background in biology facilitated her approach to the project. As she searched for tangible evidence of how social environments are embodied through human physiology, she realized epigenetics was a methodological approach through which embodiment can be

operationalized. Epigenetics is the study of mechanisms that change gene expression without altering the DNA code itself (Moore et al. 2013). Environmental exposures, like pollution or stress, can trigger epigenetic modifications that can be passed on intergenerationally (Handy et al. 2011). Thus, epigenetic markers provide biological evidence of how social environments are literally embodied by individuals and passed on to their offspring. Encinosa's literature review elucidates how epigenetic modifications provide an avenue by which racialized social experiences may become embodied as comorbidities that enhance vulnerability to COVID-19. Her work builds upon existing discussions of the interrelatedness of the social environment, epigenome, and the construction of race (Gravlee 2009; Meloni 2016; Saulnier and Dupras 2017). The overlap between the social world and human biology reflects anthropology's broader position at the intersection of the natural and social sciences.

By connecting epigenetics with embodiment theory and structural violence, this project brought nuanced conversations about race – familiar to anthropologists – to the field of biology and beyond. The natural sciences typically have a reputation for being strictly objective and “facts-based” fields in the eye of the American public. However, science and scientists exist in social worlds and are subject to biases that manifest in their research. The diversity among the experiences of non-white participants and researchers remains under-represented because clinical trials are composed of disproportionately white subjects (Scientific American 2018) and the vast majority of PhDs awarded in the biological sciences are awarded to white candidates (National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics 2019). Too often, studies that influence minority populations are conducted and discussed without significant minority input. In contrast, our project centered minority perspectives and impacts. Encinosa's review of the literature drew from academic journals that discussed physiological mechanisms of disease within Black, Native American, and Hispanic populations. She then connected findings from these studies to the message that activists communicated during 2020 and beyond: that detrimental health effects reflect larger systems of racial marginalization.

The project at the focus of this commentary, “Embodied Injustices: COVID-19, Race, and Epigenetics,” investigates how structural violence – in the form of social systems like racism – puts bodies in harm's way. By using current, real-time data in the form of disproportionate COVID-19 infections and deaths and in the form of police brutality and related injustices, Encinosa's project went beyond mere theorizing by using epigenetics to operationalize anthropological theories like embodiment. Put another way, the events of summer 2020 embodied *why* the study of anthropology is relevant. By operationalizing “embodiment” theory, Encinosa utilized her interdisciplinary training and tested her hypotheses through the application of extant research. She theorized about what epigenetic research might reveal about COVID-19 and the minority communities most at risk. Her research can be generalized to guide future research endeavors on the social determinants of health as they pertain to infectious and chronic diseases.

Outcomes and Connections to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

This project highlights how current events underscore the relevance of anthropology while also engaging current trends in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). First, researchers studying teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic differentiate between “the crisis-response migration methods of higher institutions” (i.e., converting in-person learning to online and remote methods) with the more organic trend toward “digital transformation” or the sum of all “opportunities to positively apply digital technologies optimally” (Kopp et al. 2019 in Adedoyin and Soykan 2020). This project was developed at the intersection of crisis-response migration and optimal digital technologies, recognizing and illustrating the various advantages that online learning offers (please see Adedoyin and Soykan 2020 for literature on advantages of online teaching).

Through faculty-student research projects, students are given authentic opportunities to apply anthropological theories and methods and experience the real-world implications of social science research. This is an exciting project that brings together sophisticated ideas and renders them relatable and accessible to a variety of audiences.

The collaborative effort of this commentary advances “Collective Inquiry,” a tenet identified by SoTL scholars as an emerging direction in the future of the field of SoTL (see Moore 2013). Collective inquiry involves students and faculty/staff in publications like this which encourage discussion across institutions to “enhance our exploration of complex problems and increase the likelihood of generalization” (Moore 2013). The flexible format of a DIS is highly dependent upon the student and faculty member’s skills, motivation, and interests. In the case of this project, the topics evolved organically, which created a learning environment that emphasized experiential learning, one that “eschews traditional punitive assessment and holistically considers the student’s emotional, physical, and mental well-being” (Primiano et al. 2020, 48). Together, the faculty member and student decided on deliverables that best suited Encinosa’s learning goals. Research funding and dissemination of findings were important professionalization pieces that came out of our work together. Publication of this work in various formats extends the lessons from this project to reach other anthropology and biology students and faculty (Encinosa 2020; Encinosa 2021a; Encinosa 2021b; Encinosa, forthcoming).

This project has also impacted Encinosa’s career trajectory, and her current position depends on understanding the inseparability of culture and biology as they relate to human health. One of Encinosa’s professors shared her conference poster (Encinosa 2020) with an organization hiring interns to work on non-profit and government projects (NormalNext.org). Encinosa was then quickly promoted to a full-time position as a Community Manager for a fellowship program comprised primarily of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian community leaders and activists tackling the social determinants of health (Cultureofhealth-leaders.org). Skills honed through this project contributed to Encinosa’s promotion; her boss directly credited her intuitive understanding of nuanced issues within public health and health equity as skills that made her stand out among other

candidates. In her work with the Culture of Health Leaders, Encinosa cultivates relationships between fellows and engages in conversations as they confront the very topics this project investigates: intergenerational trauma, medical racism, and the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on minority communities.

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