"Adventures in Engaged Anthropology, or Why 'Getting It Right' Isn't Enough"

Ric Curtis
John Jay College
New York City

At the 2002 AAA meeting, my colleague at John Jay College, Kirk Dombrowski, framed the field of anthropology as an on-going debate between two sides: 1) those who believe that if we can better describe the world (and these anthropologists tend to be obsessed with "getting it right"), decision-makers will listen to our well-reasoned positions and act accordingly, and 2) those "pragmatic" and "engaged" anthropologists who believe that "there is no such thing as "anthropological" research methods, just the methods one or another anthropologist used to come up with one or another particular argument in some particular place and time."

The debate that Professor Dombrowski has outlined – in his words, view #1 versus view #2 in anthropology – was settled for me many years ago, even if the two sides of the debate had not quite crystallized in my thinking in the way that he has described. As someone who clearly sides with view #2, my feeling is that if I can't have an engaged anthropology, I'm in the wrong field. Frankly, I think that most so-called anthropologists – the believers of view #1 -- are in the wrong field, but that's a fight for another day. Still, to be an effective proponent of view #2, it's good to have a solid grounding in view #1 – some amount of concern with "getting it right" -- otherwise, the decision makers who you engage are not likely to be sold on your anthropological credentials. In that department, I've done okay, but after more than 50 articles and a couple of books under my belt, it seems clear that "getting it right" can be intrinsically satisfying, but not much more than that. For me, and I suspect for many of you, there has to be more to this exercise than that, and that's where view #2 come in. Perhaps it is dangerous to play the role of anthropologist in an engaged fashion, and perhaps I'm not smart enough to avoid regressing to and fetishizing the authorial voice that anthropology has spent the last decade disavowing, but I trust that my friends and colleagues will swiftly kick me when I lapse. As for the thought that an engaged anthropology might be dangerous, look around, how dangerous can it be compared with the insanity that we're confronted with everyday? I'm willing to take that chance. In fact, I'm rather taken with the idea that it might be dangerous.

Before I talk about what I "do" as an anthropologist, let me add a word about the issues of power and engagement:

1) there are some who link the recent anthropological concern with questions of engagement to the "dramatic loss of power" we have suffered since the 1960s. I think that many people would agree, however, that we never had much power (though I agree that what little power we did have, we lost), except that anthropology was once the pastime of upper class (or "wannabe" upper class) people; and their power seldom sprouted from their work as anthropologists. The infusion of new blood rather than blue blood has, in my opinion, been an important driving force behind the renewed interest in engagement.

My interest, and the interest of those like me, is to do something rather than just say something about how “right” we are or think we are.

Many people have noted that anthropology seemed to have more relevance in the 1960s because our work was “interesting to those in power” (perhaps one could stretch it and say that we enjoyed power by proxy during that period) but as the cold war fizzled and battles over former colonial empires played themselves out, anthropologists were cast aside as quickly and as easily as the subjects of their studies. Nowhere was our marginality more evident than in graduate schools in the 70s and 80s, where whipped anthropologists dared not mention the “A” word (Applied) and they retreated – like their increasingly complacent students -- into an apolitical slumbering period of narcissistic self-reflection. It’s time for Rip Van Winkle to wake up and smell the coffee.

2) Seeking, acquiring or holding power seems to represent a third rail for most academics: they don’t want to touch it. Power, in the eyes of many, will turn a research stud (in the best tradition of view #1) into a gelding. In his presentation, Professor Dombrowski rightly noted that “the suspicion of power (like witchcraft) is that it is polluting, and that anyone who would want to know such things ought not to be trusted with such things.” I agree with this view, and like most people, I don’t want to feel polluted or have others see me that way. But after having been screwed so many times by those in power who have no qualms about becoming polluted or getting down and dirty, joining them in the gutter has become, for me, the lesser of two evils. So, I agree when Professor Dombrowski says that we “must look for a different means to try to compel decision makers to listen to what we have to say,” but for me, this includes not just “gain[ing] competency in these other realms,” not just “engaging those who run in high circles,” but threatening them (figuratively, and sometimes literally), undercutting their power, and using sharp elbows to push our way to the front. Professor Dombrowski rightfully worries that taking this route will put us “on the outs” with our colleagues in “the club” of anthropologists. I expect he’s right in that regard, but here’s a hot news flash: I was never in that club, and I don’t care to join at this late date. I think that there’s a new club in town; geldings need not apply. Did I mention, by the way, that the Deputy Mayor of New York City is an anthropologist?

Now that I’ve shown you my obnoxious side, let me talk about my adventures with engagement. My primary research topic over the last 20+ years has centered around illegal drugs – a topic for which there are no lack of opinions, and no lack of misguided, bone-headed, shortsighted or repressive policies. Holders of view #1 – and there are many in this field who are obsessed with the appearance of neutrality so that others will believe them when they say that their research “got it right,” – have been minor players in decision making over the years, and when their work has been used by policy makers, it is often in ways that the authors never intended. I’m not immune to this charge either: for example, my work evaluating the success of New York City’s Tactical Narcotics Teams (1988-90) was used to refine street-level drug enforcement strategies, thereby making it easier for the police to lock up my neighbors. The fact that this strategy was replicated nationally and internationally only added to the horror. In retrospect, some of the folks who got arrested needed to be stopped from what they were doing (like firing guns in the street), but I was disturbed by the fact that decision makers ignored the conclusions that I felt were important and instead used the information to tweak policies and procedures in ways that furthered their own agendas rather than addressing more fundamental problems with the policies. The taste of “getting it right” quickly soured in my mouth, but I developed a stomach for the fight as my work became twisted, spinning out of my control.

Public policy in the United States regarding illegal drugs has been built around the often-conflicting themes of law enforcement and public health. Since the 1920s when the first wave of doctors were arrested for prescribing opiates to their patients, law enforcement agencies have asserted their dominance over the field. For that reason, active engagement with law enforcement folks is, in my opinion, essential to have any impact on public policy regarding illegal drugs, and over the last 20 years I’ve learned to play in their sandbox (or more accurately, sandboxes), gaining competency, though perhaps not power in the sense that most people recognize it. I often play the role of anthropologist (though not always) for various neighborhood, borough, city, state and federal decision-making bodies that recognize the ability of our method – ethnography -- to “get it right” as it were. (Whether we actually do get it right is immaterial at one level: they think that we do). For example, I sit on the Advisory Board for Family Justice, Inc., a non-profit organization on Manhattan’s Lower East Side neighborhood that develops innovative solutions to reintegrating prisoners with drug problems back into society when they are released. In Brooklyn, I serve on the District Attorney’s Homicide Review Board, which examines homicides in the borough to detect trends and suggest ways to further reduce crime and violence. In New York City, I sit on the City Bar Association’s “Drugs and the Law” committee. In Washington, I’m part of a small team that is advising the DEA regarding a new strategy of “demand reduction” that they have implemented in several cities. There are several other law enforcement groups that I’m engaged with, but the point here is not to go through all my affiliations, but rather, to point out that accomplishing something, other than just “getting it right” in your research, requires engagement on multiple levels and fields, and the synergistic effect of doing that is what makes it possible.

Drugs, however, are not just about law enforcement. Since the onset of the AIDS epidemic, public health perspectives have begun to reassert themselves, sometimes with compelling evidence that law enforcement interventions can have unintended, unanticipated and ugly health consequences. A public health crisis that threatens to kill large numbers of people, however, has not guaranteed – or even made probable – that research that “gets it right” will result in enlightened public policy. For example, there has been a substantial amount of solid empirical research (from folks in camp #1) which demonstrates that syringe exchange programs substantially reduce HIV transmission among injecting drug users. The “rightness” of this research, however, has not translated into policy, and the federal government continues to ban its dollars from being used to support such activities. Most researchers in the field seem to believe that decision-makers will be influenced by more and/or better studies, and that the weight of accumulated evidence will eventually tip the balance to their side of the issue. Maybe, but given the track record over the last decade and the results of the most recent elections, those who wish for more progressive policies should not hold their breath waiting for the changes to come.

Unfortunately, as the politically timid or naïve wait for the evidence to pile up, my neighbors (the ones who aren't already locked up) are dying in unprecedented numbers. Here, I might argue that the holders of view #1 are more dangerous by their lack of engagement than the holders of view #2, who might stumble if and when they try to don the mantle of anthropology. In any event, I began an underground syringe exchange in Brooklyn in 1991, determined to shorten the waiting period for decision makers who claimed that they needed enough "scientific evidence" to accumulate before they could endorse the strategy. Those of us who participated in these early days – including activists from ACT UP -- were chased, harassed and sometimes arrested by the police, and threatened with the loss of our jobs by the view #1 folks (our bosses) who feared that the mud we splattered would smear them too. Syringe exchange, however, was not just about giving out needles to addicts, it was a political struggle too (with the police, the state, the city, neighborhoods and our colleagues), and ultimately, the State of New York caved in and granted us "waivers from prosecution" that allowed us to operate, but more importantly, they gave us money (about $150,000 per program, at first). There are currently 10 state-funded syringe exchange programs in New York City and I am the Board Chair of three of them. To some, that might sound like an accomplishment, and in some ways it is, but to me, that and $1.50 will get you a ride on the subway. It's not that I believe that holding these positions is meaningless or without power (there's that scary word again), but for a truly engaged anthropology, it simply isn't enough. Clearly, engagement on multiple levels is as critical in the field of public health as it is with law enforcement. These three programs are useful as springboards for helping me to engage with professionals and decision makers around related or other health issues. For example, I participate in neighborhood-level groups that coordinate HIV care, I actively work with the Harm Reduction Coalition, an advocacy organization that operates nationwide, I conducted a Rapid Assessment of the AIDS crisis in Newark for the US Surgeon General's Office, and currently, with my colleagues at John Jay College, I help train Residents at a local hospital in Brooklyn in how to do community research.

Considered separately, none of the things that I mentioned above would likely allow me to have one iota of impact on public policy. By combining them all, maybe I have an iota, maybe not. Even if having all these balls in play at once does not produce an outcome that I want – one that I think "gets it right" – I know that I'm on to something here. At the very least, my engagement with this multitude of committees, boards, groups, coalitions, and factions has earned me – and I mean *earned* in the old-fashioned way, through dint of effort – a seat, sometimes, at the table with decision makers. In the end, I would much rather have tried and failed to do the right thing, than sit at home feeling bitter that I "got it right" but nobody listened. I owe that much to my children and their future, if they are to have one.