# Ethnography
## Principles in practice
## Third edition

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# Contents

# 10  Ethics

In Chapter 1 we argued that, contrary to the views of some recent writers on qualitative research, the immediate goal of ethnography should be the production of knowledge – rather than, for example, the pursuit of political goals, serving evidence-based policy-making, or the improvement of professional practice. In this specific sense for us social research is not inevitably, *and should not be*, political; even though there are various other senses in which it could reasonably be described as necessarily political (see Hammersley 1995: ch. 6). Another way of putting this is to say that the only value which is intrinsic to the activity of research is truth: the aim should be to produce true accounts of social phenomena; though these should also be relevant to human concerns and have some news value. However, even if this position is adopted, it does not mean that all other values can be ignored in the course of doing research. Clearly, there are ways of pursuing inquiry that are unacceptable on other grounds.

To say that the goal of research is the production of knowledge, then, is not to say that this goal should be pursued at all costs. There are ethical issues surrounding social research, just as there are with any other form of human activity. In this chapter we will look at the particular forms they take in ethnography, and at the variety of arguments deployed in relation to them. We will concentrate primarily on issues to do with the behaviour of the researcher and its consequences for the people studied, or for others belonging to the same or similar groups and organizations.[1] Towards the end, we will look at the issue of ethical regulation, and the ways in which this introduces additional complexities into the decisions that ethnographers must take, and in some respects puts barriers in the way of this kind of work.

## The issues

Most of the ethical issues we will discuss apply to social research generally, but the particular characteristics of ethnography give them a distinctive accent. We shall consider them under five headings: informed consent, privacy, harm, exploitation, and consequences for future research.

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1 There are, of course, additional and equally important ethical matters, concerning relations with funding agencies – Willmott (1980); Pettigrew (1993) – and relationships within teams of researchers or between supervisors and research students – Bell (1977) – etc. For discussions of a wide range of ethical issues reflecting various perspectives, see Beals (1969); Diener and Crandall (1978); Barnes (1979); Beauchamp *et al*. (1982); Punch (1986); Homan (1991), Mauthner *et al*. (2002), van den Hoonard (2002), Christians (2005), Farrell (2005).

## *Informed consent*

It is often argued that people must consent to being researched in an unconstrained way, making their decision on the basis of comprehensive and accurate information about it; and that they should be free to withdraw at any time. The most striking deviation from this principle in the context of ethnographic work is covert participant observation, where an ethnographer carries out research without most, or perhaps even all, of the other participants being aware that research is taking place. Examples include Homan's (1978) work on old-time pentecostalists, Holdaway's (1983) study of the police, Goode's (1996) use of bogus personal ads to investigate courtship, Calvey's (2000) work on bouncers, and Scheper-Hughes's (2004) study of organ-traffickers. Some commentators argue that such research is never, or hardly ever, justified; that it is analogous to infiltration by *agents provocateurs* or spies (Bulmer 1982: 3). Such objections may arise from the belief that this kind of work contravenes human rights of autonomy and dignity. Equally, they may stem from fears about its consequences. For instance, it has been suggested that 'social research involving deception and manipulation ultimately helps produce a society of cynics, liars and manipulators, and undermines the trust that is essential to a just social order' (Warwick 1982: 58). By contrast, other writers argue that there are occasions when covert research is legitimate. They point to the differences in purpose between covert research and spying, or note that spying is a necessity in inter-governmental and other forms of social relations. They also emphasize the extent to which we all restrict the disclosure of information about ourselves and our concerns in everyday life: we do not tell the whole truth to everyone all the time. Indeed, it has been suggested that the deception involved in covert participant observation 'is mild compared to that practised daily by official and business organizations' (Fielding 1982: 94). On a more positive note, it seems likely that some settings would not be accessible to open research, at least not without a great deal of reactivity – though, as we noted in Chapter 3, there is often some uncertainty surrounding this.[2]

While the issue of informed consent is raised most sharply by covert participant observation, it arises in other forms of ethnographic work too. Even when the fact that research is taking place is made explicit, it is not uncommon for participants quickly to forget this once they come to know the ethnographer as a person. Indeed, ethnographers seek to facilitate this by actively building rapport, in an attempt to minimize reactivity. Certainly, it would be disruptive continually to issue what Bell (1977: 59) refers to as 'some sociological equivalent of the familiar police caution, like "Anything you say or do may be taken down and used as data."'

Furthermore, even when operating in an overt manner, ethnographers rarely tell *all* the people they are studying *everything* about the research. There are various reasons for this. One is that, at the initial point of negotiating access, an ethnographer often does not know what will be involved, certainly not in any detail; even less, what the consequences are likely to be. Furthermore, even later, once the research problem and strategy have been clarified, there are reasons why only limited information may be provided to participants. For one thing, the people being studied may not be very interested in the research, and an insistence on providing information could be very

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2  Much the same dispute about covert operations has long taken place within journalism, though the practice of covert data collection is probably much more common in that occupational context. See, for example, Leigh (2006).

intrusive. Equally important, divulging some sorts of information might affect people's behaviour in ways that will invalidate any conclusions from the research. For instance, to tell teachers that one is interested in whether they normally talk as much to girls as to boys in the classroom could produce false results, since they may make an effort (consciously or unconsciously) to equalize their interactions.[3]

Besides often failing to provide all of the information that might be considered necessary for informed consent, even ethnographers whose research is overt sometimes engage in active deception. Participants may be given a false impression, for example that the ethnographer agrees with their views or finds their behaviour ethically acceptable when he or she does not. This is integral to the kind of toleration that, is probably essential to ethnographic work (Hammersley 2005a). This will often be a matter of researchers not mentioning their own views; but sometimes it may even involve them indicating agreement or acceptance despite their real beliefs, as in the case of Fielding's research on an extreme right-wing organization or Taylor's investigation of a ward in an institution for the 'mentally retarded' (Fielding 1982: 86–7; Taylor 1991).

Roth (1962) has argued that all research falls on a continuum between the completely covert and the completely open, and it is worth emphasizing that within the same piece of research the degree of openness may vary considerably across the different people in the field. For example, in his research on Bishop McGregor School, Burgess (1985d) informed the teachers that he was doing research; while the students were told only that he was a new part-time teacher, though they found out about the research subsequently by asking him questions (Burgess 1985d: 143ff). In much the same way, Lugosi (2006) describes how concealment, of various degrees and kinds, along with some disclosure, was unavoidable throughout his research on a bar patronized largely by a gay and lesbian clientele.

The eliciting of free consent is no more straightforward and routinely achieved than the provision of full information. Ethnographers often try to give people the opportunity to decline to be observed or interviewed, but this is not always possible, at least not without making the research highly disruptive, or rendering it impossible. For example, Atkinson's research on the bedside teaching of medical students in hospitals took place with the knowledge and consent of the specialists concerned, but not with that of either the students or the patients he observed (Atkinson 1981a, 1984, 1997). In the context of research on the police, Punch comments that 'In a large organization engaged in constant interaction with a considerable number of clients' it is physically impossible to obtain consent from everyone and seeking it 'will kill many a research project stone dead' (Punch 1986: 36). Involved here are also difficulties raised by the fact that, because ethnographers carry out research in natural settings, their control over the research process is often limited: they simply do not have the power to ensure that all participants are fully informed or that they freely consent to be involved.

Above and beyond this, there is the question of what constitutes free consent, of what amounts to a forcing of consent. For example, does an attempt to persuade someone to be interviewed or observed constitute a subtle form of coercion, or does this judgement depend upon what sorts of argument are used? It has also been proposed

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3  By contrast, in action research this may not matter. Indeed, the aim may be to see how far behaviour can be changed. See Kelly's (1985) discussion of this aspect of the Girls into Science and Technology project.

that some people, in some roles, for example those in public office, do not have the right to refuse to be researched, and therefore do not need to be asked for their consent (Rainwater and Pittman 1967). While almost all ethnographers would accept the principle of informed consent, there is considerable disagreement about what this requires in particular cases, and about when (if ever) it can be waived.

### *Privacy*

In everyday life we draw distinctions between public places (such as airports and parks) and private places (like the bedroom or the bathroom), as well as between information that is for public consumption and that which is secret or confidential. A frequent concern about ethnographic research is that it involves making public things that were said or done in private. This may be seen as breaching a matter of principle, but it is also sometimes feared that making the private public may have undesirable long-term consequences. For example, it has been suggested that all social research 'entails the possibility of destroying the privacy and autonomy of the individual, of providing more ammunition to those already in power, of laying the groundwork for an invincibly oppressive state' (Barnes 1979: 22). Like informed consent, however, the concept of privacy is complex. What is public and what private is rarely clear-cut. Is the talk among people in a bar public or private? Does it make any difference if it is loud or *sotto voce*? Similarly, what about mobile phone conversations carried out in public places, or discussions in online chat rooms? Are religious ceremonies public events if anyone is able to attend? It is not easy to answer these questions, and in part the answer depends upon one's point of view and the particular context.

   In everyday life, we seem to draw the distinction between public and private differently depending upon whom is involved, and this is often reflected in the practice of researchers. For instance, it is quite common for educational researchers to ask children about their friendships, but it is more rare to investigate friendship patterns among adults; and, in part, this probably stems from the assumption that children's private lives are legitimately open to scrutiny in a way that those of adults are not, especially professional, middle-class adults. This is, of course, an assumption that is not beyond challenge.[4] Also, privacy seems to be defined in terms of specific audiences that are or are not regarded as having legitimate access to information of particular kinds. ('Not in front of the children' or, alternatively, 'Not in front of the adults'!) Sometimes, the invasion of privacy by researchers is justified on the grounds that since the account will be published for a specialized audience neither the people studied nor anyone else who knows them is likely to read it. But is this true? And, even if it is, does it excuse what has been done? Interestingly, some informants reacting to Scheper-Hughes's (1982) study of an Irish village, *Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics*, complained that it had been written in a way that was accessible to them: 'Why couldn't you have left it as a dusty dissertation on a library shelf that no-one would read, or a scholarly book that only the 'experts' would read?' (Scheper-Hughes 1982: vii; see also Scheper-Hughes 2000). This offers an interesting sidelight on the desirability of popular or public social science designed to address a mass audience (see Burawoy 2005).

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 4  And, indeed, there are those who would not only resist such differential treatment but also seek to
    extend children's rights in research much further: see Grave and Walsh (1998).

Closely related to the issue of privacy is the idea advanced by some researchers that people have a right to control information relating to them, and that they must give their permission for particular uses of it by researchers (see, for example, Walker 1978; Lincoln and Guba 1989). Thus, Lincoln and Guba argue that 'when participants do not "own" the data they have furnished about themselves, they have been robbed of some essential element of dignity, in addition to having been abandoned in harm's way' (Lincoln and Guba 1989: 236). The idea that participants own any data pertaining to them has its most obvious application in relation to interviews, but it could in principle be extended to observational data as well. It is suggested that by assigning such ownership rights to people they can be protected from the consequences of information they regard as confidential or damaging being disclosed publicly by the researcher. However, there has been criticism of this view: as, on the one hand, facilitating the distortion of evidence by participants or making genuine research impossible, and, on the other, potentially being a strategy that puts pressure on people to supply information that they would not otherwise divulge (Jenkins 1980).

Particular problems regarding informed consent arise in the case of internet ethnography. Are publicly available websites, chat rooms, blogs, etc. a free source of data for researchers to use, or must they negotiate access? In participating in chat rooms or email exchanges, must ethnographers disclose their identities and purposes? How far are their responsibilities here similar to or different from those of other participants? There is now a considerable literature discussing these matters (see Sharf 1999; Markham 2005).

### *Harm*

While ethnographic research rarely involves the sorts of damaging consequences that may be involved in, say, medical experiments on patients or physicists' investigations of nuclear fission, it can sometimes have consequences, both for the people studied and for others. These may arise as a result of the actual process of doing the research and/or through publication of the findings. At the very least, being researched can sometimes create anxiety or worsen it, and where people are already in stressful situations research may be judged to be unethical on these grounds alone. An example is research on terminal illness and how those who are dying, their relatives, friends, and relevant professionals deal with the situation. While there has been research in this area (for example, Glaser and Strauss 1968; Wright 1981; Seale 1998), it clearly requires careful consideration of its likely effects on the people involved. The research process may also have wider ramifications, beyond immediate effects on the people actually studied, for instance for broader categories of actor or for one or more social institutions. Thus, Troyna and Carrington (1989) criticize several studies for the use of research techniques which, they believe, reinforce racism: techniques such as asking informants about the typical characteristics of members of different ethnic groups. This sort of criticism may also be extended to sins of omission as well as sins of commission. For example, is a researcher behaving unethically if he or she witnesses racist or sexist talk without challenging it?[5]

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5 For cases which raise these issues, see Hammersley (1980); Smart (1984: 155–6); Gallmeier (1991: 227); Griffin (1991: 116–18).

Harm may also arise within ethnographic research from the nature of the field relations that are established. At the very least, being researched can create stress and provoke anxiety, especially if the researcher is believed to be evaluating one's work, one's life or oneself. As we saw in Chapter 4, ethnographers usually seek to build rapport and trust, so that these effects may well lessen or disappear in the course of the fieldwork. At the same time, there are dangers that can arise from successfully establishing close relations with people in the field, for the researcher, for them, or for both. Irwin (2006) provides an extreme but illuminating illustration, raising questions about the desirability of complete immersion in the field by discussing her study of a tattoo shop, during the course of which she dated and married her key informant (then subsequently divorced him!).

Turning to the potentially harmful consequences of the publication of ethnographic accounts, these can come about in a variety of ways and may affect both the public reputations of individuals and their material circumstances. The classic example here is Vidich and Bensman's (1958) account of Springdale, a community in upper New York State. Not only were some readers able to identify this community, but also a few of the individuals described were recognizable too (notably those playing leading roles in local politics), and their behaviour was thereby opened up to public scrutiny.[6]

In the case of Maurice Punch's study of Dartington Hall, a progressive private school in Devon, the problems surrounding publication dogged the later stages of the research. Initially, the Trust which financed the school, whose members included an eminent British sociologist, funded Punch to do a follow-up investigation of ex-students. At the same time, Punch was registered for a PhD and was on the look-out for a progressive boarding school to study, and it was agreed he could use Dartington for this purpose. However, the history of the research turned into a catalogue of conflicts and recriminations. Early on, despite being funded by the Trust, Punch was refused access to the school's files by the joint headteachers, even though these were his only means of tracing former students. The major battle arose, however, over the eventual publication of a book from his thesis. Perhaps rather foolishly, Punch had signed a document which stated that he would not publish anything arising from the research without the written consent of the chairman of the Trust. As a result, once he had completed his dissertation there was a lengthy struggle, with threats of legal action, before he managed to get agreement for publication. Opposition to publication seems to have arisen in large part from the trustees' judgement that the research showed Dartington in a bad light. Punch provides his own summary of the findings:

> First, it was argued that this type of 'anti-institution', with its nebulous guidelines for action, is difficult to operationalize at a day-to-day level because so many of its concepts are imprecise and because they conflict with institutional imperatives for cohesion and continuity. Second, I felt that the ideal of 'non-interference' by staff was often compromised by the staff's manipulation of the student society. But, in turn, the pupils could subvert the freedom offered to them with collective behaviour, and by powerfully enforced group norms and sanctions, that were the

6  For discussions of the ethical issues raised by this case, see Becker (1964b); Vidich *et al*. (1964). And for discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of giving pseudonyms to the people and places researched, see Homan (1991: 142–8) and Walford (2002).

antithesis of the school's most cherished values. And third, there was evidence to suggest that some of the former pupils found it difficult to adjust to the wider society, remained dependent on the school and networks of former pupils, were somehow undermotivated in terms of conventional achievements, and rather than taking an active part in changing the world, seemed to opt out into a peripheral, artistic subculture.

(Punch 1986: 61–2)

It is not difficult to understand that the trustees might disagree with these findings, and why they wished that such a book not be published, especially given the increasingly hostile political environment in which the school found itself. And the trustees' fears were perhaps confirmed by the appearance in a national newspaper a week before the book's publication of the headline: 'An academic time-bomb in the form of a highly critical book is to explode under Dartington Hall progressive school next Thursday'.[7]

The reporting of research data or findings by the mass media has also been a significant factor in other studies. Morgan's research on women factory workers was picked up by national daily newspapers (Morgan 1972), and the Banbury restudy was described in a local newspaper under the headline: 'New probe into "snob town"' (Bell 1977: 38). Clearly, such publicity can damage the reputations of individuals, organizations, and locations, as well as hurting the feelings of those involved. Whether the responsibility for this lies with the researcher is an interesting, and difficult, question.

What is significant in cases such as these, of course, is not just whether the information published and publicized is true, but what implications it carries, or what implications it *may be taken to carry*, about the people studied and others like them. And there is considerable potential for problems arising from these implications built into the very nature of social research, as Becker (1964b) points out, drawing on the ideas of Everett Hughes:

> The sociological view of the world – abstract, relativistic, generalizing – necessarily deflates people's view of themselves and their organizations. Sociological analysis has this effect whether it consists of a detailed description of informal behavior or an abstract discussion of theoretical categories. The members of a church, for instance, may be no happier to learn that their behavior exhibits the influence of 'pattern variables' than to read a description of their everyday behavior which shows that it differs radically from what they profess on Sunday morning in church. In either case something precious to them is treated as merely an instance of a class.

(Becker 1964b: 273)

The problem becomes even more serious, however, in the case of 'those who believe they possess the truth complete and undefiled', as Wallis (1977: 149) points out, reflecting on his study of scientologists. He managed to publish his book and avoid being prosecuted for libel only through lengthy negotiation and some modification of the text. In a response to his work, a representative of the Church of Scientology complained that Wallis, faced 'with a social movement of phenomenal growth and increasing impingement on society in areas of social reform' had chosen 'to paint, in

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7 Subsequently, Punch's attempt to publish an account of the story behind the research was initially blocked by appeal to the British libel laws: Punch (1986: 49–69).

dark tones, a small square in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas' (Gaiman 1977: 169). It should be said, though, that responses to research reports on the part of those whose behaviour is described within them are not always negative, and are often minimal or non-existent.

The potential for damage caused by the publication of research findings is not restricted to effects on what is publicly known or on the reputations of people or organizations. Also relevant is the use that may be made of the information. An extreme case from many years ago is Condominas anthropological account of Sar Luk, a mountain village in South Vietnam, published in French in 1957. This was subsequently translated illegally by the US government and used by its army in the Vietnam War as part of 'ethnographic intelligence'. The information produced by Condominas does not seem to have been directly implicated in the South Vietnamese army's destruction of Sar Luk, but it is clear that the publication of information about this village had at least potentially deadly consequences for the people living there, even though Condominas may not reasonably have been able to anticipate this (see Barnes 1979: 155–6).

Even the existence of a PhD thesis in a university library can sometimes cause problems, as Wolf discovered in the case of his research on 'outlaw bikers':

> A few years . . . after I'd stopped riding with the Rebels, the Calgary police brought a member of the Rebels' Calgary chapter to court in an attempt to revoke his firearms acquisition certificate. A member of the Calgary police force claimed the status of 'expert witness' and acted as 'a witness for the crown prosecutor'. 'Expert witness' means that the individual is considered capable of offering the court an 'informed opinion' on a judicial matter by virtue of his or her overall knowledge and familiarity with the situation. When the lawyer for the defendant asked on what grounds the police officer could claim any knowledge of the Rebels, the officer was able to justify his eligibility as an expert witness by virtue of having read my thesis. The Calgary Rebel eventually won his court case and retained his legal right to possess firearms; however, he came up to Edmonton to settle a score with me.
>
> (Wolf 1991: 220)

While Wolf escaped retaliation, the Calgary Rebel and his associates made clear that they were against the publication of a book on the basis of his thesis: 'No way that you're going to publish that book!' Wolf comments: 'it was an interesting ethical complication: it was a dangerous personal complication. However, these were not the brothers with whom I had made my original pact, and I have decided to go ahead and publish' (1991: 221).

A more mundane example is Ditton's (1977) study of 'fiddling and pilferage' among bread salesmen. He opens the preface to his book in the following way:

> I am lucky enough to have a number of friends and colleagues. Probably not as many of the former . . . now that this book has been published. I don't expect that many of the men at Wellbread's will look too kindly on the cut in real wages that this work may mean to them, and my bakery self would agree with them.
>
> (Ditton 1977: vii)

It might be argued that Ditton's exposure of the 'fiddling and pilferage' among sales staff working for a particular bakery caused harm not only to the fortunes and reputations of those who worked for that bakery but also perhaps to those working for other bakeries. At the same time, like many other ethical issues in ethnography, this one is by no means unambiguous.

Finch (1984) raises a more general issue about harm in relation to her own work on playgroups and clergymen's wives. She argues that it is difficult even for feminists 'to devise ways of ensuring that information given so readily in interviews will not be used ultimately against the collective interests of women' (Finch 1984: 83). Of course, it is not always clear what is in whose interests, and some would argue that the value of scientific knowledge, or the public right to know, outweighs such considerations; but many ethnographers insist on the importance of trying to ensure that the knowledge produced by research is used for good, and not bad, ends. How far this can be done, and how well grounded judgements about what is good and bad are, no doubt varies considerably. Furthermore, ethnographers will usually have little control over the consequences of publishing their work, though in most cases these will be small or unimportant from many points of view.[8]

### *Exploitation*

Sometimes it is claimed that research involves the exploitation of those studied: that people supply the information which is used by the researcher and yet get little or nothing in return. One of the teachers in the school that Beynon (1983: 47) studied summed this up, commenting: 'When you first arrived we thought "Here's another bloke getting a degree on our backs!" We resented the idea that we were just fodder for research.' And it is suggested by some commentators that, typically, researchers investigate those who are less powerful than themselves, and for this reason are able to establish a research bargain that advantages them and disadvantages those they study. This is a problem that can even arise in those situations where the researcher has an intellectual and emotional commitment to the people concerned and seeks to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with them, as Finch (1984) makes clear in the case of feminists studying other women.

Cannon (1992) found this to be an especially acute problem in her research on women with breast cancer. In dealing with it she encouraged the women themselves to reflect on the interview process, how and when it helped and did not help them, and left them substantially in control of the interviews (Cannon 1992: 162–3). Nonetheless, she felt guilt that her research might make their situations worse:

> Most of the women I interviewed felt ill, or at least were experiencing a certain amount of discomfort at the time of the interview; they disliked being in the hospital and my clinic-based interviews meant that I asked them to stay longer than

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8 Harm may come not only to those studied but also to field researchers themselves. To a large extent, of course, they must take responsibility for their own safety, and there is now a small literature dealing with risk and danger in ethnographic and other research (Lee 1995; Lyng 1998; Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000; Jacobs 2002). However, research directors and research supervisors need to incorporate into their research plans and protocols reasonable consideration for the safety of students and research assistants in the field, while yet recognizing both that it is easy to overestimate risks, and at the same time impossible to avoid them completely.

necessary; my questions required them to go way back to when they first found an abnormality in their breast, something which, to most women with secondary spread, seemed far away and hardly relevant to the more immediately life-threatening problems they now had.

(Cannon 1992: 172)

At the same time, she was able to offer the women support, both physical and emotional, so much so that with some of them she became an important part of their social networks up to and including the point of death.

Here, as in many other cases, there were benefits as well as costs for those involved in the research, but these are never easy to assess. As a result, there are problems surrounding judgements about what exactly constitutes exploitation. The concept implies a comparison between what is given and what is received, and/or between what is contributed to the research by each side. And yet, of course, most of the benefits and costs, and the relative contributions, cannot be measured, certainly not on any absolute scale. Whether or not exploitation is taking place is always a matter of judgement, and one that is open to substantial reasonable disagreement.

The argument about the exploitative potential of ethnographic research leads commentators to make a variety of recommendations: that researchers should give something back, in the way of services or payment; that participants should be empowered by becoming part of the research process; or that research should be directed towards studying the powerful and not the powerless. Such proposed remedies do not always avoid the problem, however; and they are controversial in themselves. Indeed, they can sometimes compound the difficulties. Much depends upon the circumstances. Howarth (2002: 25) found that, despite what she assumed was prior agreement, informants reacted angrily to the payment she offered, on the grounds that it was exploitative: they accused her of racism and blocked her exit from the room. It is also worth noting that there are occasions when services of one kind or another are demanded by participants, or payment. For example, Scheper-Hughes (2004) reports her experience in seeking to get information about organ trafficking:

Nervously chewing sunflower seeds and spitting them out rapid-fire in our direction, Vladimir boldly demanded a 'fair price' – '200, OK, 100 dollars' – for an interview. When I slipped him a crisp $20.00 bill Vlad nodded his head.

(Scheper-Hughes 2004: 47–8)

### Consequences for future research

Social researchers, and especially ethnographers, rely on being allowed access to settings. Research that is subsequently found objectionable by the people studied and/or by gatekeepers may have the effect that these and other people refuse access in the future. If this were to happen on a large scale, ethnographic research would become virtually impossible. This was one of the main arguments used by Fred Davis (1961a) in his criticism of Lofland and Lejeune's secret study of a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous (Lofland and Lejeune 1960; Lofland 1961); and by Erickson (1967) against the covert study of an apocalyptic religious group in *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger *et al.* 1956). Of course, what is at issue here is not so much ethical responsibilities to the people studied but rather to colleagues, present and future. As we saw earlier,

though, there may be good reasons routinely to expect a negative reaction from at least some of the people studied. For instance, Becker has claimed that there is an 'irreconcilable conflict between the interests of science and the interests of those studied', and that any good study is likely to provoke a hostile reaction (Becker 1964b: 276). This may be an exaggeration, but it does point to the fallacy of assuming that the researcher and the people studied will usually see the research in the same way. As in life generally, there may well be conflicting interpretations and clashes of interest; and there are no simple general solutions to such conflicts. The upshot of this is that while the individual ethnographer may have an ethical obligation to colleagues not to 'spoil the field', it may not always be possible to meet this obligation; and sometimes the courses of action required to meet it may be undesirable on other grounds.

## Diverse perspectives

As we have indicated, these five ethical issues are subject to diverse points of view. Building on our discussion so far, we can identify four contrasting positions which have had an impact on thinking about the ethical issues surrounding ethnographic research. These by no means exhaust the possibilities, but they do indicate the range of perspectives to be found in the literature.[9]

First, there is what we might call *ethical absolutism*. There are commentators who argue that there are certain sorts of research strategy that are simply illegitimate, and should never be employed by researchers. For example, deception is often proscribed, and the establishment of fully informed consent with participants insisted on. Similarly, strict rules are laid down by some about what constitutes invasion of privacy, and it is argued that researchers must take no action which infringes it. Warwick's (1982) criticism of Humphreys' (1970) study of homosexual encounters in public lavatories comes close to this position. Such views are usually justified by appeal to political or religious commitments and/or to the existence of certain inalienable human rights. Interestingly, though, Shils (1959) offers a version drawing on a sociological theory about the role of the sacred in modern societies. An interesting example of an application of this approach in an ethnographic study is Benjamin's (1999) anthropological study of a Jewish community in Curaçao, in which he gave participants substantial control over the conduct of the research and its publication. A similar stance is sometimes taken in the sphere of childhood studies (see Grave and Walsh 1998; Farrell 2005).

Second, there are those who argue that what is and is not legitimate action on the part of researchers is necessarily a matter of judgement in context, and depends on assessment of the relative benefits and costs of pursuing research in various ways. We might call this *ethical situationism*. This point of view usually places particular emphasis on the avoidance of serious harm to participants, and insists on the legitimacy of research and the likelihood that offence to someone cannot be avoided. It leaves open to judgement the issue of what the benefits and costs of particular research strategies are in particular cases, and how these should be weighed. No strategy is proscribed absolutely, though some may be seen as more difficult to justify than others (see Becker 1964b; Simons and Usher 2000).

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9  For discussions that take a different line on the divergent ethical perspectives to be found among researchers, see Mauthner *et al.* (2002) and Christians (2005).

A third position is *ethical relativism*. This implies that there is never a single determinate answer to the question of what is and is not legitimate behaviour on the part of a researcher. This is because judgements about the good and the bad are always dependent on commitment to a particular value perspective, and there is a plurality of values and cultures to which human beings can be committed. This position often leads to arguments to the effect that participants must be fully consulted or closely involved in the research, and that nothing must be done by the researcher that transgresses their moral values; on the principle that 'When in Rome one must do as the Romans'. Lincoln and Guba (1989) seem to adopt this position.

Finally, there are various forms of what we might call *Machiavellianism*. Here, ethical considerations are not given any priority, at least when carrying out certain sorts of research. A striking example of this is to be found in the writings of conflict methodologists. They argue that insistence on the establishment of informed consent would be counterproductive in the study of many large economic or state organizations, since those in control of them would have no scruples about manipulating the research for their own ends. It is suggested that in such contexts covert research may be essential (Lehman and Young 1974; Lundman and McFarlane 1976).

Douglas (1976) generalizes this argument, claiming that conventional views about the ethics of social research are based on a defective theory of society, one which assumes a moral consensus and widespread conformity to that consensus. He argues that deceptive methods are essential to do good social science because the social world is characterized by evasiveness, deceitfulness, secrecy, and fundamental social conflicts (Douglas 1976).

Douglas and the conflict methodologists argue, then, that researchers must be prepared to engage in unethical practices because this is often the only way that they will get the information they require (see also Hammersley 2007a). While those who pursue this line of argument may not assume that the end always justifies the means, they do believe that sometimes means which are ethically suspect from one point of view, such as deception, can be justified because they promise to produce a greater good, for example knowledge that could lead to social policies which will remedy social injustice.

The disagreements among these four positions are not just about values and their implications for action; they also relate to factual assumptions about the nature of the societies in which research is carried out, the sort of research that needs to be done and its relative value. Questions are also raised about whether the same ethical standards should be applied to all those involved in research, or whether standards should be applied differentially. For instance, should the members of an extreme right-wing political organization which engages in racial harassment be accorded the same ethical consideration as members of a democratically elected government? And should either of these be treated in terms of the same ethical norms as patients on a cancer ward? Indeed, sometimes different ethical stances may be taken towards different groups of people *within the same study*. Back and Solomos (1993: 189), for example, report adopting a 'profoundly inconsistent' ethical stance, being more open about their purposes and findings to black than to white informants. Some of these examples also indicate the fact that researchers do not operate in situations of complete freedom: those they study not only may have different needs and interests that should be taken into account, but also will have differential power to protect themselves and to pursue their interests in relation to researchers and others.

## Taking a view

Our own position is closest to the second of the four views we outlined above, what we referred to as ethical situationism, though we accept elements of all of them. In our judgement there are dangers in treating particular procedures as if they were intrinsically ethical and desirable, whether this involves ensuring fully informed consent, giving people control over data relating to them, feeding back information about the research findings, or publishing information on the basis of 'the public's right to know'. What is appropriate and inappropriate depends upon the context to a large extent, and sometimes actions that are motivated by genuine ethical ideals can cause severe problems, not just for researchers but for the people they are studying as well.

Take the example of feeding back the findings of research to participants. This is now widely seen as an obligation on ethical grounds, because it is important to be open about one's research findings. The experience of Kelly in researching a city centre youth work project illustrates such a commitment and its dangers. She engaged in overt participant observation, but because of the high turnover in clientele not all of the young people were aware that she was a researcher. Also, some of those who were aware of her role did not realize the sort of information she was collecting and would publish. As a result, when an interim report was circulated there was a strong negative reaction which affected not only the research itself but also relationships between staff and clients (Davies and Kelly 1976; Cox *et al.* 1978). What this case illustrates is that by being open in this way researchers may upset the informational economy of the groups and organizations they are studying: for instance, through making information previously known only to a few available to all, or by making public and 'official' what had formerly only been private and informal. Similar problems arise in indigenous communities within which cultural knowledge is differentially distributed, for example by age or gender. Indeed, whereas, in the past, open publication of this knowledge by an anthropologist probably would not have made it widely available within the community itself, this is now no longer the case, given the global character of modern communication.

In much the same way, the justification of research and of the publication of findings on the grounds of a public right to know can be dangerous if it is not tempered by other considerations. As Shils (1959) points out:

> good arguments can be made against continuous publicity about public institutions. It could be claimed that extreme publicity not only breaks the confidentiality which enhances the imaginativeness and reflectiveness necessary for the effective working of institutions but also destroys the respect in which they should at least tentatively be held by the citizenry.
>
> (Shils 1959: 137)

Even Becker, whose views differ sharply from those of Shils, argues that one should refrain from publishing anything that will cause embarrassment or distress to the people studied if it is not central to the research or if its importance does not outweigh such consequences (Becker 1964b: 284). And, in fact, researchers frequently acquire confidential information that they do not use. In her study of gender and schooling in a rural English setting, Mason (1990: 106) reports becoming 'aware of details of covert practices such as "moonlighting", "taxdodging", and various details of "gossip"',

which she was asked to keep confidential. Similarly, in attending case conferences for his research on haematologists, Atkinson (1995) came across suspicions about the description and staging of some tumours relating to patients who were being enrolled in a multi-site clinical trial. It seemed that these were being described in ways designed to make them conform to the particular clinical requirements of the trial. This did not relate to a central part of the research, nor was wholesale professional misconduct involved, and the details have never been published. However, this illustrates the sort of ethical dilemmas that can arise through becoming party to inside information.

Sometimes, though, the researcher may decide that even data and/or findings that are centrally relevant to the research must be suppressed for ethical reasons. The anthropologist Evans-Pritchard provides an example of such self-censorship in his book *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*: he excluded information about a particular association devoted to the practice of magic, because of the consequences publication would have for its members. 'Europeans generally feel so strongly against this association and so fiercely punish its members that I refrain for the present from publishing an account of its rites, for some of them would offend European sentiments' (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 511, quoted in Barnes 1979: 40). Similarly, in their study of a college basketball team, Adler and Adler (1991: 179) report practising 'a degree of self-censorship, avoiding discussing potentially discrediting aspects of the setting'.

Underlying the treatment of any procedures as absolute ethical requirements are assumptions about how social settings *ought to be* that may neglect *how they actually are*. Moreover, views about how they ought to be may well differ for those with different cultural backgrounds or political commitments.[10] At the same time, it seems to us that there are values which most people, across most societies, would subscribe to in one form or another, and that these should guide researchers' judgements about what is and is not acceptable behaviour. And the values and feelings of those being studied must also be considered. However, it is important to recognize that it may not always be possible or desirable to avoid acting in ways that run contrary to these values. Values often conflict, and their implications for what is legitimate and illegitimate in particular situations is, potentially at least, always a matter for reasonable dispute. There is also the problem of the uncertain validity of our factual knowledge about what the consequences of different possible courses of action will and will not be, and thus about whether particular actions are likely to have undesirable effects.

For these reasons, what constitutes harm is a matter of judgement and may be contentious. A good illustration of this is provided by Homan's research on the prayer behaviour of oldtime pentecostalists. In response to criticism of his covert research strategy, he argued that had he informed the congregations he was observing about his research he would have interfered with their worship in a way that was less justifiable than their being observed by a researcher without knowing it. Whether or not one agrees with him, it is clear that conflicting principles are involved here, and perhaps also disagreements about the consequences of adopting covert and overt research strategies (see Homan and Bulmer 1982). Similarly, in the case of Ditton's (1977) research on bakery staff, whether one regards the latter as having suffered harm as a result of his research is a matter for debate. On the one hand, their incomes may have

10  For an interesting discussion of the difficulties involved in cultural differences in ethical judgements, see Shweder (2003).

been reduced as a result, and their reputations damaged, though it is not clear whether this actually occurred. On the other hand, the behaviour they were engaged in could be described as unethical and as harming others. Given this, should they not take responsibility for their actions? The response might be to ask why the particular people Ditton studied should have to face responsibility for their actions when others do not. After all, many businesses operate on the basis that there will be a certain level of theft on the part of employees. And one can raise questions about the levels of remuneration offered to bread workers compared to managing directors and shareholders of bakery firms. Moreover, the latter may also engage in criminal malpractice, perhaps on a greater financial scale, and without this being exposed to public scrutiny. In this example, as in many others, there is plenty of scope for debate about whether the research caused harm, how serious this was, and whether it was legitimate.

The same potential indeterminacy surrounds other ethical issues. An example is the confidentiality of information:

> At times, in the course of conversations, teachers will say, 'and this is confidential'. But we might ask: what is actually held by the informant to be confidential – everything that is said, the name involved, or the occurrence of a particular episode? Further questions can also be raised: to whom is information confidential? To me and to the secretary who transcribes the tape? Or does it mean that sufficient confidentiality has been observed if pseudonyms are used? . . .
>
> There are, nevertheless, some materials that are always confidential to the researcher and permanently lost from view. For example, in the middle of a taped conversation with a teacher I was requested to 'shut that bloody machine off'. At this point the individual told me about something that he had not done. The teacher indicated that the information should never be used. . . . Such situations pose a major dilemma for me. If the informant did not intend the information to influence my interpretation why did he tell it at all? In some respects this appears to be an invitation to incorporate this material in some way, but if it is done without giving data and sources, the assertions may look ungrounded. This kind of situation also presents many other problems. First, the researcher colludes with the other person involved in the conversation if no material is used. Second, in this instance the data that are being witheld would dramatically change a public account of a situation, so in this sense the researcher is involved in some deception.
>
> (Burgess 1988a: 152)

Beynon (1983: 42) recounts a similar experience, though a different response: ' "Shall I tell you the truth about this place and will you keep it to yourself?", queried Mr Jovial. I could hardly reply that even inconsequential chat constituted potentially usable data! "Please do," I replied, feeling thoroughly devious.' As with confidentiality, so with honesty. The latter is certainly an important value, but this does not imply that we should always be absolutely honest. In everyday life most of us do not tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth in all circumstances. We are circumspect about whom we tell what, and we may even lie on occasion: not only to protect our own interests but to protect those of others too, sometimes even those to whom we are lying. What is at issue is not 'to deceive or not to deceive' in abstract, but what and how much to tell whom on what occasion. In research, as in everyday life, considerations about the likely effects of divulging various sorts of information and their desirability

or undesirability arise and must be taken into account (see Baez 2002). In our view, an element of not telling the whole truth, even of active deception, may be justifiable so long as it is not designed to harm the people researched, and so long as there seems little chance that it will do so. However, by no means all ethnographers would agree with this.

As we noted earlier, there is also scope for disagreement about whether a particular research project involves exploitation of the people studied. The demands made on participants by research can vary a good deal, but so also can assessments of the level and significance of those demands. In the case of ethnography the impact of the research may seem to be minimal, in the sense that often all that is required is that participants carry on much as normal. However, being observed or interviewed can sometimes be a source of anxiety and strain. And while there are potential benefits from research for participants, for instance the chance to talk at length to someone about one's problems, how valuable these are found may vary considerably. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of ethnographers to ensure that they do not exploit the people they study, but this is necessarily a matter of judgement, and one that is open to challenge.

In this context, it is also important to remember that the possibility of dishonesty, manipulation, exploitation, and the causing of harm does not lie only on one side of the researcher-researched relationship. Wax (1952) notes how researchers may be seen as easy prey, as fair game whose sympathies and desire for information can be exploited for gifts and favours. Adler and Adler (1991) provide an example, describing how the drug dealers they were studying gradually began to take advantage of them:

> Money they gave us to hold, they knew they could always rely on having returned. Money we lent them in desperate times was never repaid, even when they were affluent again. Favors from us were expected by them, without any further reciprocation than openness about their activities.
>
> (Adler and Adler 1991: 178)

A more extreme case is that of Wallis (1977), who found himself subjected to intimidation when it became clear that he would not toe the line. This involved

> the activities of a staff member of the Scientology organization who visited my university . . ., presenting himself as a student wishing to undertake some study or research into Scottish religion. He asked to attend my classes and lectures and inquired whether I could put him up at my home for a few days! This naturally aroused my suspicion, and I shortly recalled having seen him in a staff member's uniform when I had taken the Communication Course at the Scientology headquarters. However, I took no action at this stage, not knowing precisely how to react. During his short stay in Stirling he made visits to my home in my absence and, unknown to me at that time, presented himself to students and others as a friend of mine in order to make inquiries concerning whether or not I was involved in the 'drug scene'. After a couple of days I confronted him with my knowledge of his background.
>
> At this point he changed his story, claiming now to be a defector from Scientology, come to sell me information. I informed him that I was not buying information and gave him to understand that I believed his present story as little as his earlier one. . . .

In the weeks following his visit a number of forged letters came to light, some of which were supposedly written by me. These letters, sent to my university employers, colleagues and others, implicated me in a variety of acts, from a homosexual love affair to spying for the drug squad. Because I had few enemies and because this attention followed so closely upon the receipt of my paper by the Scientology organisation, it did not seem too difficult to infer the source of these attempts to inconvenience me.

(Wallis 1977: 157–8)

Scientologists also wrote to the body which was funding Wallis's research, complaining of his unethical behaviour and threatening legal action.

So, ethnographers must weigh the importance and contribution of their research against the chances and scale of any harm that is likely to be caused (to the people involved, to others, or to future access), against the values of honesty and fairness, against any infringement of privacy involved, and against any likely consequences for themselves and other researchers. But this must be done on the basis of a realistic view of human relations, not an idealized one; and there will be conflicting indications, difficult judgements, and probably disagreements. Ethical issues are not matters on which simple and consensual decisions can always be made. It is our view, however, that the most effective strategies for pursuing research should be adopted unless there is clear evidence that these are ethically unacceptable. In other words, indeterminacy and uncertainty should for the most part be resolved by ethnographers in favour of the interests of research, given that this is their primary task.

## The issue of ethical regulation

Up to now, we have written as if it were the individual researcher, or research team, alone who made decisions about what is and is not, would and would not be, ethical in carrying out a particular project. While there is an important sense in which this is where the prime responsibility always resides, there are others who can make consequential judgements about this. This includes gatekeepers and funding bodies, and, increasingly, institutional review boards or university ethics committees. As we noted in Chapter 2, before beginning to negotiate access or collect data, it will often be necessary for the researcher to get the agreement of such bodies. Many social science associations have long had ethical codes, but for the most part it is only relatively recently, outside the United States, that full-blown ethical regulation has come to operate.[11]

Of course, different attitudes and strategies can be adopted to deal with ethical regulation. These range from automatic compliance, at one pole, to outright refusal to cooperate, at the other. Neither of these extremes is probably sensible, or perhaps ethical, in most circumstances. But ethnographers must weigh up how to deal with any conflicts between their own ethical judgements and those of ethical regulators, and between the demands of regulation and the methodological or practical requirements of their research.

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11  For references to examples of professional codes, see the appendix to this chapter. Some of the questions now being raised about current ethical regulation were also raised when professional ethics codes were established: see Becker (1964a); Freidson (1964); Wax and Cassell (1981).

There are important questions to be asked, some of them of an ethical kind, about the justification for and consequences of the ethical regulation of social research that now takes place (van den Hoonaard 2002; Lincoln 2005; Hammersley 2006a). These stem from the fact that the regulation criteria have, to a large extent, been modelled on those developed for dealing with biomedical research. And the effects of this are compounded because ethical judgements about research cannot be separated from methodological and practical issues. Thus, it is often argued by ethical regulators that any risk of harm, or any cost, to participants must be weighed against the likely value of the research findings, which depends upon the effectiveness of the research design. In this way, ethics committees have become drawn into the role of determining what is good and bad research, and seeking to prevent the latter. Unfortunately, though, there is far from being any rational consensus among social researchers about either ethical or methodological issues, with the result that the decisions of ethics committees can have only limited intellectual legitimacy.

Ethical regulation of biomedical research arose out of, and is often justified by appeal to, abuses by medical researchers in the first half of the twentieth century. One example was the misuse of medical science by Nazi doctors and scientists, and their unspeakable 'experiments' on Jews, communists, homosexuals, Slavs and Roma in concentration camps. Another was the Tuskegee experiment, in which treatment for syphilis was withheld in the case of some black men in order to study the course of the disease. In fact, neither of these cases is entirely straightforward in their own terms. Both took place within legal frameworks, and so we should take care not to assume, unthinkingly, that ethical (any more than legal) regulation can prevent atrocities. As social scientists, we should be aware that ethical codes and their implementation are themselves cultural phenomena and reflect ideas about what it is and is not appropriate to do, and to whom, that are prevalent at the time. They are embedded within social frameworks of assumptions about what constitutes appropriate conduct, and also about what constitutes appropriate *research*. Nor should we assume that we have now gained some god-given omniscience about such matters. The Tuskegee case, in particular, is open to conflicting interpretations (Shweder 2004; see also Cave and Holm 2003), and the frequent appeals to it in the research ethics literature have come to take on the character of atrocity stories: simplified and exaggerated accounts designed for the purposes of justification.

Equally important, though, is that modes of regulation that are appropriate to biomedical research are by no means necessarily suitable for social research. What is involved in the practice of research, the people studied, the circumstances and purposes of inquiry, and the likely consequences, are all rather different in the two cases. Standard considerations about harm, informed consent, and so on, therefore need to be reinterpreted, and given different weight, in social research. In the case of ethnographic inquiry there are particular problems arising from the fact that fieldwork is carried out in settings over which the researcher does not have control, deals with many people simultaneously, and because research design in this context is not determined at the outset but develops over time.

An illustration of the problems concerns the issue of giving participants the right to withdraw from the research at any stage, a requirement which forms part of the protocol of many ethics committees. At first sight this may seem like a basic right which overrides the interests and convenience of the researcher. But ethnographers are

normally dealing with social actors as members of an organization or setting, not as separate individuals. In concrete terms, how can it make sense for the would-be ethnographer, who has carefully negotiated access to, say, a research laboratory, with all the reasonable undertakings and assurances that might be expected, to accept that the research can be brought to a complete halt if one person decides to withdraw?

There is always considerable variation in the nature of the relations an ethnographer has with different participants in the field, and this will often reflect the extent to which the latter are willing to be involved in the research. They can certainly refuse to be interviewed, for example. However, giving them the right to prevent the researcher observing meetings in which they participate – which is required by the common demand, on the part of ethics committees, for opt-in consent to observation – effectively renders ethnographic research impossible.

While we would not want to place huge weight on it, there is an important sense in which social scientists, like journalists, play a key role in public accountability: they provide information for citizens about what goes on behind public facades. While ethics committees frequently acknowledge this in principle, in their deliberations it tends to be buried beneath standard concerns about, for example, procedures for ensuring informed consent. And, in fact, such committees are not usually in a position to judge what is and is not legitimate in terms of research practice in particular studies: their members rarely have the necessary background knowledge and experience in the kind of research proposed, or sufficiently detailed understanding about the setting in which the research is to be carried out.

As Crow *et al.* (2006) have indicated, there are optimists and pessimists regarding the consequences of current forms of ethical regulation. However, there is a growing body of informal evidence about the difficulties that it is posing for ethnographic work, for example leading researchers to drop some parts of an intended research plan, notably those involving participant observation, that are judged likely to be an obstacle to approval, or at least to cause substantial delay in obtaining it. There is also the likelihood of systematic deception in the representation of research to ethics committees, and occasionally the complete abandonment of particular projects in the face of the time and resources that would be required to get the agreement of relevant ethical regulators. A more creative strategy was employed by Scheper-Hughes (2004) in her research on human organ trafficking. She writes:

> As I could see no way of having my research pass through the Univeristy of California's Human Subjects Protection Committee, I applied for an exceptional dispensation . . . requesting that, for the purpose of this study, I be viewed as a human rights investigative reporter with the same rights as my colleagues in the Berkeley School of Journalism. Permission was eventually granted.
>
> (Scheper-Hughes 2004: 44–5)

We are in danger of allowing ethical concerns that are quite proper in general terms to transform the entire research process into a formulaic one, such that there are only a very limited number of permissible research designs, determined not by their validity but by their capacity to yield research protocols that can be checked against a set of simple (but often inappropriate) criteria. This is an issue for all social scientists. However, for the reasons we have explained, it represents a particularly severe challenge for ethnographic work.

## Conclusion

We have discussed some key ethical issues surrounding ethnographic research, and outlined the rather different views about them to be found in the literature. We have also presented our own view that, while ethical considerations are important, they cannot be satisfactorily resolved by appeal to absolute rules, and that the effective pursuit of research should be the ethnographer's main concern. It is the responsibility of the ethnographer to try to act in ways that are ethically appropriate, taking due account of his or her goals and values, the situation in which the research is being carried out, and the values and interests of the people involved. In other words, as researchers, and as consumers of research, we must make judgements about what is and is not legitimate in particular cases. And we should be prepared to support our judgements with arguments if and when challenged. We must also recognize that others may disagree, even after we have presented our arguments, and not just because they have ulterior motives. It is important that the ethical issues surrounding research are discussed publicly, since this will feed into the deliberations of individual researchers and research teams. However, we do not believe that the forms of ethical regulation increasingly operating on social research today are desirable.

Reflexivity carries an important message in the field of ethics, as it does in relation to other aspects of ethnography. Some discussions of the ethics of social research seem to be premised on the idea that social researchers can and should act in an ethically superior manner to ordinary people, that they have, or should have, a heightened ethical sensibility and responsibility. An example is the frequent injunction that they should abide by 'the highest ethical standards', as if what this entailed were obvious, and as if doing it had no methodological consequences. There is also a tendency to dramatize matters excessively, implying a level of likely harm or moral transgression that is far in excess of what is typically involved.[12] Yet the ethical problems surrounding ethnographic research are, in fact, very similar to those that are relevant to other human activities. For example, what and how much to disclose of what one knows, believes, feels, etc., can be an issue for anyone at any time. And what is judged to be appropriate or desirable can vary a good deal. Above all, in everyday life ethical issues are subject to the same uncertainties and disagreements, the same play of vested interest and dogmatic opinions, and the same range of reasonable but conflicting arguments. All that can be required of ethnographers is that they take due note of the ethical aspects of their work and make the best judgements they can in the circumstances. They will have to live with the consequences of their actions; and, inevitably, so too will others. But, this is true of all of us in all aspects of our lives; it is the human condition.

This is not quite the last word. What we have discussed up to now are the ethical considerations that should restrain researchers' actions in the pursuit of inquiry, and the limits to these. But there can be exceptional occasions when a researcher should stop being a researcher and engage in action that is not directed towards the goal of producing knowledge. There is in fact always much action engaged in by ethnographers in the field that is not directly concerned with knowledge production. By its very nature, ethnography forces one into relationships with the people being studied, and one may do things because of those relationships, over and above any connection they

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12  An example, in our view, is Warwick's (1982: 50) criticism of Laud Humphreys' (1970) study of homosexual activity in public lavatories as an infringement of the freedom of the men concerned.

have with the research. However, sometimes there will be actions that are needed because of those relationships, or because of obligations arising from other roles, which are not compatible with continuing to act as a researcher, or at least which must be carried out at the expense of the research. An example might be taking action if one witnesses physical abuse of disabled residents by those employed to care for them, though even here the decision may be a difficult one (see Taylor 1991: 245–6).

Becoming a researcher does not mean, then, that one is no longer a citizen or a person, that one's primary commitment to research must be sustained at all costs. However, in our view situations where these other identities should override that of researcher are very rare; and decisions to suspend or abandon the research role must arise from considerations that outweigh the value of the research very heavily. Account must also be taken of the usually very limited capacity of the researcher to help. A common example of this sort of action is the engagement of researchers in advocacy on the part of those they are studying. And frequently associated with the commitment to advocacy, it seems to us, is an underestimation of the difficulties involved, an overestimation of the likelihood of success, and a neglect of the danger of making the situation worse (see Hastrup and Elsass 1990).

Most of the time, then, the temptation to abandon the researcher role should be resisted. Certainly, we have little sympathy with attempts to redefine that role to make the researcher into a political activist. Like absolutist conceptions of research ethics, this often seems to be based on a conception of the researcher as in some sense above the world being studied, and thereby able to partake of god-like knowledge and powers. Against this, it is salutary to remind ourselves that the ethnographer is very much part of the social world he or she is studying, and is therefore subject to specific purposes, constraints, limitations, and weaknesses; like everyone else.

## Appendix

Current social science research ethics codes include the following:

Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) *Ethical Guidelines* http://www.theasa.org/ethics.htm

British Sociological Association (BSA) *Statement of Ethical Practice* http://www.britsoc.org.uk/about/ethic.htm

Social Research Association (SRA) *Ethical Guidelines* http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethics.htm

American Sociological Association (ASA) *Code of Ethics* http://www.asanet.org/ethics.htm

American Anthropological Association (AAA) *Code of Ethics* http://aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethicscode.pdf

British Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Conduct: Ethical Principles and Guidelines* http://www.bps.org.uk/about/rules5.cfm

British Educational Research Association (BERA) *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004) http://www.bera.ac.uk/publications/pdfs/ethica1.pdf