

‘They might mistake you for an “informant”’

Anthropology in the time of the Philippine drug war

Gideon Lasco

Abstract

This article is a reflection on doing anthropology in the Philippines amid the government’s punitive antidrug campaign and on the impact of ethnographic research on public discourses on drugs. Using my own ethnographic research as a starting point, I outline how a journal article I published about the lived experiences of young men who use drugs took on renewed significance years later, in a different policy regime. I then outline a research agenda for the anthropology of drug use in the country. Despite the ethical, methodological, and personal challenges of drug-related research, the potential to give voice to ‘hidden populations’ and argue for humane, evidenced-based policies should encourage anthropologists and other social scientists to persevere.

Keywords

drug policy, drugs, methamphetamine, ethics, ethnography, Philippines

Introduction: The social life of a journal article

When in 2014 I published an article from my master’s thesis about the lived experiences of marginalized young men who use drugs in the Philippines (Lasco 2014), I thought it was a

fitting conclusion to the ethnographic research I had carried out from 2011 to 2013. While I maintained a keen interest in drug policy in the Philippines, I had since moved on to researching the ‘meanings and materialities of height’ in the country as a doctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam. By 2016, however, events in the Philippines would give my research a newfound significance. On 30 June 2016, his first day in office, President Duterte declared a ‘war on drugs’, vowing that the fight would be ‘relentless’ (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2016). He would go on to say that drug users are ‘no longer viable as human beings in this planet’ (Placido 2016), and that he would be happy to slaughter the three million ‘addicts’ in the country (Villamor 2016). Within six months, 2,363 deaths were reported in ‘legitimate police operations’ (Philippine National Police 2016; see also Kreuzer 2016), provoking sharp and divergent responses from various agencies and nongovernment actors. No longer a marginal issue, as it had been the previous several years, drugs were now at the forefront of public discourse.

It was around this time that my 2014 article started being cited by people other than academics, including NGO staff, activists, and journalists. For instance, it was referenced by Amnesty International in their report on the human rights situation in the Philippines (Amnesty International 2017, 40), a report that was described by Duterte as ‘naive and stupid’ (Romero 2017). I was also invited by an editor from *The Conversation* to write about the drug war. In the two commentaries I penned for them, I likewise had to cite my own work (see Lasco 2016a, 2016b). My three publications subsequently led to invitations to participate in various fora about the Philippine drug war. In workshops and at roundtables, I had a chance to enter into dialogue with government officials, academics, and activists. Drawing on my research findings, my overarching message was that drugs are useful for marginalized young men for whom income opportunities are limited, because it gives them energy, sleeplessness, and a disinhibition that allows them to work harder and longer – a point also made by other scholars in the region (Sherman et al. 2008; Dixon et al. 2015).

Despite the seeming impact of my research beyond academic anthropology, I knew that there would always be questions concerning the validity of my claims. These mainly concentrated on my ethnographic methodology and the ‘rigour’ of qualitative work, which did not come as a surprise when participating in an environment in which what counts as ‘evidence’ is taken to be quantitative. ‘How big is your sample size?’ one toxicologist pointedly asked me. There were also questions of generalizability. ‘Your work is interesting, but it’s just one community, while we’re dealing with an entire country’, a police officer told me. ‘If you can provide *more* evidence, please send it to us’.

This demand for more ‘convincing’ (read: quantitative) evidence and the dismissal of ethnographic insights as mere ‘anecdotes’ are often faced by anthropologists, rooted as they

are in the very question of what counts as knowledge (see Hastrup 2004; Engelke 2008). This is particularly true in health-related knowledge. For example, Stefan Ecks (2008) writes of an ‘asymmetry of power’ between medical anthropology and biomedicine, and calls for anthropologists to engage critically – and reflexively – with what counts as ‘evidence’, even as we continue to assert the importance of context. One of my responses to the requests I received for ‘convincing’ evidence was to go back to my data and publish more articles from it, in the hope of at least furnishing a ‘thicker description’ (see Geertz 1973) of my interlocutors’ lives. This move led to two more publications: one focusing on the intersections between sex work and drug use (Lasco 2018a) and another on how young people engage with law enforcement (Lasco 2018b). Nonetheless, I also felt that new research needed to be done, not just to counter the drug war or to inform the raging debates around it, but also to document what was happening in the country, especially from the perspective of those most affected by it.

Ethnography and beyond: What anthropologists can do

What sort of anthropological research needs to be done in the Philippines? Given the near-total lack of understanding we have about drug use in the country, ethnographic work remains paramount. Asking ‘what drugs do’ in the everyday lives of the people who use them may sound cliché, but in a country where such an understanding can potentially counter government discourse it remains crucial. What little research has been done in the past requires validation across geographies, genders, socioeconomic classes, age groups, intersectionalities, and temporalities. The government’s war on drugs focuses on *shabu* (methamphetamine), the drug of choice in the country. *Shabu* is held up as an exceptional drug because, according to the president, ‘it damages the brain’, unlike heroin or cocaine (Salaverria 2017). But an anthropological research agenda should also cover other drugs of concern like cannabis, MDMA (ecstasy), and nalbuphine hydrochloride (an injected drug prevalent on the island of Cebu that is associated with high HIV infection rates), among others, especially in light of the reports that *shabu* users are turning to other drugs because of the drug war (see for example Bunachita 2016). Furthermore, the work of Anita Hardon and colleagues in the ChemicalYouth Project shows that instead of categorizing drugs as, for example, ‘illegal’, ‘narcotics’, ‘medicines’, and so on, it is often more useful to look at ‘chemicals’ more broadly and consider how and why people use them (Hardon and Hymans 2014; Dalisay 2015). And so the broader project must include ‘legal addictions’ like alcohol and nicotine, ‘traditional’ narcotics like betel nut and various fermented beverages, and comparative study of these various substances and their interactions.

But it is not just the chemicals themselves that must be charted. Various ‘hidden populations’ (Wiebel 1990; Griffiths et al. 1993) involved in the drug war also need to be

documented. Foremost of these are the affected communities, but there are others. Police officers' own perspectives and lived experiences, for instance, have not found their way into political or scholarly discourse, and similar work elsewhere has proved to be insightful (for example Rhodes et al. 2006). The voices of drug suspects in jails and prisons are likewise largely unheard, and researchers can also draw from prison sociology (see Candaliza-Gutierrez 2012). Researchers can tap not just from the anthropology of drug use (see Page and Singer 2010) but, *inter alia*, notions of 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes 1996) and the anthropology of suffering (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997; Das 2001). Just as important as the 'experience-near' accounts of the drug war are studies that link them to the broader political contexts of drug use in the country (see Curato 2016), as well as its regional and global connections. Works like that of Jarrett Zigon (2015), which acknowledge both the 'shared condition' and 'local complexity' of the drug war in its various locales, can help depoliticize drugs by properly framing the issue in its historical and global contexts.

Besides conducting ethnographic research, anthropologists can play a major role in interrogating the truth claims and knowledge claims made by the government and other actors. One example is how they portray people who use drugs. As ethnographic research all over the world has shown, drug users are social actors who, despite social and physiological constraints, have some measure of agency. However, much of the public discourse in the Philippines, from media reportage to school textbooks, has portrayed drug 'addicts' as a homogenous social evil, thereby laying the moral justification for – or at least mirroring – Duterte's rhetoric (see, for example, Sotto 1994; Vidal 1998). More than two decades ago, medical anthropologist Michael Tan (1995, 28) observed that a 'moral panic' based on a misrepresentation of drugs in society had 'translated into political pressure to "crack down"'. How these perceptions have persisted and evolved through the years, and how they have been mobilized, remains largely unexplored by scholars.

Anthropologists can also interrogate the deployment of certain numbers and 'indicators' to legitimize interventions. Duterte, for instance, has claimed that there are 'four million drug addicts' in the country, despite the government's own data saying that there are 1.8 million. But even this smaller figure is debatable, since it is defined as 'people who used drugs at least once a year' (Dangerous Drugs Board 2016). With all sorts of conflation, distortions, and misinterpretations around these figures, the knowledge they aid in producing, and the practices they enable, anthropologists can tap into social theorizing about the role of numbers in governance to challenge these claims (see Merry and Conley 2011).

A final role anthropologists can take is to critically examine discourses coming from health professionals. While viewing drug use as a 'public health problem' (as the former health minister described it) is preferable to seeing it a 'social evil' – this equally monolithic view is

belied by ethnographic accounts that reveal addiction to be a complex range of phenomena that defy the domains demarcated as ‘physiological’, ‘psychological’, or ‘social’. As with the rest of medical anthropology, the challenge here is to demand an acknowledgment of complexity in a field that is critiqued for its overreliance on protocols and clinical practice guidelines (Goldenberg 2006; Knaapen 2014).

Finally, beyond the research proper, there is the crucial task of communicating findings to various audiences. Calls for more public engagement have been nagging academia for a long time (see Low et al. 2010) and I think it is especially important for issues of immediate concern. In the Philippines, I believe that ‘public engagement’ can mean speaking to and working with the actors I mentioned above: NGOs, human rights activists, government agencies, and journalists, among others. As for the public-at-large, perhaps we can also explore using various media to document our field sites and working with artists to convey our messages more effectively. Films like *Kill the Pushers* (Buenaventura 1972) show how the entertainment industry can coproduce stereotypes of drug users, but they also raise the possibility of using the same media to counter such portrayals. In any case, further and better research can give anthropologists the content and confidence by which to voice alternative perspectives on the drug war, and the insights drawn from them.

Challenges and imperatives

Given the unprecedented nature of the situation in the Philippines, it is not an exaggeration to say that the path ahead is fraught with danger, on top of the usual challenges that conducting qualitative research among vulnerable populations entails (see Wiebel 1990; Page and Singer 2010). The epistemological and methodological issues mentioned above are also raised by ethics board reviewers (many of whom are more familiar with biomedical epistemologies and research methods), causing delays in getting ethical approval. In my experience, for instance, gaining approval to obtain verbal, instead of written, consent requires considerable justification, although the situation may change as more and more social scientists participate in ethics committees.

Then there are the risks in the fieldwork proper. What if you endanger the lives of the people you are studying by drawing attention to them? As with most ethnographic work, trust remains a key element in building a long-term relationship, and this may require a well-defined security protocol. In an upcoming ethnographic research project, we are working with a people’s organization that has a long-standing relationship with both the community and the local government, so as to minimize these risks and we have also taken steps to anonymize both the site of our study and the identities of our participants. Our own safety as researchers is equally a concern. ‘What if you’re mistaken for an informant?’ asked a

member of one ethics committee, when reviewing plans for an earlier project. The word ‘informant’ – favored by anthropologists for a long time – takes on a new meaning in a drug war where being labelled as such can have fatal consequences. There are police informants who can spell the difference between life and death for drug users; they are seen as a threat. But informing the public about drug users’ lived experiences may also be seen as a threat by the government. Caught between these two fraught possibilities, we anthropologists have to count on the relationships we build among local and national stakeholders to ensure our own safety. But this will necessarily be an iterative process.

Finally, beyond physical risks during the research, there are also professional risks involved. One international organization who wanted to hire me to consult on drug policy withdrew their invitation, saying that my commentaries on the drug war (for example Lasco 2017) were too ‘sensitive’ and might jeopardize their relationship with the government. While academia in the Philippines is relatively autonomous, it is not immune from political interference. Academics whose ideas gain visibility risk censure. When Carl Hart, a neurologist from Columbia University, countered Duterte’s claims about methamphetamine damaging the brain, he was ridiculed by the president as a ‘son of a bitch who has gone crazy’ and was threatened online and offline (Drug Policy Alliance 2017). With these ominous precedents and an increasingly uncertain political future, there is a risk that those who are perceived as dissenter – a category that might someday include ‘subversive researchers’ – will face similar or more severe threats.

Even so, when I think of my ‘informants’ and the very real possibility that they are dead by now, I am reminded of what is at stake in this research, not just for the country today but for the ‘politics of the future’ (Boyer 2006). Thus, despite the grave challenges, I strongly feel that the work must continue.

About the author

Gideon Lasco is an assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of the Philippines Diliman. He obtained his medical degree at the University of the Philippines and his PhD at the University of Amsterdam’s Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. His research interests include youth studies, human stature, pharmaceuticals, and illicit drugs.

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