

Winnable Struggles: The Value of Activist Approaches for Framing Rights Issues

In *Non-Representational Theory*, geographer Nigel Thrift asserts that humans in modern societies need “a way of expanding the capacity for action in a world in which action is severely circumscribed” by global-scale phenomena such as warfare, climate change, and the spread of capitalism (Thrift 2007). Thrift’s central premise is that social action is primarily hindered by potential actors’ own “imaginative resistance” to the idea that everyday acts can still have social consequence. He believes that breaking down this resistance should be the objective of all concerned parties in society, from activists to academics. In this article I argue that undergraduate researchers’ participation in human-rights struggles is an undervalued source of empirical data and imaginative education toward this end.

Personal experience with the problems and successes of real activist movements enlightens students about how differently the world would *feel* if an identified obstacle to human rights were overcome. By pursuing a critical-activist stance, undergraduate researchers can develop a reflexive understanding of what it takes to either aid or obstruct human rights in a given research context. In imagining what it would feel like to “win the struggle,” researchers can better analyze how the current situation obstructs rights, understand the stakes for everyone involved, and see potential avenues for responsive action.

Much faculty time in undergraduate classes is spent stressing the principle of researcher objectivity. At the same time, however, professors must explain why particular research is of social consequence. In defining what problems and solutions need to be addressed, the academy is engaged in its own version of what human-rights activists do every day. I define “human-rights activism” as any action, individual or collective, performed with the goal of ending an identified abuse of human rights. Because they deal with problems, both academic theory and human-rights discourse can be read as stages upon which competing criteria for defining problems and solutions battle for influence. I argue for the critically engaged study of human-rights struggles as contexts for action—that is, as social fields in which problems and solutions take shape out of embodied experience. And activists’ experience can be treated as empirical data describing the gap in recognition of human rights.

In the social sciences, the doctrine of “objectivity” presumes that impersonal research is the only way to arrive at the truth. However, academic discourse does not encapsulate all truths surrounding abuses of human rights—nor does it energize undergraduates, who are apt to be apathetic when faced with problems distant from their own experiences. Only when students understand how a human-rights struggle is experienced by those who live it can they convey the “truth” of what is happening and, daresay, what *should*.

This assessment of experiential learning stems from my own undergraduate experience. By my second year at Southern Methodist University, I had taken enough introductory cultural anthropology courses that I knew that I cared deeply about at least one major human-rights issue: immigration. When faculty and peers inquired into my decision to minor in human-rights studies, I explained proudly that immigrant rights were “my main issue”—that I believed in the right to health and to security of person regardless of one’s migration status, and that the deaths of migrants on the U.S. border were preventable. I argued that the treatment of those excluded from the social and legal community sets the baseline for a country’s compliance with human-rights norms. Yet at the time, I had very little classroom exposure to the international laws and political institutions that support the global system of human rights.

My classroom education had informed me that efforts by the Department of Homeland Security to keep undocumented immigrants from crossing the U.S. border lack protections for migrants’ human rights. In a report on the U.S.-Mexico border (UN Human Rights Council 2009), Jorge Bustamante, then UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants, wrote that U.S. border-control policies had directly sparked a rise in the deaths of migrants from dehydration and heat exhaustion. He referred specifically to the policy of erecting fences and surveillance on the safest migration routes, thereby pushing migrants to take more dangerous paths into the country. So, curious about these enforcement mechanisms, during my sophomore year I took a two-week trip with the SMU Embrey Human Rights Program to the Arizona-Mexico border. In addition to a tour by Border Patrol agents of the Nogales, Arizona, border fence, the trip involved visits to law-enforcement agencies

and migrant-advocacy groups, bookended by evening lectures given by the founder of the humanitarian organization Humane Borders. (Lectures focused on the problem of migrant deaths due to dehydration—a phenomenon that has claimed over 2,500 lives in the southern Arizona desert since 2000.) Prior to the travel portion, weekend class meetings at SMU's Dallas campus had exposed students to the history and politics of the border. The eight students participating were all studying human rights in the context of various social sciences. The goal of the trip was to interview border-enforcement officials and migrant advocates in Tucson about pressing regional issues and to understand the social climate surrounding the claims of human rights violations we had heard. The concerns expressed by our contacts varied immensely, from “border security” to a wide range of human rights, including rights of mobility and health care. Thus the visit served as an introduction to the many “stakeholders” who either employ, neglect, or negate the application of human-rights protections on the border.

The course, though eye-opening, did not allow us to interview anyone who had personally migrated. Although we spoke with a couple of activists who had visited the desert, we lacked access to the actual experience of migration. The travel course did, however, give me the introductory education common to most undergraduate human-rights programs—a body of knowledge focusing on the historical developments and political arrangements that give rise to human-rights violations. Classes and lectures recounted timelines of relevant legislation and the emergence of human-rights concerns, placing the current situation on the border in historical perspective. Students were encouraged to consult written legislation and to learn the political functions of the Department of Homeland Security, in order to understand the system of immigration enforcement. By and large, lecturers highlighted domestic politics as the battleground for airing human-rights concerns, and they regarded historical knowledge of relations between the U.S. government and Mexican immigrants as the foundation for any intellectual debate.

As a result, following the trip we still lacked the voices of those who had walked through the desert, and we had not sought out this experience ourselves. This put us in an uncomfortable position as scholars even as it preserved our supposed objectivity. It meant that we did not, and could not, imagine ourselves alongside those crossing the border. In our commitment to absorb all the perspectives we heard on the border, we omitted the experiential and purposefully avoided identification with any “activist” stance, even that represented by the simple act of walking. We made this choice even as we intended to take the interview data home and analyze “the situation” on the border from our own dis-

ciplinary perspectives—as budding political scientists, economists, and anthropologists. This meant that although each of us would label what we had seen as having the potential for human-rights violations based on our human-rights training, while we were on the border we did not critically discuss which human rights were at risk and at whose hand.

My point is not to discount experiential learning, but rather to insist that it truly enter the realm of the experiential by physically immersing students in rights struggles and asking them to reflect critically on the experience. In that kind of undergraduate human-rights research, students can bear witness to current abuses of human rights or to environments in which human-rights violations are possible. To be effective, such research includes three steps: learning the history of the situation (what happened to a particular group of people in that place in the past); grasping the legal and political systems that bear upon the status quo; and finally, analyzing social avenues for change. Although objectivist social science tends to gingerly sidestep the last step, no human-rights violation has ever ended without a social movement. As human-rights students, our role is to work out how the international framework of human rights applies, and how violated rights might be protected using available legal and social resources, as difficult as a human-rights intervention might be.

In order to understand the importance of social movements to human rights, one must look to the principles from which the concept of human rights arises. A human-rights education carries implicit moral ambition. At its weakest, this ambition is to sustain the latticework of international human rights by adapting its legal mechanisms to emerging challenges to those rights. At its strongest, an education in human rights provides a road map for students to consciously subvert the global power relations that set apart humane and inhumane treatment, equal and unequal rights, and healthy and unhealthy conditions—for example, by inserting the issues of worker's rights, corporate globalization, and global-south poverty into political debates over immigration.

A human-rights education is centered on the goal of achieving the equality envisioned in the first sentence of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The rights framework establishes a *comparative* standard for national governments' treatment of individuals based on human dignity as a universal value. To see the true causes of human-rights violations, undergraduates must take an activist, critical stance that situates their own relatively advantaged position in the world against the disadvantages caused by the inequality in global wealth and the differing values placed on human lives. Therefore, in human-rights scholarship, from the outset activism and research are always in tension.

The true question for human-rights research is how to balance the professional ethical responsibilities associated with the production of knowledge and with activism. Many anthropologists warn against the tendency for academic credibility to translate to power in a location or movement in which the researcher is a guest, a genuine concern about “the politics of knowledge production” borne out of the “decolonization” of the academy (Speed 2006:67). Until the post-modern turn in the 1980s—and continuing today in some quarters—anthropology and sociology bypassed this concern by claiming to learn about human nature through the value-free observation of social groups (Zalewski 2000). However, a human-rights framework understands the researcher as existing within the same web of global power relations as the researched. In seeking causes and solutions to rights violations from the global to the local level, human-rights research implies involvement in activist projects.

Contrary to traditional defenses of the need for objectivity in fieldwork, I believe there are (at least) three important rationales for engaged, activist social science. First, some human-rights norms, such as the right to live free of violence, are essentially indisputable. Researchers should feel comfortable in the field aligning themselves with such basic principles. Second, activist non-governmental organizations frequently possess crucial information and insight about government operations and other stakeholders in human-rights issues. This is a reality that requires social scientists to work on common ground with NGO activists, in order to identify and produce knowledge useful to all stakeholders. Third, because social scientists are trained specifically to study cultures and organizations, they are ideally equipped to take activists’ shared beliefs and norms as objects of critical study. Anthropologists have long analyzed “culture” as a group’s shared moral outlook or, more recently, as a shared vision for the future (Appadurai 2013). Activist cultures fit squarely within this framework.

For researchers in the field of human rights to avoid close working relationships with activists would shut out the experiences of those who are most physically, mentally, and philosophically engaged in the struggle for human rights. Only the activists, affected persons included, can speak clearly and forcefully to the actual experience of the “human rights gap” between the lives of the privileged and the oppressed. At the time of my trip to the border, I was not knowledgeable about the ways in which the framework of human rights intersected with what was happening there. My report from the travel course became nothing more substantial than a pragmatic assessment of the social and legal systems affecting migrants’ health and health care in the border region. I framed this by asking “what if” the framework of “health as a human right” were more widely accepted? So in what was essentially a

compendium of anecdotes, I wrote about the fact that the Pima County Medical Examiner’s office lacks the technological and human resources to identify and repatriate all of the people who have died in the desert since deaths began to rise in 1995. I condemned local resistance to activists’ deployment of water stations for use by people crossing the border. I mentioned the U.S. Border Patrol’s carefully circumscribed policies on saving migrants in the desert (agents do not conduct active searches). Finally, I noted the public opposition to the University of Arizona Medical Center’s policy of compulsory care for migrants with health emergencies, and the fact that staff members of Mexican NGOs knew of migrants who were deported before being medically stabilized. At the time, I did not realize the obvious truth indicated by all of these anecdotes—that on the border individuals, when differentially valued, face widely divergent health outcomes, life expectancies, and even treatment after death.

Half by accident, in my senior thesis project I stumbled upon this angle of “the experience of inequality” as a lens through which human-rights research could acknowledge, and remain in tension with, activist projects. I did not initially envision the study, based on anthropological theories of embodiment—the ways that humans subjectively experience the dimensions of time, space, movement, and affect—as intersecting with human-rights theory. My attention turned to the experience of inequality after hearing activists state that walking on desert trails and meeting a migrant in person were “transformative” experiences that inspired commitment to migrants’ rights.

Indeed, the word “transformation” emerged repeatedly in interviews with the relatively advantaged, mostly white volunteers I had met during my previous research in Tucson. Aiming to understand how activists’ experiences shaped their political commitments and day-to-day acts, I returned to southern Arizona in the summer of 2012 to study an organization of humanitarian aid workers who provide water, food, and medical care to unauthorized migrants crossing the border desert. I lived at the desert camp, worked as a volunteer for a typical two-week session, and conducted surveys and interviews that inquired about volunteers’ subjective experiences.

As stipulated by Southern Methodist University, I was not permitted to travel to Mexico to speak with deported migrants. The people who came to use the camp’s services served as my only contacts with the migrant population, and those interactions are almost impressionistic. The population of people with whom I could truly achieve “participant observation” was the organization’s volunteers, the comparatively privileged individuals who intervene in the health crisis on the border. Volunteers, which briefly included myself, experience secondary trauma and guilt over

the impossibility of preventing every death. My interviews with them were dominated by testimonies to the physical exhaustion created by the desert (“I can’t imagine making this journey without a GPS”) and to an overwhelming sense of responsibility (“We are in the middle of a never-ending crisis, and we can never do enough. All we can do is put water out on trails, and we never know if we’re making a difference.”). After hearing and experiencing aid workers’ mental struggles with the arbitrary inequality of desert survival, I could more meaningfully talk about the U.S. government’s disregard for migrants’ lives as neglect of the human rights that I myself possessed.

There is no better way than the experience of affected persons for determining which human rights require immediate defense and for understanding how the situation arose in the first place. What combination of structural forces draws someone either into, or back to, the United States across a murderous stretch of desert? What is the feeling of running out of water miles from a town, or watching a trail disappear before your eyes, or ripping part of your shirt and your skin open by stumbling on a cactus as the sun beats down on you? Do you worry about your diabetes? Do you ignore the pain in your feet?

Simply visiting the border and meeting with Border Patrol officers, local law enforcement, and urban activists can only reveal so much—the functioning of the system that structures migrants’ choices and opportunities. Those types of interviews during my travel course gave participants a sense of the social status and resources with which migrants must cope, but they left out migrants’ moment-to-moment run-ins with real danger, and the many decisions they make in defiance of structural constraints.

Since the 1980s, ethnographers have come to grips with the fact that they can never be wholly objective. This is largely inherent in anthropology itself; the end result of anthropological research is not a narrowing of knowledge to discover some previously unknown “answer,” but rather an expansion of the concept of the human experience. The research subject’s mode of experiencing the world is seen as an equally legitimate alternative to that of the researcher or reader of a research article. Moreover, the ethnographer’s methodological toolkit—living with, and like, the people under study, and checking one’s observations using face-to-face interviews—naturally inspires sympathetic understanding. In the case of humanitarian aid, it was crucial for me to understand the testimony of aid workers that what is happening on the border is a “never-ending crisis” that affects

aid workers’ psychologies as deeply as those of the people it victimizes.

In order to get as close as I could to the experiences of migrants, and to do so honestly from my position of privilege, I had to understand how *any person* experiences the environment of human-rights violations. I had to witness how aid workers’ advocacy ran up against the goals of the Border Patrol, and how aid workers felt pressured to distance themselves from official institutions—such as 911 operators—due to fears that their undocumented patients could be detected and deported. In the end, my experience on the border was a study of how vouching for another’s humanity in a situation of immense danger and responsibility shapes one’s “being-in-the-world”—that sense of self-direction that stems from a person’s embedded position in the social-relational world (Heidegger 1962).

Attending to the experience of inequality is one research tactic that always carries relevance, especially for undergraduates who may not feel personally linked to global human-rights issues. Mark Goodale, an anthropologist of human rights, theorizes the “phenomenology of human rights” as the phenomenology of global inequality (2009:4). The preface of Goodale’s *Surrendering to Utopia* opens with a description of a flight he took to Finland to speak at a university about the book. Goodale shared this particular flight with a group of survivors of the Congolese civil war. He describes feeling overcome by the gap between his own life as an academic and their very different journey:

...the encounter with those survivors—those *human beings* whose normative value is precisely equal to that of the pilots who flew them to safety, to mine, to the rebel soldiers roaming at the very moment through the forests of eastern Congo, to the president of the Finnish university where I would soon appear ... to everyone who has and will ever live in the world—washed over me like a great existential wave. This is the phenomenology of human rights, that experiential dimension that lies well outside the boundaries of both the conceptual and the practical, all those intellectual puzzles that never-endingly fascinate scholars of human rights and all those bureaucratic and institutional challenges that occupy the energies of the legions of officials whose job it is to actualize the different facets of the international human rights system. (2009:4)

Critically analyzing the difference in experience between one whose rights have been violated and one who enjoys relative protection is exactly the project of human-rights

research. Moreover, it is the best point of entry for undergraduates working out their place in the world relative to human-rights issues.

This approach does run the risk of impressing upon undergraduates a conception of the world as a stadium in which inequalities play out, aided or combatted by social forces. More or less, it should. As research into humanitarian work did for me, studying the process of personal “transformation” among activists can enlighten undergraduates about the realities and theoretical justifications underpinning any human-rights movement. Most of the humanitarian aid workers in the study I did were of college age themselves. Struggling to balance their experiential learning with their conviction that the crisis on the border is “not about them,” they ran up against the central theme of equality that underpins human-rights philosophy.

In examining social inequality, human-rights research aims for critical inquiry over objective knowledge. Although it will likely be clear to activists that a researcher who is sympathetic to human-rights issues shares their basic commitments, everything about the local nature of human-rights violations and the shape of potential solutions is up for debate. For example, humanitarian aid workers in southern Arizona disagree on how to frame their work politically and on how to provide aid in ways that are transparent, fair, and attentive to the status differences between themselves and those they treat. Anthropologist Shannon Speed writes that the “tension between political-ethical commitment and critical analysis” is always imminent and potentially productive. Speed argues that researchers should not deny that they align themselves with a movement, but rather engage the tensions between their own objectives, those of other engaged parties, and critical analysis of the situation. This step enables them to join, alongside their subjects, in the search for solutions to an identified problem, while still transparently leading to conclusions that are “partial, contingent, and subject to debate (as they are in all research)” (2006:74).

When undergraduates, as I did, approach their professors with an interest in a certain human-rights issue, they do so because they have been personally, ethically drawn to some cluster of perceived injustices. Professors would do well to influence students to examine the reasoning behind their particular interests. This is the first step in encouraging students to critically analyze their personal relationship to the issue at hand, a move toward examining their own positions in the global web of inequality.

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