

## From "Engaged" Archaeology to Participatory Research 2000 AAA Conference, San Francisco

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This paper is primarily about how archaeologists can and I believe should work with communities of color—in my case, primarily African-American communities—but the things I will discuss apply more broadly to just about any type of archaeology, and indeed are applicable throughout the human sciences.

At the outset, I would like to lay out a couple of assumptions. I don't wish to rehash old epistemological debates, and it is my feeling that much of contemporary theoretical archaeology is still bogged down in stale discussion about how to "involve or engage the various publics" which we ostensibly serve, and similar mantras. This type of academic discussion, in my view, is misguided.

First, I will assume that except for the most grumpy of old-school archaeologists, most contemporary practitioners would agree that archaeology, like just about everything else, is an inherently political process, which means that it involves questions of power. Furthermore, as historically disenfranchised and colonized populations, the poor and pigmented are obviously usually on the receiving end of power politics and have been traditionally "anthropologized" and "archaeologized" as a part of European and Euro-American imperialism. I trust that I am preaching to the choir when I say this--especially since this is the AAA conference and not the SHA version--when I suggest that pervasive Eurocentrism still permeates archaeological theory and practice, and that most archaeologists still tend to shy away from the harsh reality that their activities are often perceived as oppressive and even culturally destructive by many people here and abroad. My point is not to tell archaeologists to engage in "reflection" so as to improve their science, or to encourage them to undertake more "consultation" or "dialogue," as, for example, outlined in American historic preservation policy, or as has been fashionable of late at recent academic conferences. Talk is cheap; my point in this paper is to lay out a practical program that addresses fundamental power issues, and takes for granted that archaeologists, like anthropologists generally, possess an especially strong responsibility to assist the historically disenfranchised communities with which they work toward self-determination, and that "research" and "science" don't necessarily have anything to do with that; at least not at first glance.

In this vein, I would next like to suggest that traditional western notions of what constitutes "research" and knowledge—often based on various natural sciences models—are ill suited for work in indigenous communities without significant reconceptualization. I am certainly not the first person to make this claim, although I don't just think that processual archaeologists are culpable here, but also much of the so-called post-processual and contextual archaeology as well, which I think has invested a lot of effort into

demonstrating the inherently political nature of archaeology, but then doesn't go the extra step in overtly and forcefully articulating a program which stresses the use of archaeology as a tool for community organizing, pro-community policy formation, and social change. Under the influence of traditional science models, most archaeologists are still trained to prove or disprove a hypothesis, and are notorious for treating the poor communities with which they come into contact as growths in a petri dish.

Archaeology is inherently a type of applied anthropology. The problem is that many archaeologists do not possess any real training in long-standing applied anthropological techniques, nor are they oftentimes interested in acquiring them, given the anti-social theory, pro-science bias of much of the field. The prototypical archaeologist is still a white male intrepid fieldworker and adventurer, supposedly aloof from matters of politics and public policy. It must be tough for these men to live up to the image; the reality is, of course, that many and perhaps most of these people are paper pushing, pointy headed bureaucrats whose often shocking lack of concern for the communities in which they work is not only unanthropological, but reflective of deeply-held societal beliefs about the poor, people of color, the disabled, gays and lesbians, and women.

Lastly, I would like to suggest that "outreach," "public education," or "engagement" are not the answer to some of the things I have been saying here. Usage of these terms implies that archaeology up to this point has been disengaged or disconnected from indigenous and African-American communities. Nothing further could be from the truth; archaeology has very much been engaged up to now, but it has usually been on the wrong side--at least when looked at from a community standpoint. What is the "wrong" side? Among other things, the wrong side includes research that is traditionally conducted to benefit militaries, corporations, or academic careers, not the public interest. Much of today's archaeology is funded by the state. I need not remind anyone that the United States is in a great measure a rather undemocratic country, especially vis-a-vis minority communities. In the recently concluded election, for instance, only about half of the electorate voted, and a majority of the American public agrees that the political system is corrupted by money. A broad, and increasingly vocal portion of the public is disgusted by the fact that foreign and domestic policy is largely the result of corporate influence and corporate surrogates in Congress. Citizens, especially minorities, continue to feel the need to band together against the power of these corporatist entities (Ervin 2000: 209), and archaeologists should be helping them, not hurting them. There is a reason why poor communities of color in the U.S. and worldwide are resisting currently fashionable urban and rural engineering initiatives such as "smart growth" and other such corporate-defined and sponsored "public" initiatives. In the race for development that has and continues to characterize modern capitalism, archaeologists have too frequently sided with developers and corrupt city, state, and federal agencies. It is useless to address this political reality primarily as a matter of archaeological ethics and to proffer more bland blather about the need for more "dialogue"; it is a matter of power, and community-based research is meant to address this sober fact.

## WHAT IS "PARTICIPATORY OR COMMUNITY BASED RESEARCH?"

Participatory research is an idea that is most commonly historically associated with the work of various Latin American community organizers and scholars, most notably the Brazilian legend Paolo Freire. The concept is currently fashionable in certain segments of the urban and regional planning world, amongst American and European community organizers, and in the NGO community. In his recent book on applied anthropology, Alexander Ervin also devotes a chapter to the concept. It is:

.....simultaneously a tool for the education and development of consciousness as well as mobilization for "action." In North America that translates into three strategies: reappropriation of knowledge (of the power structure, in "right to know mobilizations, etc.), development of knowledge (history, self-survey, planning), and participation in social production of knowledge...PR combines research, education, and action; and is fundamentally about oppressed communities overcoming their oppression (Stoecker 1997).

In addition, participatory research reflects the view that

..the people most affected have the most say in how their own realities are analyzed and in the courses of action taken to improve their conditions.....(Ervin 2000)

and that the power imbalances between researcher and researched are blurred and hopefully removed.

I should make clear that there are many definitions of "action research" or "community based research" currently in use, and that I am using a particular definition of the idea here; I make this point because in much of so-called "action research" "the emphasis on social change is almost completely buried and [is] replaced by technical discussions of the liberal notion of using research to increase 'participation' for participation's sake--i.e. allowing workers to participate in management decision-making even though managers still make the decisions" (Stoecker 1997). The version of PR (participatory research) that am discussing, places emphasis on the "structural division between 'haves' and 'have-nots' and , consequently, more need for community control and conflict to create change" (Stoecker 1997). In this outlook, participation is part of a broader social change strategy. Research is not conducted to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but to solve real-world, community-defined problems.

There are several ways in which participatory research differs from traditional "research," but the most distinguishing feature of the approach is the following: it is the community, not the researcher that generates the research question or questions. Furthermore, researchers must break with the notion that their work with the community is a "research project" in the traditional sense. It isn't. It is a community organizing/development project of which the research is only *a part*.

A good example of PR in action is the East St. Louis Action Research Project (ESLARP). Here is how the organization started:

"When a group of ministers from the poorest neighborhoods in East St. Louis, with the help of

State Representative Wyvetter H. Younge, approached the University of Illinois in 1987 about creating a partnership, they posed five conditions—in writing—to the university. Residents, not faculty or funders, had to both have control over the research agenda and be involved in every step of the research process. The University had to make a five-year minimum commitment, and had to be willing to engage in policy development, implementation, and the formation and support of a community controlled nonprofit to work on neighborhood revitalization" (Axel-Lute 1999).

Notice that the relationship here is between an indigenous community-based organization and the researchers, as contrasted with non-indigenous and externally controlled community-placed organizations (Ervin 2000).

According to PR expert Randy Stoecker of the University of Toledo, there are basically three roles that academics usually play in the PR process:

1. THE INITIATOR. The initiator is somebody that goes into a community and tries to start an activist research project. Because most academics do not have a community organizing background, most of these ventures fail miserably and only further destroy often long-held community images of know-it-all academics with fancy degrees who claim to have more knowledge about a community than the people that live there. Generally speaking, initiator academics lack the process facilitating skills necessary to work in low income communities and often see their role as educators whose job it is to help the community overcome its own false sense of consciousness. "Academics who do have a community organizing background, however, can successfully act as an initiator, bringing people together to build power as well as knowledge" (Stoecker 1999). You can usually recognize these academics, because they will ask the community what it desires and do not go into the field with a pre-set, developer or CRM defined agenda.

2. THE CONSULTANT. It is not possible, nor is it sometimes desirable, for the community to do its own research, although in the strictest sense, that is what much of PR is about. In the consultant role, the academic acts as they would in any traditional consulting job; the research project is commissioned by the community and the academic carries it out while being accountable to the community. It is in this role that much of archaeological research can function, particularly in unorganized communities. In this situation, the archaeological research can play a galvanizing community organizing function that empowers people, in which the scholars job is not to do the research for the community, but to assist the community in doing the research itself.

3. THE COLLABORATOR. In this approach, pioneered by the Policy Research Action Group (PRAG) in Chicago, "the academic works hand in hand with community members recognizing that each brings unique talents to the table. The collaborative model argues that community members bring crucial experiential knowledge to the table, and academics bring important general and theoretical knowledge. Community members can see and think through more alternatives and academics can better ground their thinking" (Stoecker 1999). This model, more than the others, involves sincere relationship building,

## **Features of Successful University/Community Collaborations**

(From Stoecker 1999)

- Collaboration is established before projects begin
- Communities identify research topics
- Communities are involved in the research from the beginning
- Formal processes and structures link community and researchers
- Researchers and funders include communities' views and concerns
- Community assets are recognized, not just risks and deficits
- Researchers and community organizations share funding appropriately
- Resources are dedicated to sustaining the collaboration itself
- Researchers and community groups are honest about goals and agendas, limitations, and constraints
- Research findings are shared with the community before or at publication
- There is follow-through to disseminate results and sustain the project after the grant ends
- Mutual trust and respect is built
- Credit for the research is shared between researcher and community

wherein the community and the academic develop trust for one another. An important thing to remember is that the relationship does not begin with the "project" but with house visits, coffees, lunches, etc. so that all participants can feel that they have an equal stake in the project (Stoecker 1999).

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, I have only marginally focused on the act of historical interpretation in archaeology. To my way of thinking, much of this discussion is like a dog chasing its own tail. Of course archaeology must take into account the diverse perspectives of the historical "losers" and not just the winners. What I have tried to suggest here is that given the complex political web involved in the interpretation of material culture--especially given the fact that colonialism and neo-colonialism are still to a large degree about direct or indirect control of the land--that it best falls on the possessors of that culture to perform or at least control the research performed in their communities.

There are very strong pressures to be accountable to the communities being researched, to return something of value, and to allow research products to be scrutinized. There are more demands for collaboration with community interests in research (Ervin 2000: 209).

Stated another way, for too long, archaeologists have been takers and users. It is time to start giving something back, to share control and credit, and to place our discipline in the service of those to whom we owe our livelihood.

## Sources

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