Research Note:

Doing it Old School: Reflections on Giving Back

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> *I know a please, a thank you, and a smile will take me far . . .*
> (from the song *Wanting Memories*, by the musical ensemble, Sweet Honey
> in the Rock)

1. Roots

The idea of "giving back" was ingrained in me since I was a child. I grew up in a family that prided itself in believing that nothing in this life is free and you worked hard for everything. But while both my parents focused on family, they were also engaged with the larger community in which they lived and this was reflected in the way that they "gave back" to the community.

I had the good fortune to be adopted, to be alive, and to be able to move "freely" (in a manner of speaking) in this world. This meant that I needed to give back where I could. So I learned how to put money in the basket at church on Sundays, trick-or-treat for Unicef every Halloween, help the elderly while I was in the Girl Scouts, and to say "thank you" constantly. When I was in seventh grade, I was given a medal from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) to acknowledge how as a "citizen" I had

given back (now, I think that the DAR was surprised to see a little black girl with an afro [i.e., natural kinky hair texture] holding out her hand to receive her medal, but that is another story). There were frequent indicators affirming that giving back in my community was indeed the right thing to do. And it was not just in the community— giving back started at home. You helped around the house as a way to acknowledge all that your parents did for you. My parents worked hard so that my brothers and I might have a better life. The least we could do was pitch in to show our gratitude.

In my 20s, I became more intentional about my giving back and volunteered for literacy organizations, practiced speaking English with Chinese immigrants, and worked in a domestic violence shelter. I marched in the March of Dimes walkathon every year, and sponsored a child in Zambia through the Christian Children's Fund. If I am to be honest, I believe that my motivation was an amalgam of wanting to do good, be good, and feel good about myself in the world. Yes, I wanted to "reach out and touch," but I also wanted to be touched as well. My rudimentary attempts at engaging complex and challenging issues such as domestic violence and hunger in Africa were as much about helping myself as they were about helping others.

2. Research

It was not until I went back to school that my giving back got back-seated. Two things were happening: (a) I did not volunteer because I did not have time and (b) I was being intellectually challenged by the idea of "doing research" that required me to ask people for their time, their stories, and in some cases, a piece of their spirit so that I might create work that had weight and importance and, basically, that would get me ahead. I became uncertain about the whole process and concerned about the potential impacts of all my "good" intentions. While much of what I was discovering about doing research was found in academic/feminist texts, it was one interaction I had in particular that affected me deeply.

I was working on my Master's degree at Utah State University where I focused on community forest management and gender in Nepal. I was preparing to go the field for a semester and intern with a German development organization in Nepal that was implementing a large community forestry project. One day on campus, after a moving talk by activist Winona LaDuke, I got into a heated conversation with a fellow female student, a self-defined nationalist from India. For almost 30 minutes, in front of a number of other students, she questioned my right to go to Nepal and "research" Nepali women. No matter how I responded—I believed it was important to work with women worldwide; I believed we could build coalitions—she continued to lambast me until I was in tears. During this interaction, she also asked why I did not go to Africa since I was black. Clearly, there were other issues underlying her comments (and I found out later a very different agenda that had nothing to do with the politics of my going to Nepal). But the damage had been done. Questions of power and privilege bled all over my good intentions and I suddenly became immersed in self-doubt. Could I really go somewhere that was not my community and do "good work" that would have reciprocity at its core? Could I really be in relationship with anyone where my perceived advantages (being

American, in college, etc.) did not tip the balance of power? Was there a way for me to show my gratitude and provide some kind of exchange that was more than simply perfunctory? Something that I had learned to do quite naturally early on in my life—give back—was suddenly under siege for its naiveté, potential one-sidedness, and its one-dimensionality. Not to mention the possibility that I could do real damage to the people I so wanted to "help."

So I threw out what I knew in favor of what I might learn—damn, I wanted to get it "right"! I delved into reading about community work, participatory research, and found ways to make them central to my methodology to show, in no uncertain terms, that yes, I am giving back! I am working collaboratively! I am acknowledging all that people are giving me! And then I went to the field.

Everything that I had read and learned to construct "just right" on paper was suddenly put to the test. In Nepal, I found that many of the participatory approaches I had learned about translated nicely "on the ground," in terms of facilitating my ability to glean information from the Nepali people I spoke with. But these activities did not always evolve into some kind for reciprocal arrangement—inevitably, I would come out feeling that I got more than I gave. I was further challenged by the fact that I was not completely fluent in the language, I was working under time constraints, and I would eventually leave the country and the people I had come to know. Where was my commitment to the people? Had giving back simply become some abstract concept where I could say how my research influenced some policy but was devoid of any real, one-to-one exchange?

3. Relationships

My experiences as a student researcher are in my rear-view mirror. But my concerns about how I engage with people while investigating the everyday practices that inform their lives are ever-present. Giving back presupposes that I actually know what the person I am giving back to needs or wants. And this implies that I have a relationship with them and a level of awareness and flexibility that is not generated by simply creating an airtight participatory methodology. So I intentionally engage reflexivity as a form of personal assessment. I need to be honest about the level of commitment I am willing and able to give. I need to take stock of my own capacity to give—not based on what a methodology advises me to do, but based on the truth of my situation. If I want to be able to meet someone where they stand, I better be clear about where I am standing. My commitment to the relationships that I develop "in the field" may be short or long, but it is not about length of time. It is about my awareness of what I can offer in relation to what someone needs that may be found in a simple gesture, like giving a ride to someone, showing up at their child's school to speak about what I do, introducing someone to a well-placed individual who might be able to assist them, or taking the time to share a meal.

During my on-going work with African Americans doing environmental work here in the U.S., I have also discovered that giving back does not always happen instantly when certain research is completed. A commitment to the relationship I have with these individuals allows the giving back to develop organically, over time. We have not

bounded our relationship with the same time constraints that are usually part of organizational and institutional expectations concerning research. So I may get a call from someone I interviewed in 2005 to write a recommendation letter for him or her today because they are applying for a grant. Or, someone may offer me an opportunity that they feel would benefit us both and we can explore our options together. And sometimes, I simply cannot give back in the way I would like because I do not have it to give in that moment. But our relationship can sustain and it becomes less about what I have or have not given, and more about how we are together, as people.

4. Real

It is not that there are not more grand ways to give back—I am in complete support of providing individuals and communities with the information you have gathered and, if possible and appropriate, assisting them politically in moving their agenda forward. And yes, as researchers and activists, it is important to critique and evolve methodologies to guide us while we are doing our work. It is just that I needed to be reminded that before I was a professor, a researcher, or a student, I was just a person. And sometimes giving back starts with the ability of looking at another human being and giving with no agenda other than to say, thank you.