**WHO CARRIES THE BUCKETS?**

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In my first summer working on the Proyecto Arqueológico Tepeticpac in Tlaxcala, Mexico, I had a friendly battle of wills with a man named Huicho. For several weeks, we dug a 2x2 m pozo de sondeo (sounding unit) in a place where we expected shallow stratigraphy, but instead found almost three meters of fill. In those weeks, Huicho did not let me carry a single bucket of dirt to the screen. The moment I reached for the handle of a bucket, he was there, taking it out of my hands with a friendly smile. It bugged me. Huicho had much stronger arms than I did, but I was certainly capable of carrying a five-gallon bucket of dirt a couple of meters to the screen. Did he think I couldn’t?! Was it because I’m a woman? Did he think women are weak?

In my graduate theory seminar, taught by the late great Mary Beaudry to my cohort of nine women and one man (who got an earful), we read Joan Gero’s (1985) “Socio-Politics and the Woman-at-Home Ideology” and discussed how archaeological fieldwork is coded as masculine. Men go out into the world and do the rugged manual labor and then bring home the artifacts to women, who do the housework of cleaning and organizing in the lab. We catalogued all the ways we have felt unwelcome on field sites, from the endemic sexual harassment to the ubiquitous microaggression of having buckets and other heavy objects taken out of our hands. It was a cathartic experience, a kind of consciousness-raising group where Mary assured us and we assured each other that we weren’t imagining it: we were women in a deeply patriarchal discipline.

Derald Wing Sue, author of the book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, defines microaggressions as “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue 2010, xvi). Microaggressions are commonly compared to papercuts, in that each one is a tiny irritation but a thousand would make you bleed to death. Another metaphor is mosquito bites, which carries the same significance but adds the symbolism of some mosquitoes carrying deadly diseases. A man taking a bucket out of a woman’s hands once is not just okay, it’s teamwork. When it happens over and over again, with every bucket, though, it “send[s a] denigrating message.” It’s sexist.

For my dissertation (Heath-Stout 2019) research on sexism, heterosexism, and racism in archaeology, I interviewed a diverse group of 72 archaeologists about their experiences and perceptions of these issues. I heard the bucket story over and over again from women interviewees, especially those conducting fieldwork in Latin America and the Mediterranean and Middle East. I came to expect it! Indeed, one of my mentors, a qualitative sociologist, told me that I could stop interviewing when I reached “saturation,” which I would recognize when I started correctly predicting what my interviewees would say. When I started correctly predicting the bucket story, I stopped scheduling interviews with white women.

Let me repeat that: I stopped scheduling interviews with *white* women. The bucket story was common among white women, specifically. I have several ideas of why this might be. Maybe the women of color I interviewed spent less time talking about specifically sexist microaggressions because they had much more to say about race. Maybe it’s that white women are more likely to be the recipients of such chivalrous sexism. Maybe it’s that many of the women of color I interviewed worked on historical archaeology projects that were less likely to hire local workers than the large-scale Latin American and Mediterranean projects, and those local workers were the bucket-takers.

The bucket-takers aren’t usually our highly-educated male archaeologist peers, you see. They’re the Mexican or Belizean or Guatemalan or Peruvian or Greek or Turkish or Syrian or Iraqi laborers our projects hire, specifically to do the manual labor of archaeology, manual labor like, for example, carrying heavy objects. Highly-educated white women archaeologists go to other countries, hire local men with less education, often men of color, to do manual labor for us, and then we experience them doing that manual labor as sexist. What?!

And it’s clear to many of those men that they are there to do manual, not intellectual labor. In his paper at last week’s Society for Historical Archaeology meeting, Doug Smit told an illustrative story. He was doing fieldwork in the Peruvian Andes, and had used oral histories given by his local collaborators to decide where to excavate. As they excavated a household, Doug voiced the hypothesis that the hearth was in the center. His colleague Máximo told him, “no, it’s in the corner.” Doug asked what made him think that, and Máximo explained that this was his uncle’s house, and he had stayed there as a child. Shocked, Doug asked why Máximo had never said so, and Máximo said, “you never asked!” As Doug reflected in the panel discussion, the colonial structure of the American-led field project in Perú, and Doug’s own stated interest in finding early Colonial contexts had led Máximo to believe that his own experiences as a child in 1960s were not of interest.

Ethnographers of archaeology Allison Mickel (2016; 2019), Sam Holley-Kline (2015; 2019), and Mary Leighton (2015; 2016) have investigated the roles of workers on archaeological field projects in the Middle East, Mesoamerica, and the Andes respectively. They emphasize that although archaeologists tend to see workers as primarily present to conduct manual labor so that the trained archaeologists can do the intellectual labor, workers do conduct essential work for archaeology’s knowledge production. The laborers are also thinkers.

And, on the other side, those we imagine as primarily thinkers, the professional archaeologists, are also laborers. Our macho, “cowboys of science” mentality leads us to emphasize our ruggedness and physicality, braving tough environments and doing hard physical work to bring home knowledge. It is this attitude that leads women to feel excluded and undermined when buckets are taken out of our hands: we have internalized the idea that physical strength is part of being an archaeologist.

This idea is ableist. Not everyone can carry a bucket full of dirt, but that doesn’t mean they cannot contribute to creating archaeological knowledge. There are so many different tasks on a field project: laying out units, drawing, mapping, notetaking, excavating with a variety of tools, screening. When you add the lab, there’s an even wider variety of important research tasks. Not everyone has to be able to do all of them. Indeed, on most projects there are different roles with different responsibilities and no one *does* have to do all of these tasks. Why should one’s value as participant on a dig be judged by one’s ability to do one single task? And why did we pick carrying full buckets to be that task?

Last week at SHA, I was on a panel about disability in archaeology and mentioned that I was working on this essay. The Zoom chat immediately exploded with discussion of buckets. Some colleagues shared stories of how they aren’t able to carry buckets due to disabilities and feel undermined as archaeologists. Others told of how they had injured themselves trying to carry too-heavy buckets and created or exacerbated their disabilities. Several asked why we can’t use smaller buckets on our digs, and why we all fill our buckets so full. Indeed, those buckets that Huicho took out of my hands were 5 gallon buckets full to the brim with wet, rainy-season sediment!

Our culture around buckets is a snarl of sexism, colonialism, and ableism. We operate within neocolonial structures in which men of color are paid to do manual labor, allowing predominantly white professionals and students to do intellectual labor. Then, those professionals and students must prove that they can do the manual labor as well. This division of labor requires that the archaeologist do both manual and intellectual work, while the worker is denied the right to do the intellectual labor.

In a just archaeology, the tasks on an excavation would be divided based on the abilities and interests of all of the participants rather than their race, class, nationality, professional status, and gender. Because we would value all the tasks, manual and intellectual, as necessary parts of the work of creating knowledge, we would also value all of the workers who do them. Some people would carry buckets, and others wouldn’t. Probably the buckets would be smaller and less full of sediment. They’d definitely be less metaphorically full of complicated status symbolism. Let’s build that archaeology.

One way I’m working on building that archaeology is that I’m working on forming a network of archaeologists with disabilities. We’re going to have a Zoom gathering in the next few weeks to get to know each other and talk about what kinds of projects we might want to work on together. If you’re interested in being part of that, please send me an email: I’ll put my address in the chat (laura.heath-stout@emory.edu). Thank you.

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