"I became less able to draw upon what I had practised and struggled to identify, much less respect, my boundaries and limits. I began having nightmares..."

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?

It's Been Years and Still I See Her: Navigating (Secondary Trauma)
by Ariana Markowitz

NB: This case study contains a graphic description of violence.

Hotspot

Context: This moment occurred during my PhD fieldwork in San Salvador, El Salvador during an interview with Vicente Santana (a pseudonym), a Salvadoran artist living in the United States. I was investigating how fear and trauma shape and are shaped by violent cities, so I knew that my fieldwork would involve discussing sensitive topics with people who had experienced trauma. I **reflected** on whether these conversations might be damaging to the people participating in my work, especially since I was the one initiating contact to obtain information, rather than being sought out for guidance in healing like I might have been if I were a mental health professional, faith leader, or community elder. At the same time, I felt that, "To not ask might seem like denying certain facets of their lives, like not wanting to hear."[5] I had fewer concerns about my own **wellbeing**; I had been working on violence and precarity for more than a decade and had lived in San Salvador before.

Description: During our interview, I could sense that Santana was distressed, but I was unsure if he was moving toward telling me something, what it might be, and whether I should try to diffuse the tension. Then he told me that, whilst he was in El Salvador for a project, a colleague woke him in the middle of the night, urging him to go to the town's cemetery. He told me that when he arrived at the cemetery, he found the body of a teenage girl disinterred, raped, and left on the ground where her family had buried her that day. "I remember her blue dress, the texture of the fluids on her body," he told me, pausing. He looked away and to the side. "I've only told my wife, a friend, and you. It's been years and I still see her." I watched his face slide between impassive and overcome, forced my nausea down, and batted away rising disgust. I stopped taking notes, struggled to remain focused, and fumbled for an adequate response to necrophilia.

Touchstone

Context: When I arrived in San Salvador, I sought advice from friends outside academia on how to talk with people who had experienced trauma about their experience. They advised me to listen actively, avoid sanitising people's words, and have a scripted response to diffuse tension and demonstrate that I was present: "You don't need to tell me about X for me to know that it's hard." As I spent more time in the field, however, my exposure to violence increased, as did my sensitivity to that violence. I became less able to draw upon what I had practised and struggled to identify, much less respect, my boundaries and limits. I began having nightmares which affected my ability, and willingness, to sleep. I felt volatile, agitated, and, most disconcertingly, as if my brain were disconnected from my body. I realised that when a participant, Vicente Santana (a pseudonym), told me about his experience of witnessing necrophilia, narrating this to me triggered deep emotions in both of us, adding to the cache of violence both of us had witnessed in the course of our life and work.

Description: I have no recollection of how I responded to Santana's disclosure apart from forcefully internally reminding myself that our conversation needed to focus on him, and that if I gave in to my nausea, and told him how I felt, then the conversation would inevitably become about me. We remained in contact afterwards and I invited him to be part of a workshop I organised with other Salvadoran artists who engage with violence. The participants, many of whom shared traumatic experiences, said it was interesting and helpful to discuss their art across disciplinary boundaries. I found the workshop worthwhile, too, but my ability to focus on collecting data deteriorated as my nightmares worsened. The internet was filled with "wellness" advice: "neoliberal and patronising conception[s] of care that obscured the distress I felt, directed me away from the support I needed, and [were] only available to the privileged few."[6] Looking for ways to stabilise myself, I reached out to a friend, Sandra Olarte-Hayes, who is a social worker. She affirmed that secondary trauma – which I had never

heard of in the context of research – was real, and that my response was "a normal response to something scary and inhumane and not okay." When I returned to UCL, I accessed counseling through the university's Student Psychological Services.

Blindspot

Context: I scoured literature on violence, looking for something that validated my ongoing experience with secondary trauma and eventually found an article on self-care for researchers working on violence.[7] Emboldened, I began to mention to colleagues that I was finding my fieldwork more challenging than I had expected and asking if they were struggling too. Their responses were a catalogue of maladies: nightmares, insomnia, substance abuse, broken relationships, destructive and compulsive behaviours, illness, and more. Several people showed me their tattoos, attempts to make visible the pain they felt and document violence they witnessed. Two people said they had abandoned researching violence altogether. Academic rigour is sometimes thought to stem from unflappable rationality: scientific, unbiased data collected and analysed from a safe professional distance.[8] Such an understanding prizes analytical and technical skills over emotional intelligence.[9] As a result, as academics, we often frame our work "to make certain things disappear – confusion, threats, danger, the unpredictable, the non-event."[10] This reproduces the historic imbalance between subjective and "feminine" interpretive research and the "masculine" production of positivist knowledge.[11]

Description: By failing to harness "informed empathy,"[12] we relegate emotions to "distortion and noise in the research process rather than part of its potentiality."[13] Informed empathy, and the **vulnerability** that it entails, is an essential tool for producing knowledge in a way that foregrounds **care,** compassion, and, ultimately, transformation.[14] At the same time, informed empathy requires an infrastructure of **care** and support, ensuring that researchers have the capacity and bandwidth to identify, protect, and stretch their boundaries. Universities, like all workplaces, have a duty of **care** to their workers, especially PhD students and Early Career Researchers. This duty exists whether we work close to home or offsite, in person or online,[15] and it has both interpersonal and institutional dimensions. **Ethics** protocols and **risk** assessments are a primary means to establish an institutional relationship of **care,** but the process I undertook prior to leaving for San

Salvador failed to mention "that I the researcher might experience some form of traumatic response"[16] or guide me toward managing the traumatic responses of the people who participated in my research. The literature about research on sensitive topics largely replicates this blindspot, hindering comprehensive preparation and the development of communities and structures of support.[17] It is also rare that literature treats trauma as part of data rather than something that happens alongside it.[18]

Moonshot

Context: There are personal, interpersonal, and institutional dimensions of an infrastructure of **care,** attesting to the fact that, "Care work is work. It is not self-indulgent; it is radical and necessary."[19] These dimensions enable researchers to identify, protect, and stretch their boundaries, ensuring their own wellbeing and that they have the capacity to empathise with the people who participate in their work. This is especially critical in the case of sensitive research. Given the growing threat of conflict, climate breakdown, and inequality, however, even "safe" contexts and topics can suddenly become dangerous or fraught.

Description: Researchers require support, time, and money to construct and maintain an infrastructure of **care.** Self-**care** practices vary, but I keep energy in reserve and build a close circle of confidants. Mindfulness exercises keep me grounded,[20] and I use rituals to delimit challenging spaces and moments. I take breaks, I cook, and I rest, but only within the confines of what my migration status permits; if I had interrupted my studies for a prolonged period or switched to part-time, I would have lost my student visa, which would have had its own negative impact on my wellbeing. Funding expiration dates can have a similar impact.

Supervisors need relevant experience and specialised training in interpersonal skills to be effective academic advisors, professional mentors, and pastoral caregivers. There are additional considerations to take into account if they are working with people doing sensitive or dangerous research, about which there are no widespread guidelines,[21] and if the people they supervise hail from under-represented groups in academia.[22] Moreover, supervisors, advisors, mentors, and caregivers must themselves reflect a diversity of identities and life experiences.[23]

Formulated thoughtfully, **ethics** protocols and **risk** assessments provide a vocabulary to facilitate sensitive conversations, raise questions that trigger reflection and planning, and suggest additional resources, from literature to psychosocial support to funding (See *Practising Ethics Guides to Built Environment Research*: # 5 Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing).[24] They can make clear that **care** for one's research participants, and oneself as a researcher, is constant, concerted, and necessary work.

Principles

Care
Feminist Ethics
Harm
Vulnerability
Wellbeing

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   Chih Yuan Woon, "For "emotional fieldwork" in critical geopolitical research on violence and terrorism," *Political Geography* 33 (March 2013): 39.

6   Ariana Markowitz, "The better to break and bleed with: Research, violence, and trauma," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 1 (2021): 98.

7   Kimberly Theidon, "'How was your trip?' Self-care for researchers working and writing on violence," *Drugs, Security and Democracy Program*, 2014, http://webarchive.ssrc.org/working-papers/DSD_ResearchSecurity_02_Theidon.pdf.

8   Kai Thaler, "Reflexivity and temporality in researching violent settings: Problems with the replicability and transparency regime," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 1 (2021): 18–44.

9   Gill Hubbard, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, and Debbie Kemmer, "Working with emotion: Issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 4, no. 2 (January 2001): 119–37.

10 Pamela Nilan, "'Dangerous fieldwork' re-examined: The question of researcher subject position," *Qualitative Research* 2, no. 3 (December 2002): 370.

11 Markowitz, "The better to break and bleed with," 94-117.

12 Chih Yuan Woon, "For "emotional fieldwork" in critical geopolitical research on violence and terrorism," *Political Geography* 33 (March 2013): 31-41.

13 Alison Pullen, "Gendering the research self: Social practice and corporeal multiplicity in the writing of organizational research," *Gender, Work and Organization* 13, no. 3 (2006): 280.

14 Virginia Held, *The ethics of care: Personal, political, and global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

15 Melanie Boucher, Rachel Stephenson, and Angus Clark, "Higher education sector guidance on health and safety in fieldwork and travel, including all offsite visits and travel in the UK and overseas," Universities Health and Safety Association, 2018, https://www.usha.org.uk/images/stories/files/guidance-documents/MASTERUSHA_Safety-in-Fieldwork-Guide.pdf.

16 Dale Dominey-Howes, "Seeing the 'dark passenger:' Reflections on the emotional trauma of conducting post-disaster research," *Emotion, Space and Society* 17 (November 2015): 56.

17 Markowitz, "The better to break and bleed with."

18 Maja Zonjić, "Framing violence: The politics of representing embodied trauma in feminist geographic film," *Area* (March 2021): 1–10.

19 Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, et al, "For slow scholarship: A feminist politics of resistance through collective action in the neoliberal university," *ACME* 14, no. 4 (2015): 1235–59.

20 Christine Eriksen and Tamara Ditrich, "The relevance of mindfulness practice for trauma-exposed disaster researchers," *Emotion, Space and Society* 17 (November 2015): 63–9.

21 Dominey-Howes, "Seeing the 'dark passenger:' 56.

22 Ibipo Johnston-Anumonwo, "Mentoring across difference: Success and struggle in an academic geography career," *Gender, Place and Culture* 26, no. 12 (December 2019): 1683-1700.

23 Karen Falconer Al-Hindi, "Vibrant mentoring landscapes in feminist geography," *Gender, Place and Culture* 26, no. 12 (December 2019): 1657-63.

24 The project of which this case study is a part, Practising Ethics, is an example of a thoughtful approach to ethics. For additional information on risk and wellbeing, see the guide I contributed, available at practisingethics.org/s/5-Researching-Risk-and-Wellbeing.pdf