

“Research as a process itself has an element of colonisation which includes taking knowledge away from an area without giving back much in return...”

Case studies of built environment research

*#1 The Transitoriness of Research Ethics:
when values and practices travel*
by Vikas John and Priya Singh

Ethical Processes: Case Studies

These *Ethical Processes: Case Studies* offer insights into the ethical dilemmas that can arise during a research project. Developing an ethical practice involves a number of iterative and reflective processes generated in response to problems, dilemmas or difficulties – **hotspots** – often involving a challenge to an accepted value system or a tension between a research practice and an institutional ethics process, so requiring pausing the research in order to undertake some critical reflection. In reflecting on an ethical dilemma researchers often draw on principles, protocols, and publications – **touchstones** – in order to consider their options and decide how to act. The processes of reflection and transformation and the development of understandings around them can often reveal **blindspots** in social and cultural systems. This sense of growing awareness may provide opportunities – **moonshoots** – for re-imagining practice and the support structures required to enable an ethical approach.

Hotspot – recognising an ethically-important moment

A **‘hotspot’** is a moment in which a researcher-practitioner encounters an ethical dilemma, and is thus unable to continue to act as before. Guillemin and Gillam describe this in terms of an “ethically-important moment,”¹ or dilemma, “refer[ing] to a situation in which there is a stark choice between different options, each of which seem to have equally compelling ethical advantages and disadvantages.”² Recognising an ethical **hotspot** can be the first step in a process of developing an ethical practice. It is a process that can be activated by considering aspects of our own research practice, for example:

- Describe the ethically-important moment in your project and what took place.
- Make your account as clear as you can.
- Consider why this moment was so challenging for you.
- See whether any of the words in our lexicon of [ethical principles](#) could be used to describe the key qualities of your **hotspot**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Touchstone – reflecting on a hotspot

In responding to a **hotspot**, researcher-practitioners weigh up possible forms of action from an ethical perspective. By reflecting on their own practice, and with reference to ethical principles, decisions about new forms of action are reached. The philosopher Michel Foucault, for example, describes this process in terms of involving a “basanos” or “**touchstone**” – a way of testing the degree of accord between a person’s life or practice and a principle of intelligibility.³ For this reason, ethical principles can act as **touchstones** and be helpful in making ethical decisions. Continuing to reflect on your hotspot can involve referring to other examples and literatures to guide your future actions:

- Describe what happened after the ethically-important moment took place as specifically as possible.
- Think about how you responded, and why.
- Did anything in particular guide your actions? Advice from a colleague/friend? A book? A film? An instinct?
- What did you do to resolve matters? Did you seek advice from any particular source?
- See whether any of the words in our lexicon of [ethical principles](#) could be used to describe the key qualities of your **touchstone**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Blindspot – revealing a new ethical understanding

From a physiological perspective, a **blindspot** is the spot in the retina where the optic nerve connects, because there are no light-sensitive cells in this area the retina cannot see. The process of encountering a **hotspot** and reflecting on an ethical dilemma with reference to a **touchstone** can reveal a **blindspot**, an aspect of practice previously obscured perhaps due to habitual ways of doing things. Ethical practice can involve challenging the habits and norms of academic disciplinary methods and institutional cultures. This requires careful consideration, and it may take time to fully grasp the reasons and understand the context for what occurred in your own research practice.

For example, you may wish to think about what happened after the ethically-important moment took place and you responded to it. Some of the following questions might help as guides:

- In retrospect, do you think you did the 'right' or 'wrong' thing? If so, based on what criteria?
- Would you do things differently now?
- What did you learn from the experience?
- What advice would you give to others facing similar difficulties?
- Would you say you've changed as a result? If so in what way?
- On reflection, did this experience open up any **blindspots** for you? If so, can you name and define them.
- Do any of the words in our lexicon of ethical principles help to unpack the key qualities of any **blindspots**. Add words of your own if none on the list resonate.

Moonshot – imagining a future possibility

According to Mariana Mazzucatu, “moonshot thinking is about setting targets that are ambitious but also inspirational, able to catalyse innovation across multiple sectors in the economy... bold societal goals which can be achieved by collaboration on a large scale between public and private entities.”⁴ The process of recognising an ethical **hotspot** and reflecting on this in relation to **touchstones** is not always easy. In revealing a **blindspot** a researcher often discovers something about the context in which they work that may be challenging for them and for those that they work with. It is often not possible to share ethical problems with researchers or participants due to concerns regarding confidentiality. So a **moonshot** provides an opportunity to imagine an action which might need to disrupt a norm, and go beyond the ethical principles offered by the **touchstones**.

What tools, skills, training and mentoring can be imagined that would address the challenges posed by the insights revealed in the **blindspots**, perhaps by offering certain kinds of support, training, mentoring and guidance?

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Hotspot

Context: The presence of IIHS (Indian Institute for Human Settlements) researchers in institutes in Tanzania and Thailand presented a dilemma. Conducting alumni trajectory studies in these nations put us in a “contact zone,”⁵ in which since both the researcher and the researched subject came from the Global South different cultural backgrounds could meet without asymmetrical power relations. But as IIHS researchers, coming from the Global South, working on a project funded by the Global North, we found that we were carrying multiple legacies of knowledge production, both southern and northern in their characteristics, requiring us to revisit our understandings of how we thought about the south and north in our study. In particular, how the established practice of research ethics, historically emerging from the Global North, was being played out in the Global South,⁶ across both disciplines and sites. This situation allowed us to examine this through our encounters in these contact zones.

Description: For any good social, qualitative study to be ethical it needs to be inclusive. Thus inclusions of gender and caste were important in the planning of our research. However, ethical concerns emerged when translating this into practice. In the case of India, where much sensitivity exists around the subject of caste – how to ask someone about their caste when the respondent may be hesitant to talk about these dynamics? In India, the experience of caste within higher education is quite fraught.⁷ There is a history of reservations (similar to “affirmative action”⁸ in the United States) that allows for students from historically disenfranchised populations to access higher education. In other words, students belonging to lower or depressed castes have a set amount of place reserved for them in universities or have different minimum cut-off scores, or a combination of both. This system of reservations has come into greater scrutiny in recent years with its logic being questioned, particularly as it hinges on caste.⁹ This system, some argue, comes at a cost to students belonging to other caste categories.

This has also resulted in the lived experiences of students coming from historically disenfranchised populations into higher education spaces being riddled with overt as well as microaggressions. Given this context, it was important for us to be sensitive to the sensibilities of the respondents around such questions.

Unlike caste, gender is notionally identifiable, although not in its multifaceted entirety. Additionally, as part of demographic capture, questions concerning gender can be explicitly asked of the respondents. However, how gendered experiences play out in the narratives of the respondents can also be influenced by the ways in which an inquiry proceeds and interlocutors are positioned. This was particularly salient in cross-cultural conversations. We realised, by having different cultural backgrounds and epistemic contexts, the way we approached the questions of gendered experiences varied. For instance, we thought-through questions on gendered experiences of the classroom¹⁰ when asking these questions to male and female respondents. Part of our mandate was also to talk about aspirations, and we were cognizant of how that plays out in patriarchal societies. This allowed for a conversation that was specific to people and contexts as opposed to one led by a generic set of questions.

The offline to online site transition brought about by the COVID-19 global pandemic in 2020–21 also brought with it a new set of ethical challenges. How does one ensure **confidentiality** or **anonymity** in a digital environment if one has access to email IDs, phone numbers or skype IDs of the respondents, information which would not have been accessible in the case of an in-person conversation? How does confidentiality work in such a scenario, even if initial consent for data sharing, transparency, clarity, anonymity, responsibility, and permissions have been given? While the offline interviews only recorded audio, when using video call software for conducting online interviews, the face of the respondent is recorded too. Thus, while advancements in technology and software have made communicating over large distances more viable, this transition to a digital mode of interaction has also been exclusionary in terms of cross-cultural and cross-language interviews.

Touchstone

Context: When reflecting on the hotspots that arose, we looked back at our methods and practices, and our principles of ethics, as well as the decisions and actions we had taken. After the hotspot, or ethically-important moment took place, and on recognising our position as researchers from the Global South, working on a project funded by the Global North, who carry multiple legacies of knowledge production, both southern and northern in their characteristics, we revisited our understanding of how we thought about north and south relations in our study. In thinking through our **positionalities** in this divide we considered specific elements of our practice. The ways in which questions within the project travelled across locations was a primary concern for us. Since the element of **harm**, as understood in the wider practice of research ethics, is, for studies like ours, evidenced in the provocations we set for our participants, it became important for us to carefully construct our questions, taking into account not only the imperatives of the project but also how questions travel and the impacts they have in different geographies and cultures. In particular, our study engaged with the experience of higher education (planning, specifically) and probed layers of identities, examining the ways in which an 'othered' position – in terms of race, class, gender, and multiple other differences – influenced the experiences of higher education and an alumni's emergent practice. Questions aimed at eliciting responses to these aspects are inherently sensitive, for instance in the Indian context caste is often an unspoken yet influential aspect of the experience.

Description: We rethought our approach to the questions about social identities, deciding to make them more cohort-oriented than individual-focused. The respondents would then have to respond to how the cohort, faculty, and institution reacted to diverse social-economic backgrounds without needing to reveal where they belonged in the hierarchy. In particular, this process allowed (and also emerged) from a method of "storytelling," where the participants did not only reveal their experiences but situated them in a story or narrative about these experiences. This approach also allowed participants to make their meanings within contexts that they defined, thereby enabling them to create **agency** over the narrative.

Another way that the social dimension posed a particular challenge was regarding the aspect of gender. The field team in the different locations of the study was mixed in terms of gender. During the conversations with female participants, in particular locations, the team tried to shift the main interlocutor to female when speaking to the female participants. This allowed for the disruption of power imbalances.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought its own challenges to our research practice. In particular, we had to think through how the shift to online spaces of conversation troubled the practice of ethics in research. One of the key requirements for ensuring participants' data protection is to maintain the sanctity of **confidentiality** and **privacy**. To maintain this, we had to think through several aspects. For example, by ensuring the use of the right application for this process, we engaged with the particular features of Zoom, Skype and G-Meet, to figure out which of these allowed for "best practice" in terms of ensuring data **confidentiality** and individual **privacy**. We had also to be cognisant of how data itself would travel – from individual systems to servers and institutional repositories. We worked out ways in which we could effectively manage the data. Throughout this process we also kept our participants informed, as best we could, of how to maintain the principles of **consent** in research.

To ensure that the transition to online interviews did not turn exclusionary and that the participants felt comfortable, we introduced the options of video calls with or without the camera on (over a range of applications and software, all of which were free to use) and the possibility of interviewing on the telephone. Additionally, we requested the participants' informed consent regarding the recording of these calls. As the use of video calls became the norm a few months into the pandemic, the participants too became aware of video calls and recording protocols. As an added layer for maintaining the confidentiality of the respondents, the transcription of all video calls was done in-house, with no one outside the immediate project team having access to the material.

While reflecting on the hotspots we encountered in our research, the touchstones that occurred were guided by many ethical principles, including the importance of the participant taking **agency** of over their narrative, the need to **respect** participants' stories and life experiences, to maintain **confidentiality** and **anonymisation** of participants' personal information, to **respect** participants' privacy, to reduce **risks**, and to ensure participants did not undergo any **harm** as a result of the research.

Blindspot

Despite the benefits of modern science and research, they have also developed from the systemic exploitation of millions.¹¹ Research as a process itself has an element of colonisation which includes taking knowledge away from an area without giving back much in return, a practice explicated in Asha de Vos' work on "parachute research."¹² Research, therefore, has an aspect of imbalanced power to it¹³ – an inherent absence of **equality**. Any interaction undertaken under such a power-laden structure is tainted by this, leading to relations of dependence if not subordination.¹⁴ Researchers need to engage in constant practices of decolonisation,¹⁵ including **reflexively** engaging with the ethical conduct of research itself. In the late twentieth century, recognising colonial origins has, over time, troubled binaries including the conceptual ideas of the "Global North" and "Global South." Ethical adjustments have become necessary as this troubling or blurring occurs across multiple vectors including disciplines,¹⁶ and sites.¹⁷ Ideas and inquiries in an interconnected global knowledge production system are mobile, which affect the practice of research ethics, rendering ideas of research ethics, gendered spaces, and sites, as transitory. The recent past also bears witness to a blurring and merging of these Global North-South boundaries,¹⁸ leaving questions about the multi-dimensional relationships between power and agency for researchers to answer themselves. Our case study sheds light on how these colonial power structures impact the practice of research ethics especially when situated within a context of blurred boundaries and the disruptions that also arose as a result of adopting digital technologies to conduct research during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moonshot

One of the things that helped us develop our practice of ethics in research was the presence of the Research Ethics Committee at IIHS. IIHS institutional structures help guide researchers towards a considered approach to research practice in the field that takes into account the rights of the participants and the researchers themselves. IIHS' institutional structure is informed by best practices in the area. We draw on global best practices and are informed by the existing knowledge drawn from a long history of guidelines that have emerged informing the ethical conduct of research, including the Nuremberg Code,¹⁹ The Declaration of Helsinki,²⁰ and the Belmont report.²¹ Institutionally our guiding principles are 1) Welfare of subjects, researcher, and society at large 2) Full and equal rights, and just distribution of benefits, 3) Autonomy of mind and body. Given this guidance, we were able to adapt our practice at different scales, both in general practice and also in the moment of the COVID-19 crisis. We took into account the ways in which questions and inherent knowledge production legacies travel, as well as the ways in which situated contexts differ across disciplines, and we engaged with the need for a renewed understanding of **consent** and protection of **confidentiality** of data and **privacy** of individuals when we shifted our site online. We were also informed greatly by a wealth of research done in this area.²²

Endnotes

- 1 Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam describe what they call 'ethically important moments,' which for them mark the 'ethical dimension' of decision-making around the day-to-day dilemmas of research practice. For Guillemin and Gillam negotiating these dilemmas and their relation to institutional ethical procedures requires a degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher. See Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, no. 2 (2004): 261–280.
- 2 Marilys Guillemin and Lynn Gillam, "Ethics, Reflexivity, and 'Ethically Important Moments' in Research," *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10, no. 2 (2004): 261–280.
- 3 In Michael Foucault's lectures on parrhesia, when he describes Socrates asking Laches to "give the reason for his courage," he is not asking for an examination of conscience, a confession, or a narration of events in one's life, but rather to "make appear the logos which gives rational, intelligible form to this courage." The role that Socrates takes, for Foucault, in asking for a rational accounting, is that of a "basanos' or 'touchstone' which tests the degree of accord between a person's life and its principle of intelligibility or logos." See Michel Foucault, *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, edited by J. Pearson, 1999. Six Lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, October–November 1983, (<https://foucault.info/parrhesia/>) (accessed 4 July 2019).
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- 11 See Russell Bishop, "Maori People's Concerns about Research into their Lives," *History of Education Review*, no. 26, (November 1997): 25–41; John Poupart, Cecilia Martinez, John Red Horse, and Dawn Scharnberg, "To Build a Bridge: An Introduction to Working with American Indian Communities," *American Indian Policy Centre* (2000); Raven Sinclair, "Indigenous Research in Social Work: The Challenge of Operationalizing Worldview," *Native Social Work Journal*, no. 5, (November 2003): 117–39; Mpoe Johannah Keikelame and Leslie Swartz, "Decolonising Research Methodologies: Lessons from a Qualitative Research Project, Cape Town, South Africa," *Global Health Action* 12, no. 1 (January 2019), doi:10.1080/16549716.2018.1561175; and Vivetha Thambinathan and Elizabeth Anne Kinsella, "Decolonizing Methodologies in Qualitative Research: Creating Spaces for Transformative Praxis," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, (January 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211014766>.
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