INTEGRAL, ANCILLARY, OR INCIDENTAL: TEACHING IDEAL OR REAL IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH ETHICS?

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There is a certain convenience in saying that our students don’t come to us with a well-developed, personal moral or ethical sense, and that is why teaching them research ethics is problematic. I don’t think that is the real difficulty for teaching ethics to any class, especially social science research ethics. Rather, problems arise from how we as researchers view ethics in relation to our work. Do we see ethics as integral, at the core of the very way we structure our research agenda and methods? Or are they actually ancillary, of secondary importance, serving as an aid to our research and supporting our projects? Maybe they are really just incidental, occasionally necessary when unpredictable occurrences surface in the course of our projects? I suspect that most social scientists would like to say that ethics are integral, reflecting our disciplines’ and our personal ideals about social justice.

The realities of our practice, however, suggest that ethics actually may not be integral, functioning most of the time as ancillary, part of the background of our discipline and our own research. Disciplinary ethics codes, for example, function partly as reminders of best practice, but codes also serve to keep outsiders—even the people we study—“off our backs.” We can hold our codes up to show that we are ethical because we follow a well-developed code of ethical practice that all anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, or other social researchers have worked out. Likewise, IRBs make us jump through ethical hoops, but mostly demonstrate that we have considered ethical concerns in our research and help to protect our institutions legally. Frankly, however, when “push comes to shove,” most ethics are incidental, and ethics don’t enter our minds unless some event or person surfaces to challenge our practice as being somehow unethical. I suspect that the way we think about ethics gets reflected in how we teach research ethics to our students: we tell
them that ethics are integral, but to most of us they really are not.3 The way we teach ethics most of the time tends to be by offering a dribble of ethics “theory” followed a deluge of case studies and ways to deal with the IRB, not with the practical aspects of making ethics integral to research. We expect them to link the ideal (integral) and real (ancillary and incidental) by some mystical process. What our students get from our approach is that the ideal is nice, but not the way things really work. If we want social scientists to be ethical, we need to find ways to teach ethics as integral to research, making the ideal as real as the ancillary or incidental roles.

This matter first came to my attention when I served on the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) Committee on Ethics (CoE) from 2002-2005. Most CoE members subscribed to the notion that ethics should be integral to our research, but several of us were not sure that it was. Our discussion drifted to a suggestion that ethics should drive everything anthropologists do and that we needed to start training our students about ethics in their introductory classes and textbooks. Yet when we looked at a few intro texts, we were discouraged to see that most exiled ethics to a few pages, usually a sidebar or part of a chapter, and maybe a few sample ethical dilemmas or cases. A suggestion emerged that we could encourage textbook authors to make ethics integral to their textbook by offering an award for introductory texts that did it best. The CoE developed the guidelines for it after I left the committee, but by 2008 the AAA Award for Excellence in the Presentation of Anthropological Ethics in an Introductory Text became a reality.4 The first of six criteria states that an awardee should show “success in demonstrating that ethical considerations and competence in the field of ethics are integral to anthropological research, scholarship and practice” [emphasis added]. Newly announced awards generally have a recipient fairly soon, but this award has yet to be given. The reason, current Co-Chair Dena Plemmons reports, is that “we got ethics texts, rather than introductory texts that had ethics integrated throughout.”5 She also reports that the CoE will be making changes in the nature of the award. My suspicion is that the CoE couldn’t find such texts because even though most anthropologists think that ethics should be integral, they can’t really tell you how. I am not all that sure, however, that our inability to do so is that bad.

The way we think and teach about ethics may be a lot like the way we teach and think about theory in most social science disciplines. We know theory is somewhere in our work, that it is integral and drives our
research, but it may be difficult to articulate explicitly just where theory applies or how it influences us. So here’s the rub: if ethics are integral, maybe we realistically can’t pull them out of the matrix in which they are embedded and shouldn’t try so hard to. Maybe making ethics explicit somehow diminishes their value and power. Maybe they are just confusing. As Darby Conley (2007) has his Bucky Katt character quip in the Get Fuzzy comic strip, “Ethics are so annoying; I avoid them on principle.” Or maybe my reasoning here is just too convoluted.

Let’s assume for the sake of argument that ethics should be really, not just ideally, integral to our research and that we can teach students how to make this happen. What might that mean for social scientists and ethicists who teach social science research ethics? Please allow me to elaborate on some examples and see where they lead.

A core understanding for integral social science ethics would have to be that social science research is essentially collaborative with those we study. For whom and for what purpose do we do our research? As an anthropologist I may have a warped perspective, but in the anthropology, political science, sociology, and psychology classes I’ve taken, all instructors at some point declared that we do social science “for the betterment of humanity.” Important questions, of course, are who decides what the research will be and who decides what the better in “betterment” means? Before Millgram, Deloria’s “Here Come the Anthros” in Custer Died for Your Sins, and Project Camelot, social sciences were essentially scientifically colonizing. Impelled by those ethical crises, collaboration with those we study became the decolonizing model.

Informed consent became collaboration’s anchor. In one sense, truly informed consent insists that we explain our research to those we study in terms they can understand, along with its possible risks and benefits. They may not need to know everything, but they need to understand how the information will be used, the possible products, and the general process of data acquisition. In other words, at some level they need to “buy into” the research and become partners. We know how difficult this can be because informed consent in the US, at least, is aimed at the individual, not groups. We know that some individuals and some groups are incapable of understanding our research for a variety of reasons: disinterest; no written language; no authority structure with decision-making power; age-graded, gendered, ranked, economic and other strictures on access to information; not the slightest understanding of statistics; the list goes on. For most of us, unfortunately, development of the consent form and getting it cleared by the IRB pushes ethics more
into the ancillary realm than the integral. Is this just cynical? How many of us regularly consider the ramifications of informed consent and work to really specify it to our collaborators and perhaps even negotiate it with them? As for the “betterment” part, that is another, even more difficult problem.

In the United States, we find ourselves pushed toward what by the mid-1970s would have been anathema to social scientists: hardcore ethnocentrism. American society seems to have become bipolar, with “traditional family values,” negative views about immigration, and religious or moral absolutism at one pole versus “alternative family structures,” shifting ethnic composition and societal needs due to immigration, and cultural relativism at the other pole. The American situation mirrors much of the world, and globalization exacerbates the tensions. We see this reflected in what appear to be changing social science ethics. The Human Terrain System (HTS) being applied in Afghanistan and Iraq is essentially social science done for military purposes, employing unapologetic anthropologists, sociologists, and other social scientists, much to the consternation of mostly senior colleagues. HTS is essentially Project Camelot without being clandestine about the funding source. I know that the American Anthropological Association is struggling fiercely with HTS, and other social sciences may be too. Does the HTS “better” humanity for the United States military or for the Afghan and Iraqi villages they study? How can betterment be defined, how can informed consent be obtained, and how can reasonable collaboration be developed when doing so may violate individual or group principles (and I include those of the researcher here)? What does relativism even mean any more?

There is more than concern about morality in our research. For example, in collaborative models, how do academics give up cherished principles such as academic freedom? Collaboration demands it, unless we redefine what we mean by academic freedom. Informed consent means we must abide by collaborators’ decisions to say no. What if their demands are stricter, requiring approval of what we say about them, or even not publishing our results? Social scientists, but especially anthropologists, have cherished the notion that we can be objective, or at least that if we make our biases clear, we are ethical. Do our collaborators have any concern about our objectivity when we are required to behave by their rules in order to do our research?

Do our attempts to be ethical cause problems for our collaborators? There may be concern when non-social scientists, say the media, look at
the same groups we study. The subjects will certainly notice that a television reporter doesn’t worry about having them sign an informed consent document, and often just shoves a microphone in their face. Maybe our ethical practice actually poses problems. As a case in point, ten years ago, a colleague and I conducted a cultural property study of Effigy Mounds National Monument for National Park Service (NPS). In our contract, the NPS said that because they dealt with tribes on a nation-to-nation basis, we needed to have tribal council approval before we could talk to any tribal members about the meat of the project. Only two of about a dozen tribes responded to letters outlining the project and seeking permission. Fortunately one of our team archaeologists was a member of one of the tribes. After being shuffled from office to office, she was finally told that the tribe didn’t answer our letter because nobody had ever asked them for permission before! Doctors, churches, media and others just came onto the reservation and talked to people, no permission asked or granted, except perhaps by individuals who refused to participate. The tribe had developed no protocols to deal with what social scientists (and most IRBs now) would consider everyday ethical practice. Our ethical practice essentially was going to make more work for them, so the letter ended up in a deeply heaped in-basket of the tribe’s business manager. The point here is that our integral and ancillary ethical practices may have little meaning or may cause problems for those we study. How do we know? Perhaps our ethical practice is meant only to satisfy our own sense of respectability, so it doesn’t matter if ethics are integral to our work.

We also have the complexities of new data sources to complicate collaborative research. In the past decade or so whole new sources of social science information are opening up in which collaboration of any sort is difficult. Social networking such as that provided by Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, and video sites such as YouTube and Yahoo! Video provide fodder for social analysis. In the past couple of years, three of my own projects have involved data from them, a project on representation of Native Americans on YouTube, a discussion on racialism in American Archaeology by members of a Yahoo group, and analysis of homeless persons’ blog sites. With the Yahoo group asking permission and telling them what I would do with their discussion was straightforward, but for some of the others, especially the comments on YouTube videos, there was no attribution other than an online name. Note that all of these discussions were fully public, but having their contributions analyzed by a social scientist probably never entered their
minds. Would they write the same things if they knew I was going to use them? Certainly identities were kept as confidential as their online names allowed, but in the videos I’ll wager not a single individual had signed a model release and unless they were specifically identified, I certainly didn’t know who they were so that I could ask their consent. As a social scientist, I will admit that only in the case of the Yahoo group did I consider even asking permission to use the materials. Not until the APPE meeting last year when I mentioned my study of homeless persons’ blogs in a session did a colleague raise the issue. What my example goes to show is that even for a social scientist who has written a lot about ethics and collaboration, at least regarding the issue of the use of social networking data, I barely thought of ethics, more incidental than ancillary and certainly not integral. When ethics teachers don’t consider the ethical ramifications of their work, can we reasonably expect to teach our students that ethics are integral?

As I finish reasoning my way through this, I find myself back at something I wrote earlier, that if ethics are integral, maybe we realistically can’t pull them out of the matrix in which they are embedded. Maybe there is nothing seriously wrong with the ethical practice of the vast majority of social scientists, and the NSF and NIH concerns are ill-founded. Maybe all we need is the occasional reminder that ethics should be integral to our research. Perhaps just going through the difficult process of considering the ethics of our research is enough. But given that I’ve already written this brief paper, let me say in what probably is a profoundly unsophisticated truism, that educating toward ethical practice in the social sciences may be among the most difficult tasks in ethics education. To be ethical, social science research must pass successfully through several filters of concern: the scientist’s personal moral or ethical concerns; disciplinary ethical concerns; institutional ethical concerns; funding agency ethical concerns; and perhaps the most difficult of all, the perception of these concerns by the people they study. Social science ethics are a Gordian Knot, but with no Alexander to cut through it. Social science ethics need to be taught with ethics as “really,” not just “ideally,” integral to research, with the ancillary as touchstones to indicate that it is, and the incidental as the occasional event that can best be avoided if ethics are indeed integral to a project.
NOTES

1 I’m not setting up a straw man argument here. This is a direct observation by a physics colleague who teaches a general unit on research ethics to students as part of a science-oriented, first-year entry college class.

2 I would note that this is especially so with anthropologists because one of their primary methods is participant observation in which there is often fairly close, daily interaction those they study.

3 I suspect that those who will be part of this APPE panel and the audience will be people for whom ethics certainly are integral, mostly because we have them as a research interest.

4 http://www.aaanet.org/about/Prizes-Awards/Award-for-Presentation-of-Anthropological-Ethics.cfm

5 Personal communication. E-mail of 9/29/2010

6 Of course in one sense that is probably what integral actually means!


8 I suspect readers know this, but I refer to the 1960s social science Project Camelot, not the truth-teller, whistle-blower, conspiracy theory site on the Web at http://projectcamelot.org/mission.html. This project was started by two people with sociology and psychology degrees who seem to work perilously close to the ethical edge with their research techniques!

9 See Galtung, p. 13 (Galtung, J. 1967. ‘Scientific Colonialism’. *Transition* 30: 10-15) for a discussion of scientific colonialism which simply defined is when the locus of information about people is centered on scientists investigating them and their behaviors, not on the people themselves. Hence it is exploitative, with scholars controlling acquisition, interpretation, and dissemination of information.

10 If it really needs to be said, few things in society and culture are actually binaries; most behaviors and attitudes fall along continua.