

Ethics and Ethnography

- Ethical principles not the same as moral principles.
- Eg Bourgois felt ethically bound to respect his subjects privacy, even though what they were doing was morally wrong. (See *In search of respect: Selling crack in El Barrio* Cambridge University Press 1995)
- The researcher must try to strike a balance between ethnographic curiosity and their responsibility to:
 1. Be sensitive to the rights of others.
 2. Safeguard the proper interests of those involved
 3. Report their findings accurately and truthfully
 4. Consider the consequences of their work or its misuse

Key Ethical Issues

- Discussion of ethical issues can usefully be divided into four main areas:
 1. Whether there is harm to participants
 2. Whether there is informed consent
 3. Whether there is invasion of privacy
 4. Whether deception is involved

Is there likely to be harm to participants?

- What is harm?
- What if research brings up traumatic memories or emotional situations.
- Should there be a benefit?
 - Recompense
 - Other benefits

What is Fully Informed Consent?

- Can you always ask people in advance?
- Can People Understand?
- Open ended Research?
- Who can give consent?
- Retrospective Observation?

Is there an invasion of Privacy

- Confidentiality: What is Private?
- Responsibility for the effects of your research relationships.
- Exposure of malpractice
- Is participant observation Intrinsically unethical?

Is there deception Involved?

- *If the researcher is completely honest with people about his activities, they will try to hide actions and attitudes they consider undesirable and so will be dishonest. Consequently the researcher must be dishonest to get honest data. (Gans Quoted in Bryman p.478)*
- Are there cases where deception is justified? Eg to prevent Manipulation of the data or to get at Powerful or secretive interests
- Four 'wrongs' of covert research
 1. Potential for unforeseeable harm
 2. Damage to the reputation of the discipline
 3. Unreasonable burden on researcher
 4. Lack of informed consent

Useful Web Adresses:

- Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth: Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice.
- <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.htm>
- The British Sociological Association – Statement of Ethical Practice:
- <http://www.britsoc.co.uk/>