Research Ethics with Vulnerable Communities

Center for Civic Leadership Research Ethics Workshop

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Research ethics in Anthropology
- Ethical dilemmas in my fieldwork
- The subject of research
- Universality vs. Specificity
- Vacuum vs. Context
- Constructing one’s field site
- Histories of Research
- Ethical Norms in Anthropology
- Questions, Ongoing Dilemmas
Introduction

• PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology
• Instructor, FWIS class “Humanitarianism in Global Perspective”
• Thoughts about research ethics began with:
  • MA thesis
  • Pre-fieldwork project
  • Dissertation fieldwork
  • Each project raised a different set of dilemmas and considerations
Research Ethics in Anthropology – A Brief History

• “The most humanistic of sciences and the most scientific of the humanities.”

• 1960s - Politically tumultuous; geopolitical shifts

• 1970s – Decolonization; Self-reflexive literature

• 1980s – Ethics and politics are related; Moral valence to fieldwork; new kinds of questions

• Implementation of professional ethics codes
Ethical dilemmas in fieldwork

Important Questions to Ask:

• How will the actual practice of me researching them affect / impact their daily lives?
• How will my departure from the field affect/impact their daily lives? (Especially if you are in a research/volunteer capacity)
• How will the knowledge that I produce and I circulate based on this research (i.e. dissertation, journal article, essay, editorial, website, etc.), affect/impact their daily lives?
• How will the interlocutors’ engagement with me as a researcher and with my research affect/impact their daily lives?
Constructing the subject of research

• Telling a story
• Portrayals of actors in a given field site
• Relationship between research subjects and environment
• Portrayals of their vulnerabilities
Universality vs. Specificity

• Different kinds of difference / Different kinds of vulnerability
• What brings members of a group together?
• Individual differences
• Histories of a community
• Pre-interview interview, questionnaire, survey
• Modes of assessment that can create a more well-rounded understanding of the specificities of your interlocutors
Vacuum vs. Context

• No community exists in a vacuum.
• Understanding the political, social, and cultural history of a community is key.
• Histories of the research site
• Conditions the kinds of questions you can ask
• Have communities dealt with traumatic histories?
How the field site is constructed

• Geography of a community
• Homogeneity of a community
• Disparate or Bounded?
• Questions that matter to the community
• Local and national concerns
Histories of research

- The history of research in that area
- How knowledge is produced
- Exploitative practices of research
- How to avoid reproducing them
- What are the end goals of your research?
- How are they going to be used?
Ethical Norms in Research – Do No Harm

• Think through potential harmful effects
• Harm to dignity, bodily, material wellbeing
• Protecting written and material records
Be open about your research

- What is your purpose, methods, outcomes, and sponsors?
- Tangible and intangible interests
- Transparency
- Don’t omit significant information from participants
- Informed Consent
Informed Consent

- Being transparent about research goals, method, funding, sources, sponsors, expected outcomes, anticipated impacts, and rights and responsibilities of participants.
- Establish expectations around anonymity, and credit.
- Present possible impacts of participation
- Situations where confidentiality might be compromised.
- Be careful when it comes to visual media
- Inform participants of changes to research design
- Revisit and renegotiate consent
- Informed consent is: DYNAMIC, REFLEXIVE, CONTINUOUS
- Quality of the consent, not its format
Competing Ethical Obligations

• Distinguish different kinds of interdependencies
• Cross-cutting ethical obligations
• Vulnerabilities of individuals, communities, populations
• Hierarchies of power
Protect and Preserve Your Work

• Ensure the integrity, preservation, and protection of your work.
• Determine record ownership
• How will records to be stored, preserved, disposed of in the long-term
• How to protect raw data and collected material
• Must communicate this to research participants and determine what their views on this are.
• Preservation and accessibility of resulting material
Maintain Respectful Relationships

• Maintain professional relationships with participants and with your colleagues (Participants can sense tension and conflict).

• Comport oneself in a way that maintains equitable, supportive, collaborative environment.

• Avoid exploiting individuals, groups, animals, cultural, or biological material
Thank you!

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