Protected: Open access materials for teaching research ethics

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Online ethics training programs (a photo essay)
When I was a graduate student, we all had to take an online ethics training course from the U.S. National Institutes of Health. I think it was a condition for our department to receive federal funding of some sort. I wonder how many other anthropologists have taken the NIH ethics training? (I'd be curious to know, so post a comment if you have, or tell me if you've done CITI or some other online ethics training).

The NIH training course has many strengths, but it is ill-suited for training anthropologists for the kinds of ethical dilemmas they will encounter in the field. The basic model of "human subjects research" that it assumes is one of clinical research, but the intricate and intimate relationships that develop during ethnographic research raise dilemmas that are nearly unthinkable in a clinical encounter – dilemmas like: What if you're doing research on sexuality and you start sleeping with your informants? (See Ralph Bolton's chapter in Taboo [1995] for some thoughts).
So I got this idea that I would make my own ethics training module for social science students. My

original idea was to take the NIH training module and just tweak it to make it ethnography-relevant and more attuned to the context of Australian research (because the NIH training module is heavy with U.S. regulatory code). But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that I couldn't just make a few changes here and there; I needed to come up with something wholly new.
Macquarie was very generous in giving me funding, and I recruited 2 co-authors: Paul Mason, a PhD student at Macquarie who was just back from his first trip to the field and still had those fieldwork experiences and dilemmas fresh in his mind, and Kristina Everett, an anthropologist in Macquarie's Department of Indigenous Studies / Warawara, who contributed material on research in Australian Indigenous communities (which I know nothing about).

Pedagogy and aesthetics
I won't describe the entire module that we came up with here. It's freely accessible online so go to http://www.mq.edu.au/ethics_training to have a look for yourself. I've written about the website on Culture Matters, and Zachary Schrag, a U.S.-based historian who is working on a book on the history of ethics regulation over non-biomedical human research, has reviewed and critiqued the site at length on his Institutional Review Blog.
Here I want to consider the intertwined aesthetic and pedagogical decisions that went into creating the site. When I first started planning, I said to myself, "If I were going to improve on the NIH training module, what would I do?" First, I decided that the site could not resemble a corporate PowerPoint slide. Check out this sample page from the NIH website:

Awful. I think the NIH training module has many merits, and aesthetically I think it's overall pretty good too, and I know that using photos of people can be ethically fraught, which probably explains the use of these illustrations… but ugh!

Second, it shouldn't read like a dry policy statement – after all, if it did then people might as well just go and read the regulatory code instead.

On a related note, I decided that it shouldn't be jargony; it should be written at a level that would be accessible for first-year undergraduate students. The words ontology, hermeneutics, and epistemology were banned from the lexicon. (So was lexicon!) But at the same time, it had to be written at a level that wouldn't make a sophisticated reader feel patronized (I don't know how successful I was).

Pedagogically, the route I chose was to feature lots of case studies. Case studies make abstract issues accessible and real. There's a whole section called "case studies" that contains 4 famous ethics controversies:

-Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment (psychology)
-Laud Humphrey's famous Tearoom Trade study (sociology)
-Sudhir Venkatesh and his book Gang Leader for a Day (sociology), and
-the Human Terrain System (anthropology)

But the other sections almost all contain case studies as well – some are historical and well known, while others were taken from my research or that of my co-authors and other colleagues (we used pseudonyms to protect people's privacy).

Aesthetically I decided that it had to be broken up into relatively short chunks of text, and every page had to have a photo.

Finding illustrations

OK, so how do you get 100 fieldwork photos for a website?

First, Paul and I hit up our colleagues in the anthro department at Macquarie. They had a lot of great photos, but some I couldn't use, because I thought they were just too complex or ironic for an intro to ethics. For example, Chris Lyttleton offered me this photo and grinningly suggested that I caption it, "drinks before dinner."

Hilarious, right? Most of us would read that with an ironic wink – or would we? I started to worry: what if undergraduates think that the vision of ethnographic fieldwork that we're promoting is one in which Anglo white people get served by exotically dressed foreigners? So I nixed Chris's awesome picture. Irony, R.I.P.

Then, I hit up the people I was writing the case studies about: Philip Zimbardo, Laud Humphreys, and Sudhir Venkatesh. Laud Humphreys is dead, but I asked his college and they donated some photos. Philip Zimbardo has his own very cool website about the Stanford Prison Experiment (which was just as much an inspiration for my web module as the NIH training module was), and he very generously told me that I could use any of the photos off of his website, plus he supplied a photo of himself.

Same with Sudhir Venkatesh – he sent me original high-res photos of the Robert Taylor projects in Chicago where he did his research and said I could use them.

I've got to admit, I was a little surprised. These people are about as famous as it gets in academia, and I was writing about them critically. And yet they were very generous in sharing their images. Also, they made no attempt to control how I presented them. Out of courtesy, I sent them the text I'd written about them for review and gave them the opportunity to fact-check and request edits, but nobody ask for any changes.

As for the Human Terrain System, there were plenty of images that were copyright-free because they were taken by the U.S. military (same with the photos from Abu Ghraib which I used to illustrate part of the Stanford Prison Experiment case study), but here I just have to mention that I managed to track down one of the HTS people in these pictures, Major Robert Holbert, and I did an interview with him about the story behind that picture – it's posted to Culture Matters and it's quite riveting if you've been following the debate over the ethics of HTS.

Going open access

I still needed more pictures, so the next place Paul and I looked was in the Creative Commons-licensed photos on Flickr. I should mention that our training module is online, free for anyone to use, and licensed it under Creative Commons, so anyone can use it or adapt it for their own purposes, as long as these adaptations are nonprofit and attributed. And I'm sure that's one of the key reasons that people were so generous with their own images. We wrote to all the people whose images we used and invited them to tell us exactly how they wanted to be credited. Again, people were very generous and enthusiastic about letting us use their pictures.

It's with the Flickr photos that I took the most liberties in selecting illustrations for each web page. I was thinking a bit like a fashion magazine: all that mattered was having a nice picture, and who cares how accurately it represented the point being made? Clearly there are pitfalls to such a strategy, though. Check out this fantastic picture of a room in a zoological museum in Romania:

It's such a great photo, and I paired it with Kristina's discussion of the theft, circulation and display of Aboriginal body parts. I didn't want to offend Aboriginal readers with pictures of actual Aboriginal body parts, so I thought this picture would do a good job of illustrating the point that European scientists saw dead Aboriginal people as equivalent to animals on some level, suitable for being stuffed and put on display in museums of this type — though not actually in this museum. But when I assigned this training module to my ethnographic methods class and we were discussing it, one student said, quite earnestly, "It's just so awful that they have stuffed Aboriginal people on display in a museum in Romania!"

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