

Agency and Advocacy: The importance of anthropologist's work in minorities

An anthropologist's work is typically to study a group or minority, from a certain perspective. A study is typically developed through observing a topic or problem surrounding a group, by researching the context and background information about this group, and finally by explaining how this group can function and change within its given society. Using the book "Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement," and the article "Indigenous Women and Gendered Resistance in the Wake of Acteal: A feminist activist research perspective," I will describe how the authors' studies can address agency and advocacy among a minority, and how the authors as anthropologists can become advocates through their work.

The topic of Christa Craven's book, "Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement," surrounds the development of the reproductive rights movement, and how advocacy efforts aimed at legalizing midwives with homebirth are presently suited for specific socioeconomic classes among a consumer-stratified society. Craven argues that the evolution of the reproductive rights movement has supported the affluent, white middle class mothers for their desired birthing options, while leaving birthing options limited for low-income and racially stratified women (Craven 2010). In this case, agency for the supporters of homebirth and midwives is given to the majority within the group; "the majority of affluent participants in my study often felt it was their *right* to have choices in their childbirth experience," presumably "because they enjoy a secure economic status, solidified by their racial, educational, and class status, that they can afford to take social risks"

(Craven 2010:130, 110). Craven then describes how low-income supporters are marginalized within their movement. To supporters belonging to a different socioeconomic class, low-income and/or non-white homebirth supporting mothers' ideas were seen as detrimental to the movement, and thus they "stopped [going] to organizational meetings because they did not feel that their concerns were being heard" (Craven 2010:134). The realization among the reproductive rights movement is what Craven explores, and in doing this she addresses the imbalance of power and agency within the group of supporters.

Next, the history and development of the movement is explored in detail. Through the historic background check of proponents of the homebirth movement, Craven is able to explain some causes and condition of the stratification of socioeconomic class among supporters. She highlights how the development of a neoliberalist society over the past 200 years has put agency in the hands of powerful consumers. This led to trends of birthing practice in the United States fluctuating between such things as twilight sleep, natural childbirth, and medicalized hospital births, all of which were pushed by the "affluent, white" class of women who held agency in the society (Craven 2010:32). Even in recent years supporters lobbying for pro-midwife and homebirth legislature, Craven describes, are those with "consumer rights," who can afford various options of childbirth (Craven 2010:121-125). In researching and describing the history and problems which develop her initial observation of unequal cross-class birthing options, Craven defines the societal condition of consumer's rights under neoliberalism, which restricts agency between supporters, and limits advocacy to supporters of the movement who align themselves with this societal condition.

By defining the problem, and history surrounding the condition that created it, anthropologists can make conclusions about how this problem fits in society, and ways that it may change. Craven explains how the difference of agency between cross-class supporters can be equaled if advocates

change their strategy of lobbying following the social condition. Her belief is to challenge the views of activists who can believe “that social change can only be achieved through consumer choices rather than through collective political action” by actually addressing the condition of a “broader neoliberal shift away from government commitments to preserve all citizen’s rights” (Craven 2010:145,144). Concluding with this, the anthropologist actually becomes an advocate herself, in saying that disadvantages of those lacking agency within the movement will be better supported if advocates’ strategies challenge the condition by which they were created.

A similar example of how agency can be represented through an anthropologist’s work is shown by Shannon Speed, in her article “Indigenous Women and Gendered Resistance in the Wake of Acteal: A feminist activist research perspective.” Taking a feminist viewpoint, speed highlights power and agency among gender in events surrounding paramilitary occupation in Northern Mexico. Specifically, she studies the “gendered resistance” of Indigenous women protecting their homes and communities following the massacre at Acteal, and why this resistance was unexpected and portrayed in the media out of context (Speed 2006). Speed notes that “official discourse diverted attention from women’s agency, and thus kept many from focusing on the potential “real story” (Speed 2006:184). Speed’s topic is ultimately why agency of the women taking part in the resistance was taken away through the gendered ideals of Mexico, accepted and portrayed by public discourse.

The background information on the conflict in Northern Mexico and social ideals accepted in Mexico help Speed explore the subtraction of this group’s agency. She includes a background of women’s participation in the organized uprising; the challenge of the highly patriarchal condition of Mexico by the Zapatista group. She notes how the community problems caused by paramilitary confinement and the massacre at Acteal did not succeed in diminishing the power and agency of the Zapatista group, but instead led to the gendered resistance of the women of targeted communities and

the “power to resist not just the military incursion but also the strategies of terror waged against them” (Speed 2006:178). It is important for the author to state this as evidence for her argument that it was purely agency among these women that caused the resistance, and it was not acted on behalf of the Zapatista organizing strategy.

Speeds’ definition of the problem and understanding of the patriarchal social condition of Mexico allowed her to explain how popular public discourse took agency from women acting in the resistance, how “indigenous women’s agency as political actors is negated, erased” (Speed 2006:182). Taking a feminist viewpoint allowed the anthropologist to explore the gendered workings and viewpoints portrayed during these events, and how agency can be better defined or blurred by societal and cultural condition. She acts as advocate by challenging gender norms, but also describes how an anthropologist’s work can “[provide] insights that might not be gleaned from simple observation” (Speed 2006:184).

Conclusively, I believe that anthropologists’ work in studying people and minorities shed light on how ideals are created and accepted within a society. By understanding the creation of differences in agency and advocacy within groups by a societal condition, such as neoliberalism and patriarchy, an anthropologist can critique and suggest areas of advocacy focus for change. In reference to Michel Foucault’s “power of the norm,” I believe that an anthropologist’s work can allow a society or culture to understand the condition that concedes the intra-societal surveillance among its members (Craven 2010:10). This understanding will grant agency and advocacy more equally to groups striving for change.

References

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2010 Pushing for Midwives: Homebirth Mothers and the Reproductive Rights Movement. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (232p)

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