

Positive Anthropology: A new theory of our perspective, purpose, and power

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Professors Roger Goodman and Dan White, and Debrah Miller for helpful comments, and Sangeeta Mishra, for exceptional and encouraging editing.

Author Note

In early 2021, this paper was submitted to and rejected (without a chance for revision) by a leading anthropology journal, on the grounds that it needed “fine tuning”. I didn’t feel like doing that work, because I had been working on it already for many years and had other projects to do.
– July 26, 2021.

Abstract

Pessimism, postmodernism, and deconstructionism have persuaded many anthropologists, including for a long time the author, to overlook matters of purpose and action. However, by choosing to study exemplary individuals and systems, choosing to be positive about one's informants' life choices, and by rethinking the interplay between ethnographic fieldwork research and the public interest (especially, by changing one's lifestyle and perspective and being positive with one's abilities and potential to make a public contribution), this paper suggests that anthropologists may wish to consider a more positive approach to their research that engages in policy debates in an optimistic and progressive, yet no less critical, way. A more positive approach to our work may also bring the possibility of guiding action/activist researchers to creatively and practically pave their own individual paths as they walk them, and holds promise for the discipline's future public relevance, too.

Keywords

Positivity, theory, methods, anthropology, exemplars

Introduction

The purpose of the theory I offer here, which I base on my own ethnographic experiences and call “positive anthropology”, is to stimulate scholarly actions in ways that create a positive public contribution, to pay society back for what we get as scholars, as it were (Trouillot 2016, see also Muehlebach 2013: 304). I think of this payback in terms of honor, not transaction, something we choose to do.

Albert Einstein once said that a theory was meant to explain “as wide a range of phenomena as possible” (Einstein 1938[2007]: 40), and “justified insofar as it makes events understandable”. But positive anthropology also offers an actionable blueprint for anthropologists to use when the events they encounter encourage or even compel them to act; in that sense, it also makes processes understandable.

Admittedly, this proposed theory presupposes subjectivity, and I readily acknowledge that my assumption is that an ultimate form of understanding human societies is subjective, and, perhaps akin to beauty, ultimately definable only in the eye of the beholder. As such, this theory may not work for every scholar, and that is fine by me.

And yet, I still believe that many researchers may be like me and may not wish to stand on the sidelines. They may also wish for a new game plan for scholarship and activism. I use these sports metaphors intentionally, for it is by studying elite coaches and athletes that I have come to formulate these ideas, and why I have been inspired to build on their heroic efforts with humble efforts of my own.

Background

The seeds of positive anthropology were planted in the writing-up stage of my postdoctoral research, when some personal changes led me to acknowledge gratitude, for my informants of course, but also for the broader ecosystem – university, education system, economic system – that allowed me to do my work in the first place.

After doing fieldwork in two countries, seeing the world, and learning more than any human being deserves, I began to see the value in encouraging not only education and research, but also positivity, optimism, and pragmatic reform. Many people had encouraged me along the way, especially at times when the work was hard or the rewards for it hard to imagine. I therefore chose in my writing to respectfully acknowledge differences of opinion, and weighed the facts on balance instead of casting blame or judgment. Perhaps this made me appear naïve, but it was the best way that I had found, so far, to live and work well as an anthropologist.

One of the scholars who encouraged me was William Damon, a positive psychologist of education and youth. With his guidance, I realized that I could build on constructive approaches in fields adjacent to anthropology, by choosing to study exemplary individuals and systems, choosing to be positive about one's informants' life choices, and by rethinking the interplay between ethnographic fieldwork research and the public interest. While "exemplars" are a focus of positive psychologists and have been studied with great success, rarely are they the focus of anthropological inquiry, which is a shame because positive psychology is an adjacent field concerned with similarly important issues.

Thesis

Based on these experiences, this paper suggests that anthropologists might do well to consider a more positive approach to their research, in terms of theory and methods. For me, this means studying exemplars and also engaging in policy debates in an optimistic and progressive, yet no less critical, way.

A more positive theoretical approach, especially one that acknowledges possible solutions, brings the possibility of guiding anthropologists who might consider themselves action/activist researchers to creatively and practically pave their own individual paths as they walk them, and holds promise for the discipline's future, too.

As a method, I think positive anthropology should be primarily used *during the writing-up stage*. That is, I do not believe that anthropologists should set out to justify their preconceived notions *before* fieldwork. Certainly agenda-led research would be a patent methodological mistake, and one that would surely doom any research project to failure before it even begins. But who can fault us for 'adding our two cents' after our research is complete?

The time for this theory is now. If we as scholars do not help the public think critically about our social worlds, but also think positively and constructively about them, who will? We can begin by asking ourselves, "What is the point of this research?" and "How can I make a positive impact now that I have learned what I have learned?"

Positive anthropology is thus not only a conceptual proposal, but also a practical methodological one, as I think we can benefit from a new way of looking at ourselves, our roles, and our work. The world is certainly full of problems, and we as scholars must surely address them, but there can also be a place in our field for the study of what works, and why. Even when we do study "problems" or "precarity" (Muehlebach 2013), if we pay attention carefully enough, we may see solutions. Why not seek positive answers to the "so what" question after our fieldwork is done?

In the pages that follow, I will briefly detail the context and problem as I see it, and then outline the history of our field's engagement with the "real world", that is, the world outside the academy. I then examine my own fieldwork studies through the lens of this proposed positive anthropology framework, in the hope that doing so may help other anthropologists better understand how to pave their own paths.

Context and problem

I must first offer some context to the claims that I am making, although I am reluctant to identify a “problem” with the field *per se*, since the very act of doing so suggests a negative approach.

Generally speaking, there are three concerns I have with anthropology today: a general pessimism and negativity that pervades the work of many anthropologists, who seem to spend considerable time diagnosing social problems without focusing on what might help solve them; a rather hegemonic form of postmodernism that often delegitimizes a moral form of anthropology materializing and thereby crowds out other voices and/or discourages pragmatic policy-oriented research projects; and widespread but often unstated Marxist political ideology, which sometimes offers insightful analysis about the problems of capitalism but little practical guidance beyond revolution, not to mention effectively discounts insights (many derived from symbolic interactionism) that also give our scholarship persuasiveness among lay readers. Moreover, it seems that postmodern, Marxist revolutionary advocacy discourages scholars from asking the quasi-spiritual questions of how and why a scholar is to become an advocate for anything in the first place.

This is where a focus on exemplars would come in. After all, how are we as scholars to become actors in the broader society if we do not first consider ways of knowing and seeing the world other than those we have learned in our disciplinary training? The dismissiveness of our field to certain ways of knowing and seeing is sometimes hard to accept.

Right away, though, I must note recent exceptions, such as Robbins, who argues that there needs to be room in our field for studies of “the good,” (Robbins 2013) van Dinter, who defends anthropologists who want to speak on moral issues (van Dinter 2020), and Anjaria and Anjaria, who make the case for refocusing anthropological attention from misery to fun, pleasure, and play (Anjaria and Anjaria 2020: 233). Muehlebach (2013), too, highlights some encouraging studies (e.g., Bourgois and Schonberg 2009; Rutherford 2015). I have no doubt there are other exceptions, too, which may simply have not yet crossed my desk.

Still, it seems too many anthropologists remain focused on “precarity” and studying those whose lives have been harmed on the margins of society. Don’t get me wrong: this kind of anthropology has great benefit for our understanding of society, but in an era where long-form journalism is arguably flourishing on the Internet (without traditional print journalism’s relatively stricter word limits), and in an age where context is often discarded by the 24-hour news cycle and social media’s commonplace knee-jerk outrage, anthropologists can contribute to public debates if they embrace their insider/outsider role and *also* study people and places where things go right. Certainly, they will find privilege when they do, but does the presence of privilege require them to dismiss the reality they see? Moreover, does the witnessing of privilege require them to *assume* that it was always gained unethically?

Marxist thought bubbles under the surface of many recent anthropological works, and while it is doubtlessly true that work under capitalism can be alienating and that some jobs are indeed exploitative – I know this well, for I am a member of the adjunct underclass – rarely is the wealth created by capitalism acknowledged, nor is it common for anthropologists to credit this economic system for its ability to offer choices for individuals to choose the work they do, or to the individuals who “buy in” to the system and work hard to create better lives for their future selves. (More on this notion later).

It is true that some in society get to choose their work more than others, and that “life chances” are not handed out evenly, but that fact does not negate another important one – that labor choice remains a powerful benefit of a capitalist system, and that choice amounts to the ability to choose how one develops their skills and their sense of self. Alienation and exploitation, then, are not exactly the same thing as slavery.

Much anthropological scholarship is also based on post-Frankfurt School critical theory and focuses on criticizing capitalism for what it does not or cannot provide, especially in terms of culture. Many scholars of the Frankfurt School, of course, were extending Marxist ideas to an analysis of the 20th century.

Yet critical theory gives little attention to the power of the human spirit when individuals rise *despite* the economic system or *despite* the great odds that system creates against them. What theory exists now in anthropology that highlights such spirit?

Postmodernism has also improved the field in important ways, so I do not wish to criticize it in blanket terms. Scholars who subscribe to it have raised essential questions about the legacies of colonialism, racism, and sexism, not to mention the hidden ways that these ideologies remain central to our social worlds. Whole courses are taught on these issues, and should continue to be taught without reservation.

However, postmodernism has also limited anthropologists’ ability to speak to pressing political matters with conviction, to take a stand without hedging, or to be positive or constructive in the things they say publicly. The field, in short, has become insular and sometimes too focused on applying the latest theoretical fad (often, for the purposes of hiring, promotion, and publishing).

These “ism” problems have direct and real consequences. As Bourgois argues, the “growing postmodernist deconstructivist approach... allows ethnographers to obey their discipline’s narrow ethical dictates through a reflexive investigation of the hermeneutics of signs and symbols devoid of political economic social context”, and that “anthropologists continue to ignore or avoid the human tragedies engulfing their ‘research subjects’” (Bourgois 1990: 43). I read this to mean that if we interpret the ethics of anthropological research narrowly, then we do a disservice not only to our profession but also to the very people whose lives we rely on to further our careers.

On top of this, many anthropologists have critiqued “the system” or the “discourse” in order to fashion themselves as revolutionaries – and publish papers – even though they have neither seriously considered what their professional role ought to be in their (loosely defined new world order), nor seriously imagined what organizing principles would prevail if our current blend of capitalism and democracy were to be replaced. Rarely do anthropologists either ask or answer: *Is there a better system that will eliminate alienation and exploitation and allow individuals like ourselves to choose their work?* If so, what would the pros and cons of that system be? Would we as anthropologists be able to do the work we do? As such, recommendations for reforms seem almost antithetical to our field, because reforms are considered short-sighted and incapable of solving “the root problem”, that is, the “precarity” caused by “neoliberalism” (Muehlebach 2013).

Thus, we remain faced with a vexing issue of scholarly purpose and duty, for which I must confess I have no blanket recommendation for all anthropologists; yet, I, nonetheless, feel the need to raise the issue and suggest that a change of theoretical perspective and method might be in order for some.

Some say that the PhD gives us license to do research with public money. If so, do we then have an obligation to share with the public our policy recommendations in return, especially if we earned our PhD using public funding? And if that is the case, is it fair to assume that the taxpayers who fund our work want us to recommend that they revolt? Surely, they have enough demagogues in the political arena as it is. Perhaps our public role ought best be defined as scholars who identify problems, raise awareness about them, and do our part to help solve them.

If the reactive responses to globalism – Trump, Brexit, protectionism – and the COVID-19 pandemic – anti-maskers, vigilante militias, libertarianism – have taught us anything, isn't it that we must return our conversations to the common good? How are we as anthropologists to not only take part in those discussions, but to lead them?

A brief history

“Solving problems”

The three aforementioned problems – pessimism and negativity, postmodernism, and Marxist political ideology – arguably stem from a crisis of identity that is itself borne of current philosophical tensions in the field.

For example, some recent anthropologists have taught us that the field of anthropology has historically produced knowledge through inherently unequal hierarchies of power, like empires or privileged positions of wealth. For some, this realisation has signalled a call for relativistic or nihilistic conclusions, so that we do not repeat the indignities of history. The assumed dichotomy is this: if all power is constructed and all knowledge production is ‘situated,’ to use Haraway’s term, then anthropologists can only say one of two things: either (a) ‘All truth claims are equally valid’ (relativism) or (b) ‘All truth claims are reducible to existing power hierarchies or to underlying power moves’ (nihilism) (Hale 2006).

Anthropology, though, was not always this way, and need not be. In *Patterns of Culture*, Benedict refers to “coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence.” But, as Menand shows in his review of King’s, *Gods in the Upper Air*:

It’s true that...Benedict spoke of ‘relativity,’ [but] everything else in Benedict’s book contradicts the assertion that all cultures are “equally valid.” The whole point is to judge which practices, others’ or our own, seem to produce the kind of society we want. The anthropological mirror has a moral purpose (Menand 2019).

Why then have so many anthropologists appeared to have broken that mirror?

I believe that moral relativism is insufficient and perhaps even immoral in some instances. Nihilism, too, leaves too much to desired, since it implicitly discourages effort to help others and may even encourage apathy. I agree with Scheper-Hughes when she writes:

Anthropologists may be “suspending the ethical” in our dealings with the “other.”

Cultural relativism, read as moral relativism, is no longer appropriate to the world in which we live, and anthropology, if it is to be worth anything at all, must be ethically grounded (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 409).

I also think she is on to something when she suggests a third possibility that transcends the aforementioned dichotomy: that of carefully choreographed ‘anti-relativistic anthropology.’ At times she calls it ‘militant anthropology,’ but I do not care for her term because it implies that

there can be no heart in our work, and that the only way we will be heard is if we fight. I would prefer that we ‘kill them with kindness,’ so in 2016, I proposed a new notion – ‘positive anthropological activism’ – and I highlighted the power of what Murphy-Shigematsu calls “heartfulness” (Murphy-Shigematsu 2018). Brown calls it courage, a term that derives from Latin and means “to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart” (Brown 2011). As Van Dinter (2020: 1005) has shown, there is a resistance to moral anthropology, but that this resistance often paints with broad strokes and do not sufficiently acknowledge the “genuine ethnographic value” of considering moral issues.

As a discipline, anthropology began during the age of colonialism, at a time when white men dominated the field; when research often aided national, state, and local governments; and when many studies were concerned with “practical matters.”

Anthropologists, though, did not always have the same goals as their colonialist colleagues. For example, Tylor, who was one of the main founders of the field in the United Kingdom and was appointed to the first chair in anthropology at Oxford in 1883, was particularly interested in “educating colonial officials about native customs” (Ervin 2005: 14). He fervently believed in the unity of all mankind, even if he may have used the term – “primitive” – to describe human beings in what he deemed an earlier state of development. In the US, Boas, who held the first North American appointment in anthropology at Clark University (he later moved to Columbia, where he trained Benedict), adopted a scientific approach to the study of humanity in order to submit recommendations to the US Commission of Education regarding the importance of culture and context. Boas argued against both racism and what were then popular policies that restricted immigration to British and Northwestern Europeans (Ervin 2005: 14-15). In the 1920s, Malinowski also noted the importance of applying knowledge gained through ethnography to British governance of far-flung colonies, and during the New Deal, American anthropologists advised the Bureau of Indian Affairs (Ervin 2005: 16; see also, Van Willigen [1993]2002: 17-41).

These anthropologists were engaged with real-world issues, and they were driven by a desire to eradicate bigotry but also by optimism that, with their work, they could. When viewed through our contemporary eyes, it is easy to see how these endeavors were far from perfect – after all, no society should ever be labeled “primitive”, since the term itself is pejorative – but they shared one important thing in common – they were intended to “make the world safe for difference,” as Benedict would later say, and in that sense, they were acts that were driven from the heart and driven by real world practical concerns. Their writings must be praised for the progressivism they demonstrated *at the time*.

Early on, anthropological institutions were also as practical as these individuals. Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) was established “to promote the science of anthropology, to stimulate and coordinate the efforts of American anthropologists, to foster local and other societies devoted to anthropology, to serve as a bond among American anthropologists and anthropologic[al] organizations present and prospective, and to publish and encourage the publication of matter pertaining to anthropology” (AAA Articles of Incorporation n.d.). Nowhere in that initial mission statement were the words “solving problems,” which is now part of the AAA mission, but there was an implicit emphasis on objectivity, collaboration, and the power of science to educate the public and policymakers. Again, there was optimism operating in the minds of the men and women writing these words.

“Values in need of nurturing”

What might be called “practical anthropology,” or “progressive anthropology”, began with Boas, who leveraged the principle of cultural relativism to combat discrimination against immigrants and later developed to a greater degree in the work and activism of Margaret Mead, who wrote about fixing American education in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Mead then went on to advocate for the abolition of nuclear weapons, environmental protections, and the legalization of marijuana.

Boas, Benedict and Mead led the way, and the organizational infrastructure followed. In 1941, the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) was founded, and it included luminary anthropologists such as Mead, Bateson, and Benedict. (The SfAA also founded a journal for the field, first called *Applied Anthropology* and later changed to *Human Organization* (Low et al. 2010: S205). Mead and Benedict applied their research methods and knowledge to the war effort, meeting with government officials to discuss plans to boost national morale and writing reports to understand the culture of the enemy (Mead 1944; Benedict 1967). (Times were different then. The war was not as controversial as wars that have been fought in my lifetime (e.g. Operation Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom). The enemy seemed clearer, and the need for everyone to take part – even those in the “Ivory Tower” – seemed clear, too.)

World War II and the practical needs of a nation fighting enemies whose culture most Americans did not understand thus closely influenced the founding of SfAA. At that time, 95% of all anthropologists in the US were involved in the war effort in some capacity. Benedict, for example, was sponsored by the US War Information Department when she conducted research for *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, about the culture of Japan. It is true that her methodology was suspect – she based her findings largely on interviews with Japanese-Americans – but that flaw neither negates her intent nor the value of her practical effort to solve what was then the world’s biggest problem – fascism. (Spoiler alert: it may still be.)

By contrast, in the UK, and especially at Oxford in the post-war period, Evans-Pritchard and his followers tried hard to make anthropology a part of the academy, and specifically part of the humanities (i.e., not a social science), and so he chose to take a neutral stance on the “correctness” of the practices of foreign peoples. As a result, Evans-Pritchard never came to be known for public anthropology (let alone “applied”, or “public”, or “engaged anthropology”), instead choosing to undertake a sort of empirical reportage of foreign lands that steered clear of judgment.

Evans-Pritchard’s leadership in the field effectively encouraged anthropologists to respect the facts and prize empiricism above all. However, his desire to professionalize the discipline may have inadvertently hamstrung future generations of scholars who wanted to be more like Mead.

In America, the social unrest of the 1960s undoubtedly contributed to creating a climate in which “anti-imperialism” and even anti-establishmentarianism dovetailed with rising social consciousness about issues such as civil rights, women’s rights, gay rights, environmental rights, and Native American self-determination, which led to draft statements requiring anthropologists to contribute our expertise to public policy debates. The 1971 AAA Code of Ethics, for example, states that “anthropologists bear a positive responsibility to speak out publicly...on what they know and what they believe as a result of their professional expertise gained in the study of human beings” (Quoted in Bourgois 1990).

The aforementioned movements also galvanized anthropologists like Tax, who in the late 1970s, gave a formal lecture on “action anthropology,” to reconsider their own roles in those movements (Wolff 2000:16). Tax believed that there were tens of thousands of people in the

world who “held anthropological values” but were “without a medium for communicating with one another along lines of mutual interest.” He said that the values inherent in a “human science” like anthropology - “relativism, pluralism, and appreciation for the complementarity of tradition and change” - “needed nurturing” if those who had studied anthropology, but didn’t make a career of it, were to contribute their knowledge in the working world (Wolfe, 2000: 16).

Since Tax’s lecture, practicing anthropologists have been increasingly interested in more than mere critical reflection on difficult problems; they have also been engaged in action, administration, and implementation of anthropological ideas. In particular, many of Tax’s followers went on to focus on how to apply anthropology concepts in the workplace.¹

Some have lamented that practicing anthropologists largely “apply” their practical ideas to the highest bidder (Ervin 2005: 24-25), but who but the most rigid academic purist can blame them? The total number of academic jobs began to fall short of the number of people graduating from anthropology PhD programs as early as the 1970s, and anthropologists left outside the academy had little choice but to find work elsewhere, often in business or government.

In the early 1980s, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) established the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA). Various scholars began arguing that anthropology could only ensure its relevance if it established practicing anthropology as a “fifth subdiscipline,” complementing the traditional four fields of social/cultural, linguistic, archaeological, and biological (Baba 1994: 174). Anthropologists who were engaged in applied work were promised to be given “recognition” and an “equal place within anthropology” (Ervin 2005: 7).

But have they? It is hard to say with conviction, and it probably depends on the person who is asked.

In response to the “practicing anthropology” movement, which some perceived to be sullied by its associations with money and the market, the field of “public interest anthropology” emerged, yet it too struggled to get off the ground (Ervin 2005: 7). Public interest anthropology aimed at exposing social problems and how they are related to social structure, but also to using one’s platform as an intellectual to “work with citizens in promoting fundamental social change.” According to Ervin, “applied anthropology” developed “independently of theoretical...anthropology”, because it “had to respond to the needs of its clients, not intellectual curiosity” (Davis and Mathews 1979[2000]: 38).

According to Davis and Mathews, public interest anthropology struggled because general “anthropological theory, derived from the study of ‘isolated’ tribal groups, was inadequate for understanding complex political economics and industrial states” and anthropologists “were far more accustomed” to putting their research “at the disposal of academic journals or administrators than in the hands of citizen groups” (Davis and Mathews 1979[2000]: 42). In short, anthropologists needed to team up with others outside the field to do the kind of public interest work that would actually work. In some cases, they have, but training in the field is still much more commonly oriented around individual projects that are conceptual rather than driven by practical concerns.

Since the 1980s, there have been many terms used to describe a kind of non-Ivory Tower anthropology. “Engaged anthropology” is used to illustrate the various ways in which anthropologists can be experts in the public sphere while also being true to the discipline. Other

¹ The SfAA’s second publication – after *Applied Anthropology* – was called *Practicing Anthropology at Work* (later shortened to *Practicing Anthropology*, first published 1978).

anthropologists have suggested bridging the gap between academic/theoretical anthropology and applied anthropology by taking a so-called “praxis” approach, in which applied anthropologists “engage in theoretical discussions in the context of actual practice with their research subjects, clients and collaborators” (Warry 1992; Singer 1994, See also Checker 2009).

For still others, “public anthropology” became the more desirable moniker, especially after James Peacock’s AAA presidential lecture in 1997, and encourages scholars and students to address public issues in public ways.

And yet, despite these efforts, and despite the AAA adding the words “solving human problems” to its mission, there is certainly no disciplinary imperative for anthropologists to be public-minded or practical in their application of knowledge, let alone positive about it. Even an introductory text to the field of applied anthropology stated in 2000: “clearly...generating knowledge directly useful to society is not the principal mandate of academic anthropology” (Ervin 2005: 3). Has much changed since then?

Another related and essential question that remains is this: shouldn’t we strive to remain loyal to the practical seeds planted by Malinowski, Tylor, Boas, Mead, Benedict, and others without sugarcoating the problems that remain or throwing out the great knowledge that has been acquired regarding sexism, classism, racism, and colonialism and other problems since the “postmodern turn”? Secondly, if we do, can we show that loyalty and incorporate that knowledge while always ensuring that we think carefully about using our unique skill set and research abilities for positive purposes?

The work of public interest anthropologists is the closest to my vision of positive anthropology, but I believe that to do work that is in the public interest we anthropologists must also study people who are positive and processes that are positive, and try to see positive aspects in all the processes and people we study. It’s not enough, in my opinion, to just think of the public interest; we also have to study how exemplary people and processes can serve as guides for the public to follow.

Of course, the public interest must be considered on a case-by-case, topic-by-topic basis, and we must engage with the public and work in their interest only after we have finished our research and feel qualified to make a positive, practical, and policy-oriented contribution. With optimism that a positive approach will lead to results that are in the public interest, anthropologists can be freed to imagine new visions for future human relations.

Let me explain why I think this way by sharing details from two case studies.

Case Study #1

When it came time to pick a topic for my first major graduate school paper, the topic that fascinated me was corporal punishment in Japanese sports - called *taibatsu* in Japanese – which can loosely be defined as the striking, beating, hitting, or kicking of the body to discipline or punish, by a person in a position of authority relative to a person in a subordinate position.

I began by wondering why it existed, why it persisted despite educational laws that technically prohibited its use in schools. I was shocked by it, but I learned to check my biases at the “research door,” and do research in as objective a way as I could. I had not experienced such punishment as a young athlete growing up in California, so this was no easy task – in my heart, it seemed to be a cruel and unnecessary form of punishment.

I first encountered the practice in rural Japan. I had been hired by the Japanese government to teach English to a small town’s children, and on one of my first days I was shocked to see the physical education teacher slapping a thirteen-year-old boy across the face. I

did not understand Japanese at the time, so I had no idea why the boy was being physically punished. I was also surprised by the fact that I did not flinch in the face of it. Looking back, I feel ashamed that I did not speak up and make my perspective known.

In the years that followed, as I read around the topic, I realized that there was much academic debate (Gershoff 2002a and 2002b; Baumrind, Larzelere and Cowan 2002), and research in Japanese showed that there were ethical debates over *taibatsu* within Japan. I wanted to understand why, but existing theory seemed insufficient for creating a personal plan of action. If I approached the subject from the perspective of symbolic interactionism, then I would have been content interpreting what the phenomenon meant to the Japanese (which I did). If I followed Foucault, then I could explain why certain kinds of behavior, such as the acceptance of corporal punishment by people upon whom it was inflicted, was reproduced (which I also did).

But neither theory could offer me a path to action, for myself as a scholar-activist, so ultimately, after I published a monograph on the subject, I decided to explore how corporal punishment in Japan helped lead me on my journey to becoming what I called a “positive anthropological activist”.

Case Study #2

After I completed my research on corporal punishment, I returned home to California and began to do research at Stanford University. I had not focused on *taibatsu* in my dissertation, instead choosing to write about pedagogies of sports coaches. For that latter work, I had followed a coach of a college women’s team in Japan, so at Stanford I began following the university women’s team, too, hoping to one day “compare apples to apples”.

However, I quickly learned that there was a chorus of those calling for more power for college athletes, and some of them proposing a more direct form of “pay-for-play” (Branch 2011, Berri 2014). Several former big-time college athletes also filed litigation against the NCAA and its corporate sponsors during this period, alleging that they used their names, images, and likenesses (NILs) without permission. The chorus bent some ears, and in 2014, several big-time conferences agreed to cover the gap that had grown between what an NCAA “grant-in-aid” provided and the “true cost of attendance” (TCOA).

In late 2019, California passed the first ever bill “freeing” college athletes to profit from their own NILs, prompting other states to draft similar bills, and prompting U.S. senators Booker and Blumenthal to propose national legislation seeking large-scale college sports reform. Meanwhile, the NCAA has all along insisted that paying players *in any way* would harm what it considered the integrity and “allure” of the college sport’s product – amateurism. The NCAA’s system of capping athlete “salaries” at the cost of an athletic scholarship (with or without TCOA) had been working fine for them and the universities that they represented.

In early 2021, during the March Madness basketball tournament, several players protested on social media that they were #NotNCAAProperty, and rumors suggested it likely that Congress would take up Booker and Blumenthal’s bill sometime that year.

But female athletes were, and had been, largely ignored in these conversations about exploitation, and that fact reflected the deeper problem that women were typically ignored in conversations about sports in general.

Yet many of the same universities that refuse to pay their big-time male athletes advertise their institutions’ educational offerings and institutional excellence with billboards, pamphlets, and web pages of female athletes. These universities also restrict female athletes’ ability to control their own NILs.

Things came to a head when various celebrities again called out the NCAA on social media for preparing subpar training facilities for women's players during the 2021 NCAA Tournament, reminding us that women's basketball was, while televised and apparently big-time, not treated the same.

Between Nuance and Purpose

Women's college basketball teams assume a peculiar space in American culture--at once they are marginalized from the mainstream of big-time men's sports discourse, but also often they enjoy considerably more amenities and privileges than other "minor" women's sports (e.g., gymnastics, swimming) that do not generate the same levels of income or public attention. In the national lexicon there is no "medium" time; you are either a "big-time" team or not.

To complicate matters further, the women's basketball players I observed were on full-ride athletic scholarships attending an elite academic university and would go on to become leaders in a wide-range of fields, and in some cases even become national celebrities. They at once represented not only a marginalized group from the core of American sports culture, but also a praiseworthy group that led comparatively privileged lives.

The team - and the athletic department in which it is housed - was also part of a prestigious academic university, so there is great institutional faith that college sports are and should always remain an integral part of higher education. But thanks to the university's women's basketball coach Tara VanDerveer and her staff, the team has also been exceptionally successful and, therefore, a profitable arm of the university's entertainment division. The Stanford brand of college athletics was not only an idea, but also a commoditized logo that could be licensed, in the same way that Stanford Athletics, which is formed as a limited liability company, called Cardinal Sports, LLC, could license multimedia rights for its sports broadcasts. In short, sports were not simply educational pursuits at Stanford; they were big business, too. That was the case for Stanford men and women, and while it appeared that the men generated more revenue than the women, that did not mean that the women were not, in their own way, big-time, too.

How to acknowledge both the accomplishments and the promise of these exemplary athletes, and the failures of a commercialized and sexist college sports culture to acknowledge their exploitation and marginalization? How to simultaneously acknowledge and reconcile sport's power to uplift and to oppress?

Many recent academic studies of college sports appeared to me to be half-truths driven by postmodern theory and incapable of seeing anything positive that might come out studying the topic. In order to publish, scholars know that they must focus on racism, exploitation, and sexism in sports. I have no doubt these are important topics to study.

But I wanted to find a space between the impressive individual and collective growth that I observed between coaches and players, the heart-felt emotions of American sports fans who craved a faithful escape and/or looked to sports for hope, the cheerleading or sensation-seeking journalists, and the cool-headed but often negative view of scholars who focused, sometimes myopically, on college sport's (economic) exploitation.

Buying In

The more I thought about these questions, the more it seemed that what was needed was a more balanced and constructive view to counteract those scholars who, by virtue of their fixed negativity mindset, only seem to see the glass half empty. Such scholars appeared fixed to the

idea of looking for societal problems to address, and reluctant to try anything different or interview anyone but the marginalized and discriminated. But what about studying exemplary individuals who live and operate in a broken system, and buy in to it? Isn't there much we can also learn from them?

The Misunderstood Power of Sports

These questions came to me as I wrestled with the question of how to understand sports in a capitalist economy. While labor exploitation of big time college athletes is clear, since many of the top performing athletes would earn more if they were not restricted by the NCAA from doing so, Marxist conflict theory seemed insufficient for explaining why sports are popular among fans, or why athletes, especially at the big-time college level, routinely and voluntarily put themselves through so much to "play" them.

There is a competition for resources in a capitalist economy. And, in a smoothly operating system, the wealthy *want* to invest in others and profit from their labor, and that creates the conditions by which those who "buy in" to the system and work hard can prosper, too. Sports have become steppingstones for young people to prove to the wealthy they are worth investing in, by demonstrating hard work, team play, and competitiveness. I do not wish to suggest that this is a perfect system. It is far from it, but saying as much should not preclude me from also saying that there are positive ways of looking at it. In particular, athletes who chose to buy in and work hard ought to be applauded in our narratives, not ignored.

I had grown up loving sports. Sports had been a great escape during my childhood and early adolescence. I made friends in the process, too, so I came to appreciate sport's individual and social function.

But when I tried to reconcile my own experiences with the typical views of other college sports scholars, it did not seem persuasive to me to argue that sports are like religion, as some Marxists of sport claim (Harris 1981: 3B; Bain-Selbo 2008), and thus the "opiate" of the people that keeps them blinded to their false consciousness. (Or, as T.R. Young puts it, that "advanced monopoly capitalism uses the advertising industry to colonize desire" and uses "sports as an envelope in which to insert commercial messages" (Young 1986)).

Nor am I persuaded by the argument that sports are altogether a man's world that women can only occupy perilously, and that true liberation for women will only come through overthrowing the patriarchy and "developing a separatist philosophy" and a "total separatist lifestyle" (Scraton and Flintoff 2002: 34).

After many years studying sports intellectually, I remain a believer in the power of sports, even if I also can acknowledge that Marxism raises important questions about sport. Indeed, my scholarship is full of insights derived from such scholarship. But the answer to the question, "why sport," and particularly, "why big-time sport for women?" must be found elsewhere, in a grey area between pros and cons, in tension between liberation and exploitation.

Which is why a different form of non-radical feminism² offers more than a Marxist condemnation of capitalist exploitation because it acknowledges that power that sports can have in the lives of girls and women.

As scholars, we have professional biases that lead us to write about what we do, and my own biases will be nowhere more apparent than in my belief in the *educational* power of sports, for girls as well as boys. Even though I grew up in the 1980s, many years after the enactment of

² See esp. Scraton and Flintoff 2002: 32ff for a discussion of various strands of feminist thought: liberal, radical, post-structuralist, and black.

a landmark law, Title IX, that effectively changed the way Americans look at sports and gender, I was sent outside to the fields while my sisters were sent to drama and music classes.

Alongside sports participation came opportunity, which my sisters did not have. I was never a star athlete, but being on the team was something to talk about with my friends, teachers, and family and relatives. Sports – and particularly basketball – continued to shape my life in important ways for years to come. I joined a team as an exchange student in London, and another near the school where I taught English in Japan after college. The way I played the game helped reveal to others *who I was*, and that helped me make friends with people with whom I wanted to be friends. I came to see that sports could be both an “individual good” and also a “social good,” something that could help an athlete and a society better understand and improve itself. Above all, though, it offered opportunities for educational growth.

Still, undertaking research on sports and education in Japan and the US opened my eyes to the different ways that others learn through sports, making me more aware of how athletics is experienced differently for different people. For some women and girls, for example, the calculation of “character-building” in sports is not the same as it is for men, just as the meaning of “big-time” does not mean the same for them as it does for male athletes.

And yet there is still great educational power in sports for all, and it seemed unwise to overlook it. We can see the sexism and classism (and racism) in sport without ignoring the educational power it holds.

Changing My Perspective

Scholars of sport and culture who adhere to, apply, or adapt theories initially formulated by Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, postmodernists and feminists, may largely focus on the conflicts that are endemic within capitalist society, on an esoteric formula for understanding the notion of power, or on the enduring paternalism and sexism of the patriarchy. Some of them may focus on the ways in which we as researchers are part of the problem, sometimes in ways that are beyond our control (e.g. inherent bias).

But in doing so, one may inadvertently overlook other ways of seeing sports. Why not recognize both the pros and cons of the existing system of big-time college sports?

At first, I saw the Stanford players primarily for their roles as athletes: strong, muscular, and determined, but ultimately as second-class in the sense that men’s football and basketball players still enjoyed a higher social status and earned more revenue for their universities. It was hard to see that story in anything but a negative light, and to feel pity for them.

But after some time, I started to see their efforts in a different way. I still saw them as elite athletes who put their bodies on the line for entertainment, but now I could also see that they also pushed their minds to the ultimate limit, every day, too, for their own sense of mastery. They not only attended a world-class institution of higher learning, they also balanced their studies with performative excellence in their chosen sport. That successful balance deserved to be celebrated.

The Latent Power Within

And yet I had a great deal of trouble finding anthropological studies that celebrated their informants in a similar way, or least offered a balanced and not outright negative account of their experiences. Which raised an important question of professional purpose for me: Is our purpose as scholars to be critical of “the system”? If so, is that critique enough to make our contribution and make the lives of others better?

Although the mass sports media dominates the way the public feels about college sports, the ways that scholars interpret the relationships between coaches and athletes, media and corporations, and how they judge the NCAA and athletic conferences, and universities who operate at the big-time level, also matter, especially when it comes to reform. As scholars, it is our job to be specific about the how, who, when, what, where, and why, so that our voices are heard. College sports undoubtedly serve to exploit and misuse young athletes, but they can also serve to educate and uplift. It depends on the sport, institution, the coach, the boosters, and the players involved. In the end, I decided that the best and worst of college sports – and everything in between – must be part of the story that we scholars tell, and so I wrote a book about college sports that did just that. (entitled, *Buying In*, forthcoming).

If we speak and write in a language people can understand, and if we offer critical studies that also give hope by describing what works (and what does not), we can present a more balanced assessment that may help them avoid cynicism, anxiety, and inaction, which, ultimately, is the true barrier to progressive reform. As Nancy Skinner, the California state senator who championed 2019’s landmark college sports reform measures regarding names, images, and likenesses, once remarked:

All of a sudden, the light bulb was going off. Rather than being the bystander going, “Gosh, this is so unfair, how do these people get away with this?” I’m like, “Hey, if I’m in the Senate, can the state do something about it?”

We may not ourselves have the power of a state senator, but each of us has the ability to get the ball rolling on reform, or push it forward when it is our turn.

In Praise of Athletic Beauty

Although they do sometimes seem few and far between, there are scholars who think positively about athletes and coaches, such as the literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who in his book *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, also notes the general criticality and negativity that intellectuals often have toward sports and their overwhelming inability to praise athletes for what they do (Gumbrecht 2006: 29). Intellectuals, Gumbrecht argues, are unable to praise athletes because they “feel obliged to be *critical* --- only and always critical” (Gumbrecht 2006: 24):

When scholars, even scholars who love sports, apply the tools of their training to athletic events, they often wind up feeling obliged to interpret sports as a symptom of highly undesirable tendencies. Some academic critiques have gone so far as to denounce sports as [Foucauldian] biopolitical conspiracy that emerges from the delegation of state power to self-reflective micro-powers. Through practicing and watching sports, according to this view, we regulate and restrain our bodies against our individual self-interest (Gumbrecht 2006: 25).

For Gumbrecht, viewing sports in such a negative, beauty-less way diminishes their value, and also our ability to revere and praise heroes and feel gratitude for them. Gumbrecht explains that he had a “determination to see and to value athletic beauty,” which he calls *praise*. “And this capacity to praise,” he adds, “is what we have lost – to the point where the very idea can seem embarrassing to us.” He concludes: “I...feel gratitude for the pleasure of watching sports...and praising athletics...allows me to express this gratitude” (Gumbrecht 2006: 35).

Thus, in order to “practice” what I call “positive anthropology,” I chose to make the Stanford women’s basketball coaching staff, and the team’s players the central characters in a story of triumph. While duly acknowledging and sufficiently exploring many of the problematic aspects of the big-time college sports culture, I attempted to avoid sugarcoating the challenges

these women face, while also showcasing them in a positive way and highlighting the positive efforts they make every day.

In the end, my research at Stanford revealed that sports are both valuable to women's development and also a barrier, but that as a scholar I have a choice when I choose which of these to highlight, and whether I will give equal ink to both.

Just as the players on the Stanford team overlooked arguments about exploitation, got on with their business, and "bought in" to the idea that there was value in investing in oneself, I realized that anthropologists needed to "buy in" to what their informants are selling – e.g. power of having grit, rolling up sleeves, focusing on solutions, and focus on winning, which presupposes that we pick an opponent and identify a problem that needs solving (beyond simply highlighting racism, sexism, and classism). I also learned that anthropologists could learn from the positive psychologists who guide many elite athletes, about our own sense of self and our own development in particular. In this way, athletes and coaches can be as inspiration for scholars (athletes like NBA stars Kevin Love, Paul George coming out and sharing stories of mental health issues come to mind here, too).

Finally, anthropologists can devise solutions *to problems defined by informants*, as a way to both amplify our voices in public in a positive way, but also to honor those people who have opened their worlds to us.

What is positive anthropology?

What exactly do I mean when I say positive anthropology, then? First, here is what I do not mean: positive anthropology should neither supersede the need for careful empirical studies or reflexivity, nor should it be used as a method before the research is done. It should neither replace participant observation, the comparative method, nor respect and empathy given to all informants; rather, it should supplement them. It should not blanketly dismiss other theories that exist, but rather engage them in a conversation that respects what they also offer and builds upon it. Finally, I do not mean to suggest that scholars only offer a rosy portrait of things as they are, or ignore the problems of the world. Far from it.

Rather, by using the term positive anthropology, I suggest that we consider exemplary, positive individuals, institutions and processes in our work, and that however and wherever possible, we maintain a responsible, 'glass-half-full' vision of how things *might* become, *with our help*, and undertake our work with that vision always in mind and in a way that keeps our eyes set on that prize. Of course, that necessarily implies that we are positive about ourselves and about our power to effect change.

By positive anthropology I also admittedly imply the humble application of anthropological methods and theory for positive human purposes. Although, in using this definition, I do admit the pluralism and subjectivity that may come from a diverse group of scholars defining 'positive human purposes' for themselves. Still, I see value in the approach, even if debate may ensue in our field about what "positive" means.

Perhaps the best way for other scholars to be positive in their own work is to trust their gut, and do both practical and theoretical work that they feel will make the lives of people around them better.

Above all, this theory is meant to guide researchers who want to make an impact, who want to offer humble *prescriptions* rather than only offer *descriptions* of social life.

I see no good reason why our field should exclude such scholars and their desires. But, nonetheless, exclusionary this field sometimes seems. I am not tenured, and a few senior

professors have warned me to be careful about what I say, write, and publish before I earn it.

But what I wait for may never come. Tenured positions have been in deep decline for many years, and I will be lucky if I can afford to stay in academia beyond my current, limited-term contract. That is why, to me, simply describing the problems of the world and interpreting their context seems insufficient.

As scholars, we can produce research that challenges people to think through and deeply reflect upon the social relationships in which they are involved. We can choose to focus our attention on what works now and what might work better for human societies in the future. If anthropology is going to remain publicly relevant, and/or deepen our public footprint, then we have to give our audiences constructive guidance that they can use. In some sense, as scholars we are the only members of democratic society who truly have freedom of thought and expression, yet so few of us try to use them for positive ends.

Doing positive anthropology may include shedding light on the best paths available for the people and institutions from whom we draw our salaries and receive our funding. In this respect it may be closely aligned with engaged or public interest anthropology, but it is not just that we are engaged or advocate for the public interest, but that we do so in a way that is positive for the public and for ourselves. We do not live in a vacuum, and so I believe we must embrace our many roles: as educators, as civil servants, and as researchers.

Paving our own paths

I could not have come up with the notion of positive anthropological activism if I had not been undertaking extensive research about violence, sexism, and exploitation in sports. After all, I found myself witnessing the best and worst of human life every day, from the great accomplishments of our athlete-heroes to the great failures that sometimes afflict them just the same. In the process, I realized that humans are capable of using our bodies to dance beautifully, while also using them to inflict intense pain.

I was in a privileged yet precarious position. I was not directly involved in the violent, sexist or exploitative acts I observed. Yet I saw what happened, or at least read about it, and I felt an obligation to report.

I also felt an obligation to tell both sides of the story, since that seemed to separate us from profit-minded journalism and seemed to give our work a deeper meaning. (I have been reminded in many peer reviews that one of the worst things you can say about an anthropologist's writing is that it is "journalistic".)

Telling both sides of the story, however, is not the same thing as resorting to morally relativistic conclusions. Our research and hard work have earned us the right to offer well-reasoned recommendations.

As a scholar I always have choice: I can focus on the problems that exist in social life. I can focus on and write about the solutions we as human societies have already created. Or I can help envision the ones that are, for now at least, just beyond our reach. Most importantly, I can also imagine my own positive role in bringing them into our grasp.

I started my doctoral work fifteen years ago, but when I was working on my graduate studies and doing a postdoc, I thought I was an imposter. I worked myself ragged because I did not think I belonged in academia, and that intense focus on my work, without the proper perspective and without asking myself "so what?", led to some serious health problems.

As an imposter, I tried not to step on anyone's intellectual territory, so when I found a thesis written by someone else, that answered some of the questions I had hoped to answer, I switched gears and chose a different dissertation topic, rather than asserting myself. I was

halfway through graduate studies at the time, and the incident left an indelible mark on my thinking about what academia was and what it was and was not for.

Without a clearer sense of purpose, most of what I wrote remained conceptual and theoretical, ostensibly aimed at understanding, but I was essentially speaking to an audience of people not terribly dissimilar to myself: young Japanophiles who also had some interest in social theory.

And while conceptual research like that *is* necessary in today's world, and while there are very good reasons to defend it in a world that is increasingly bent on allowing quantitatively, performance-oriented approaches dominate everything we call "research", after a while, the conceptual work no longer satisfied me, and I suspect others in our field may agree.

In 1990, Myles Horton and Paolo Friere (1990) argued that scholarly activism could only be developed by those 'who make the road by walking it'. I have learned on my path, as I walk it, that neither nihilism nor relativism will work for me.

We face so many intractable social problems today, from the production of massive amounts of waste, the environmental and human devastation of global warming, and the horrific and inhumane practice of human trafficking, so we clearly need more anthropologists applying their qualitative knowledge, not only to fields outside the academy, but in papers written for people in it, too. Those of us fortunate enough to live and work in the Ivory Tower take in the outside world and then produce knowledge for it, but if we are to always publish rather than perish, then do not we owe it to that outside world, and to ourselves (and to our offspring), to ask "so what?"

For me, it is not the time to stand on the side lines. I want to do more than interpret the discourse, and I know I have to avoid paralysis by (over)analysis and overcome my sense of being an imposter to do it.

Sometimes, we seem keenly aware of 'the other' we study but remarkably ignorant of where we currently stand ourselves, and just as blind to where we want to stand down the road. In the past Americans had no other news source to shape their point of view of 'the Other.' Now they have all sorts of options, and many of them carry the moral/normative message that we often shy away from sending. Just as we are often marginalised from the mainstream of the academy, and the academy itself is often marginalised from mainstream American society, we choose to write about the Other dispassionately and talk only amongst ourselves. This is a closed conversation, and so I believe, a disservice, to our informants, to our students and to ourselves. We say we refrain from normative statements because of objectivity, but it sometimes feels like simple cowardice.

Some, of course, find success in writing for a broad audience, offer policy recommendations, or trying to disseminate the best of their research widely. And others have reached wider audiences through open-source publishing outlets.

But ultimately, positivity starts within, and it may require being more assertive than is comfortable. For years I was afraid of what true honesty might bring. But then I remembered that my voice carries weight, not because of who I am but because of what I have done, and what my intent has been, and because what I say is based upon extensive research, and intended to benefit the public interest.

I have applied Foucauldian theory in much of my work, but it may be helpful to remember that it is a choice to limit yourself with a reluctance to judge or appear 'neo-colonial', as if your subjective prescriptions were the greatest obstacle of Foucauldian power relations your informants faced, or as if you were not already making judgments with your choice of research

topic/informants/fieldsite(s) in the first place. There is no such thing as absolute objectivity, so you may as well make your case honestly, thoughtfully, and respectfully. Just as we are taught not to underestimate the impact of our role in our research, we must be careful not to overestimate it.

These deep-seated fears of offending often relegate us to writing monographs that few people read, theory papers that hardly influence policy, and books and articles that rarely stoke the fires of social change.

So it is that I propose a more positive, constructive, and optimistic form of anthropological writing and scholarly activism. Our discipline – and much of the world around it – seems to be crying out for it.

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