Research Ethics: Between protocol and practice in Central Asia

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Speaking personally….

• … as a social anthropologist
• Doing ethnographic and interview research in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Russia
• Based at a UK university
• Affiliated with a Kyrgyz University and Research Centre
• Funded by UK research councils and funding bodies…

→ General ethical principles; but specificity of research projects and contexts
Two discussions of “ethics”

• 2003
  • “Have you thought about ethics?”
  • Do you know how to come home in an emergency?

• 2008
  • Give us an exact list of all the questions you will ask
  • “How will you get your data home safely if there is no DHL?”
  • Protocol designed for medical studies
Lederman: “virtual” vs. “real” ethics

“Participant observation-based field research involves the long-term cultivation of social relationships as both the medium and the substantive content of that work: relationships in and through which the IRB mandated concern with “informed consent” comes to make local sense. What is more, … the cultivation of social relationships must proceed in critical respects on ones informants’ terms—not on the researcher’s terms and under his or her control (as is the case in interview-based and experimental social science). Because participant observers aren’t in control of the research process, the ethical challenges that they face in their projects cannot be known in advance except in vague and inaccurate ways.

Because participant observation is a necessarily non-methodical method… IRBs’ mandated insistence on prospective reviews of research set anthropologists up to fudge, circumlocute, and fake their descriptions of project “design”, “subject selection”, “informed consent”, and the rest.” (Rena Lederman, Educate your IRB)
1) “Ethical clearance” as a starting-point, not an end point

- In Batken/Sokh
  - Living with a family, becoming “enfielded”
  - Initial focus on border guarding changed
  - Anonymity ≠ confidentiality
  - “Please tell the world”…
2) Research as a negotiated exchange

• In Batken/Moscow:
  – Can you help me get to Britain to work?
  – How will this research help us?
  – To interview in places of work, or not?
  – Dealing with flexible legalities..
3) Between mascot and spy: research in authoritarian political contexts

• “Karimov is a goat”
• “Who sent you here?”
• Commitments to multiple communities of research
Dilemmas…

• What really constitutes “informed” consent?
• How often should consent be repeated?
• To create a paper trail, or not?
• What if somebody does not want to remain anonymous?
• Anonymize names of places as well as people?
• Which narratives to include and exclude?
“Ethical and legal dilemmas occur at all stages of research - in the selection of topic, area or population, choice of sponsor and source of funding, in negotiating access, making 'research bargains' and during the research itself conducting fieldwork, in the interpretation and analysis of results and in the publication of findings and the disposal of data.” (ASA Ethical Guidelines)
References

• ASA Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice (http://www.theasa.org/ethics/Ethical_guidelines.pdf)
