

**“Despite my sincere
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**Case studies of built
environment research**

#2 Halima's Kitchen
by Judit Ferencz

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 – **moonshots** – 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?

Halima's Kitchen

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Hotspot

Context: The event I describe here is part of my PhD research in architectural design. My case study for the research is Robin Hood Gardens, an East London housing estate scheduled for demolition since the start of my research, where the majority of residents are British Bangladeshis.

One early March morning in 2015 Halima, a resident at Robin Hood Gardens, gave me a curry recipe. Halima told me the recipe in her mother tongue Bengali which her son Akram kindly translated into English for me. I scribbled the recipe into my sketchbook, sitting in the kitchen of her apartment at Robin Hood Gardens. Both Akram and I, non-native English speakers, struggled with the culinary vocabulary. To help clarify, Halima would take out spices from the kitchen cupboard which I identified through their smell.

A few days later, I spent an afternoon drawing Halima as she was preparing curry for a family celebration. I drew her cooking on loose sheets of A3 cartridge paper in graphite pencil, on both sides as I was running out of drawing space. I sat at her kitchen table. She was moving around in her kitchen with ease, sitting on the floor cutting the meat or standing by the stove stirring the curry. In the intensity of drawing it suddenly dawned on me that I was watching the repetition of timeless gestures of cooking that has been passed on from generation to generation, in different kitchens, across cultures and continents.

On this afternoon the window was open, and the wind kept blowing the curtains into the space of the kitchen. From time to time it cleared the view and from where I sat, I could see the top of the trees, still bare in March, and through the branches the opposite building, already emptied.



Judit Ferencz, "Halima cooking," (2015), pencil on paper, 297 x 420 mm.

Description: When Halima finished cooking and I finished drawing, the family gathered to view my drawings. I was anxious as to whether my drawings would stand up to their expectations. Through the drawings I wanted to thank Halima for her generosity of letting me into her life for the course of that afternoon and sharing a recipe which was, she told me, an intimate inheritance from her mother.

My **anxiety** derived from my **ethical** dilemma – how could I remain **respectful** to Halima, the subject of my drawing, while at the same time, by reporting on the broader issues of demolition processes as part of my research, exposing her life, some of them shared with me in quite an intimate way, to others? I was happy to find that both Halima, and her husband who briefly entered the kitchen while I was drawing, seemed content to **recognise** themselves in the drawings. Yet a discomfort has remained with me, nevertheless, that could not be resolved by following established insitutional research **ethics** processes, such as receiving Halima's informed **consent**, or by considering the possibility of offering payment for her time, something which had not even crossed my mind back then.

Touchstone

Context: I first presented the drawings of Halima to people other than Halima's family at Jane Rendell's MA Theorising Practices/Practicing Theory module that I was taking that term. There, to a group of students also producing "site-writing" works, I introduced my drawings, explaining that I had found the smell of curry on the decks of Robin Hood Gardens so characteristic of that site that the idea of making an illustrated cookbook appealed to me as a way of relating to the place. And that therefore, I had simply decided to ask the people I met on the decks of the housing estate for recipes.

Description: The invited critics commented on my **position** as a foreigner to British culture, and they suggested that it was therefore possible for me to make a particular kind of connection with the Bengali families on the estate. At the time, I could not relate to this notion. Although I was, and am still, a foreigner to both Bengali and British cultures, I self-confidently believed then that my encounters at the estate stood above national or ethnic belongings, clashes or harmonies. However, later I came to **recognise** that a feeling of rootlessness that I had in those years made me more open and empathetic to a fragile notion of home.

Blindspot

Context: When writing up the thesis, I read Lisa Sandino's introduction to *Oral History in the Visual Arts* (2013). There, Sandino quotes Molly Andrews in understanding the recording of life stories as "an abandonment of the self in a quest to enter the world of another."⁵ This remark resonated with my own experiences of drawing in Halima's kitchen. The crucial difference was, I found, that in oral history interviews both the interviewer and the interviewee can speak for themselves in their own voices especially if both question and response are recorded, even if the text is later edited, while in reportage drawing, typically only the illustrator, often the researcher, draws while the researched subjects – equivalent to the interviewee – provide themselves as image. There is a resulting one-sidedness then in drawing as a form of recording, as opposed to oral history interviews especially when the interviewer's questions and the interviewee's answers are preserved in their original form. In the case of drawing, only the illustrator's drawing represents a subject for future interpretation.

Description: In my research I have entered the life of my subjects as a stranger who draws them. Initially, I am a stranger in this **situation** specifically because I have entered the world of another in order to draw them – as subjects. But then, I noticed, that as I start **drawing** them, these subjects who are initially also strangers to my own inner visual world, begin to enter my drawing as subjects in their own right – they might be speaking to me while I draw, or doing something, like Halima cooking, or interrupt me with a question or a story. We are able to meet through the drawing, both in real life and in my illustration of this life. When I complete my drawing and stop viewing these people as my research subjects, I show them the picture I have drawn of them, and they become the viewers of my drawing of them, and **recognize** themselves in the drawing. At this moment there is a shift in our **positions**, with my subjects becoming, however passingly, the critics of my work and respondents who have the opportunity to express their dissent and so change the course of my research.

Thus, for me, this moment of separation – of drawing an object and drawing as object, from drawing as process – encapsulates the ethical dilemma that is a source of anxiety. I drew Halima and have continued to write about my evolving thoughts and feelings about drawing her. Despite my sincere endeavour to render a faithful and respectful representation of her, I realise that I have potentially silenced her twice: first when drawing her as a researched subject, and then when writing about her.

Moonshot

Context: By the time I came to write this case study, the building opposite the one where Halima and her family lived is already been demolished. In late August 2021 when I returned to England after several years to visit the remaining building awaiting demolition in the near future, I realised that Halima and her family had already been moved out of this building. I tried to call and send an email to Akram, who was my contact for the family, but I received no response. I am saddened by this loss, thinking that I will not be able to see them again.

In this new context where the lived experiences of Robin Hood Gardens already belong to the past, my drawings of Halima in her kitchen have become relics of a human encounter that is, by nature, unique and unreproducible. The dialogue that began between Halima and I, has shifted to a dialogue between my drawings of Halima and the viewer of those drawings. It is now, with the irreversibility of the family's displacement with the demolition of the building, a shift that has been sealed.

Description: I now realise that through the process of drawing Halima in her kitchen, through our physical and psychic encounters, and my subsequent reflections, **recognitions** and **anxieties** on them, I have been continuously problematizing our relative **positions**. In my research, Halima has been consigned first to my representation of her, and then to the viewers' interpretation of my drawing of her. The subject of an artwork is **vulnerable** to interpretations but also misinterpretations as well. I decide not to post edit my drawing of her, for I intend it to remain a reminder of how I perceived the event at that time. This seems to be my only way of expressing my **respect** for the **privacy** of the real life subject and my caution around appropriation.

This experience has made me realise that the use of reportage drawing in research needs to recognise more fully the positionality of the researcher and researched subject and their interaction and that we need to look at more possibilities for involving researched subjects actively in acts of reportage and in processes of drawing their own situations, as well as themselves.

Principles

- Anxiety
- Consent
- Ethics
- Positionality
- Privacy
- Recognition
- Respect
- Situatedness
- 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 Lisa Sandino, "Introduction. Oral history *in* and *about* art, craft and design," in *Oral history in the Visual Arts*. eds Lisa Sandino and Matthew Partington (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3.