"I was a foreign researcher from a rich country, so might my working with gangs strengthen their hand, empowering them..."

Case studies of built environment research

#3 Framing it the "Right Way" for the "Real Authority" by Ariana Markowitz

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 <u>ethical principles</u> 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: This moment occurred early in my PhD fieldwork in San Salvador, El Salvador as I sought a way to safely collect data in the Mercado Central, the city's central market. The Mercado Central is enormous, a city within a city. There are more than 6,000 traders in its 10 warehouses and spilling into the surrounding streets of the Centro, the city centre. Some of the traders are registered and have permanent stalls and restaurants, but many are not, carrying their wares around or selling them on tarps or out of baskets. The Centro has long been a key site of protest and contestation in El Salvador and a meaningful place from which to send a message and assert control. Over the past quarter century, the growing presence of so many small businesses and unlicensed traders throughout the Centro and inside the market has made the area a lucrative target for extortion. Recognising that, the country's three principal gangs – the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the feuding Revolucionario and Sureño factions of the Barrio 18 (18th Street), which have thousands of members and tens of thousands of people dependent on them for their economic livelihoods – continue to violently parcel it out.

Description: Upon my arrival in San Salvador, I met with Úrsula Escobar (a pseudonym), a civil servant in the Gerencia de Mercados, the government agency that administers San Salvador's municipal markets, of which the Mercado Central is one. Escobar confirmed that the agency consented to my research in the market – but, regrettably, they were not the ones in charge. She then drew me a map of the market, pointing out which gang controlled which space. She told me that the gangs appoint deputies for each warehouse and offered to introduce me to them so I could make a case for the work I wanted to do. Provided I framed it the right way, she said, she was confident that they would allow me to proceed. I asked her what the "right way" was. The gangs are just as interested as we are in the market's profitability, she explained, if for different reasons: when the traders can't sell, no one can pay *la renta*, extortion fees. If you say that your research is aimed at improving the market's bad reputation, the gangs will be glad to help.

Touchstone

Context: Researchers have written about the perils of undertaking fieldwork in violent places and the need for frank conversations and careful planning to mitigate hazards since the early 1990s.[5] Before going to San Salvador, El Salvador to undertake fieldwork, I drew from the knowledge of friends and local researchers,[6] and sought guidance on operational security from people with military experience. When I went to rough areas, I sent my partner's mother with whom I was staying a pin with my location and sometimes I instructed her to assume something was wrong if I failed to communicate with her by a certain time. Nonetheless, when I sought permission from the "legitimate" authority – the government – to collect data in a municipal market, they passed me along to the gangs, an "illegitimate" authority. The gangs, I was told, would ensure my safety as long as I adjusted (or perhaps misrepresented) the aims of my project. The rift between university ethics and risk management protocols and "street ethics" in a city beset by violence was unbridgeable.[7]

Description: Academia takes a hard line on **transparency**, but sometimes less-than-full disclosure can protect people.[8] If, on the one hand, I secured the gangs' permission, and if that permission ensured that I could interact with people without putting them at risk, perhaps misrepresenting my research aims was defensible. On the other hand, I was a foreign researcher from a rich country, so might my working with gangs strengthen their hand, empowering them to demand higher *renta* and make more credible threats? I also questioned whether I could **trust** the guarantee of safe passage from groups engaged in violent crime and in conflict with the state. In a way, though, collaborating with the gangs felt unavoidable and there were even indications that it could be beneficial.[9] Plus, I knew that working with people who engage in violence is essential for preventing violence.[10] Ultimately, I opted to abandon the market and undertake the remainder of my data collection elsewhere in the city. Forging **equal** relationships and managing expectations with violent actors on the margins of the law felt impossible

in the time I had. I also suspected that accepting their gatekeeping assistance would compromise the **integrity** of my data beyond the "normal" impact of working in a place marred by conflict.[11]

Blindspot

Context: My PhD research site was a dangerous place in a dangerous city. I gave myself three months to secure access to the site where I wanted to collect data and another three to work with participants there, but neither of my efforts with the two gatekeepers I approached for assistance went as planned. One of them a government official, directed me to speak with the gangs who she said were the ones with "real authority" over the site. I seriously considered it before backing away, opting for the daunting prospect of looking for a new research site halfway through my fieldwork.

Description: Had I had more time, I could have tried other routes. There even may have been a way to **ethically** collaborate with the gangs whilst minimising **risk**. The trope of the "heroic fieldworker" – someone who appears to easily navigate the field, gain the **trust** of participants, and gather meaningful data without putting anyone at risk – was tempting.[12] I also nearly bought into the idea that data collection, especially as a PhD student, is a test of endurance and self-sacrifice.[13] But gathering sensitive data in dangerous places requires a "localised ethic" that is attuned to **vulnerability**: "what conversations (and silences) were important, what information was too costly to life and limb to get to, [and] the amount of exposure to violence considered acceptable."[14] Sometimes researchers engage in problematic conduct whilst *Researching Internationally* (See *Practising Ethics Guides to Built Environment Research*: # 6), taking advantage of low or non-existent legal or ethical guardrails.[15] Local researchers, who often face greater risks than foreign or visiting ones,[16] may exploit the same loopholes.[17] Given the time and information I had, I believe I made the right decision, but it was not without consequences.

Moonshot

Context: After deciding I was unable to find an ethical and safe way to collect data in San Salvador's central market – the Mercado Central – I began looking for another site in the city. Meanwhile, a major UK professional body short-listed and then rejected my application for funding when I said that I was shifting

my research site. I explained that I did not feel confident that I would be able to protect myself or my participants in the site where I had originally planned to work. In their feedback on my application, the organisation noted that, "the successful candidates were carrying out less risky fieldwork that was more fully developed methodologically."

Description: Whilst ethics protocols are clear that risks to research participants or the researcher are unacceptable, the situation on the ground is often marked by a macho swagger that encourages pushing physical, emotional, or **ethical** boundaries; what feels overwhelming or unsettling in the moment could be fodder for a great story in the pub or a reputation for bold research. But fieldwork is not a "masculinist rite of passage,"[18] and everyone involved in research is entitled to **care** and **respect** – to look after themselves and protect their participants (See *Practising Ethics Guides to Built Environment Research*: # 5 Researching, Risk, and Wellbeing). If we omit failures and messiness when we write or speak about our work or when we stage it (See *Practising Ethics Guides to Built Environment Research*: # 4 Staging Research), we reinforce the idea that research, especially on sensitive topics or in dangerous places, can be planned and predicted in advance and that there should be consequences when it goes awry.[19] Instead, we can reframe methodology "not as a rigid or fixed framework for the research but, rather, as an elastic, incorporative, integrative, and malleable practice."[20] Supervisors and mentors can emphasise this flexibility with their students. Established scholars can be honest about unexpected problems and mistakes, encouraging ethics committees to be open to change, academic publications to recast such issues as viable forms of data, and funding bodies to permit space and time for reflection and reorientation.

Principles

Honesty
Harm
Integrity
Reflexivity
Risk
Situatedness
Transparency
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 Jeffrey A. Sluka, "Staying alive while conducting primary research: Fieldwork on political violence," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Violence*, ed. Marie Breen-Smyth (Abingdon: Routledge Press, 2012), 301–25.

6 Amelia Frank-Vitale, "Rolling the windows up: On (not) researching violence and strategic distance," *Geopolitics* 26, no. 1 (January 2021): 139–58.

7 Ellen Van Damme, "When overt research feels covert: Researching women and gangs in a context of silence and fear," *Journal of Extreme Anthropology* 3, no. 1 (July 2019): 121–34.

8 Corinne Davis Rodrigues, "Doing research in violent settings: Ethical considerations and ethics committees," *Drugs, Security, and Democracy Program* 5 (July 2014): 1–20.

9 Dennis Rodgers, "Joining the gang and becoming a broder: The violence of ethnography in contemporary Nicaragua," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 26, no. 4 (2007): 444–61.

10 Jenny Pearce and Nicholas Loubere, "Under threat: Working in dangerous environments, " in *Understanding global development research: Fieldwork issues, experiences, and reflections,* eds. Gordon Crawford, Lena J. Kruckenberg, Nicholas Loubere, and Rosemary Morgan (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2017), 155–76.

11 Alex Bellamy, "Reducing risk, strengthening resilience: Toward the structural prevention of atrocity crimes," *Stanley Center for Peace and Security*, 6 September 2019, https://stanleycenter.org/publications/reducing-risk-strengthening-resilience-toward-the-structural-prevention-of-atrocity-crimes/, accessed 9 September 2021.

12 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): 519–40.

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): 537–65.

14 J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat, "Negotiating dangerous fields: Pragmatic strategies for fieldwork amid violence and terror," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 1 (2002): 214.

15 Kate Cronin-Furman and Milli Lake, "Ethics abroad: Fieldwork in fragile and violent contexts," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 51, no. 3 (July 2018): 607–14.

16 Mayssoun Sukarieh and Stuart Tannock, "Subcontracting academia: Alienation, exploitation and disillusionment in the UK overseas Syrian refugee research industry," *Antipode* 51, no. 2 (March 2019): 664–80.

17 Juan Martínez D'Aubuisson, "El rol de identidad sociocultural en la violencia de pandillas en El Salvador (Mejicanos, 2010)" (BA diss., Universidad de El Salvador, 2016).

18 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.

19 Alistair Fraser, "The 'throwntogetherness' of research: Reflections on conducting fieldwork in South Africa," *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 33, no. 3 (2012): 291–95.

20 J. Christopher Kovats-Bernat, "Negotiating dangerous fields: Pragmatic strategies for fieldwork amid violence and terror," *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 1 (2002): 210.