

Taking it to the Streets: Engaged Research in Political Science¹

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You cannot go back to every place you have ever been. But you can return to some. For social science researchers, it is all too common to conduct field research, learn what one can, and then be done with a place. This article argues there can be great value to engaging communities with research and taking results back to the “streets” after academic research has been completed. Not only is it generally morally right and the responsible thing to do, but it can also hold great meaning for people who contributed to research, provide an opportunity for new insights and validation of findings, and even stimulate new research topics as new issues arise. “Engagement” has become a buzzword across many scientific and social science fields, but has taken on a variety of meanings, and it has rarely been considered how to best engage after a project has been completed. While post-research engagement may not be appropriate or feasible for every setting or research project, this article urges researchers to think ahead about future engagement at the moment the research is being conducted, or even prior to setting foot on the ground. I discuss the literature on engagement from anthropology and political science. I then detail my recent engagement process of sharing results from a study of nonviolent mediation during civil conflict with the community of La India in Colombia.

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“When the hero-quest has been accomplished... the adventurer still must return with his life-transmuting trophy. The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom, the Golden Fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.”

--*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell, p.178

You cannot go back to every place you have ever been. But you can return to some. As social science researchers, it is all too common to conduct research, learn what one can, and then be done with a place. There is a hurry to move on and do more, and the early phases of the next project always seem more exciting. This article urges researchers not to think of a project as finished once the editor’s acceptance letter has arrived. Further engagement, or re-engagement, holds the potential for additional learning and to see the contributions of the research through to fruition.

Research engagement and dissemination of results means more than just publishing or briefing results to policymakers. While these activities are helpful, they do not necessarily redound to the people who contributed to the research or who might most benefit from it (or at least they do not do so directly). Like Joseph Campbell’s hero of the monomyth, the work of political scientists can be like the hero’s journey, to return with the “ultimate boon.” In some fields, such as medical research, this can literally be an “elixir” or medical treatments, although it can also mean the production and dissemination of knowledge and findings.² I do not egotistically claim that we, as academics, are heroes, but that we can have the duties of heroes, and must complete a similar trajectory.³ Too often scholars are guilty of stopping at the “refusal of return” and do not finish the cycle of moving from academic meditation to bestow boons on society. And for good reason: it is hard and a lot of work!⁴

² According to Campbell, “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (28). Vogler (2007) adapts this perspective to writers of literature.

³ In the subsequent section on the ethics of return, I note however, that in some cases, researchers must consider whether and how the research findings will be viewed as “boons” and will influence the community or stakeholders.

⁴ According to Campbell, “But the responsibility has been frequently refused. Even the Buddha, after his triumph, doubted whether the message of realization could be communicated, and saints are reported to have passed away while in the supernal ecstasy. Numerous indeed are the heroes fabled to have taken up residence forever in the blessed isle of the unaging Goddess of Immortal Being.”

I argue that there can be great value to engaging communities with academic research and taking results back to the “streets” after research has been completed (i.e., beyond possible self-serving researcher motives of “engagement” merely to recruit study participants). Not only is it morally right and the responsible thing to do, but it can also hold great meaning for people who contributed to research, provide an opportunity for new insights and validation of findings, and even stimulate new research topics as new issues arise. However, professional incentives in political science mean these outcomes often fall by the wayside. Further, since political science does not have its own empirical methods, it is not surprising it does not have its own clear methods of engagement as well. Re-engagement is neither simply an emotional, “feel good” enterprise, a fad or a waste of time. There are ethical and pragmatic reasons to do it, and there is also the possibility of real-world impacts.

In this paper, I first review basic trends in the growth of engaged research and discuss the literature on engaged research in the social sciences. Next, I consider the limited forms of engaged research that have been conducted in political science. I then detail my recent engagement process of sharing results from a recent study I conducted on nonviolent mediation during civil conflict with the community of La India in Colombia. Lastly, I discuss some of the ethical tensions that may arise in returning research findings to the field. Based on this experience I conclude with some recommendations for how other researchers can implement re-engagement practices as part of their research projects.

Approaches to Engagement in the Social Sciences

Existing writing on engaged forms of research argues for the importance of engaged research and also notes some tradeoffs involved in different forms of engagement. In Stokes’ call for greater engagement, he notes, “...disconnected scholarship can become intellectually arid; it exists only for the personal gratification of the author (Stokes 1997, in Percy et al. 2006).” I discuss the various forms of engaged research and situate where returning research findings fits among them. The review suggests that there are scattered examples of returning research that are feasible for political scientists and other scholars and that different benefits may accrue to both

researchers and former research participants. I argue that returning findings can involve and aid previous research participants, provide a deeper, more complete understanding of research results, and promote dissemination policy recommendations without compromising the research process and risking confounded research designs and results.

“Community engaged research” is a buzzword in academia, but there is not a common understanding of what this concept entails.⁵ For some, “community engaged research” is synonymous with service-learning. Others define this concept in more traditional academic terms, where the researcher incorporates the community as a contributor to his/her academic fieldwork. The level of engagement varies widely. Some researchers only interact with communities to solicit information, whereas other researchers involve communities at all stages of the research process.

Several authors highlight *mutual benefit* and *participation* as defining characteristics of community engaged research. Percy et al. note that research becomes “the scholarship of engagement through its active and interactive connection with people and places outside of the university in the activities of scholarship, setting goals, selecting means and methods, applying means and methods, reflecting on results, and dissemination of the results” (125). Atalay, in citing Grey’s definition for collaboration that informs community-based participatory research, identifies “pooling of appreciations and/or tangible resources...by two or more stakeholders, to solve a set of problems which neither can solve individually” as the hallmarks of this type of research (55).

The term “engaged scholarship” arose in the late 1990s, when the Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities popularized the term “engaged university” (Percy et al., xvii). Ernest Boyer, an American educator and president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1979-1995), is cited as an intellectual founder of engaged scholarship. Boyer’s *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1991) posits that the “scholarship of application” will move towards *engagement* when the scholar asks: “How can knowledge be responsibly applied to

⁵ This is also known as “participatory action research,” “community-based participatory research,” (CBPR, especially in medicine) and “engaged scholarship.”

consequential problems...Can social problems themselves define an agenda for scholarly investigation?" (Boyer, 21).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has been a leader in this area and has developed an accreditation process for academic institutions, resulting in the study "Community Engagement Elective Classification" from 2010.⁶ Out of 4,643 higher education institutions in the U.S., 311 total had some form of engagement programs and 305 pursued "outreach and partnerships" (the remaining six institutions pursued "curricular engagement" only). The non-profit the Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC) works to "build strong university-community partnerships and community capacity" and counts 28 member institutions. Sandmann, Thornton, and Jaeger conclude that "classification is contagious...Almost all states are represented by the engaged institutions, thus offering a national perspective on engagement" (Sandmann, Thornton, and Jaeger, 5). There has also been an increasing number of engaged scholarship awards and funding opportunities across universities.

Post-research Engagement

Lastly there are post-research notions of engagement, which is the primary focus of this paper. These include interactions with communities to validate research outputs and for the presentation and dissemination of results. As Benoit et al. (2006, 5) note, stakeholders "may have an interest in the research itself and may have some claim on the data because of their role as participants or as members of a partner community." Dissemination to the community is therefore important because the ethnographer may become a mirror for the people who he/she studies, reflecting their "lives, their thoughts, and their choices" (Civico 2006, 143). The community may also later be involved with sharing research with government officials or other policymakers (Atalay 2012, 197). In

⁶ The study includes community colleges and technical schools in addition to universities and 4-year colleges, reflecting voluntary participation by institutions. It does not represent a comprehensive national assessment of community engagement in higher education. "Community engagement describes collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good."

these cases, “community review” can also be used to evaluate and validate research for its contribution to a community and to positive social change” (Atalay 2012, 86). These kinds of re-engagement are possible even if the initial levels of engagement and involvement of subjects in the design or completion of the project were minimal or impersonal.

Anthropologists have pursued several such post-research forms of engagement, including long-term fieldwork and returning to the field (Kemper and Peterson Royce 2002). Howell and Talle (2011) underscore the value of the re-engagement enterprise, including through their double-entendre book title, “Returns to the Field.” Scholars have also outlined qualitative methods for re-engagement and extended fieldwork to track social change over time (Saldaña 2003 and McLeod and Thomson 2009). Examples of anthropologists who have had sustained interactions with communities and regular re-visits over many years include Vogt (1994), who documents the process of the Harvard Chiapas Project, and Wallace (2012), who studied Philippine Indigenous communities over a period of fifty years (long-term fieldwork can but does not necessarily mean taking findings back to share with research subjects).

Closer to topics of political science, some non-academic projects on international conflicts and foreign policy have done a good job of setting examples of “returning” that political science scholars can follow. In the documentary film “Reunion,” Norwegian conciliators who met with a group of Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo in 1999, before the war, revisited and reconvened the same group in 2009 (Bryn 2008, Bryn et al. 2011). They found that the structure of violence led to segregation and different accounts of events but that it was later possible to facilitate renewed dialogue. Photojournalists Dix and Fitzpatrick (2011) returned to Nicaragua after that country’s civil war ended to interview and capture images of subjects from twenty years prior. Duckworth and Kelley (2012) examine the growing engaged scholarship in the conflict resolution field.

In the next section, I describe how I conducted post-research re-engagement over political and institutional research topics with a community in Colombia.

“Walking the Word”: Re-engagement in La India, Colombia

I had the opportunity for research re-engagement in the summer of 2013 in the wake of publishing a journal article of a case study from my doctoral research. In the original case study I analyzed the nonviolent efforts of the local farmer’s association in La India, Colombia, the Peasant Workers’ Association of the Carare River (ATCC by its Spanish initials), to deal with the armed conflict and gain autonomy from the armed actors (Kaplan 2013, and now a book chapter in Kaplan 2015).⁷ From the 1970s through the late 1980s the community suffered greatly, losing its founding leaders to violence and witnessing an estimated ten percent of its residents killed during the worst years of fighting. I studied the ATCC’s investigations mechanism to protect civilians through different field visits to the region from 2007 through 2009 and additional meetings with residents in Bogotá and other cities (although even during this time some episodes of violence occurred in the community).

To understand the logic of the sophisticated institutional procedures the Carare civilians innovated, I documented and mapped the sequences of threat episodes and applied social science theories and techniques of constructing counterfactuals. I conducted extensive interviews and focus groups, since most history was oral and little was recorded, in part because some of the community leaders involved in these procedures were admittedly minimally literate. I used this information to create and analyze a dataset of community investigations and found that suspected armed actor collaborators found to be innocent in ATCC investigations were less likely to be killed than suspects believed to have collaborated.

In my re-engagement with the community, I returned for two days to interact with residents again and give a public presentation on my work. I timed my trip so my presentation could coincide with and be part of a large event that the community organized, the Peasant Assembly (*Asamblea Campesina*), that would draw residents from the outlying villages (so that I would have a large audience and reach as many people as possible). The event was held on July 17, 2013 in La India to commemorate the twenty-

⁷ In Spanish, *La Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare*. La India is located in the municipality of Landázuri, Santander Department.

fifth anniversary of the founding of the ATCC.⁸ Approximately 150 people attended the event—village leaders and lay people—in the central community park. They clustered in chairs around the dirt clearing under the shade of tall trees, with some standing in the back, leaning against trees or the walls of houses. Some people from outlying villages walked up to eight hours through forest and under the sweltering tropical sun to arrive at the town center for the event. Others had taken long journeys by motor canoes. With this in mind, I felt the imperative to honor them by doing a good job.

It was costly for me to visit La India again as well. Reaching La India from Bogotá means riding twelve hours on bus, including two hours on unpaved roads (I went one direction on motorcycle), and then the resulting carsickness, which lasts for days (and all this after first traveling to Colombia). But I felt it was an obligation. During my original fieldwork, people had volunteered much of their time to orient me, speak with me, make introductions, participate in interviews, and watch out for me and guarantee my security while I was in the community. The participants did not face great risks in speaking with me (since the community had established their own security by that point), but for some, the issues and discussions were not easy as they recalled traumatic events (human subjects protocol). I had also promised I would return and share the results when possible after I published them, in part to give some ownership of the work to back them.

Preparing for the Return

I had been presenting to other academics about La India. Now I was presenting about them to them. I was admittedly a little worried. What state would I find the community in? Would they believe me? Would I find that the analysis I had labored over was correct? Would they even remember me?!

In preparing for such a re-engagement, I reflected on how to ensure clear communication with my expected audience and considered which formats would be appropriate for them. An academic journal publication in English is nice to have but may be accessible to few or none. The residents of La India were a different audience—not typical consumers of journal articles or even op-eds. Certainly some were well educated,

⁸ It was actually the twenty-sixth anniversary of the founding of the ATCC in 1987, but was close enough for “Colombian time.”

but many were accustomed to oral traditions and were of limited literacy (not from a reading culture), and were not used to academic seminars or to digesting academic writing or language (this may be especially true across developing countries where rates of illiteracy are high). Therefore, before the talk, I consulted with leaders to run my proposed presentation approach by them and get a sense of what would be most accessible and useful to them (in terms of content, type of presentation, and timing, etc.). I had to de-technify my language and translate my thoughts into Spanish. With the few individuals that might have a deeper curiosity about my study in mind, I also translated copies of my article to leave in the high school library and community archive.⁹

Boons to the Community

When I was called to give my presentation, the current president of the ATCC farmer association introduced me by saying “It’s a good gesture for the community and it’s autonomy” (remarks translated from the Spanish). This was a man who *accompanied me* for my first visit to La India six years earlier to make sure I felt safe venturing into the “red zones” of rural Colombia (not the least because reaching La India requires passing through Puerto Boyacá, the self-proclaimed “Anti-subversive Capital of Colombia”). Without hesitation he had ridden twelve hours on a bus to meet me in Bogotá. And then he rode another twelve hours with me *back* to the community. As he spoke, the weight of that gesture weighed heavily on me and I felt indebted to not let them down.

As he continued, he emphasized that my research with them was not just a case of extracting information from the community. He noted that I came for a deeper interaction and continued that interaction by returning, saying, “This work has been very valuable because this is a person who came to learn, share with us and listen.” It was at this moment that I realized that the distance I traveled was a costly signal to them. As Woody Allen said, “Ninety percent of life is showing up.” And it is true. Just showing up can mean a lot to people. The leader of the community also referred to how my study contributed to the “construction of peace” by using the indigenous adage “*caminar la palabra*,” or literally that I had “walked the word.” Informally, the phrase might be

⁹ Colombian colleagues Esperanza Hernández Delgado and Gloria Inés Restrepo and the Center for Historical Memory (CMH) also made tremendous efforts to return their research findings to the community.

translated to “Talk the talk and also walk the walk.”¹⁰ The Puno Declaration explains the significance of this phrase to the ACIN Indigenous organization of Cauca Department:

Communication is the spinal column of humanity. This has been practice since our people began to walk the Mother Earth. We were called to recuperate the word itself, to decolonize it, to take up once again the task of walking the word together, united in our diversity, and communicate from the vision of the communities by constructing mediums of communication that truly express who we are (ACIN 2009).¹¹

The declaration states that it is not just (engaged) actions that matter, but that taking ownership of and spreading ideas and carrying a community’s message is also valuable work. That is to say, follow-through after action is to be praised as much action.

I gave my presentation and then there was a short question-and-answer session. I was also able to have a few follow-up conversations with audience members and leaders in the breakout afterwards. These moments gave them a chance to ask me additional questions about my study. But it also gave me the chance to put questions to them for additional feedback and to gauge the value and their comprehension of my presentation. Did they understand the presentation? Did the presentation help? How? Did the research and findings help?

One person commented that my presentation surprised her because she felt I “knew more than most people from the community about our process.” Some people had not realized that some of the events I cited were recorded in their archive documents or that those documents were even in their own community archive. Based on my approach, one person realized they could contribute to organizing their own community history, saying, “We can do that kind of work.”

In an instrumental way, the re-engagement also provided important feedback for the community to see how their experiences are represented to the outside world and get assurances that their accounts (whether they are about community successes or failures)

¹⁰ Also “Carry the message,” or “Be the change the you want to see.”

¹¹ In Spanish: “La comunicación es la columna vertebral de la humanidad. Esta ha sido ejercida desde que nuestros pueblos comenzaron a caminar en la Madre Tierra. Estábamos llamados a recuperar la palabra propia, a descolonizarla, a retomar la tarea de caminar la palabra juntos, unidos en nuestra diversidad, y a comunicar desde la visión de los pueblos construyendo medios de comunicación que expresen realmente lo que somos.”

are being communicated accurately. This concern was voiced by the ATCC leader when he said, “People that don’t know the region and [observe] from far away have their perceptions and concepts that they write and circulate.” The question session after the presentation allowed the audience to gain additional feedback about their community. One man wanted to know “What do people outside of Colombia think about the ATCC?” Another asked, “How did you get interested in the topic and come to La India”? At this point, I had the opportunity to share examples with them of communities from other parts of the world that I had come across.

I was surprised to find my presentation also had additional real-world impacts. One man said, “Your talk motivated many people here, because some were losing faith with the [ATCC] process.” I graciously thanked the man for his comment but was a little skeptical that he was able to get such a quick read of the crowd. “How do you know?” I asked. “Because you motivated me!” He replied (and suggested others in the crowd had felt the same way). During the years of conflict, community leaders had been taking particular actions to protect people who came under threat. This man, like many, had not been aware of the lengths to which these leaders had gone and risks they had assumed. The comprehensive history was known only to few since the villages are dispersed and the events had not been tabulated or regularly reported. The presentation therefore reminded them of their history in a new way and reinforced that their process is valuable. This reminder was helpful to encourage residents to reengage with the process and, crucially, keep the organization alive as it was repurposed to new tasks and goals. In this sense, my talk inadvertently became part of the participatory and nonviolent norm promotion for which this community is known.¹²

In a similar vein, one audience member used the presentation as an opportunity to make some public comments to underscore that if their community’s model is known abroad and worth studying by outsiders, then residents should also pay attention to it and continue to take it seriously and support it. Perhaps a little aspirationally (and preaching to the choir of those residents involved enough with the association to attend the event), the individual exhorted the audience to unite and participate, “When the ATCC calls us to

¹² E.g., especially for youths that had come of age to participate in the association, long-time residents who became more engaged with the association, or newcomers to the region.

meetings, we attend; to a community project, we come out [and work]; to a march or protest in favor of the protection of life, we are there and available day or night to strengthen the community process.” In this sense, through my study, the “word” had walked to the rest of the world and then the message circled back again to La India. In sum, many people were involved in my research project but knew little of its origins, why their community drew outsiders to study it, or how the research process works from start to finish. The presentation was educational for them in several ways, closing the research circle.

Boons to the Researcher

Validation of data and findings. As part of my post-mortem conversations, I was also able to gain valuable feedback on and validation of my research (even though I may not ever publish it in an academic outlet beyond this article). The attendees of my presentation felt my analysis was largely correct. By contrast, some attendees felt that other researchers had come to the community, completed their projects, left the community, and then later published their work, but made errors or conveyed incomplete assessments of the community (i.e., one man felt that a previous study had perpetuated a stereotype that Afro-Colombian residents of the community were not hard workers).

Consistent with my previous findings, I also heard observations about a neighboring community that seemed relatively historically unorganized compared to La India and that also suffered some tragic massacres. I heard confirmation that at one time it had been the “house of paramilitaries” and that, based on the sayings and everyday language used there, there was also more of a “culture of war.” Bellicose nicknames, some half-comical, were even common among the residents, including “*Tirolento*,” or “Slow Shot” (a play on *Tirolfijo*, or “Sure Shot,” the *nom de guerre* of former FARC leader Manuel Marulanda). It was also commented that some residents had stories of torture and that the village junta councils had not historically functioned well (and some theories were supplied as to why).

I was also able to ground-truth historical estimates of coca crops (the plant from which cocaine is produced) in the region that I produced after I had completed my initial fieldwork in the community based on satellite imagery from the UN. The data indicated

certain villages of the region were hubs of coca cultivation, which contributed to increased contestation, denunciations of suspected armed group collaborators, and violence. I got confirmation that the areas indicated by data largely overlapped with recollections of where coca had been grown. The validation of findings can lead to improved understanding that benefits the local community and also clarifies the utility the findings may have for other similar communities.

Observing changes. Finally, the visit also provided a chance to do some additional “soaking and poking” to make some time-series observations among changes I saw in the community since my last visit and share them with the community. I saw people that had been kids five years earlier now having grown to be adolescents and young adults. Some had advanced to take better jobs within the community (and some outside the community in larger cities), growing into new roles, accepting responsibility, and participating in, maintaining, and steering the ATCC organization and process. Others were working in the lumber mill six days a week, ten hours a day, hauling heavy beams of wood under the hot sun from the motor canoes on the river bank to the mill and from the mill to the trucks. They at least had jobs, but not the most gainful employment or with clear opportunities for advancement or growth. These cross-temporal (diachronic) snapshots underscored the human development challenges of excluded communities in a personal way.

I also noticed a squad of blue-uniformed antidrug police resting with their packs in the shade on the side of one of the dusty streets of the village. They were still conducting at least sporadic antidrug patrols in the area by foot. Yet, on my previous visits, I recalled seeing more military patrols (in green camouflage) moving through La India on their way to patrol the outlying villages, so the shift from the army to police was a positive sign. This experience underlined how return can prove helpful for evaluating theories that predict either persistence or change in social conditions. In this case, I was able to observe how successful community management may shift patterns of interaction with state institutions over time.

New research issues. In my return visit to La India, I also became aware of new social issues that had arisen in the community since my previous visit. These issues represent opportunities for theory generation and possible topics for new research. Since the security situation had largely stabilized by 2013, the community and the ATCC were beginning to focus their attention and efforts on land titling and existing land conflicts. The mediation procedures that were previously used to calm neighborly disputes (including over property rights) and conflicts with armed groups were being more forcefully put toward resolving deeper land conflicts. This suggests the broader research question of how civilian institutions that emerge out of conflict are adapted to post-conflict conditions and challenges. Productive answers to this question could have implications both for the community and for other communities in Colombia and around the world.

I was also able to observe the state of community organization in the region. Now that the security threat had partially abated, the ATCC was facing the new challenge of how to motivate participation among residents for new community endeavors (including protecting the environment and creating micro-enterprises). The potentially self-undermining dynamics of the ATCC's success suggests processes of endogenous institutional change (Greif and Laitin 2004) that are most easily observed over extended periods of time. However, I also learned that new citizen security threats had emerged since my last visit to the community, including continuing threats by delinquent criminal bands (commonly referred to as BACRIM). This suggested possibilities for studying the topic of post-conflict and post-demobilization resurgence of crime.

In sum, there are a number of reasons to re-engage with research participants and communities, but one of the biggest is the intrinsic reward of ongoing human relationships and making a contribution to people on the ground. At the time of my remarks, the ATCC leader said, "Thanks for this accompaniment. The door to La India is open" (*La puerta de La India está abierta*). Indeed, it was on this visit I found I was able to accompany the community, not by direct activism (as outlined by Mahony and Eguren 1997), but through my research. It may not be the most rational reason for a research trip, but it definitely feels good.

The Ethics of Returning

It may seem that returning to communities and constituencies to share research findings is unequivocally the right thing to do (and I have indeed worked to make that case). Indeed, if research subjects are to be treated as ends in themselves and not simply the means to a research end, then returning with findings can constitute a scholarly duty. However, returning findings is not always ethically unambiguous. Community involvement in disseminating research findings raises a particular set of ethical concerns stemming from potential unintended harms; conflicts of interest among different stakeholders; misuse of data; perpetuation of stereotypes; and questions of ownership and benefits of the data, etc. (Benoit et al. 2006). Just as mere presence as a participant-observer in a community can influence local behaviors and attitudes, the sharing of results itself can also be seen as an intervention, good or bad. Under these circumstances, precautions should be taken to do no harm, or at least anticipate and minimize potential harm.¹³

Restricting engagement to returning findings at least has the benefit of avoiding the risk of excessive activism and limited objectivity and detachment during the research process. As Civico (2006, 132) notes, there are ways in which “the anthropologist can find himself in situations where he unintentionally becomes an agent of change.” Relative to other forms of engagement, the post-research return to share results is perhaps a step removed from direct activism and therefore reduces the risk of confounded results. However, ethical concerns are not eliminated. Although Civico points to the challenges of engagement during the research process itself, even accompaniment through dissemination of research can have unpredictable real-world impacts.

If one is returning to share positive findings about a particular social process, there may be clear reason to believe it will be beneficial for research subjects (as was largely the case with the ATCC process). But it can become murkier if the results are negative (bringing other, less fortunate communities I studied in Colombia to mind). At the least, such findings may be neutral or have no impact and be quickly forgotten or ignored. At the worst, they could contribute to harmful outcomes. In the exchange in La India, I shared the predominantly positive results of successful conciliations that

¹³ I thank Adria Lawrence for encouraging me to develop this line of thinking.

protected residents under threat. Yet there were also certainly cases of conciliation failures and breakdowns in their procedures, where residents still ended up harmed by armed actors, which I shared as well. I did not feel it right to conceal this truth, but I was aware that inconvenient truths could also have negative repercussions (i.e., is a returning hero still carrying “boons” if sharing cases of failure?).

Prudent researchers will weigh the costs and benefits of return. Yet there are few criteria for how to do this. One guidepost is the ethics approval scholars must obtain from Institutional Review Boards (IRB) prior to conducting research involving human subjects. This includes a risk-benefit assessment of how the research process may impact study participants, with positive interactions with researchers and the production of knowledge commonly listed as benefits (in the social sciences, at least). Such an exercise should be taken up again when considering dissemination and returning of findings.¹⁴ On a case-by-case basis, researchers should be aware about how findings will be received and interpreted by different segments and individuals within communities. First, researchers should consider what the benefits of research dissemination are and what it might mean for findings to help communities and individuals. Would it make people know that they were perceived accurately and make them feel their voices were heard (and by whom)? Would they gain useful information and awareness that they did not previously have? If they were to act on such insights, would it positively alter conditions on the ground?

Researchers should secondly also consider whether it is a duty to bring non-findings or deleterious findings back to communities, or whether the effects of returning findings cannot be easily anticipated. For instance, could any meaningful or lasting learning still arise from negative findings, and would such learning outweigh the potential distressing, deflating, or deactivating effects of bad news? Could negative findings lead to negative changes in behaviors within the community? Depending on the parameters of the original research design, there could be additional concerns of privacy and re-contacting study participants, as well as challenges involved in convening the complete set of original participants (since some but not all may still be present, or even

¹⁴ In some projects, Institutional Review Board protocols may commit researchers to share study results with research participants.

living). For example, only some of the original ATCC study participants could attend the ATCC event, while many could not. The feasibility and wisdom of returning may further depend on the current context of the community. Some communities may be more welcoming to returning researchers or more able to digest research findings than others. For instance, communities with low literacy rates may not have the skills to interpret, manage or implement complex findings. Or, if the security situation is unstable or if there are hostile cleavages within community, sharing findings could put individuals (including the researcher) at risk or possibly provide political ammunition to contending factions.

In sum, there are many ethical reasons to return research findings to research participants and their communities, but in some cases more complicated considerations and tradeoffs may also arise. The return of research findings is less invasive and more desirable than certain “engaged” research designs where favoritism or exclusion can arise during the data collection process. But potential risks must also be taken into account and call for increased awareness of how communities may perceive a return visit. So, while this text calls for certain forms of participation in research and engagement by political scientists, it also sounds a note of caution that is not often heard among the rush toward engagement.

Conclusion

Too often we forget the “social” part of social science. By returning to La India, I became not just “*El Gringo*” but “*El Gringo Que Volvió*,” the American who returned. Other researchers had visited La India to do their projects but never came back, and the community never knew how those projects turned out. There are limits to doing follow-ups and it is not always possible—I unfortunately could not visit every community I studied for my larger project. But part of the poor incentives of the field is that follow-up is not valued. Researchers are often too eager to move on to the next project, without giving back to the subjects of their research. Hopefully that can change. One suggestion would be for journals to include sections for articles on engagement and follow-up, just

as some have sections for datasets or short research notes.¹⁵ A recent positive development is the website: engagedresearcher.net One does not have to be a “rogue sociologist” (Venkatesh 2008) to do engaged research. One just has to follow up.

The process documented here sets an example, a roadmap of how academic follow-through can be conducted for both locals and academia. It may not be cost-free, but nor is it necessarily impossible. To “walk the word” means more than just taking findings to elite policymakers. It means bringing insights back to the streets, to return the boons of knowledge to society. While some forms of engaged research are feasible mainly for particular types of studies and research designs, re-engagement can apply to studies of communities in almost any field using any methods, whether they be surveys, formal models, interviews, or even more removed forms of measurement and analysis. Re-engagement itself can also take different forms for different types of projects and “communities.”¹⁶ Public presentations, like the kind I gave to La India, are not the best way to re-engage, they are just *a* way.

My experience with the ATCC in La India, Colombia provides examples of different kinds of re-engagement interactions that can occur between researchers and communities and shows both moral and practical reasons for doing so. The community got a shot of reinvigoration from seeing its history cast in a new light. As a researcher, I gained validation of my previous research and insights about potential new research issues. As I found, in contrast to other forms of engagement, re-engagement can help avoid ethical concerns related to the Heisenberg principle of social research, where investigators end up influencing conditions on the ground in unanticipated ways through direct activism during research. A final reason to be a good researcher-citizen is to not burn bridges for other researchers who might come study communities and institutions, and instead keep doors open, preserve relationships and leave good impressions.¹⁷ Re-

¹⁵ For example, *Foreign Affairs* publishes “Postscript” articles where previous authors comment on how their work has held up over time. A recent positive development to promoted engaged research is the website: <http://theengaged.weebly.com/>.

¹⁶ Policy institutions or other organizations or fora can also be thought of as “communities” in a broad use of the term if their employees or members were original participants in the research process and the provision of data.

¹⁷ As part of my larger dissertation project I conduct similar engagement exercises with the Colombian Agency for Reintegration (ACR) for the component of the research that involved interviews with ex-combatants from guerrilla and paramilitary groups. While I was unable to track down subjects from those

engagement can help limit research fatigue by avoiding leaving false expectations about the benefits of participation in research.¹⁸

The only task that remains now is to bring this study back to La India as well.

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interviews, I translated and turned in a report to the agency—apparently one of the first researchers to do that kind of follow-through.

¹⁸ I heard of this problem in conversations with USAID researchers and contractors about the program to help “consolidate” state presence in one region of Colombia. To craft stronger bids for a contract, the prospective contractors flooded the region to interview residents to better understand the region and their concerns, but then only the winning contractor returned and most other bidders did not. They were able to help only a small portion of residents with extensive assistance, dashing expectations of many. The creation of expectations combined with limited re-engagement ended up hurting the potential success of the program.

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