Research ethics from the cultural anthropologist's point of view
Comments on Dianne Quigley's Draft Report "Summary of Issues on Environmental Health Research Ethics with Native Communities from Various Case Studies and Selected Articles"

prepared by
Ann Grodzins Gold, Professor
Department of Religion, The College of Arts and Sciences and
Department of Anthropology, The Maxwell School
Syracuse University
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Introduction

I have been asked to comment on the issues raised here from the perspective of my discipline, cultural anthropology. Within the broad field of cultural anthropology, my work is located among the more qualitative, interpretive, reflexive and dialogic genres. Much of anthropology's identity lies in its being a "field science" -- and, as Gupta and Ferguson have argued, "the field' is a clearing whose deceptive transparency obscures the complex processes that go into constructing it" (1997:5). Successful fieldwork, using methods of "participant observation" depends on nothing so much as sustained good relationships within a community, relationships based on mutual trust as well as mutual advantage.

In my own writings I have frequently discussed fieldwork situations (Gold 1988; Raheja and Gold 1994) and collaborative research efforts (Gujar and Gold 1992; Gold and Gujar 2002). But I have never spoken of ethics, preferring for reasons of style and conviction not to generalize from the particularities of unique situations. My approach has always been an attempt to illuminate the complex ways interpersonal relationships are deeply implicated in the production of knowledge -- anthropological knowledge, that is. The knowledge sought by medical scientists and public health researchers may seem to be of an altogether different nature. And yet -- as Quigley's report reveals -- any kind of situation in which outsider experts enter a community in order to gather "data" requires of the researchers certain kinds of preparations, awareness, sensitivity, and behavioral codes for conduct. All of these related concerns are loosely gathered in Quigley's report under the heading of ethics.

Quigley cites Montour and Macaulay as stating that "only rarely do researchers live or work in aboriginal communities. Aboriginal groups are naturally wary when outsiders want to do 'studies'. . . . . " It appears to these groups that researchers "swoop down from the skies," and later "disappear." Anthropologists, by contrast, usually do live or work in the communities they study. Yet problems of sudden entry and irresponsible disappearance remain salient to anthropology's ethics.

Health research should have one distinct advantage over anthropology in that the results of health studies might be seen as more immediately of potential benefit to participants in these studies. Knowledge presumably leads to positive action. Yet even here, as Quigley's report highlights, multiple factors are at play making such presumed benefits neither immediately perceived nor inevitably delivered.
If the goals, methods and topics of anthropological research differ greatly from those of health research, what they may share are the myriad difficulties entailed by fieldwork across cultural divides in situations of skewed power. Situations of skewed power lead to skewed self images and what Maddocks, cited by Quigley in her introductory section, considers "an uncomfortable situation." For example, aboriginal peoples may see researchers as "insensitive, intrusive, exploitative, and conferring no benefit on the communities at all," while -- following Quigley's paraphrase -- scientists see themselves by contrast as "liberal, objective, upholding a view of science as value-free, fearlessly adding to the sum of human knowledge." Anthropologists certainly also experience similar cases of cognitive dissonance. To confront problems of research ethics with honesty would be to acknowledge some validity to both these conflicting perspectives.

The year 2001 was marked, and marred, for anthropology by a major and highly public "scandal" generating furious debates not only in academic journals, but in the mainstream press and on the internet (Miller 2001). This was precipitated by the publication of an investigative journalist's book Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon (Tierney 2000). The most hair-raising accusation this book made had to do with health research, and the possible collusion of a recently deceased and renowned human geneticist with a still active, more renowned and controversial cultural anthropologist in spreading a deadly measles epidemic in Amazonia ("genocide through vaccination"). This charge was quickly and definitively refuted. Yet the impact of Tierney's book has by no means been diffused. Senior anthropologist Marshall Sahlins begins his review -- one among scores -- with the line: "Guilty not as charged" (2000). Or as Nugent puts it in deliberately convoluted language, regarding the most serious claims made by Tierney, they "are false, but they could be true in a larger sense, even if in this case they are not" (2001:10). The import of these and similar statements is that anthropology is deeply worried about its own ethical behavior, past and future.

The Darkness in El Dorado case has produced a fantastic amount of heat, but along with this, possibly, some light as well has resulted. On May 31, 2001, the El Dorado Task Force, officially convened by the American Anthropological Association, released an interim report which, like the two reviews cited above, implies that it is not the dubious particulars of Tierney's charges against anthropology that are of greatest interest. Rather they wish to emphasize the far-reaching ethical implications of the kinds of situations and possibilities of maleficence the book brings to light, even if in exaggerated fashion. Thus the task force states that their intention is "to contribute to the Committee on Ethics' efforts to extend guidelines and create materials concerning field research conducted wherever anthropologists work." They continue:

[We] intend to look forward, directing our reflections on past practice toward establishing new dialogues in the profession about the refinement of anthropological practice and the improved training of students. Our goal is that anthropological practice be more likely, not only to produce valuable new knowledge, but to facilitate the improvement of the lives of those who, like the
Yanomami, have graciously shared their knowledge and ways of life with us (2001).

In the rest of my comments I will briefly highlight a few developments in ongoing discussions of research ethics in anthropology that seem to me to intersect with some of the issues in health research ethics Quigley stresses in her report. Of course, there are some areas where the nature of anthropological research would seem to alter the terms of discussion quite significantly. For example, guideline #6 on Quigley's list regarding "cultural sensitivity training" would seem to have no meaning for anthropologists whose entire professional lives are dedicated to learning, understanding, and appreciating other people's cultures. Yet if multiple deceptive and duplicitous situations such as those described by Tierney in Darkness in El Dorado make anthropologists nervous, even if they are at least half untrue, then I fear we must acknowledge discouragingly intractable constitutional problems in cross-cultural research ethics. It seems that any situation where outsiders commanding greater resources wish to study human subjects in communities that have been historically less empowered are situations with huge potential for ethical downfall and abuse.

I focus my comments on skewed power and indeterminate responsibility as problems highlighted in anthropology’s recent ethics discourse. Then I turn to lessons from participatory studies, and claims about morality and the situated, emergent nature of research ethics to offer some suggestions for this project.

Skewed power and indeterminate responsibility

Power Rayna Rapp, a feminist anthropologist who writes with great frankness about her own moral and ethical quandaries while studying the new technologies surrounding pregnancy in urban America, highlights the extraordinary impact of power differentials that divide patients, scientists, doctors, social service workers and anthropologists concerned with applications of modern medicine:

Power is shot through the world of biomedicine, where the cutting edges of genetic research converge with social policy and its translation into inequitably distributed health services. It blasts communicative chasms between health care providers, already stratified by differences attached to gender, education, and often racial-ethnic or national background, and their multicultural, multiclass patient populations (Rapp 1999: 22).

No research situation is isolated from broader social, economic and political circumstances.

Multiple structural inequalities in research situations demand attention when we try to imagine ethical parameters, as many others have also pointed out. Quigley would like to teach researchers how to avoid blasting communicative chasms -- to use Rapp's ominous explosive metaphor. The first step would seem to be a recognition not just of potential chasms but of pre-existing subtler cracks and fissures with all their insidious ramifications.

Fluehr-Lobban's 1998 chapter on "Ethics" in a Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology offers a nicely condensed, lucid and systematic discussion of the development of ethical concerns and statements in American anthropology in the
twentieth century. Fluehr-Lobban tells us that while ethical issues had been raised as early as 1919, the first "code of ethics" was not produced until the Viet Nam War era. Sahlins recently observed that the Viet Nam war "prolonged itself in arrogant perceptions of the weaker peoples as instrumental means of the global projects of the stronger" (2000). He suggests that these political circumstances left an enduring legacy in social scientists' "obsessive search for power in every nook and cranny of our society and history, and an equally strong postmodern urge to 'deconstruct' it" (2000). It is no accident that the first formal attention to ethics from American anthropology's professional association took place during this conflicted era. As Fluehr-Lobban puts it, just as the entire American society was "torn asunder by issues of politics and morality," so was the American Anthropological Association (1998: 176).

In the same turbulent era of U.S. history, Vine Deloria's popular book, Custer Died for your Sins, issued a wake-up call and challenge that anthropologists could not ignore. Published in 1969 as a mass market paperback, Deloria's book was on the required reading list for the Ph.D. in Anthropology when I entered graduate school in 1976. Its unforgettable chapter titled "Anthropologists and Other Friends" is written in a unique style of deep sarcasm, at once playful and caustic. Its message made many anthropological researchers cringe, but forced them to rethink their identities.

Deloria's chapter opens with the immortal words, "Into each life, it is said, some rain must fall, Some people have bad horoscopes, others take tips on the stock market . . . . But Indians have been cursed above all other people in history. Indians have anthropologists" (1969:83). Many of the serious complaints Deloria had of anthropologists in 1969 are notably still on the table when we review Quigley's summary of ethical issues for health researchers in Native American communities. Deloria, for example, notes that in spite of superficial differences (such as quantity of footnotes) between "pure research" and "applied research," a bottom line for both is that "Relevancy to subject matter is not discussed in polite company" (1969:84). Here we find the areas of "risks and benefits" as well as "impact and empowerment" -- both highlighted by Quigley -- accusingly engaged.

Introducing their handbook on anthropological ethics in 1987, Cassell and Jacobs treat Deloria's book as a landmark that "heralded a new age in which anthropologists were to be called to account by Indian representatives" (1987: 5). In 2000, an anthology treating still more recent ethical issues, contains the following one-page statement by Tonya Frichner of the Onondaga nation. In blatant and deliberate contrast to the verbosity of her anthropologist colleagues, Frichner crisply declares:

"We are writing our own books now. We are publishing our own papers. We are only under obligation to our peoples, our elders, our lands, our languages, our distinct and sovereign Nations, and our children yet to be born (78)." Significantly, she refers back to Deloria's charter work in concluding:

"Future co-operation with scientists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and others of like kind must be predicated on the development of a frank understanding that is, in the words of Native scholar, Vine Deloria, Jr., "honest, sincere, and equal" (78)."
Deloria made some prophetic demands in 1969:

I would advocate a policy to be adopted by Indian tribes which would soon clarify the respective roles of anthropologists and tribes. Each anthropologist desiring to study a tribe should be made to apply to the tribal council for permission to do his study. He would be given such permission only if he raised as a contribution to the tribal budget an amount of money equal to the amount he proposed to spend in his study. Anthropologists would thus become productive members of Indian society instead of ideological vultures (99).

Many of the changes Deloria envisions as radical have in fact come to pass. Thus Fluehr-Lobban rather triumphantly concludes her historical survey:

The era of colonialism has passed, and indigenous peoples of America, indeed the postcolonial world, are actively restructuring their relationships with states and all manner of external institutions that impact their lives, including the activities of researchers. Most U.S. and Canadian Tribal Councils have autonomous research review boards to which anthropologists and other researchers must apply before receiving approval to carry out their projects. Typically, through the process of requesting permission to conduct research, the terms and conditions of the research plan are negotiated, in effect an official airing of the proposal where the required openness and disclosure amount to informed consent (1998: 189).

If tribal councils today do indeed control research access, I suspect that the fair financial arrangement Deloria proposes remains a rarity, testifying to ongoing structures of power and privilege that resist resistance. Thus, issues of "equity" highlighted by Quigley surely remain important points of tension in the twenty-first century.

Several anthropologists have argued that discussions of ethics in the discipline are severely undermined by non-discussions of encompassing and structuring hierarchical conditions. For example, Phillippe Bourgeois, in 1991, pointed to a paradox: to claim an ethics of responsibility to subjects and impartiality to material results in denial of what may be the most salient features of a fieldwork situation. He writes that "understood in a real world context, the entire logic of anthropology's ethics are premised on a highly political assertion that unequal power relations are not particularly relevant to our research" (120).

Eight years later, Peter Pels in an influential article reinforced the point made by Bourgeois. Pels also claims that anthropological ethical codes are based on ignoring important political and historical realities. As he puts it, "The professionalization of anthropology was partly accomplished through the definition of a dyadic relationship between anthropologists and people studied, from which the colonial situation, its representatives, and its values had been erased" (1999: 110).

I may briefly summarize some of the points about how skewed power skews research relationships that have been raised here. According to Rapp, power differentials in the broader society permeate small-scale research situations with destructive volcanic potential. Sahlins suggests that exposure to power and injustice in the larger society has infected the social sciences, affecting not only methods but
agendas. However, Bourgeois and Pels differ from Sahlins in stressing not obsession with power but blindness to it. Both consider much of the discipline's discussion of ethics to be seriously short-sighted and therefore ineffectual because it ignores these encompassing conditions. As Nugent (also commenting on the Darkness in El Dorado case) asserts succinctly, for anthropology, "a code of ethics not rooted in the historical reality of relations between the studiers and the studied is doomed to triviality" (Nugent 2001:13).

Responsibility. Cantwell, Friedlander and Tramm (2000) argue in their introduction to the most recent volume on anthropological ethics I was able to consult that "the paramount ethical issue facing anthropologists in all subdisciplines today, as in the past, lies in questions of accountability" (ix). Yet, like power, accountability operates on multiple levels and its referent is subject to ambiguity. Accountable to the tribal council? accountable to the funding source -- whether governmental or private? accountable to the scientific pursuit of truth? accountable to each kind person who cooperates?

We may briefly review the history of responsibility discourse that has dominated codified anthropological ethics. In 1971, after several years of debate and discussion, the American Anthropological Association published their first unified statement on anthropological ethics, called the Principles of Professional Responsibility (PPR). Its primary assertion was that "in research the anthropologist's paramount responsibility is to those he studies. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first" (cited in Fluehr-Lobban 198: 176). Twenty-five years later this code was modified (a copy of the 1996 statement, reproduced from Fluehr-Lobban 1998 is appended to my comments).

Fluehr-Lobban points out that the most important procedural change evident in this new document is that, "the code shifts from one that has a grievance procedure with ability to sanction individual anthropologists to one that emphasizes ethics education." She adds, however, that during the twenty-five years since the PPR were initially created, no anthropologist had in fact been censured. Thus the 1996 changes were only adapting to an existing situation, rather than altering practice.

Other changes involved an expansion of the objects of paramount responsibility from people only to include people, animals, and materials. As Fluehr-Lobban puts it, "the anthropologist is now enjoined to do no harm, to respect the well being of humans and nonhuman primates, and to conserve the archaeological, fossil, and historical record" (1998: 179).

The new code also calls for open and accessible publication of research results within a reasonable period of time, offers some specific guidelines on informed consent, and presents advocacy as a moral choice (but not an ethical imperative). In spite of repeated stress on responsibility or accountability, the nitty-gritty process remains murky (which is likely why no censorship could have been based on these or the similarly far-reaching and decontextualized principles of the earlier code).
Toward an ethics of doubt and dialogue

Richard Fox writes, "We feel miserable and think the reason is that the ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguities we face today are unprecedented and push anthropology beyond its limits" (2000:2). Fox's proposed remedy has to do with the work of cultural translation, which in his view provides anthropology's "core ethics" (6). He proposes that our translations be "foreignizing and against the grain," so that reading about another cultural world may lead to critical consciousness of one's own. These "displacing translations" offer one ethical pathway. Even health research might benefit from being forced to question its cultural assumptions and common sense.

Participatory research has often seemed like an antidote to all that was wrong in the skewed power structure of social scientific and development projects. It has been widely advocated and often successful in a variety of fields. Although devotees of participation are just as prone to speak in schematic vagaries as any of their fellow researchers, they also sometimes offer more humble insights. Often these amount not so much to prescriptive ethical codes as to recommendations for a basic humanity: respect for other peoples' feelings, viewpoints, and expertise; and listening skills such as we try to teach our children in primary school.

For example, in an edited volume including case studies drawn from participatory research in health care, I found some of the best advice I have seen for researchers, based on a Zimbabwe project to gather demographic data on fertility, population size and mortality in a semi-nomadic community. The author, Marindo-Ranganai, summarizes his "lessons learned" on a practical level. Among these are the need to have "humility and a desire to consider all angles and suggestions, recognizing your own limited knowledge," and "respect for local power structures and beliefs, because the community members have to continue to survive in their own way after you have gone." He also observes that "creation of rapport is important, and sometimes working with children can help in breaking the ice."

Finally, and importantly, Marindo-Ranganai notes wryly that "an empowered group of villagers is not necessarily an easy group to work with." In other words, when villagers felt free to critique his research, their criticisms were sometimes harsh and painful, if ultimately salubrious (Marindo-Ranganai 1996: 187). In the same volume, Khanna observes of a project in India that Participatory Action Research allows fieldworkers to "reintroduce feelings and human considerations into research by teaching us to respect people's concerns and feelings as opposed to the objective and often amoral stance traditional science and research tends to take." And equally importantly, that "Participatory Action Research reaffirms by its inherent relevance that knowledge building and the frameworks of knowledge are not neutral. They have to be circumscribed by the morality of the people they purport to serve" (1996:71).

These profound lessons from participatory health research projects in Africa and India offer some of the most worthwhile formulations I have encountered. They offer a pragmatic research ethics, having to do with attitudes as much as behaviors. I suggest
that this is because they are based on the experienced realities of dialogue, negotiation and contingency. Unlike Krimsky (whose views seem to be echoed if somewhat less forcefully by Wallwork), I do not see the "pursuit of truth" as a "categorical imperative." Whose truth?

Comitas has pointed to a distinction between ethics "as collective standards of expected behavior" and morality, " as personal judgment of right and wrong." He wonders if morality is not a more appropriate focus of discussion for anthropology, because, "Ultimately, we are left to decide the conduct of ethical behavior on moral grounds" (1999:199).

This return to personal judgment might seem a dangerous retreat from the need to forge ethical codes to protect the vulnerable in situations of skewed power prone to breeding cross-cultural misunderstanding. But I find several other authors helpfully elaborate on the need to see ethics emerging from situations and interactions, rather than forcibly laid on top of them. Pels, for example, in a later writing, suggests "the possibility of an emergent ethics" which would locate "ethical discussion in the negotiation of individual or communal interests that is characteristic of the practice of fieldwork. . . ." He observes that "a relational and contingent constitution of the anthropological subject seems more appropriate than that of the isolated liberal self that 'humanistically' sets itself up as the source of value" (2000:163). In other words, ethics for any given project might emerge for researchers through conversations and negotiations with tribal council or community representatives -- rather than be predetermined.

Marilyn Strathern seems to agree with Pels that any codification of ethics results in a reduction of anthropology's valued creativity in the moment of fieldwork encounter. Thus she writes, "However much talk there is of collaboration or of conserving the autonomy of subjects or recognizing their input into the research or taking power into account, this aspect of ethics in advance of anticipated negotiations, belittles the creative power of social relations" (2000:295). Anthropologists continue to value that emergent and conversational nature of their practice and findings -- and thus to search there for ethics as well.

Toward designing teaching modules on ethics for health researchers, then, my first and strongest recommendation would be to prepare them to anticipate multiple, confusing situations and multiple ethical quandaries -- in spite of having had courses in how to avoid them! I am also fairly convinced that the best way to prepare for such on-the-ground realities is not to read and study the kinds of generalities set forth here, by Quigley or by me. These are appropriate background. And Deloria should certainly be required reading.

I recommend that researchers in training look at case studies of ethical dilemmas in multiple fieldwork situations; read them, discuss them, act them out. Perhaps each of the many co-PIs on this grant could be required to create a fictional dramatic sketch of an uncomfortable situation based on his or her own most painful experiences in the field. These would be included in the course modules. Role playing sessions would be in order. Such cases should be presented not in order to extract general principles, but
rather to imagine in advance the varied, specific and often agonizing situations they depict. There are not going to be easy answers. (For a rather outdated case book of ethical dilemmas in anthropology see Rynkiewich and Spradley 1976).

Thus I urge Quigley and her colleagues to make sure their courses include practical preparations for exercising ad hoc interpersonal morality, as well as offering formulations of idealized behaviors. It is unfortunately easy (as Darkness in El Dorado makes all too clear) to ignore disciplinary and ethical codes in the context of everyday struggles to achieve knowledge and professional success, and to promote a truth that seems true to you.

Copans' comments encapsulate my recommendations:
Ethics for the anthropologist is this constant doubt about the other and about oneself and, consequently, about one's professional practice, called scientific. An ethics of doubt is an ethics of dialogue and democracy, of cultural reversal (Copans 1999:118).

I suspect that some may find this an extreme and unsettling position. But it is also counter-intuitive to imagine it possible that abstracted ethical codes may be imposed on complex situations that are by definition fluid -- especially when these situations are characterized by persistent structural inequalities, conflicting values, and variant world views. An ethics of doubt and dialogue in many ways follows naturally from all the guidelines Quigley has highlighted.
References


