"All the actions that I thought were helping seemed to exclude anyone that differed from me. I started to question, was I accountable..."

# 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?

# Our Starter Culture
# by Montserrat Gutierrez Mesegue

## Overall Context

*Our Starter Culture* is a tool created to reintroduce empathy to help us approach, and be able to operate in, a world where a climate crisis exists. The project develops an intersectional pedagogical methodology through remedies, zines, online blogs, and tiktoks. It begins with a participant sharing a remedy with me through conversation. I then explore the remedy in relation to Aztec herbal remedies and current social injustices in order to emphasise the role of intersectionality and care relationships for addressing the climate crisis.

The project relies on and emphasises the work of others, acting like a method of congregation for what initially may look like a set of disjointed narratives that include self-reflection and a call to arms. Through the development of the project, I found myself at a critical juncture, questioning my own position on morality when considering the role of individual actors within systems and processes of social change and environmentalism.



Montserrat Gutierrez Mesegue, "Our Starter Culture" (2020).

## Hotspot

When I initially undertook the project I was concerned with how individuals navigate their responsibilities in the environmental movement. Yet this position quickly created a standstill as it forced me to reflect on my own definitions of **responsibility**, **ethics**, **morals**, **equality**, and **justice**. I discovered these are not just theoretical terms but life choices that I soon realised could not be defined not only through self reflection but also by looking outside of myself as an individual. I found that the kind of environmentalism that I was practicing was individualistic, privileged and centred on capitalism. All the actions that I thought were helping seemed to exclude anyone that differed from me. I started to question, was I accountable? It became clear that the morality that I was practicing, which I had drawn from not critically engaging with diverse theories and practices, made me accountable only to myself, and this simply did not work when trying to address global issues. I needed to be able to identify who I needed to be accountable to and what I needed to help dismantle. If I had continued without addressing these issues, my response to the environmental movement could have been as egotistical, uninspiring, and accusatory as the actions that I was critiquing.

## Touchstone

While reflecting on my own position during the development of my project I began to feel like a fraud, I was acting on my own assumptions rather than conversing and listening to my community and those impacted by the environmental movement. Whilst attending IAS Turbulence: Feminist Futures for Turbulent Times,[5] I was deeply inspired by the words of Ama Josephine Budge[6] and her perspective on the feminist environmental movement. This is where I learned about the work of adrienne marie brown and where I was introduced to transformative justice, intersectionality, and the use of mycelium as a metaphor for a sustainable future.[7] From these practitioners I was able to understand that to move forward we must be in a perpetual motion of learning from and remembering not only our own path but those of our ancestors and those who practice their methods and beliefs. Drawing inspiration and being educated in this way brought about a tenderness that ended up becoming crucial to my practice.

## Blindspot

From then on, I treated the ecological crisis as overlapping with social issues which impact certain communities more than others. I began to see and critique the centring of the white man,[8] and the white polar bear[9] in mainstream environmental movements. I understood that to work towards a just ecological future, what was in fact needed, was to critically engage with and to dismantle systems of oppression – specifically capitalism, racism, and patriarchy. Through intersectionality I was able to see that the way in which I was operating an an environmentalist, the so-called "freedom" I thought I had been fighting for, would not – without a social, racial and gendered critique – be for all, and to me, that was not good enough. My earlier position on the environment no longer aligned with the ethical position I was striving to practice. This crucial step allowed me to accept a larger sense of duty while simultaneously finding inspiration and comfort in small scale actions of caring for one another – this became my "true" practice.

## Moonshot

I was able to use care to reconnect with others through the creation of empathy. I decentralised my way of approaching morality by taking a **feminist** point of view and understanding of the **ethic**s of **care** and by championing a focus on community and relationships rather than on absolute truths. I used the vehicle of sharing remedies, passed down by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters, to sit and have conversations with the people around me about how we can care for ourselves, but in relation to broader environmental and social issues. I began to see how these small domestic remedies could be revolutionary acts of healing ourselves which could then help heal the earth and its inhabitants, when understood as part of a larger ecological system. I then **translated** these conversations and remedies into different forms of crafts, packages, zines and tiktoks designed as ways of decentring ourselves as individuals in the climate narrative and instead recentring on empathy and **care relationships**.[10] The method that I developed in *Our Starter Culture* gave me the ability to reignite my sense of duty; each remedy work almost like a small exercise to strengthen my ability to empathise and to develop a shared sense of **responsibility** to others. The zines that I made and the conversations that I had with others throughout the project were so incredibly touching and intimate that they almost served as forms of protection which continue to help me navigate such a relentless and unyielding time.

## Principles

> Accountability
> Care
> Ethics
> Harm
> Intersectionality
> Justice
> Morality
> Reciprocity
> Relationality

## 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).

4   Mariana Mazzucato, *Mission Economy: A Moonshot Guide to Changing Capitalism* (London, Penguin, 2021), p. 28.

5   IAS Turbulence: Feminist Futures for Turbulent Times," Events, University College London, accessed 25 August 2021, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/institute-of-advanced-studies/events/2019/feb/ias-turbulence-feminist-futures-turbulent-times.

6   "About," ama josephine budge, accessed 25 August 2021, https://www.amajosephinebudge.com/about-1.

7   adrienne marie brown, *Emergent Strategies* (Scotland: AK Press, 2017).

8   Wretched of The Earth, "An Open Letter to Extinction Rebellion." *Red Pepper*, 3 May 3 2019, accessed 25 August 2021, https://www.redpepper.org.uk/an-open-letter-to-extinction-rebellion.

9   Dorothea Born, "Bearing Witness? Polar Bears as Icons for Climate Change Communication in National Geographic," *Environmental Communication* 13, no. 5 (February 2018): 649–63, https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2018.1435557

10   Nel Noddings, *Caring: a Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).