

Research Ethics with Vulnerable Communities

Center for Civic Leadership Research Ethics Workshop

**Helena Zeweri, PhD Candidate,
Department of Anthropology, Rice University**

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!

Contact Information: hz25@rice.edu