

## EXPERIENCE AND PERSPECTIVES IN A SLUM NEIGHBORHOOD: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW

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This paper discusses the relatively new field of urban anthropology, with emphasis on the problems encountered by anthropologists engaged in this kind of research. To illustrate this type of activity the author relates his experience in a slum area of Greater Manila. He discusses problems and the strategies employed to solve them, particularly by adapting traditional anthropological techniques of participant observation to an urban situation. Also presented are some impressions about slums and slum dwellers. The author concludes that anthropology can offer insights into urban studies that other social sciences may not possess.

As a discipline, anthropology has always been associated with studies of so-called primitive peoples, remote tribal groups, people with simple technology but exotic practices. Another stereotype is that, among the disciplines, only anthropology bothers with old things, digs up buried objects, reconstructs history from pieces of potsherds, and makes a big fuss about a mammalian tooth.

Thus, it is quite unbelievable, even to many university colleagues and educated laymen, that an anthropologist should also be interested in studying urban neighborhoods — a sacred domain of the sociologists. Even anthropology students are sometimes surprised to discover that anthropologists are interested in and have worked in the city. As one graduate student protested: "But sir, we are not sociologists. If we do this kind of work, then we are doing sociology, not anthropology." When a sociologist colleague of mine learned I was doing work in an urban neighborhood, he confronted me during one of our extended coffee-breaks and said: "Welcome to the fold. What shall I call you now — an anthropo-sociologist?" Another acquaintance, an educated layman, crossed her brows when she knew I was studying streetcorner gangs: "But I thought you were an anthropologist. *Pati pa ba iyan ay*

*sinasakup mo na?* ("You include that [the gangs] too?")."

These reactions simply illustrate that the role of anthropology in urban research is still not well known. This is understandable, because the anthropologists' involvement in research among urban dwellers is very recent — beginning less than 50 years ago. In American anthropology, for example, Horace Miner studied a city in Africa in the 1930s in order to test Redfield's rural-urban-continuum hypothesis. Lloyd Warner studied *Yankee City*, a work well known in sociology. Raymond Firth studied kinship systems among Londoners. Recently, James Spradley came out with a book on a tramp subculture in the United States, entitled *You owe yourself a drunk*. British anthropologists are now focusing their attention on problems of urbanization in Africa. Many are also engaged in studying the phenomena of rural-urban migration. In the Philippines, anthropologists have just recently become directly involved in urban research, although previously it is true, they had been called upon to participate in planning research dealing with urban problems.

In this paper I shall discuss some of the problems anthropologists have encountered in conducting urban research, and some of the strategies they have developed in coping with

such problems. I shall also discuss briefly what anthropological field techniques can contribute to the sharpening of research tools for urban studies.

### *Field Problems*

Studying urban communities or subcultures is more complex and indeed more difficult to undertake than doing work among rural villagers or among the so-called cultural minorities. Unlike the rural village or mountain settlement, the urban neighborhood or community confronts the anthropologist with multicultural situations. In fact, his first reaction is that of alarm, followed by the question, "Where do I begin?" First, if he has chosen a slum neighborhood, the locality is never defined in terms of identifiable boundaries. If his choice is a tenement house, as in Punta or Vitas, it is somewhat easier, but his problem is how to relate this one big apartment to the bigger community. If he has chosen a government housing development, the boundaries are clear-cut, but the community is too large and needs to be cut up into a number of subunits. Second, there are no headmen, barrio captains, or definite leaders to whom one can introduce himself and through whom he can be introduced to the people. Third, there are hundreds of roles, resulting from specialization and occupational pursuits, all demanding attention at the same time. Fourth, the peoples' views of one another are impersonal. It is difficult to get a resident to introduce the fieldworker to the community because each one seems not to bother with the affairs of his neighbor — nor even bother to know who his neighbors are. Fifth, the urban community is generally segmented into different small subgroups, each group having different lifestyles depending upon such variables as length of stay in the city, provincial or regional origin, occupational specialization, and levels of income.

Conducting urban research requires more workers than would be needed for an ordinary or traditional anthropological project. It is difficult to make of the study a one-man job, as one might if he were doing a small community study. A team is necessary. Some

traditional anthropological techniques need to be modified and others have to be intensified. For example, the use of key informants may not be feasible because of the limited accessibility informants have to one another's private lives, especially if the neighborhood chosen is a middle-class one. In the slums key informants are possible, but it takes a longer time to separate permanent residents from the extremely mobile. Informants come and go and sometimes one wonders whether the information obtained refers to the community or neighborhood studied, or to experiences in another where the informant lived previously.

There are many other problems in urban research which an ethnographer may not have encountered while studying rural or tribal groups. Even interviews are difficult to carry out; there are many fears entertained by informants which are not found among rural dwellers. If you are working in a slum neighborhood, you may be suspected as a police agent attempting to infiltrate the street-corner gang organization; if it is a middle-class neighborhood, you might be an agent of the government spying on those who are delinquent in taxes or have hidden wealth. These anxieties are not present in many rural communities, because once you are there most people are likely to know you sooner than you think. In the urban area, you encounter new faces, you make new acquaintances, and you cope with new situations almost every day. You can live and die in the city without the neighbors' knowing who you are, what kind of job you have, where you work, or how old you are.

### *Strategies in Entering the Field: A Case Study*

The first social unit of urban life which attracted my anthropological interest several years ago was the slum. It was attractive then because everyone was doing something for slum people. Moreover, many of my rural informants, especially those from the Laguna Lake area, had come to Manila to live. Furthermore at that time academic discussions were centered on the exciting "theory" or position of Oscar Lewis — "the culture of poverty." Hence I was

interested in testing out Lewis' hypothesis that poverty brings about a subculture of poverty.

*Questions to be asked.* In the Philippines, the slum had been characterized as the place where poverty-stricken people lived — where the culture of poverty could be studied. With this idea in mind, I started to ask the following general questions: What is a culture of poverty? What is poverty, in fact? Whose values should be used to characterize what is an impoverished life and what is not? What is a slum? Is it a place where poverty, squalor, and neglect are the basic features of everyday life? Who are the slum dwellers? What happens to people who have chosen to live in a slum community? What do they do there? What does the slum do to them? What is the nature of their interactions? If the slum is a product of urbanization, what kind of relationship exists between it and the bigger society? What makes a slum the so-called breeding place of criminality, delinquency, immorality, and other forms of social problem? Is it possible to discover, isolate, and analyze some of these variables associated with slum life?

*First approach to the slum.* Thus, with this interest in urban anthropology, especially slum life, I brought my wife (immediately after our wedding) to live in a slum neighborhood. I remember vividly how she reacted to surroundings. She confided later, "I did not know what anthropologists were; I thought I married a *professional*." The question of where to begin immediately confronted us. We established residence in a dilapidated two-storey house, owned by what has recently been known as the professional squatter.

I moved about the neighborhood, but found to my dismay that this was not to be as easy as I thought. On every corner there was at least one group or two of hostile-looking men drinking, even as early as seven o'clock in the morning. When I tried to be friendly and asked questions, I was immediately surrounded and questioned instead. It took me a long time to explain my purpose. One evening, another group of men came to see my credentials — identification cards and so forth. One of the men, who I knew was a Visayan, tarried a bit when his

companions had left and said: "You better move out; you are in an OXO (notorious gang's) territory." I found out the following day that there had been three killings in the neighborhood that week — the last one involved a policeman. We left the neighborhood in a hurry.

*Second approach.* We moved to another district, but the community we selected approximated the first one. We were told that this too was an OXO territory. However, it was in this place, which we named Looban, that we stayed from 1964 to 1967.

This time I learned new tricks. I did not walk around immediately, announcing to everyone that I was an anthropologist, or that I was there to study the people's lifestyle so that I could make recommendations regarding what assistance government agencies might give. I completely shed the idea of studying poverty or the culture of poverty. I also avoided asking too many questions. Too many questions brought suspicions. Mapping, one of those necessary things an ethnographer should do, as we are told in the classroom, was impossible. Written or structured interviews was next to impossible. One could not possibly hold a paper and pencil and ask questions without provoking suspicion on the part of the respondents, particularly members of the street-corner gangs. Suspicion could lead to physical harm, and many incidents had occurred in the neighborhood because of this kind of interaction.

The method that did prove successful involved (a) refraining from volunteering information about my identity as an anthropologist, and (b) living in the area for a long time. In the first place, no one asked who I was, and in the second, it was only in prolonged residence that firsthand observation was possible. By participant observation I understand living in the community and observing what people do, then checking actual behavior against what they *say* they do. Where discrepancy in information existed, we asked the informants to explain why they did not do what they said they usually did. The same line of inquiry was taken for informants' observations of their neighbors' activities.

Thus I would sit down with storekeepers and talk to them about the neighborhood;

sometimes, I would listen to the gossip of housewives (menfolk also gossip) as they washed or did their laundry beside the illegally opened fire-hydrant close to where we lived. Often I would sit in front of the nearby *tianggi* (variety store) and note what people talked about when they came to make their purchases. Almost nightly, I would stay with the young men in the neighborhood as they sang, talked, and drank through the night, especially on weekends. I would hang around the street corners and observe what people did. Members of my family, especially my wife, would often note information available only to women.

*Reflection on field techniques.* I admit that through this method, the range of our knowledge of slum life was limited to those activities accessible to us. We could not be everywhere, despite our desire to cover wider areas of interaction with the people. Neither could I hire field researchers, even graduate students, if only for the reason that our numerical visibility would arouse suspicion and lead to non-cooperation. Nonetheless I feel sure that any lack of representativeness in this study is compensated for by depth of participation and observation in various slum activities — information which no survey method could ever hope to tap.

For three years my work was never questioned or interfered with by our neighbors. Insofar as my informants were concerned, I was also a slum dweller. Or they may have known who I was — as people always have a way of knowing things — but no one accosted me about my work or bothered me about my identity.

Whether this research technique was proper or not is now an academic issue. But at the time of my fieldwork, not talking about ourselves to people was one way to get into the heart of slum life, to penetrate what I thought was the reality of slum experience. I never showed that I was doing research, at least in my overt behavior.

*Sampling problems and solutions.* To get an idea of the composition of Looban residents, even in a restricted way, I took a sample of 300 households, selected purposively from those

who were willing to cooperate. I did not do this until the second year of residence. At the beginning I thought of a random sample of about 500 but gave it up later as unrealistic for my purpose. There were two important reasons for this decision.

First, the population was very unstable. People frequently and unpredictably changed residence. The rate of migration, at the time of our residence in the area, averaged three to five families moving out of the neighborhood every week and no less than two to four new ones coming in to replace them. I was thus forced to focus my attention on those families which were relatively permanent.

Second, I did not want to invite suspicion among the people by writing down, in their presence, their responses to my questions. This would create resistance among them, as had been my experience before. I had also seen local residents' intimidating newspaper reporters following up news stories about events occurring in the area. Even the official census-takers or enumerators for the City of Manila, as well as those from the Bureau of the Census and Statistics had a hard time. Similarly, social workers had difficulties.

Thus, I had to devise my own technique. I casually dropped in at the houses in my sample and, in the spirit of a neighborly visit, asked the questions I wanted to ask. In this way I overcame almost all known barriers to spontaneous responses. I wrote down the information when I arrived home.

Whatever shortcomings this technique had, I am sure that my information was relatively accurate. In the first place, the household units studied shared the same characteristics — that is, they were migrants into the place and they belonged to the same low-income group. Second, the level of education attained by almost all residents was limited to elementary or high school. Third, they were exposed to about the same environmental conditions and were responding to almost the same ecological pressures.

#### *Initial Conclusions*

Although the data from my three-year experience in the slums have not yet been

published, I have come to a number of conclusions about the slums, and about the so-called culture of poverty — mostly lessons in human understanding. I do not claim to know or understand the slum better than anyone else. What I learned there was mainly new perspectives in human adaptation. What to the outsider is a slum, for example, is to the residents a home. What appears to be threatening behavior is to them a simple coping mechanism for handling difficult or unfamiliar situations. The difference between the slum-dweller's view and that of the outsider is traceable to the level of social reality which is focused on. Such labels as slum, non-slum, home, residence, and so forth are not only statements of fact about the physical world but also judgments arising from the inner values of the observer and the participant.

I learned to see the world of the slum dwellers quite differently from the way I saw it before beginning the study. Now I know how it feels to be a slum dweller; to be a resident in a squalid part of the city. I also came to understand the meaning of frustration in terms of actual situations in the complex institutional organization of social and economic opportunities — not from the charts and graphs scholars are interested in. I discovered that theories developed in experimental laboratories and translated into human strategy for adaptation were inadequate to handle practical problems. My academic ideals were shattered, and I became a pragmatist just like other slum dwellers. I came to realize the range and understand the limit of opportunities available to them, the options open in seeking redress for violations of individual rights. The link between the slum and the larger society, at the time of this study, existed in the abstract; how to operationalize it in the context of social and economic realities remains problematic and sometimes inaccessible, even to the most sophisticated sociological instruments.

My three years of continuous residence in the area, and another three years of continuing visits, have altered whatever negative value judgments I previously made. I even doubt the value of such a concept as *culture of poverty*.

Seeing the slum dwellers cope with their everyday problems makes one doubt the so-called first-hand views of the lower-class experience which are generally written from a middle-class perspective. Knowing the slum closely, I appreciate the fact that even in this neighborhood, "bleak and filled with unrelieved misery," people can be happy. By limiting their wants to the capacity of their resources, slum dwellers are in a better position than most of us professionals because the per-unit want satisfied is higher than that of the university professor, whose income is below his expected economic, social, and professional needs.

It is amazing how in human affairs a change in outlook brings about changes in the complex relationship between the environment and man. Many informants were initially annoyed by my inability to see anything good in what they were doing. Members of the gangs sharply criticized me if I complained about the noise, the dirt, and the "roughness" in behavior of people in the neighborhood; the storekeepers scolded me when I complained about sanitation, improper handling of foodstuffs, flies, and cockroaches. The couple living on the ground floor of the house we were occupying would impatiently twist their noses if we commented about how people spent their time "idly" in front of the house, on the streets, or at the corner-stores. Our neighbors felt slighted by any remark directed at any aspect of the local lifestyle or material culture, if such a remark indicated a negative evaluation of the neighborhood. At the beginning of our residence, in other words, we were completely unattuned to the nature of things in a slum environment.

#### *Discussion on the Meaning of Slum Life*

What do all these impressions add up to? What do they mean? I have asked myself this question over and over again. It took me a long time to realize that the slum dwellers have learned to take a positive approach to specific types of sociocultural adaptation. Of course, given the chance to enjoy the so-called good things in life, they would not waste one moment but would grab the opportunity, regardless of the means to achieve them. These continuous

shifts from local norms to the ethical imperatives of the larger society as each situation arises are what, I think, bring about many of our misconceptions about slum life. One has therefore to stay close to the slum dwellers to see these conditions – to note the particularity of their lifestyles which give cohesion and organization to their behavior in a slum environment.

For even “poverty” (whatever this term may mean) became part of everyday life so that deprivation – so-called – lost much of its meaning. It was normal, insofar as the people were concerned, to have two meals a day or to have none on lean days. While aspirations for better ways of life were verbalized, the attitude toward being poor was set and accepted, and the people took their economic deprivation with ease and comfort.

The fact that the slum has positive and adaptive value to the residents, as I pointed out, does not mean that no action should be taken to improve the conditions there. There are agencies charged with this responsibility. I leave to those more competent and qualified than I the problem of improving the general welfare of slum dwellers. My general purpose in making a study of the slum was to describe the slum condition as I saw it, and as the residents viewed it, and to make it clear to those who can and will help that slum life has its own realities. This inner view can seldom be attained by survey research.

This is not passing the responsibility to others. Rather, this position is taken in recognition of a lack of competence on my part. Perhaps the insights that will emerge from my description of slum life (as soon as the data are published) may be useful to those who are able to do something for the slum dwellers. For it is in knowing them and their lifestyles that innovators (i.e., city-planners, social workers,

civic leaders, and others) will be better equipped to deal with slum problems. The first requirement of any competent urban planning or welfare program is an ecological inventory of the physical, social, and cultural processes within the system. These data should then be interpreted in light of the value system that links the elements of society together and provides the people with avenues for opportunities and sources of constraints in their behavior.

#### *Methodological Note*

I hope that this rather personal sharing of ways by which research has been achieved will stimulate ideas, discussions, strategies, and plans for work in the field. I still say and perhaps insist, there is no substitute for prolonged fieldwork. Being in the community and describing what you see, talking to people for long periods of time cannot be replaced by the one-shot, structured-questionnaire approach. Perhaps, the mixture of both can achieve a much better perspective. If only for this, anthropologists can be said to have contributed to field techniques in urban research. Perhaps the results of the anthropologist's qualitative description of what he has seen and experienced – what has been called the ethnoscience approach – can be used to construct with confidence questionnaires which include those cultural units which are meaningful to the people being studied.

#### *Note*

The author is chairman of the department of anthropology, University of the Philippines. He received the Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Chicago in 1963. This is the slightly revised version of a paper presented at the National Convention of the Philippine Sociological Society, held at Bocobo Hall, University of the Philippines, Quezon City, on January 20–21, 1973.