

2

ETHICS

Like its offline and online counterparts, hybrid ethnography must be undertaken with careful attention to ethical behavior. This chapter outlines ethical concerns at the design stage, offers guidance for applying for ethics board clearance, and provides opportunities to think through professional and community standards of responsibility. You will deepen your approach to tailored aspects of your ethical research in subsequent chapters. Ethnographic research comes with guiding principles that are applicable across disciplines. Researchers are first expected to do no harm. We are expected to communicate honestly with participants about the research, which includes letting people know when we are conducting research and obtaining informed consent from anyone who takes part in research activity. We expect each other to put the needs of the community of research first and to avoid letting our own personal or professional desires supersede those of the community. Whether or not it is framed explicitly as applied research, fieldwork should be undertaken with an awareness of community needs, and these needs should fit in with the research project. In general, research results should be made accessible to community members so that it can be of use. At the same time, personal or sensitive information should be safeguarded; researchers are expected not to share materials in a way that is inconsistent with the permissions given by people who shared it. We access guidance on specific ethical concerns, such as how recordings are treated, through professional associations whose members' research interacts with artifacts, recordings, and other data.

IRBs, ETHICS BOARDS, AND RESEARCH DESIGN

At its best, working with your institution's board or group that oversees research ethics is one of many tools to help you conduct an ethical research

process.¹ If you are experienced with this process, skip directly to the next section on unique challenges that hybrid research can pose for ethics board review in “Concerns for Partially Online Fieldsites.”

University-Based Review Boards

An institutional review board (IRB), research ethics board (REB), or similar group is charged with holding university-based research projects to standards that protect research participants and safeguard your institution from legal liability. Members of the IRB or ethics team will review your research plan, subject recruitment strategy, interview and survey protocols, and other relevant portions of your research project. While their language is legalistic, these boards are in place for a very good reason: Participants should be treated with respect, and your research project should not harm your collaborators.²

To prepare for ethics review, read your institution's documents for researchers and start a list of questions that you have about the process. If possible, attend an information session or meet with a staff member early on to get a sense of university-specific rules, forms, and timelines. Work at the planning stage helps to avoid delays later. Even if you have completed ethics reviews in the past, be aware that rules and best practices can change. For example, U.S.-based researchers were affected by a change to the Common Rule that went into effect January 1, 2019. Flip forward to Chapter 6 in this book for more information on the ethics of working with recordings and to Chapter 7 for work with surveys and interviews. If your fieldwork receives external funding, verify the rules to which you assent by accepting funding and review any deliverables expected of your work. When you complete the positionality exercise later in this chapter, consider the way constraints of

¹Working with an ethics board is a reality of doing research with people. It may be helpful in some ways, and it may feel like a hindrance in others. These boards tend to have conservative approaches to research, and, as is the case with many types of bureaucracy, they do not change quickly, even when updates could be helpful. A critique of the conservative nature of IRBs and an explanation of how this can burden qualitative researchers is found in Lincoln (2005).

²Research review boards help to prevent abuses that have been perpetrated in the name of research in the past, such as the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study, in which African American men were studied but not treated or informed about the disease. The U.S. public health service disguised research as healthcare, and the men did not receive a medically sound treatment that could have improved their health and even saved lives (Reverby, 2009). This well-known case is worth revisiting: It demonstrates the dangers of othering research participants and of failing to take ethical considerations seriously.

funding or priorities of funders may impact you as a researcher. For more on seeking funding and the ethical implications of accepting funding, consult Cheek (2005).

Additional Oversight Boards

In addition to a university oversight board, some groups have their own review boards or procedures for researchers. Schools, Indigenous Nations, religious institutions, and other groups may require an additional formalized review process. Take time early in your design phase to learn about appropriate documentation for review so that you can follow these processes if applicable. It is useful to familiarize yourself with the standards to which your university or other institution will be holding your project and to learn about the standards held by the group with whom you will be working, as described above. These exist in balance with your professional and personal ethical standards.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

A review process addresses the minimum standard of consent, privacy protections, risk level, standards of compensation, and related aspects of a qualitative research study. Yet the permissions granted by an IRB, REB, or similar body do not take the place of ethical decision-making on the part of the researcher or research team. Working with other people carries ethical implications. Sharing information gained through participant observation, too, has moral resonances. The importance of ethical decisions is compounded across differences in status or position, hence the focus on positionality in hybrid ethnography. Expressive culture research does not carry the same risks as biomedical or psychological research, yet the way we understand ourselves and each other carries implications of value, which impact how people treat each other in material terms.

As researchers, we may find that some standards to which we hold ourselves are more stringent than those required by ethics boards. For example, in the United States, data published in public forums on the internet is often considered by IRBs not to require an ethics protocol because the information is considered public (Buchanan & Ess, 2008). Yet should you choose to use such data, you might consider the potential risks to naming contributors or quoting directly from public forums, particularly if your research question touches on potentially sensitive topics. Additionally, consent is often best understood as

a process, not a one-time procedure. Simply obtaining a signed consent form to share results from an interview, for instance, does not impel you to share all of the information therein. Should a participant share information that is not widely known, you might check back in with that person to see whether or with whom they wish for the information to be shared, a practice I have found helpful in my own research. Finally, IRBs respond to culturally situated norms of behavior: those of the institution in which they are housed. In a particular fieldsite, guidelines for how to gather information, what information can be shared, and how, may be very different—and potentially more stringent.

A practical example of navigating varying standards of appropriateness is found in the work of Erin Debenport. The anthropologist worked with Pueblo communities on Indigenous language reclamation. Her collaborators in the Rio Grande valley began to write down a tribal language that had previously only been orally transmitted. This transition brought potential aids for learning and also risks for material that was previously internally controlled. As Debenport explains, “Tribal members are at once eager to innovate, producing written materials to aid language learning, yet wary of the possible risks involved with writing Keiwa. Potential hazards include the inappropriate circulation of cultural knowledge, language standardization, and damage to the religious system” (Debenport, 2015, p. 5). Eventually, the group chose to return to oral-only language teaching and learning. Due to concerns about making information public, Debenport uses a pseudonym for both the language and the community with which she worked.³ She uses pseudonyms for her collaborators—a decision that she notes was her own—“in order to reflect the importance that is placed on the careful circulation of cultural knowledge and the centrality of inference and avoidance in this community” (Debenport, 2015, p. 8). In other words, it is her reading of culturally relevant standards of information transmission—and not the external imposition by a university or tribal-based governance board—that impacted the level of detail she included in her writing. Her interlocutors directly impacted her decision not to share certain facets of the language: She “omitted tokens of the Keiwa language in this book or any other of my publicly available materials, a decision made in collaboration with tribal members” (Debenport, 2015, p. 8). She is able to share insights about language use, transmission, and community interactions around Indigenous language without actually revealing details about

³Keiwa, the term she uses in her book, is her pseudonym for the language of San Ramón, the pseudonym for the region in which she worked. Her 2015 book details how she chose these pseudonyms, a useful model for research with sensitive cultural information.

the community or the language, a stance that allows her work to enter into dialogue with linguistic anthropology without sharing information about the language that should, as her colleagues helped her understand, remain secret.

Adapting to Changing Standards

Internet-based communications and the way people interact with them in the hybrid field are constantly changing. Publications cannot anticipate all of the specific ways that these changes may occur. Following the spirit of the ethical research standards that guide qualitative inquiry for your field is good practice, as the specifics of regulations and work-arounds may be out-of-date. Checking in regularly with fellow researchers, your fieldwork community, and yourself is no less important to ethical research than it is to meet required research standards.

Some basic rules of thumb include the following:

- Consider collaborative and/or community-based research methods, if appropriate.
- Be transparent that you are conducting research.
- Respect your group and its members.
 - This includes respecting the group's decision if they determine it's not a good place for research.
- Proceed only with permission.
- Listen and watch for other people's comfort.
- Ensure that everyone has a real choice to not participate if they do not want to.
- Dialogue early on about how research products will be shared in ways that are productive and accessible for scene participants.
- Ask for permission before recording.
- Check back in regularly for other people's opinions and thoughts.
- Give credit to your fellow participants in a way that is consistent with how they have asked to be identified.
- Make yourself consistently available for questions, and answer honestly.

Professional associations help to clarify ethical expectations. The American Anthropological Association (AAA; 2007) distills ethical behavior

into seven central activities for research: avoiding harm, behaving honestly, obtaining consent, weighing competing interests, making results accessible, protecting your records, and maintaining respectful relationships (American Anthropological Association, 2012). Key points are described with a specific bibliography for each section on the AAA Ethics Forum (blog). Your disciplinary association may be able to help you develop appropriate ethical protocols. The International Sociological Association (2001), National Communication Association (1999), American Psychological Association (2017), and the Society for Ethnomusicology (1998) all offer support; links are in this chapter's Further Reading. You may also have community protocols or even an additional formal review process in order to comply with best practices (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Discipline-specific codes are sometimes available in published volumes (such as Robben & Sluka, 2007), yet the online versions from professional associations are often the most up-to-date. Some, like the AAA, mentioned above, also maintain an ethics blog for professional discussion. If your discipline or subdiscipline does not yet have a formalized research ethics code, start with one of these and consider joining or starting a working group or conversation at your association conference to discuss ethical concerns.

While professional organizations offer guidance, these standards should be considered a minimum for professional responsibility. Because of the rapid pace of changes in communication technologies, it may be necessary to think beyond the existing guidance for online interactions, data access, and the current realities of privacy concerns. Contemplate your own perspective as a researcher and empathetically consider the position of your fellow research participants as you add additional safeguards that are relevant to your scene. The following exercise can help you develop an ethical approach appropriate to your specific project.

EXERCISE 2.1

Locate the most recent version of your professional society's ethics statement or, absent a specific code, one in your nearest discipline.

Then, find two to three others in related fields.

Read these carefully, and then jot down your responses to the following questions in your research notebook:

- How is online activity addressed or absent in each code?
- What guidance is offered about the ethics of data management, storage, and privacy?

- Read the code for assumptions about what constitutes a fieldsite and what qualifies as research activity. If there are aspects of your hybrid field that exceed the boundaries of the ethics statement, what are these?
- How are ethical and legal requirements that differ across national borders or geocultural areas addressed in the statement? Consider how your own project's regional or cultural specificity may require additional guidance.
- To what other standards might researchers in your field hold themselves?
- To what other standards might you be held by participants?

Jot down your responses, writing in detail or discussing these with members of your research team as fits your situation. Your own personal ethical standards for research will also be influenced by your position in the field, as is detailed later in this chapter and in Chapter 3.

Balancing Multiple Ethics Standards

Arriving at consent to share information and deciding what to share with whom involves juggling the multiple sets of standards described in the previous sections. These are seen clearly in an example from participant observation. In an ethnographic study with people who post regularly on Wikipedia, Christian Pentzold first reviewed the standard for what insiders consider to be an appropriate level of confidentiality. Community expectations in a specific field are a central measure of ethical behavior. In the case with which Pentzold was working, these expectations were published within Wikipedia, and though not strictly enforceable, they informed the spirit of his ethical approach. He cites discipline-specific and interdisciplinary research guidelines, which in his case are the standards of the International Communication Association and the American Sociological Association as well as the Association of Internet Researchers (Pentzold, 2017, p. 144). The detailed ethics guidelines articulated by the AoIR working group offer questions and answers, as well as narrative examples and sample guidelines for researchers (Ess & AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002). This pragmatic document provides a starting point for questions that are best addressed through online research. While, as Pentzold notes, it is limited in the specific technology that it can address due to the quickly dated nature of specific guidelines for internet-based communication, the 2012 version provides a relevant reboot

(Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This later document specifically articulates guidelines, not a specific code of rules, “so that ethical research can remain flexible, be responsive to diverse contexts, and be adaptable to continually changing technologies” (p. 5). Indeed, researchers must be flexible not just within a single guiding document but when applying multiple standards of ethical behaviors that apply in a given field context.

Combining insider expectations, professional ethics guidelines, and specific research on areas of concern creates a study that is responsive to multiple stakeholders. Information deemed sensitive or private, in Pentzold’s case, did help the researcher in his own analysis, but it was not shared with others. His informed consent process was more than a one-time assent on the part of platform editors. Rather, he gained informed consent when pragmatic and adopted a policy that applied to the reality of his field. He writes, “While it seemed advisable to gain informed consent in all episodes and for all stations, it was mandatory or at least appropriate in observing interactions and collecting documents from episodes and stations that were treated as being private or limitedly private and which contained information thought to be sensitive or limitedly sensitive” (Pentzold, 2017, p. 151). Open or non-sensitive materials were not subject to consent, but the researcher “considered it compulsory for episodes and stations which Wikipedians treated as being more private and secluded from public view” (Pentzold, 2017, p. 152). He chose to use the platform to make his scholarly affiliations and name accessible to other users, publishing details about himself on his user page and always logging in when he participated.

This example of an online ethnography offers useful take-aways for the hybrid researcher. Informed consent is a process, not a one-time yes/no response. However, it can be more complicated than an ethics procedure that assumes simple face-to-face interaction. Platform-specific ethical guidelines are best used to navigate consent; these should take into account how publicly (or privately) information is made available, the closeness of the researcher’s relationship with participants, the sensitivity of the information they share, and how necessary the information is to the research question. Disclosing researcher status with participants is crucial. Not everything the ethnographer learns must be published.

CONCERNS FOR PARTIALLY ONLINE FIELDSITES

For the hybrid ethnography researcher, important ethical concerns of online fieldwork are accuracy and transparency, which are commonly discussed in digital ethnography as well. Past research in online fieldwork

offers useful lessons in representing the scene accurately. While initially applied to online-only research, these can be pragmatically adapted for the hybrid field. One concern that some researchers have about working online is the verifiability of information (Walther, 2002). Interestingly, this is also a concern when speaking with people face-to-face: One cannot know immediately if a participant is attempting to share small untruths, which typically are only revealed over time and with input from multiple individuals. There are, admittedly, some kinds of deception that are more common on the internet (perhaps so common so as not to always be considered deception). For example, frequent Reddit commenters may create multiple accounts; this is understood on the platform as within the range of expected behaviors. A single participant creating multiple personas is much more difficult—and more socially stigmatized—in a physical setting. In the hybrid scene, the researcher's imperative not to perpetuate false information continues, yet we have additional tools in this area: When working with the same individuals on- and offline, we have additional data points from which to discern how individuals are crafting their personas and how they choose to present themselves in overlapping internet-mediated and physical worlds.

As a method that is grounded in interacting with fellow humans, ethnography accounts for a range of beliefs and opinions. It also helps the researcher make meaning from our situated observation of behaviors. In hybrid work, we account for a variety of perspectives on actions we observe and also hold ourselves to relate what we learn as accurately as possible. Reading observations alongside each other, we operate across online and on-the-ground communications in order to come to useful conclusions. An example starting with offline ethnography demonstrates how this can work. Watching audience members interact in a dance performance, it is possible to read how engaged they look by watching them. Carefully observe behavior and take cues from body language. Talking with dancers afterward about how they felt creates opportunities for conversation that checks the way the researcher has observed behavior and also gives insight when self-reported and observed behaviors seem to be at odds with each other. Online, how do you do firsthand readings? Certainly it is possible to do a first-hand reading of text; other signifiers layer on more information. One can look at the frequency of participation, wording, capitalization, spelling, and learn to “read” other kinds of discourse. That is, one can read for norms and see when participants are fitting with them and also observe for behaviors that show enthusiasm,

detachment, anger, or other emotions. More on interpreting norms across the hybrid field—including in internet-mediated communication—is detailed in Chapter 5.

In fully online research, it is possible to observe without contributing to a site, platform, or discussion. This presents an ethical quandary for the researcher around potentially avoiding disclosure, which is a pitfall for transparency. The hybrid field ethnographer should not be tempted to hide one's participation; being communicative in-person about how one is also active online deepens communication with fellow participants and helps build trust (Bruckman, 2002). While less commonly treated in methods literature, possible non-participant observation also extends to others reading online communications. That is, people other than the researcher and those commenting may be observing what happens on a site without their presence being publicly known. Hosts of sites may be able to access information on who is viewing but not actively commenting through logs of IP addresses and/or geographic information for visitors. However, especially for sites not operated by the researcher, this information can be harder to access. Navigating the possibility of users who avoid direct engagement is addressed in Chapter 9. The hybrid site again offers a strength here; talk with people you know in person about potential risks of disclosing sensitive information and discuss what is—and is not—possible to learn about who is reading online content and whether privacy limits are prudent for certain kinds of sharing.

Researcher Safety and Privacy

Ethics boards are charged only with protecting external research participants—not the researchers themselves. Reflective scholarship by ethnographers details the scope and type of risks that academics face when conducting participant observation, including risks to reputation, harassment, physical threats, and violence, including sexual violence (Berry, Argüelles, Cordis, Ihmoud, & Velasquez Estrada, 2017). Hybrid research intensifies these concerns. As a researcher, you make some information about yourself public as part of establishing trust. This is the case in face-to-face communications, as well as online. It is possible for a fellow participant or someone who is not a participant but learns about you and your work to threaten or harass you, including through trolling or online harassment.

BOX 2.1

Berry et al. (2017) describe each individual anthropologist's experience in the field and how she responds to threats and/or violence. These reports, each from a researcher who is situated differently within global power structures, call attention to the importance of safeguarding the researcher as well as fellow participants. They also address a concern that is a theme in this book: Each combination of researcher(s) and research situation requires context-specific reflection, navigation, and adaptation. Because of the power dynamics in which research takes place, attending to these contextual differences can require adjustment at the design level. Claudia Chávez Argüelles writes that the listening postures she was taught to assume as a general best practice for fieldwork were misinterpreted when she was interviewing male leaders in a mountainous area of south-east Mexico. In this case, "best practice" listening postures may work well for a male researcher, particularly a foreign male researcher, but Chávez Argüelles' experience pushes us to consider when alternative listening practices are required to create clear limits for safety reasons.

Ethics boards and professional organizations suggest best practices for protecting fellow participants from harassment; we can and should ask our institutions and professional organizations to also safeguard researchers. Structural change can be slow, so it makes sense to come up with strategies for individual safety as well. When you as researcher-participant are likely to face more than a minimal risk, ask colleagues, advisers, or community members for help employing strategies to mitigate threats. Ask yourself the following questions: What information about me needs to be publicly available? Should I limit some kinds of personal data, like my personal address or exact movements, to a smaller or more private group? Are there situations in which it would be helpful to have members of a research team with me or other fellow participants I trust available, for safety? Identify trusted colleagues you can read in should you or members of your team be threatened online or in person.

The platforms you use in the hybrid field also introduce unknowns in the realm of researcher safety and privacy. An IRB might reasonably want to know if we are asking people questions about sensitive political topics. At present, they typically do not investigate how sensitive data can be shared when people do not disclose it directly. However, this can come up in hybrid ethnography. When scene members use an app, they provide certain information to the operator or parent company. It is possible that this could be information that users would

rather keep private. For example, some communication apps track location data. Others make certain kinds of message content available to companies that purchase it or government entities that acquire it. Whether or not a professional ethics board requires it, it is worth investigating what we can learn about data sharing, expressing caution for those platforms that do not meet participants' standards for privacy and looking for alternate communication mediums, if available. Ethical concerns of online data sharing are further explored in Chapter 9. As a rule, when thinking about participant safety and privacy, ask which provisions should also extend to the researcher. We are working with fellow participants to generate new understandings of relevant scenes and pressing research questions; our searches do not need to place our fellow participants or ourselves at significant risk of harm.

POSITIONALITY

Qualitative research offers opportunities to work collaboratively and comes with responsibilities for accurately representing the scene in which one works. The power dynamics between you and your fellow participants impact the way you navigate ethical questions. Additionally, your position may have specific ramifications for what you can and cannot access. For example, your perceived gender might impact whether or how you may participate in gendered events (Kisliuk, 1998). Other aspects of your personal background, such as your religious affiliation, might help you integrate yourself into your scene, or you may find yourself conflicted about how much you share if your beliefs differ from those of your scene members (Koskoff, 2014). Just as

EXERCISE 2.2

In your fieldnotes, jot down your responses to the following:

- What aspects of your identity as a researcher and as a person are likely to be foregrounded in your scene?
- How do you perceive these aspects of your identity? How might your friends and family? Your colleagues?
- How do these aspects overlap—or fail to do so—with various members of your scene?
- How might these degrees of overlap come into play during your research?

your knowledge of yourself influences how you act in the field, the knowledge others have of themselves influences how they behave in your scene. Using a reflexive approach, it is imperative to recognize how your situated position and those of your fellow participants impact perception in your scene.

Research context affects the aspects of participants' identities that come to the fore. If your research question addresses depictions of racial difference on film, anticipate that the way fellow participants perceive your racial identity will impact the encounters you have. Your position also influences power dynamics in the scene. In hybrid research, if you have a significant degree of familiarity with the online platform on which participants communicate, this may give you some prestige and act as one power differential in the field. The technical fluency aspect of your identity could provide an opportunity to take an active role, perhaps in the group's media sharing strategy. Continue reading and reflecting as you prepare for the field. For sources on the responsibilities of representation, the writings of Dwight Conquergood and Soyini Madison offer points of departure (Conquergood, 1991; Madison, 2005). This chapter's Further Reading offers additional reading on positionality and includes case studies in which authors navigate their position in the field. These topics will be explored further in Chapter 3 as well. After completing the initial steps outlined here to prepare your research ethics for your project design, you are ready to start practical pre-field hybrid ethnographic work.

SUMMARY

Building from how past scholarship wrestled with ethical issues online, the chapter has detailed concerns and suggested practical protocols for maintaining research integrity in the hybrid field. Given multiple standards of ethics and shades of gray that are likely to emerge, thoughtfully balancing many perspectives is required, and some degree of ambiguity is likely to remain. As you proceed, communicate carefully in order to set realistic expectations of privacy with participants, given the realities of online archiving and the potential for security concerns with online data. It is crucial to follow best practices for maintaining appropriate privacy safeguards. Taking care to abide by your research community's ethical standards, your discipline's professional code, your institution's research ethics standards, and your own ethical barometer will help you proceed with a research design that is personally and professionally sound.

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