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Ethics in the Field: Contemporary Challenges

JEREMY MACCLANCY AND AGUSTÍN
FUENTES (EDITORS)
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REVIEWED BY LISA C. DEPAOLI

Ethics in the Field: Contemporary Challenges, an edited volume by Jeremy MacClancy and Agustín Fuentes, brings together eleven contributions from researchers across the US, UK, and Japan, drawing from anthropology, behavioral ecology, and sociology. It illustrates well that ethical issues often cannot be anticipated. Many times, there are ethical concerns relevant to the particular context that do not become apparent until the research has commenced. It also refers to research that was done both before and after the mid-1990s, when formalized university ethics approval became a requirement. Before this time, there were only disciplinary guidelines on ethical practice.

Chapters cover a mix of topics including medical and web research; five chapters discuss ethics in primate research. Other topics include the investigation of ethical queries raised by the ever-more pervasive use of new technologies (Miller; Rundall) and the consequences of having a private body fund one's research (Parker; Kilshaw), an increasingly common and concerning phenomenon in these neoliberal times.

Society has also become more litigious, and so there is the need to protect informants, researchers, and institutions against lawsuits. Informed consent,

intended to advise potential research participants about what their involvement in the research might mean for them, in principle also has the role of protecting the institution and researcher from litigation. There are numerous ethical and logistical complications with the idea of informed consent, including the difficulty of obtaining or achieving consent that is truly informed, e.g., when conducting participant observation (Parker and Allen; MacKinnon and Riley; Miller; and MacClancy).

As a whole, the book's themes illustrate a number of ethical concerns that are common to primatology and social and biological anthropology. These include:

the centrality of ethics to the research methods of all three; the integral importance of ethical training to neophyte fieldworkers; persistent questions over the benefits and obstructive downsides of a prescribed code of ethics; the simultaneous presence of multiple moral codes [e.g., fieldworker, informants, local community, university] and the quandaries their encounter cause; the dearth of easy, quick answers; the sustained need to constantly negotiate moral complexities, which may well prove irresolvable in a conclusive manner; the enduring ethical consequences of long-term fieldwork, and of their persistence, even after the academic has left the fieldsite (p. 4-5).

Two further themes include the observation that ethical review and regulation has had a profound effect on research topic choices, and that ever tighter ethical regulations are not the best answer to these difficulties.

As MacClancy and Fuentes state in the opening chapter titled "The Ethical Fieldworker, and Other Problems:" "...morality...is a distinctive, essential, integral aspect of humanity that results in complex webs of ethical scenarios and conduct" (pp. 3-4) and "as moral beings in morally complex settings, we have to learn to live with ambiguity" (p. 5). They affirm that this book is the first attempt at a "transdisciplinary comparison within anthropology, broadly conceived, of ethics in the field" (p. 2), a consideration of common moral challenges faced

by fieldworkers in social anthropology, biological anthropology, and primatology, as well as what might be distinctive to the moral field practice of each. Thus, the primary aim of the book is the comparative investigation of these queries and an exploration of the common challenges that their practitioners face.

The secondary aim is to revitalize transdisciplinary anthropology, in part by focusing on methods that can be used across sub-disciplines. Thus, this book is a complementary successor to *Centralizing Fieldwork: Critical Perspectives from Primatology, Biological Anthropology and Social Anthropology* (MacClancy and Fuentes 2011), which is also a comparative exploration across the three subjects, using the practice of fieldwork as the anchoring methodology.

In case their efforts to examine these issues in a transdisciplinary way raise anyone's ire, the editors state that:

instead of trying to squeeze the variety of anthropologies into a single paradigm, we are more concerned with facilitating mutual interaction across sub-disciplinary and theoretical boundaries. We wish, in sum, to exploit, not to confine, the transdisciplinary potential of our subject (p. 2).

Considering the fracturing of our field into separate disciplines, this is a position that this reviewer appreciates: the synergism of the whole is (also) valuable and is different than the sum of its parts. This is particularly relevant for environmental and ecological anthropologists because of the often inter- and transdisciplinary nature of their work.

The second chapter, "Questioning Ethics in Global Health" (Parker and Allen), compares challenges that were encountered in two very different projects: the first based on fieldwork undertaken in a clinical setting within a UK teaching hospital on sexual networks and the transmission of HIV/AIDS in the 1990s; the second on fieldwork undertaken since 2005 at selected sites in Tanzania and Uganda on neglected tropical diseases. One fundamental issue for anthropologists is the extreme difficulty

of obtaining informed consent from all those being researched when utilizing the core method of participant observation; thus, this method may be viewed as unethical by public health and medical ethics boards. Overall, the chapter serves to illustrate the impossibility of predicting many of the ethical issues which may arise in the course of fieldwork, especially considering the multiple ways in which the political, social, and economic context shapes anthropological sites and projects. Some decisions that are faced by researchers may ultimately have life or death consequences for informants.

Parker and Allen also discuss the ethical problems that arise when institutions pressure researchers to construe biomedical interventions as successes, irrespective of the evidence. In one case, some of the issues that had been raised by the researchers included the risks and hazards of depending upon school teachers and village drug distributors to hand out treatment, lack of appropriate communication with target populations, and a continuing lack of biological monitoring. They had also expressed concern about the increasingly context free approach to mass drug administration being promoted as an idealized solution to alleviating poverty.

Chapter 3, "Ethical Issues in the Study and Conservation of an African Great Ape in an Unprotected, Human-Dominated Landscape in Western Uganda" (McLennan and Hill), addresses the problematic nature of conducting primatology in landscapes which are increasingly dominated by humans. In this case, efforts to reduce rural poverty had hastened increased conversion of unprotected forest to farmland, which ultimately led to increased human-chimpanzee conflict. McLennan found that his presence had important destabilizing effects on local human social and political dynamics. In the words of McLennan and Hill, "The possibility that by its very nature the study of a large protected mammal on unprotected land might be particularly sensitive and controversial, was not something we readily foresaw" (p. 47). One might wonder why this would be the case, but as the authors later point

out, primatologists are not as accustomed as social scientists to considering their position within the human social and political milieu in which they perform fieldwork. Finally, this chapter also considers how primatological fieldwork may inadvertently threaten the survival of the very animals whose conservation it intends to assist. It is partly for this reason that prevention and mitigation of ape-human conflicts is increasingly a focus of applied research.

In the fourth chapter, Strier reviews the evolving ethical terrain of her long-term fieldsite, asking whether long-term observational studies of primates can really be considered noninvasive. Inevitably, she demonstrates, no matter how noninvasive they try to be, human observers affect both the spaces and ecologies in and around the fieldsites. Chimpanzees and gorillas, for example, are particularly vulnerable to human infectious diseases--mainly respiratory diseases because of their biological similarities to us. The author uses her research experiences with the critically endangered northern muriqui to consider "some of the ways in which the ethical landscape of a long-term field study can shift as the research questions and the animals change over time" (p. 68). Though it is difficult to assess the effects of the long-term observational study on the muriquis, Strier examines whether it is possible that, through the passive protection of the observers, the project enabled population growth and increased terrestrial feeding, which would in turn impact their study of the primates' adaptive behavior.

In Chapter 5, "Complex and Heterogeneous Ethical Structures in Field Primatology," Kutsukake discusses field ethics – "a moral compass for decision making during fieldwork" (p. 84) – and how it is often necessary to refer to this moral compass when dealing with local people and communities, governmental authorities, colleagues, funding agencies, the public, and the mass media. There are differing sets of ethics that primatologists have to consider: the researcher's personal morality, that of the community with whom he or she is residing; and that of their profession. Though at times there are no discrepancies in

these ethical codes, at other times they are at odds with each other. The author states the importance of mutual communication, understanding and negotiation between the parties involved in order to address ethical conundrums. He asserts that primatologists need a more formal platform from which to promote discussion of ethical problems. If there were sufficiently detailed records, for example, of discussions or processes by which ethics decisions were reached, subsequent researchers could learn from these archives.

In the sixth chapter, MacKinnon and Riley consider the outcomes of several recent symposia and publications dealing with ethics in primatological field research. They highlight the need for more ethics-oriented considerations in research projects and in the teaching and training of primatology students. One suggestion is to provide real-life examples of complex issues faced in the field. To bring ethics to the fore, they outline a formalized code of ethics for future primatological field research.

Nekaris and Nijman report on their statistical analysis of ten Great Ape study sites in Chapter 7. According to the authors, far less attention has been given to primate conservation and to the study of other endangered primates (besides the Great Apes, which consist of chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans). They submit that it may be unethical to favor one species over another and suggest optimizing the use of these established research sites to also study other species of primates. This would maximize the positive impacts of a long-term study site (e.g., finances, infrastructure, trained assistants, supportive communities) while minimizing the negative impacts (e.g., the risk of humans transmitting diseases to primates, which is more likely to happen in newly opened sites).

In Chapter 8, titled "Scrutinizing Suffering: The Ethics of Studying Contested Illness," Kilshaw relates the ethical dilemmas and issues she faced throughout her research into Gulf War Syndrome. She deals in particular with three challenges that

she contended with: how to present oneself to those with whom we perform fieldwork; how to manage ongoing relationships with those individuals; and how to balance these considerations with one's relationship to the funders of the research project. When conducting research within controversial, emotive, and heated arenas, Kilshaw illustrates one will inevitably end up in a position where one's work upsets or angers some of the stakeholders. This chapter serves as further illustration of how ethical issues are not black and white but rather have to be considered in light of particular contexts and situations. Ultimately, she asserts that:

We need to be free to interpret and write, even if our informants dispute our findings, indeed, even if they (or others) perceive our findings as causing harm either through questioning their firmly held beliefs or affecting their claims to compensation (p. 138).

In "Messy Ethics: Negotiating the Terrain between Ethics Approval and Ethical Practice," Miller provides the reader with helpful background information on the origin of ethical codes and guidelines for professional practice. In addition, she compares and contrasts two qualitative longitudinal studies in order to illuminate issues of access and consent, data collection, and leaving the field. She argues that unforeseen – indeed, unforeseeable – and ongoing ethical issues can and do arise. Miller notes the difficulties in navigating the ethical dimensions of fieldwork in complex social and cultural worlds, and submits that, because ethical considerations unfold during the research process, researchers are more in need of ongoing ethical support than regulation.

Chapter 10 investigates the ethical dimensions of doing surveys on the internet, a rapidly expanding arena of study. In the course of an anonymous, asynchronous websurvey she carried out, Rundall isolated five key ethical considerations that had to be confronted: the inequalities of internet accessibility; informed participation and consent; anonymity and confidentiality; the safety of participants and researchers; and security of data. She argues that

this research tool is cost-effective, convenient, straightforward to design and implement, and an excellent choice when collecting data from hidden or widely geographically dispersed populations. This chapter provides useful guidelines for academics and others wishing to do research in this field.

In the final chapter, MacClancy reports on an ethnographic investigation into the process of ethical regulation by University Research Ethics Committees (URECs) in the UK. According to the author, this is the first ethnographic research of its kind. He describes how it is easy for regulatory committees to become overly bureaucratic, which is in part due to the lack of tools to adequately identify the risks and benefits of proposed research. In some cases, these committees can hinder or prevent research, and may ultimately determine what kind of research is done. He concludes by arguing that these committees should stop regulating social scientific research, and instead concentrate on the ethical training of less experienced fieldworkers.

As discussed throughout the book, in the dynamic contexts of today's globalized world, many anthropologists see fieldwork as an essentially exploratory approach, and partly as a result, they need to be resourceful, adaptable, and ready to follow wherever the data may take them. In the same way that fieldworkers have to be prepared to question their research goals, methods and some of their most strongly-held concepts, they must also be ready to rethink and revise their ethical parameters. This book does a good job of demonstrating that ethical codes are not able to transcend the explicit contexts of their production; rather, they are products of their own time and circumstances. This is true not only across time but across space as well, i.e., across cultures. Thus, as aptly stated by MacClancy and Fuentes (p. 19), "Perhaps the best that can thus be desired is that fledgling fieldworkers be trained to be as ethically aware as possible."

This book will be informative and helpful for anyone planning to do fieldwork in the social sciences. It is particularly appropriate for environmental or

ecological anthropologists because of the often inter- and transdisciplinary nature of their work and because it covers ethical and methodological issues similar to those they may encounter. Although not an introductory book on field ethics, it would be valuable for advanced undergraduate or graduate students who have previously been introduced to these issues, or as a valued addition to other more basic materials on the subject.

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- MACCLANCY, J., AND A. FUENTES, EDS.
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