"There remains scant consideration of, and provision for, how our bodies and the identities ascribed to them – gendered, queer, racialised, disabled, and more – affect research..."

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?

"You Look Good in Short Skirts:" Gender-Based Violence in Fieldwork
by Ariana Markowitz

Hotspot

Context: This moment occurred early in my PhD fieldwork in San Salvador, El Salvador as I sought gatekeepers who would ensure that I could safely collect data in the city's central market – the Mercado Central. The market is violently contested by the country's three principal gangs and one route I had tried to secure entry seemed like a nonstarter. San Salvador is a small city filled with overlapping familial, childhood, and professional networks. Many of the people who participated in my research were friends of friends so I often had unplanned meetings with people in social settings outside of business hours. In addition, constant advances by known and unknown men and boys – catcalling, unwanted touching, threats, and worse-– punctuate my life and the lives of most women, girls, and LGBTQ people in San Salvador, one reason the city feels so hostile.

Description: After an evening book release event, I went to a bar with colleagues. Someone I considered a key gatekeeper, Milton Tablas (a pseudonym), was also there and mutual friends introduced us. He was drunk and flirtatious. He gave me his number and invited me to contact him. When I wrote to him the next morning, he apologised for being unable to give me a ride home the night before. He was driving a motorcycle, he explained, and I was wearing a short skirt. I clarified that I had chosen not to accept his offer of a ride because he was drunk; the issue was not my attire but his sobriety. Trying to change the subject, I told him I was keen to see the maps he had mentioned the night before. He instead circled back to what I was wearing, noting that he was not suggesting I should refrain from wearing short skirts since I looked good in them. I ignored the comment and pivoted back to maps. He said he would get back to me about a time to meet.

Touchstone

Context: A key gatekeeper, Milton Tablas (a pseudonym), for my research site in San Salvador made an advance on me the first time we met, by chance in a bar at night when he was drunk, and again the next day when I wrote to him to arrange to meet. When I ignored his advances and redirected our conversation to my research, his enthusiasm for my work evaporated, and he continued to make comments about my appearance.

Description: After that meeting in the bar, I fretted. I questioned my sartorial choices. I wondered whether I should have declined my friends' offer to introduce us in an inherently "unprofessional" setting.[5] I felt anxious about where and when Tablas would suggest we get together. When I confided in a friend, she rolled her eyes: she had seen Tablas "come on" to multiple friends of hers. So, she messaged him to say that she had heard we would be working together and that she and I were old friends. Her message reinforced my professional **position** and conveyed a warning: news travels fast and people are watching. Nonetheless, when he and I did schedule a meeting a month later, he never showed up. When I tried to reschedule, he was evasive or unresponsive. We finally met seven months later, two weeks before I concluded my fieldwork. Tablas's relationship with my research site was such that, had he not made his support of my work contingent upon my willingness to engage with him intimately, I might have been able to navigate or bypass the safety concerns I had about the other gatekeeper I approached. With both routes blocked, however, I opted to undertake the remainder of my data collection elsewhere in the city.

Blindspot

Context: There is an instinct to treat gender-based violence (GBV) during research as normal, to ignore it or suffer in silence. When a key gatekeeper interacted with me as a sexualised body instead of a professional researcher, despite how much it made me question myself, my competence, and my behaviour – and despite how much it disrupted my research – "I was more concerned with carrying out the research effectively rather than considering the impact the incident had on me."[6] In mid-2020, I came across a group of researchers, the *Network of Women Doing Fieldwork*, who were creating spaces for people to speak frankly about GBV during research.[7] Until I heard aspects of my own experience reflected back at me while listening to other researchers' experiences, I failed to appreciate that there was a problem and that the problem was systemic.

Description: When I **reflected** on my **positionality** in the field and how it might affect my safety, I confronted my entrenched and expansive privilege: my ethnicity, nationality, youth, my able body, my well-resourced and prestigious institution, my access to capital, and more. I also considered the expected and unexpected impacts of my life experiences.[8] In effect, I looked inward at my lived experience and outward toward systemic power dynamics that tipped in my favour.[9] I was less equipped, however, to handle the space between: "approaches to power that could simultaneously account for our systemic privilege at structural and 'global' levels, and the recurring moments of powerlessness we experienced in the field as female-presenting researchers."[10] This is in large part because there remains scant consideration of, and provision for, how our bodies and the identities ascribed to them – gendered, queer, racialised, disabled, and more – affect research.[11] The image of the default fieldworker is male, straight, white, able-bodied, and unencumbered.[12] Scholars who identify as women, including those with additional minoritised identities, are increasingly resisting "performances of gender neutrality" in the field, making visible how these performances undermine doing and preparing for fieldwork.[13]

Moonshot

Context: The #MeToo movement continues to make clear that women's experiences with gender-based violence (GBV) are pervasive. Although nearly every woman-identifying researcher I know has experienced some type of GBV whilst working, the conversations about it remain at the margins of research practice.[14] Almost all attendees at every event I have joined or organised on these topics have been women, even though men are largely to blame for the violence we endure. Likewise the authors of literature on GBV in fieldwork are almost exclusively women.[15] Because GBV "feels like" a "women's issue," most women I know seek support from other women, often after failing to find support from their male supervisors or feeling uncomfortable broaching the topic.[16] Women thus often bear the emotional labour of supporting each other through GBV whilst men remain in the dark. Besides taking a toll on emotional **wellbeing**, opening up about GBV can paint an unflattering picture of the institution where the researcher is based, triggering fears of liability that provoke a backlash, especially against PhD students and Early Career Researchers.[17] Plus, because peer-reviewed work on navigating GBV in research is rare, someone who writes about their experience runs the risk of finding that their trauma and vulnerability can eclipse the rest of their academic profile.

Description: Since 2020, I have been working with the *Network of Women Doing Fieldwork* to create space for people to speak frankly about GBV during fieldwork, review literature and produce data to mitigate risks, and partner with Higher Education Institutes to rework their policies and protocols with a gender lens. With support from a research assistant, Dena Qaddumi, we worked with The Bartlett's Development Planning Unit (DPU) at UCL to assess the department's PhD programme with an eye toward confronting the risk of GBV in fieldwork. The project identified five potential sites of intervention:

1. *Supervision.* To consider the production of guidance for supervisors to introduce the issue of GBV in fieldwork with students. Because these conversations can be uncomfortable, DPU may also appoint a Fieldwork Coordinator to consider potential problems and connect staff and students who share similar concerns.

2. *Departmental seminars.* To consider the addition of sessions, readings, and discussions to the existing series of departmental seminars. These could focus on health concerns – including mental health concerns – during fieldwork, "**situated**" or "embodied" **ethics**, navigating sensitive conversations with supervisors, potential risks and vulnerabilities of using specific methods, and **care** and **wellbeing**.

3. *Ethics approval and risk assessment processes.* To consider revising risk assessment procedures to be more explicit about GBV in fieldwork, including asking students to identify allies in the field who they could count on for social or legal support, suggesting where they could access emergency healthcare, local laws on sexual practices and sexual health (e.g., criminalisation of homosexuality or abortion), and advising students how they could adjust their data collection if there is a risk of harm.

4. *Upgrade process.* To consider ensuring that students and staff highlight and address concerns about GBV in fieldwork throughout the upgrade process: for example, in students' written material, in the seminar presentations about their research that they lead, in their upgrade viva, and in feedback they receive on each of these components.

5. *UCL support services.* To consider reaching out to areas of the university that could expand services and training related to GBV in the field, including Psychological Support Services. The university could also consider creating a register of where current students have conducted fieldwork to enable students to connect with other students across the university to share guidance and support. In addition, the university could provide students with a tailored first aid kit, something that other universities do already (e.g., the University of Birmingham). The kit could include standard items as well as specific items based on answers to a questionnaire that is sensitive to gender and context.

Principles

Feminist Ethics
Positionality
Relationality
Reciprocity
Vulnerability

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   Alison L. Bain and Catherine J. Nash, "Undressing the researcher: Feminism, embodiment and sexuality at a queer bathhouse event," *Area 38*, no. 1 (2006): 99–106.

6   Erin Pritchard, "Female researcher safety: The difficulties of recruiting participants at conventions for people with dwarfism," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 22, no. 5 (September 2019): 508.

7   Anna McKie, "Female researchers join forces to make fieldwork safer," *Times Higher Education*, 6 May 2021, https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/female-researchers-join-forces-make-fieldwork-safer.

8   Danielle Drozdzewski, "Retrospective reflexivity: The residual and subliminal repercussions of researching war," *Emotion, Space and Society* 17 (2015): 30–36.

9   Faranak Miraftab, "Can you belly dance? Methodological questions in the era of transnational feminist research," *Gender, Place and Culture* 11, no. 4 (December 2004): 595-604.

10   Mindi Schneider, Elizabeth Lord, and Jessica Wilczak, "We, too: Contending with the sexual politics of fieldwork in China," *Gender, Place and Culture* 28, no. 4 (2021): 521.

11   Maya J. Berry, Claudia Chávez Argüelles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ilmoud, et al., 'Toward a fugitive anthropology: Gender, race, and violence in the field,' *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (November 2017): 537–65.

12   Susan E. Frohlick, "'You brought your baby to base camp?' Families and field sites," *Great Lakes Geographer* 9, no. 1 (2002): 49–58.

13   Maya J. Berry, Claudia Chávez Argüelles, Shanya Cordis, Sarah Ilmoud, et al., 'Toward a fugitive anthropology: Gender, race, and violence in the field,' *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4 (November 2017): 538.

14   Mindi Schneider, Elizabeth Lord, and Jessica Wilczak, "We, too: Contending with the sexual politics of fieldwork in China," *Gender, Place and Culture* 28, no. 4 (2021): 521.

15   See the open bibliography compiled by the *Network for Women Doing Fieldwork,* available here: https://www.zotero.org/groups/2737349/gbv_during_data_collection.

16   Dalit Yassour-Borochowitz, "'Only if she is sexy': An authoethnography of female researcher-male participant relations," *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion* 31, no. 5/6 (2012): 402–17.

17   Luisa T. Schneider, "Sexual violence during research: How the unpredictability of fieldwork and the right to risk collide with academic bureaucracy and expectations," *Critique of Anthropology* 40, no. 2 (June 2020): 173–93.