THE DRUG COMPANY NEXT DOOR
POLLUTION, JOBS, AND COMMUNITY HEALTH IN PUERTO RICO

TEACHER'S GUIDE

The production of pharmaceuticals is among the most profitable industries on the planet. Drug companies produce chemical substances that can save, extend, or substantially improve the quality of human life. However, even as the companies present themselves publicly as health and environmental stewards, their factories are a significant source of air and water pollution—toxic to people and the environment. In Puerto Rico, the pharmaceutical industry is the backbone of the island’s economy: in one small town alone, there are over a dozen drug factories representing five multinationals, the highest concentration per capita of such factories in the world. It is a place where the enforcement of environmental regulations and the public trust they ensure are often violated in the name of economic development.

The Drug Company Next Door unites the concerns of critical medical anthropology with those of political ecology, investigating the multi-faceted role of pharmaceutical corporations as polluters, economic providers, and social actors. Rather than simply demonizing the drug companies, the volume explores the dynamics involved in their interactions with the local community and discusses the strategies used by both individuals and community groups to deal with the consequences of pollution.

The Drug Company Next Door puts a human face on a growing set of problems for communities around the world. Accessible and engaging, the book encourages readers to think critically about the role of corporations in everyday life, health, and culture.
SUMMARY

After opening with a brief vignette to illustrate how the author became introduced to local environmental activists, the introduction presents the reader with the book’s central conflict: that high technology industries, while often presented as economic saviors for poor communities, can carry with them negative consequences for local culture and health. In the case of pharmaceutical companies, they position themselves not only as economic saviors, but literally as life-savers. In Puerto Rico they are often given credit for being part of the industrialization process that brought the island much improved health statistics and economic development – however, the highly toxic chemicals their factories have released into the air and water have left a legacy of pollution for nearby residents.

The lessons learned, through both successes and failures, of economic development and public health intervention in Puerto Rico provide important policy knowledge for developing countries, as well as for many other communities within the United States. As one of the most prevalent and profitable industries in the world, it is crucial to understand the role pharmaceutical companies play in health and culture.

DISCUSSION POINTS

The introduction serves as a foundation for the themes of the book, which include:

• the idea of “political ecology of risk”, a way of thinking about how the environment can affect people’s health
• the importance of drug companies in our perception of health, as well as their potential effects (both positive and negative) on our overall physical health
• the influence of American capitalism in the Caribbean and Latin America
• the practice of public health and the challenges of understanding environmental health effects
• the complexities of environmental activism, and how activists can sometimes come in conflict with one another
• the pervasive presence of corporations in everyday life, culture, and politics
• the beliefs, practice, and influence of the “corporate social responsibility” movement
• the health of a community may be defined differently by the community itself than by health professionals, politicians, or corporate managers
SUMMARY

This chapter tells the contemptible story of the neighborhood of Tipan and its long history of struggle with pharmaceutical-related air and water pollution. It describes the emergence of a grassroots movement to improve the functioning of the regional wastewater treatment plant, where the pharmaceuticals deposited untreated chemical wastewater from 1981 through the later 1990s. There is evidence that Tipan has a community health burden that may not be easily quantified through traditional epidemiological methods. However, the pharmaceutical companies and the local government have marginalized the health and ecological concerns of Tipan in their efforts to support the long-standing, environmentally insensitive methods of achieving economic progress. This theme is elaborated throughout the book. The purpose here is to draw the reader immediately into the experience of living in a contaminated environment and to illustrate the frustration and suffering caused by a struggle against corporate giants and their local allies.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• Who is responsible for the disposal of industrial wastes? How should those responsible be held accountable?

• Who is responsible for health? Do you always have the power to choose to live healthily? What are some influences on health that are environmental, rather than personal?

• Can corporations be members of a community? If so, what kinds of rights and responsibilities should they have?

• How do epidemiologists and other public health professionals measure health problems? Can you think of other ways to measure or describe some of the health problems in this chapter?

• The chapter opens with a map – what can the map tell readers about the irony of Tipan’s location with respect to the local pharmaceutical companies?
Chapter 2 elaborates on a number of key points in the history of Puerto Rico and Nocorá specifically, crucial for understanding how it is that the pollution problem developed in the first place. My experience in teaching this topic to students is that they often have trouble understanding how such a situation (as presented in the previous chapter) could be allowed to go so far. The chapter opens by describing through examples the process of assessing environmental impacts, and the variability often inherent in these procedures. With this information in hand it is easier to go back to the time of early industrialization on the island, to understand how regulatory agencies, government, and the companies themselves could have avoided confronting the problem for so long. The economic development of the island has had significant impact on environmental and health-related ideologies and sociocultural relationships. These dynamics have created a situation in which Puerto Ricans are generally willing to trade short-term economic gains for the long-term negative potential of serious pollution. Even those most directly affected by pollution can be ambivalent about placing the responsibility on the drug industry.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• How is the environmental impact of industrial development evaluated? Who gets to decide if a project will damage the environment or people’s health? What happens to projects that are deemed dangerous or of significant risk?

• How was “progress” understood by different players in the history of Puerto Rico in the 20th century? How do those ideas compare to how we think about progress now?

• Why is understanding history important to understanding culture? Why is understanding the economy important to understanding other social and political relationships in a society?

• What are “personalistic” political relationships? What role do they play in Puerto Rican society?

• What were the events that eventually led to the arrival of the pharmaceutical industry in Nocorá? What kinds of social changes were already underway?
SUMMARY

Continuing to explore the social roles of the pharmaceutical industry, chapter 3 examines more closely how local politics play a significant part in framing social relationships in Nocorá. This chapter briefly introduces the reader to the elaborate rituals of Puerto Rican electoral politics, tying them into broader observations about economic development and culture. The instrumental role of the alcaldes [mayors] of Nocorá in the founding of the pharmaceutical complex is explored, illustrating the defining power they wield in the community. Also explored is the question of whether or not the drug companies can be, in anthropological terms, “members” of this small community, as they claim to be, and as local politicians would like them to be seen. Of particular importance in considering this complex idea is the centrality of their participation in local rituals and token good deeds. The actions of corporate actors demonstrate how performance and perception can inform Nocoreño beliefs about whether the companies are, on balance, beneficial or harmful. Beliefs such as these have the potential to drastically influence whether or not people are willing to assign blame to the pharmaceuticals. These beliefs can even have an impact on whether people believe they have the power to change their own environmental destiny.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• Who are the major political actors in Nocorá? What kinds of variables contribute to the political power of these actors?

• What is a cacique?

• What are some of the apparent contradictions of Nocoreño public opinion about the environment? About the pharmaceutical industry?

• What is confianza? Why is it important?

• How do pharmaceutical managers talk about the community? Based on examples from the book, what do you think they mean by the word “community”?

• Why do Puerto Ricans use the term la brega to describe the struggles of everyday life?
SUMMARY

Chapter 4 zeros in on the sometimes unexpected dynamics that exist between non-profit groups that are supposedly working toward the same goal (environmental protection). Through their cultural and political influence, the pharmaceutical companies in and around Nocorá have created a cultural perspective about the environment that serves their interests in reducing costs and maximizing short term profits. However, the conflicting relationship between the Tipan activists and a larger NGO that is tied to the pharmaceuticals is not a simple one in which the larger NGO “sold out.” This chapter introduces legal and dispute resolution theories that can help the reader think in a more nuanced way about social conflict, an antidote to perceptions that such problems exist solely as either “black” or “white.” This perspective is necessary in order to be able to analyze and understand why certain actors make the decisions they do, including how people who have fought to protect some communities may take actions that are harmful to others.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• What is regulatory “capture” as described in this chapter? What is meant by “deep capture” and how does that concept relate to how anthropologists think about culture?

• What is “harmony ideology”? How does the impulse to harmonize economy and environment affect policy decisions?

• How are the environmental groups CDAN and GUIA different from one another? How are they similar (if at all)?

• What kind of influence do the pharmaceutical companies have on environmental justice organizations? Does that influence make those organizations not legitimate?

• What is a “nuisance” complaint? How is it different from a complaint of toxic pollution?

• In American popular culture it is common to speak of suing someone if you think you have been injured in some way. What are some of the aspects of the legal process that may prevent justice from being carried out?
SUMMARY

Continuing the discussion of power-laden relations between Nocoreños and the drug companies, chapter 5 examines the arrival of the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) movement in Puerto Rico in the early 2000s. A number of ethnographic examples from working with and observing Puerto Rico’s only CSR NGO, as well as the CSR-related activities of the pharmaceuticals, demonstrate the social and economic complexities masked by simplistic, feel-good CSR phrases like “triple-bottom-line” (i.e., company, customers, and community all benefit from successful business). The chapter emphasizes the unique case of Puerto Rico, while at the same time encouraging the reader to consider the many possible consequences of the global CSR phenomenon for local communities, including the problem of “greenwashing.”

Greenwashing is the practice of promoting a particular company’s environmental or sustainability practices, which are in fact of dubious impact. It is an accusation often directed at pharmaceutical companies, or sometimes at non-profit organizations operating on their behalf. However, it is important to understand how some of these organizations are attempting to leverage their influence within the business world to transform corporate practices, whether or not they are ultimately succeeding.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• What is the difference between corporate philanthropy and corporate social responsibility?

• How do managers of polluting industries (including the local water company) sometimes attempt to avoid being assigned responsibility for pollution? Is it legal? Is it ethical?

• What is paternalism? How does it influence corporate behavior in Puerto Rico?

• Can a corporation ever be socially responsible? What are the responsibilities of a business? Who are its stakeholders?

• Do you see evidence of CSR in your own life? Do you think it’s transformative? If not, could it ever be?

• Do you think having the pharmaceuticals in Puerto Rico is “worth it”? Why or why not?
SUMMARY

The concluding chapter returns to the core issue of environmental impacts on health and brings forward the pervasive problem for activists, residents, and pharmaceutical employees alike: the knowledge required to prove that there is a relationship between the environment and poor health is in the hands of “experts,” many of whom are in some way beholden to the industry. Those who are not beholden often have “captured” perspectives: their sincere beliefs, built upon the perceived economic necessity of the drug companies, lead them to discount evidence and experience presented by non-expert citizens. Workers who live in and around Nocorá are additionally vulnerable because their own skepticism about the companies can cause them to ignore restrictive safety measures, supporting the claims that if someone isn’t healthy it is “her own fault.”

In conclusion, strategies are suggested through which activists and educators can work to promote a more equitable redistribution and production of environmental health knowledge. This approach would benefit both residents exposed to pollution and employees exposed to unhealthy pharmaceutical work environments. Philanthropic and programming opportunities for the drug companies to support these efforts are also elaborated, in the event that they are legitimately interested in changing the long-term patterns in their community relationships.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

• How are some of the issues faced by pharmaceutical employees similar to those faced by residents? How are they different?

• What does it mean to change the approach to public health on a “structural” level? What would it take to make those changes happen?

• Why do some “experts” dislike working with communities? Can you think of any ideas to help overcome this type of prejudice?

• What is the relationship between environmentalism and independence ideologies in Puerto Rico? Are they necessarily always tied together?

• Why is the redistribution of knowledge described in this chapter being referred to a “radical”?

• How would you define “community environmental health”? 
SUMMARY

Following the main body of research, an epilogue is included, drawing on the most recent post-field visits and contacts to briefly describe some important events in Nocorá in the years 2006–2012. In light of changing levels of global awareness of corporations, these stories invite the reader to consider what lasting impact these social movements may have had for environmental health in Puerto Rico, and for other communities with powerful corporate neighbors.

APPENDIX

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The appendix included is an English translation of the community opinion survey used during my research.
• At the beginning of the book, the author states that she will use pseudonyms for the majority of actors described, including the pharmaceutical companies. What do you think of her explanation for doing this? Would you have made the same decision as a researcher?

• Do you think we have sufficient environmental protections under U.S. law? What information from the book supports your answer?

• Are corporations necessary to the American economy? To the world economy? Why or why not?

• Having read this ethnography, do you agree that Puerto Rico has developed a “culture of pollution”? Why or why not?

• Have you ever experienced a process that created communitas? How did it work?

• Have you ever been involved in a process that you think was trying to create communitas but failed? If so, why do you think it failed?

• How much pollution should be allowed in a residential environment? On what basis would you make that decision?

• Corporations often argue that complying with environmental regulations is expensive, and the costs will eventually need to be passed on to consumers. Would you be willing to pay more for necessary products, such as pharmaceuticals, if you thought their producers would therefore be better stewards of the environment?

• Consider the different definitions of “risk” used in everyday conversations, and compare them to the epidemiological definition of risk. Is the epidemiological definition the one that should always be used? Are there other ways worth describing circumstances we judge to be “risky”?

• How does your environment influence your behavior? Are there aspects of your environment that encourage unhealthy behaviors?

• How has industrialization in the Caribbean changed gender roles in that region?

• Have you ever participated in a government or policy process? What did you do, and what kind of impact do you think your participation had?

• What do you think are the best tactics for holding corporate entities accountable?

• Do you think a corporation can be a good neighbor?

• If a pharmaceutical company came to your community wanting to build a new factory, what kinds of questions would you ask in a public hearing?
• Research the origins of the corporation in American society. What was the original purpose of corporate entities? How has the role of the corporation changed over the past 200 years?

• Select a country in the Caribbean and find out about its relationship with the United States. What kinds of political, economic, and other cultural ties exist between the two countries? How is this relationship similar or different to the relationship between the U.S. and Puerto Rico?

• Find out where there are other communities that have a significant pharmaceutical factory presence. Do they have a history of pollution? Of health problems? Of community environmental activism? How do they compare to Nocorá?

• Find an environmental assessment document for a project in a location of interest to you. Do you think it sufficiently addresses community health issues?

• Collect some examples of corporate social responsibility campaigns, both in the U.S. and overseas. How do they compare to one another?

• Using reputable sources available on the internet, research toxic releases in your own home town. Does what you learned change the way you think about the place you are from?

• Investigate a famous disease “cluster”. How are the facts in that case similar or different from those presented in this book? What was the ultimate result in that case?

• Workplace safety, like environmental protection, continues to be a contentious global issue. Find an example of a workplace safety issue reported in the press. Does it alter your thinking about the products made by this company?