Blogging in the Field

www.caities-indian-summer.blogspot.com

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With the increase in internet access options, it is unsurprising that the ability to blog while in the field is attracting so many anthropologists. However, as I discovered with my fieldwork, there are particular concerns to contend with due to the sensitive nature of certain subject areas. In this article, I will be addressing issues relating to medical anthropology with special reference to my work with HIV-positive women in Chennai, India.

Before arriving in Chennai for my fieldwork, I set up a simple blog to keep in easy contact with friends, family and colleagues while researching the illness experience of HIV-positive women in the city. I had imagined this little sector of the internet as a place to keep friends up to date with my adventures while also using the blog as a sounding board for research concepts and theories. Upon arriving in India, I realized there were inherent problems with blogging about sensitive research: protecting my participants and maintaining the requirements of my ethics approval. With my subject area so deeply entrenched in stigma and discrimination, I worried that positing about the fieldwork might potentially endanger my participants. As a result, the blog turned instead to personal experiences while in the country and posts ranged from a recipe or two to travelling with friends to Bangalore or Sri Lanka.

For my participants, the need for privacy is critical as they could face very serious consequences if their HIV-positive status was revealed. For example, they could be evicted from rented accommodation, fired from their employment and even isolated from their family and friends. Public reaction to the condition has been driven primarily by misunderstandings and rumors, which maintain that the acquisition of the virus must be through immoral or abnormal behavior. Therefore, one of the main challenges I faced was the question of how much information should be shared in such a public domain. Ultimately, I decided to avoid as much of my direct research work as possible, although I did share the organization I was working with. However, this information was shared due to involvement with the more commercial side of their work, specifically an eco-friendly kitchen run by staff members rather than focusing on their HIV clinic activities.
Personally, the rewards of blogging were twofold: the ability to share my adventures with family and friends back home and the fact that my posts now serve as a record of my time in India. While I would have liked to share more about my research, I do feel that my blog documented the important events of my fieldwork experience. For example, working with the eco-kitchen staff members to distribute food in a low income community was eye opening and helped me to understand what some of my participants were experiencing outside the clinic setting. At the same time, I think that post allowed my readers to experience the setting and activity with me and therefore gained a greater understanding of life in India away from the tourist resorts and sites.

Finally, I believe blogging makes anthropology more accessible to casual readers as it allows individuals to experience the steps of research along with the fieldworker. For example, when describing my role as an anthropologist, I often find myself struggling to put my work into terms that are more widely understood than “fieldwork” and “anthropology”. If more anthropologists were blogging then I believe it would be easier to direct friends and family to information in a familiar format, which would lead to clarity on the subject as a whole. I also think these blogs will be useful to students preparing for their own fieldwork by answering questions about how to organize your time in the field, how to find housing and other practical concerns and making it clear that feeling a bit lost is completely normal.