The Ethics of Fieldwork

Use this chart to address ethical concerns throughout the process of fieldwork.
Click on the item for information about that topic.

	FORMATION: Developing the Proposal	CONDUCT: Behavior in the Field	COMMUNICATION: Making the Work Public
ACCURACY	1. Basic topic of study 2. Self-fulfilling study 3. Sampling and participant selection	13. Leading questions 14. Biased researcher 15. Biased informants	24. Truthfulness and veracity 25. Meeting audiences' expectations
HUMANE TREATMENT	4. Prediction of possible harms 5. Selection of methods 6. Obligation to informants	16. Establishing rapport 17. Learning local norms of conduct 18. Negotiation of defined harms— learning local concerns 19. Participants as exemplified or exotic	26. Will participants be represented in ways they can understand? 27. Embarrassing revelations
INFORMED PARTICIPANTS	7. Degree of anonymity or confidentiality 8. Representation of researcher identity 9. Sampling and participant selection 10. Self-assessment of ability to conduct the work	20. Power differentials in fieldwork 21. What and how much can we promise?	28. Participants changing their minds after the study 29. Power differentials in writing
NECCESSITY & APPLICATBILITY	11. Motivations for doing the work 12. Possible applicability of the work for the participants	22. Learning local knowledge needs 23. Learning locally desired applications or service	30. Publication and distribution channels 31. Availability of raw materials to other researchers

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I. Ethical Issues

1. **Basic topic of study:** When we choose a research question, that very opening move contains ethical concerns. These ethical concerns are directed primarily towards our general audience for whom this study will be of interest. We must ask ourselves whether we believe we can accurately address our research question or whether we are setting ourselves up for half-baked conclusions that could negatively affect both the community of study and the community of scholars.

   Tips:

   * Review the existing literature on your topic. What were the limitations of those studies? What were the problems they faced? Will you be able to avoid the same? How will your research provide new and useful information?

2. **Self-fulfilling study:** Some studies seem designed to find exactly and only what they are looking for — through the language they use and the definition of terms, through constraining the questions so that only a handful of answers are possible. Are we designing the work or defining our terms and questions such that we're bound to find only that which we already expected? How is our research design leaving us open to surprise, to learning something unexpected, to understanding our topic from the various perspectives of the people in the community we are studying?

   Tips:

   * Identify your assumptions about the topic and what you expect to find. How might those assumptions be faulty or debatable? How have those assumptions directed your plan of research?

3. **Sampling and participant selection:** When we work among a population, we should expect to find diversity — diversity in gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and personal habits and opinions. Are we attempting to gain a broad sample of voices in our work? When we learn something, are we attempting to find people who might disagree, or would add a more complex interpretation?

   Tips:

   * As you work, identify your informants according to the various roles and categories they fit within in that society (e.g. occupation, religious group, political affiliation, etc.) Have you sampled broadly? If not, can you? If not, have you addressed these limitations in your study?

4. **Prediction of possible harms:** The social sciences may not place people in physical danger in the same way that medical research might, but we can cause changes among those with whom we work. How will we attempt to protect the reputations of our participants? Could our work cause disruption in the community, or interfere with other ongoing plans? Could we inadvertently change the power structure in place through seeming to side with one group over another?

   Tips:

   * Refer to your school's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for guidelines on identifying and dealing with possible harms to your participants.

   Exercise:

   * Hypothesize worst-case scenarios. How might you deal with them? Then develop less dramatic and more realistic scenarios. How might you deal with them? It might help to place yourself in various roles in the social setting, playing the role of the participant and not just the researcher.

5. **Selection of methods:** Some questions can be answered through archival research, others through questionnaires, and still others only through immersion into a group. What is the least invasive method we can employ to get the answers to our questions?

   Tips:

   * Review the methods typically used in your field of study. Discuss the benefits and limitations of each. Be sure to ask yourself not only which are the most relevant, but which are the least invasive as well. You may have to make a compromise as you balance these two factors.

6. **Obligation to informants**: When doing fieldwork, we are not only asking people to take time to work with us, we are also asking them to trust us. Each relationship we build with an informant is different, but all are implicitly reciprocal. Identifying exactly what are obligations are to our informants is perhaps the most crucial step we take in ensuring we act ethically.

   Tips:

   * The Golden Rule applies to most ethical questions, but here it is particularly useful as a starting point. If you were the informant, what would you expect from the researcher you were working with?

   Exercise:

   * Choose any or all of the categories below and answer them for your project. See how many other questions you can develop that would be usefully answered before you enter the field. Note that many of the questions one might develop are addressed in other areas of this chart.
     * Compensation for your informants?
     * Chance to edit own interviews?
     * Maintenance of contact after the project ends?
     * Share all data with all informants?

7. **Degree of anonymity or confidentiality:** Confidentiality means that the researcher knows which participant has said or done something but agrees to keep that identity a secret. Anonymity means that even the researcher doesn't know who has said something (such as responses to an unsigned questionnaire). But sometimes we can't control who knows things: using a pseudonym in a report on a small group can still leave a person recognizable if we comment on their habits or social role; we may have to coordinate our research with an existing organization who will recognize the people they work with; and sometimes our participants themselves may want to claim their comments and make their beliefs or actions known. What level of confidentiality can we reasonably offer to our participants? How can we help them understand the risks and benefits of their choices?

   Tips:

   * This dilemma is one of the most pervasive in fieldwork. It is also one of the most disputed. Begin by identifying the standards in your discipline. In sociology, for example, confidentiality and anonymity are generally expected. In folklore, the opposite is true. And in anthropology, it's as often one as the other.
   * Construct a list of all the benefits and reasons why it would be useful to name your participants. Then construct a list of all the harms in doing so. Can you strike a compromise to accommodate both lists?
   * As you work on this, refer back to the list of harms you developed in #4.

8. **Representation of researcher identity:** Researchers in "underground" settings have often disguised their identities or purposes: someone studying radical political groups may not be accepted as a researcher, but might be welcomed if they posed as a new recruit. Is this deception ever warranted? Are there ways we can gain the information we need without hiding our purposes?

   Tips:

   * Before going into any fieldwork site, you'll want to think carefully about how you will present yourself. Even in situations where you present yourself at face value, you'll need to think about how to describe what you're doing so that your participants can understand you. Saying "I'm an ethnographer and am really interested in studying how you achieve social cohesion through group dynamics" will alienate everyone except other trained ethnographers. Practice your introduction before entering the field.

   Exercise:

   * Brainstorm instances where you think it might be necessary or advantageous to hide your identity. Do the justifications for doing so outweigh the potential harms?

9. **Sampling and participant selection:** We usually can't talk with every single person involved in some group; we make selections in order to save time, while still attempting to keep our sample balanced. Should we tell individual participants why they were selected to participate as opposed to others? Should we tell them if (and why) we have left some others out of our study?

   Tips:

   * Often participants will be reluctant to be interviewed for fear of being thought of among their peers as trying to be "the expert." Sometimes this fear is cultural as well as personal. Ask yourself whether you have in fact identified the appropriate people to work with. If you have, you'll want to think of how you can assure them that they are not going to be misinterpreted as being THE voice of the group. In such cases, identifying how you are choosing participants can be extremely important.
   * Asking current participants to suggest other people you should work with can seem like a great way to find willing participants. However, be aware that this kind of networking can quickly lead to unknowingly restricting your work with a single, small group with shared interests. The complexity of a community and the inevitable disagreements in views will be lost.

10. **Self-assessment of ability to conduct the work:** Fieldwork often demands many skills, from interviewing and questionnaire design to the protection of participant confidentiality to data management and reporting. But when we take on work that is beyond our capacity, we may cause harm through our mistakes or misjudgments. How can we accurately assess whether we are competent to safely and thoughtfully carry out the work we have selected?

    Tips:

    * Refer back to your selection of methods. Do you fully understand them? Are they appropriate?
    * Then consider other factors such as the time needed to be thorough and whether you have available transportation. How about personality issues? For example, do you enjoy and are you capable of talking extensively with people?

11. **Motivations for doing the work:** Social research can easily slide into voyeurism — we want to see what people do because it's just fun to see what people do; we want to see what some "dangerous" or "scandalous" activity looks like. Can we be honest with ourselves about why we take on certain projects? Are we trying to advance a body of knowledge, or assist our participants themselves in gaining better self-understanding? Or are we just curious for our own curiosity? Or even are we doing this because we think it's the easiest way to fulfill a class assignment?

    Tips:

    * List all the reasons you want to conduct the research. Be honest. Ideally, this will help you focus your topic and help you ensure you have chosen wisely. This list, of course, is not sufficient in order to ethically decide whether the topic is appropriate. You will still need to consider other factors such as possible harms to the community as well as possible benefits.

12. **Possible applicability of the work for the participants:** Fieldwork often involves taking knowledge from one community for use by another. Perhaps the people we work among and study can also benefit from what we learn. How can we make our work available to those who have made it possible, so that they can make use of it? Who most needs to know about the results we have found? To whom must we write?

    Tips:

    * A research project does not need to derive directly from the community to have useful application. However, the sooner you consider possible applications the better. This is true not only for the success of application, but for convincing your participants that their time and energy is being well-served.

13. **Leading questions:** When constructing questionnaire items or interview questions, we can accidentally lead people to answer a certain way. How can we guide our respondents to the types of answers we hope to receive, but without also guiding them to the content of their answers as well?

    Exercise:

    Imagine the different response to these questions:

    * Do you support our soldiers in Iraq?
    * Was the Administration justified in sending American military into Iraq?
    * What is your opinion of American military involvement in Iraq?

    It is very likely that even those Americans who believe that the administration was incorrect in sending forces to Iraq would still support the troops and hope for their safe return. The third question is more neutral than either of the first two, because it allows the respondent to choose the aspect of the issue to which s/he wishes to respond, but it also leaves our research more difficult to interpret.

14. **Biased researcher**: Even when we set out to be completely objective, a lifetime of assumptions, beliefs and experiences colors how we see the world, record information, and interpret that information. How can we remain vigilant about possible bias sneaking into our work?

    Exercise:

    * Choose a topic related to your study. Then brainstorm everything you think you know about the topic. Once you've done this, go back and analyze the list for the implied assumptions. Now trade lists with a peer. What assumptions did they identify? Did any surprise you, whether from your own list or your peers? How might these unintentional or unconscious assumptions affect your study of the topic you chose?

15. **Biased informants:** When working with local participants, we should begin from the stance of believing that what they say is true, but we should also think whether they have a natural reason to be biased about an issue. When studying local development, for instance, you might imagine that a real estate agent, a farmer, a current homeowner, and a county planner might all have different impulses for what they want. How can we think carefully about the underlying assumptions that our participants bring to the table.

    Tips:

    * One way to begin to identify and account for such bias is to make sure you have chosen a broad range of participants.
    * Once you have begun working with participants, consider their various roles and positions in the community. What assumptions might people in a particular position or role hold? What biases?

16. **Establishing Rapport**: One of the most important and difficult steps in successful fieldwork is establishing rapport with informants. Without it, we will rarely be able to gather useful and accurate data. How can we get possible informants to trust us?

    Tips:

    * Be honest.
    * Reverse the power structure by making it clear why the informant is important to the study
    * Identify possible reasons the person might not trust you. How can you prove to them you are trustworthy? (Simply telling them won't cut it.)
    * Recognize that this takes time. Don't rush things.
    * Brief, regular and frequent contact can often do far more than lengthy, sustained interaction, especially at first. Consistency breeds trust.

17. **Learning local norms of conduct:** As fieldworkers, we are guests in someone else's community, and we should be attentive to the etiquette that governs their interactions. We could unintentionally alienate our potential participants by violating certain local customs, such as talking to children prior to getting their parents' consent, or "talking shop" in a local tavern where workers go to leave their working day behind. How can we ensure that we are aware of local norms for behavior?

    Exercise:

    * Simply becoming aware of how pervasive and powerful such norms are can be useful to the fieldworker. Choose a social scene that you are a part of and develop a list of the norms of conduct or rules of behavior. To get you started, think about all the etiquette involved in riding on an elevator. How jarring would it be if someone got on the elevator and instead of turning to face the doors, remained standing and staring at the other passengers?

    Ethical Hypothetical Scenario

18. **Negotiation of defined harms—learning local concerns:** Prior to going into the field, we attempt to enumerate the possible harms that our research might entail, and to prevent or minimize the chances for them to come about. But the community members themselves may have different concerns that had never occurred to us: they may be engaged in illegal activity that we discover; they may want to discourage knowledge of or visitors to their community in order to retain its peacefulness; they may want to continue local healthcare practices that would be discouraged or perhaps even forbidden by health authorities. How can we become more sensitive to the prevention of harms that the community may fear?

    Tips:

    * Remember that one of those community fears might be you. As an outsider and someone engaged in the study of their group, your presence may be disconcerting to community members. Your first step will be to gain the trust of at least one community member (presumably you will gain the trust of the rest of the community or at least your participants as you continue your fieldwork). While you cannot rely completely on that person, they may be very helpful in identifying community concerns and fears that might not be initially apparent.

    Ethical Hypothetical Scenario

19. **Participants as exemplified or exotic:** It is often tempting to study a group because we perceive them as exciting or exotic (such as drug users, prostitutes, athletes, or specific ethnic groups), or to study a specific small group as an example of how all of "them" behave or think (such as including a single African-American participant as exemplifying "the Black perspective," as though all African Americans have the same set of experiences, beliefs and habits). How can we help ourselves become more sensitive to the realities of specific lives as our participants themselves interpret them?

    Tips:

    * Part of the concern of having only one or a few voices speak for an entire group is the same concern with biased informants and sample size. However, part of the concern is tied to the fact that while general patterns can be identified, the individuality of your informants is still an important factor in the data you collect.

    Exercise:

    * Another concern here is the tendency to label what we ourselves do as normal while things done differently by other people as unusual. In order to understand how alienating this can be for our participants, describe a group that you belong to in two different ways: one, as you understand the group and would like to be portrayed, and two, as an outsider unfamiliar with your culture might.

20. **Power differentials:** Especially when conducting research among the poor, oppressed communities, or those less educated than ourselves, we have certain privileges that we must be aware of. But even among those of our own social status, we have the power to interpret and write the findings, while they do not. How can we mediate our own power as academics and storytellers to not unintentionally harm or offend those we work with?

    Tips:

    * Identify how your participants are experts and hence powerful figures in your relationship to them. Encourage them to see themselves as your teachers or trainers.

    Exercises:

    * Think about the times you feel intimidated by other people. What makes you feel this way? Then think about times where people in power have put you at ease. How did they do it?

    * Brainstorm the various roles and identities you might be labeled with by your informants (e.g. academic, college kid, rich kid, etc.). What kinds of values are associated with these identities? What kinds of power are often granted these identities? How can you avoid these stereotypes and assumptions? How can you avoid alienating your participants?

21. **What and how much can we promise?:** In our "informed consent" statements, we often outline what participants will be asked to do, how they can end their participation in the study, what they will receive in exchange for participating, and how we will protect their confidentiality. But as the conditions around us change, we may discover that we cannot adhere to all of the things we promised. Further, it may soon become evident that we have discovered new questions that are more central to our understanding. How can we keep our participants abreast of our current thinking and the shifts in our research questions or practices? What should we be prepared to ensure to our participants, and how do we keep them informed of possible breaches of those promises? How can we think of "informed consent" as being an ongoing process of negotiation rather than a one-time guarantee?

    Tips:

    * One way to avoid one-time guarantees is to ensure that you don't engage in one-time fieldwork. In other words, your work with participants should generally extend beyond a single interview, even if it simply means a thank you note or a follow up phone call. Maintaining some degree of contact makes it much easier to alert participants to any important changes in the project.

    * There will also be times when the research focus changes but you feel it does not affect the initial consent that participants gave. Before assuming too much, you may want to check with one or two of your closest participants.

22. **Learning local knowledge and service needs:** As we work within a community, we may discover things that the community itself does not know or recognize in any systematic way. How can we make our work useful to those we work among, and who are the local people who can most effectively put this new information to positive use?

    Tips:

    * Have you identified any problems in the community that might usefully be addressed by your work?
    * Are people in the community already working to solve particular problems that your research can contribute to?
    * Does your research give voice to groups of people who have not been heard before? Are their concerns being addressed within the community? If not, are there ways for you to get their voices heard.

23. **Learning locally desired applications or service:** We may come to a community thinking that we can help them accomplish something that we might think is positive, only to learn that the community itself would prefer other outcomes. How can we be attentive to the kinds of applications or services that this community most desires, particularly when they do not mesh with our own assessment of what can or should be done?

    Tips:

    * Identifying community goals is generally not that difficult; often community leaders have a long laundry list of what they want to accomplish. The problem can come in having conflicting goals or a disagreement about priorities within the community. Chances are you cannot please everyone. Strive to establish a goal that is feasible, productive for the community, and interesting to you.
    * Another dilemma that may arise pits the interests of the researcher against the interests of the community. A question that is interesting to us, that we believe is important and will ultimately lead to valuable advancements, may not be important to the community. It can be very difficult to conduct fieldwork in a community that views your research as useless. However, it can be equally difficult to get motivated to do research that does not interest you. Again, try to find a compromise. And remember: the problem the community most wants solved may not be a problem you are trained to address. Set reasonable and appropriate goals for yourself.

24. **Truthfulness and veracity:** It is tempting to social researchers to ignore the one messy piece of information that might upset our otherwise clean or uniform conclusions. How can we ensure that we present all of the pertinent data we have collected to portray the fullest possible picture, with all of its complexities?

    Tips:

    * Review the scholarship in your field. How have scholars before you dealt with anomalies, variations and complexities in the data? Is there a standard within your field for how to present this?

25. **Meeting audience's expectations:** As we consider who will make use of our knowledge, we have to understand that different audiences have different expectations for the kinds of reading they will find most useful. A systematic analysis may be deemed "accurate," according to academic standards, but be unrecognizable and hence "inaccurate" for community members.

    Tips:

    * Construct a list of relevant audiences for your work. What kinds of conclusions will each be expecting? Generalizable results? Specific description and details? Objective statements or subjective musings? Does your discipline allow for a combination of these elements?
    * Consider using different media to convey your results. A written paper can handle very analytical arguments well while video can often handle affective conclusions more effectively.

26. **Will participants be represented in ways they can understand?:** In many cases, we write about one group of people for the education of another group of people. But we still owe our participants the honor of being represented in ways that they themselves will find accurate and appropriate. How can we show our participants as whole people while still focusing our reporting on key elements of their lives?

    Tips:

    * While it is tempting to believe we can avoid this dilemma by simply writing different products for different audiences, we are still obligated to the people we work with to be consistent and respectful.
    * Think about how this becomes easier or more problematic when you offer confidentiality to your informants.

27. **Embarrassing revelations**: Fieldwork often allows us to get to know individuals very well, including intimate details of their lives. Sometimes this personal information is integral to our study and cannot be ignored. Confidentiality and anonymity can help in such situations, but in instances where our participants expect and want to be identified, this problem is more complex. Will any of our data embarrass our participants? How can we ensure that we understand what might embarrass our participants, rather than simply assume they share our own values?

    Tips:

    * Assuming you understand what is or is not embarrassing to a person can be dangerous. How might you establish a relationship with your participants so that you can determine what might be embarrassing to them?

28. **Participants changing their minds after the study:** In most informed consent agreements, we indicate that participants may end their participation at any time without penalty. But what happens when a participant who has been central to your analysis decides at the very end of the project that s/he no longer feels right about the work and wants you to not include her or his information? Should we allow people to decide on their level of participation right up until the moment of publication, even though their withdrawal of information may effectively render the study useless?

    Tips:

    * Are there compromises to these situations? What kinds of concessions could you make to maintain the truthfulness of the study and your obligation to your participants?

29. **Power differential in writing**: As the authors of other people and groups' lives and stories, we have a lot of power when we write up our findings. While we may not be able to completely avoid telling "our" version, what obligation do we have to ensure that we give voice to the people we work with. How can we ensure we do not co-opt their story?

    Tips:

    * Brainstorm ways to make sure the voice of the participants is heard. One of the most obvious is to include direct quotes, but be sure to consider how easily these can be manipulated if you pick and choose according to your own agenda rather than theirs.

    * Another way might be to include your participants in the process of writing and revising. You could show drafts of your work to them and ask for input. However, again, think about the potential problems that might arise. What if they disagree with your assessment, an assessment that your data clearly supports? And what if competing factions within a community give you conflicting advice about how to tell their story?

30. **Publication and distribution channels:** As we think about methods of reporting, we must also think about the locations of that reporting. Writing about a community for an academic journal or a class paper probably means that the community itself will never read their own stories. Do we have a responsibility to choose a venue of publication that will speak more directly to the participant community? And if so, how will we do this? Other academics might prefer an "objective" report with many ties to prior literature, while lay readers might instead want a powerful story with recognizable characters and challenges. How can we write in ways that our readers will find most helpful and engaging?

    Tips:

    * Review the possibilities your research has for application. How can your final write-up assist in this application?

    * Be creative and flexible. Can you write-up your research in a number of different forms and styles? For example, can you write both an academic article and a blurb in a community newsletter?

    Exercise:

    * Start with an article your read in class that is similar to the type of product you might produce from your own research. Translate it into various forms that the community involved in the study might be useful. Examples might include a community newsletter, a public lecture, a video for community outreach, a grant application, etc.

31. **Availability of raw materials to other researchers:** In some fields, researchers are expected to make their raw notes available to other researchers who may want to take their investigations in a different direction. How does this impact agreements about confidentiality? Can you adequately honor participants' "informed consent" once another person begins to make use of their information? Does an individual researcher have the right to withhold collected information even though another scholar might make effective use of it and expand our knowledge?

    Tips:

    * First, determine whether your discipline expects such sharing. If so, are there parameters? In other words, do they expect all of your fieldwork or just interview tapes and more formal data collection?

    * Even if your discipline does not expect such sharing, would it be useful to other researchers to do so? Or do your public presentations and publications convey all the useful data you gathered? If not, can you identify certain parts of your fieldwork that could be shared without violating "informed consent." Remember that other researchers may not share your ethical standards.

II. Ethical Hypothetical Scenarios

Ethical Hypothetical #17: Learning local norms of conduct

I. The Ethical Hypothetical: Whether or not to participate in a religious ceremony that you are observing.

You are working with a local church congregation and are present during many of their religious ceremonies. You are not a member of the church. Everyone is clapping and singing while you sit quietly in your pew. Eventually, everyone moves to the altar to accept communion.

You don't want people to think you do not approve of the way they worship, nor do you want people to think you presumptuous by participating.

Do you participate in the ceremony by clapping and singing and eventually receiving communion? Or do you remain a quiet and detached observer?

II. Identifying the Ethical Dilemma

A. Examine the relevant ethical guidelines for appropriate behavior. These may be personal, discipline-specific, institutional, cultural or legal.

In this case, relevant guidelines may be personal, institutional or cultural.

B. Identify the ethical mandates that are in conflict or at issue. You can refer to the Ethics of Fieldwork Chart or put them in your own words. Eventually, it will be useful to compare to the Chart for further assistance.

In this case, the ethical conflict centers around #17: Learning local norms of conduct. Simply learning the norms, however, may not be possible. The problem may remain, if people within the group do not agree on what is acceptable behavior.

III. Evaluating the Options

A. Learn whether there is a standard norm. If so, the dilemma quickly disappears. However, if there are contradictory opinions held within the community, you will need to contemplate the issue in more depth.

B. Specifically: What are the degrees of harm that will ensue if you choose one path or the other? Is sitting quietly less risky than joining in? Or vice versa?

C. Compromise: Can you avoid an either/or dilemma and identify a compromise that allows you to avoid offending either side? To try to find a compromise, you can…

1. consult with various members of the congregation, including, but not only, the people "in charge" such as the pastor. Try to get a sense of why some might be offended if you did not participate, and why some might be offended if you did. You may find that the sides are not equally invested. That is, you might find that people who want you to participate would be pleased if you did, but not offended if you didn't, whereas the people who do not want you to participate would be highly offended if you did.

2. be specific about what each side “needs.” In this case, the participation in the service may be masking a larger issue, one that may be spiritual, may be personal. Again, talk to people to identify what is at the core of the issue.

IV. Fieldworkers Weigh In [Remember, there is no one right answer]

Fieldworker 1:

If I’ve already received approval to be there observing, then the safest bet for me is to remain sitting, quietly, observing. This is what I said I would do so it shouldn’t surprise anyone that that’s what I’m doing. If people encourage me to get involved, whether explicitly by telling me to go up and get communion or to “get happy” and start clapping, then I would tentatively do so. But if I knew some people did not like this, I would politely decline. Inaction always seems better than actively offending.

Fieldworker 2:

I think it’s a fallacy to assume that doing nothing is better than doing something. I would determine whether there was a norm for behavior, but if people were split on the issue, and both were equally adamant about it, then I would follow according to the leader, the pastor. The congregation has given him or her their trust, and I couldn’t be faulted for doing the same. If anyone questioned me on this, I would simply inform them that the pastor has told me to do this.

NOTE: There is potentially another ethical dilemma here. What if the congregation and pastor agree you should participate while there, but your religion forbids you do take sacraments such as communion in another church?

Ethical Hypothetical #18: Negotiation of defined harms—learning local concerns

I. The Ethical Hypothetical: Under-aged Drinking

You are working with a college club sports team to understand the organization from an emic (insider's) perspective. Your research has focused on the social structure of the team, particularly as it operates to unify a diverse group of athletes who aren't getting scholarships or any other outside incentive to play.

The team has been cited numerous times for violating the no-drinking policy, and has been told that if they violate it again, they will be disbanded. In the course of your work, you realize that the drinking culture of the group is an integral part of the team. T-Shirts, cheers, chants and songs all herald alcohol as an important part of the culture. You see this particularly in terms of the social bonding that occurs off the playing field at the numerous parties held. You can't offer confidentiality to the team since you are working on a video ethnography.

What do you do?

II. Identifying the Ethical Dilemma

A. Examine the relevant ethical guidelines for appropriate behavior. These may be personal, discipline-specific, institutional, cultural or legal.

B. Identify the ethical mandates that are in conflict. You can refer to the Ethics of Fieldwork Chart or put them in your own words. Eventually, it will be useful to compare to the Chart for further assistance.

In this case, the ethical conflict might be summarized as: #22: truthfulness and veracity vs. #18 negotiation of defined harms and #25: embarrassing revelations.

III. Evaluating the Options

A. Universally: Is one of these ethical mandates clearly more important than the other?

B. Specifically: What are the degrees of harm that will ensue if you ignore each of the ethical mandates? Is the harm greater in one or the other?

C. Compromise: Can you avoid an either/or dilemma and identify a compromise that allows you to avoid a direct conflict of the ethical mandates? To try to find a compromise, you can…

1. consult with your key informants and present the dilemma to them. In this case, consult the team members and get a sense of their concerns about continuing to violate the no-drinking policy. Have their been changes? If so, can you discuss these?

2. be specific about what each side "needs." In this case, you might ask yourself exactly what about the drinking culture is needed to explain your conclusions? Can you address this without suggesting it remains a problem? Or how about the other side? What are the regulations exactly? Can legal aged players drink? If so, can the video show only those members without proving a violation of the school's policy?

IV. Fieldworkers Weigh In [Remember, there is no one right answer]

Fieldworker 1:

If I encountered this problem, I would work towards a compromise. I would find out exactly what the administration deemed an example that would warrant their expulsion as a team. However, most of my work would be with the players, since my goal is to portray them accurately and humanely. I would ask them to talk on camera about the drinking culture that got them into trouble with the university. They could discuss these issues as ones of the recent past. This would allow me to accurately address the role of drinking culture without arguing it was still a problem. Instead, the players could make it clear how and why drinking was important to them, without ever lying about their current problems. As long as my study was not specifically about how sports teams renegotiate identity in the face of forced change, this compromise should not affect the validity of my research.

Fieldworker 2:

I tend to be fairly protective of my informants. If there really is any chance at all that the group could be expelled because of my research, I would back away from discussing those issues. Do I invalidate my research? It depends. If I construct an interpretation of the group that suggests they do not drink, and that drinking is not an issue for the group at all, then yes. This would be unacceptable. However, if I found equally relevant avenues for analysis, perhaps based around gender issues, or competition, or the struggle to construct coherent identity for a team that gets little to no financial or fan-based support from the university, then I think this is OK. The focus is still emic, still relevant, still accurate, and my analysis of the group is not undermined by the omission of the drinking culture.