Ethical considerations for anthropological studies on sensitive issues
"The great variation and complexity of field work situations make it difficult, if not impossible, to adopt a single set of standards for all ethnographers"

Ethical guidelines in anthropology...

• Only provides a general framework or
• Points of attention

• Does not work as a checklist you can go through at the beginning of your project
• Ethical considerations thus needs to be done through the whole project
• Most – if not all projects – will include sensitive topics
Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association

1. Responsibility to the people … with whom anthropological researchers work and whose lives and cultures they study
2. Responsibility to scholarship and science
3. Responsibility to the public
1. Responsibility to the people …

1. Anthropological researchers have primarily ethical obligations to the people … they study and to the people with whom they work
2. Anthropological researchers must ensure that they do not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people..
3. Do the informants want to remain anonymous or receive recognition?
4. Informed consent
5. Informed consent is still necessary in situations where the anthropologist has developed a close/intimate relationship with some informants
6. Not exploit informants and recognize debt
2. Responsibility to scholarship and science

1. Ethical issues should be addressed through all stages of the research process
2. Anthropologists bear responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their discipline
3. Future fieldworkers should be able to follow in the field
4. Honest and transparent with all stakeholders about the nature and intent of their research
5. Utilize results in an appropriate fashion
6. Access to data
• Honest and transparent with all stakeholders about the nature and intent of their research (AAA ethic guidelines)

• “For safety reasons, when obtaining community support for VAW research, it is important to frame the study in general terms – such as a study on women’s health or life experiences rather than mention violence or abuse directly” (WHO/Ellsberg & Heise 2005: 38)
Spradley (1979)

- Informants first
- Protect the rights, interests, and vulnerability of the informants
- Inform about the purpose of the research
- Protect the privacy of the informants
- Do not take advantage of the informants
- Give informants access to the results
3 fundamental ethical principles

- Respect for persons
- Benefit
- Justice
Informed consent

- The provision of adequate information, including description of research purposes and the study’s risks and benefits
- Comprehension of information by the informants
- Voluntary participants
- How anonymity will be guaranteed
The quality of the research is also an ethical question

The possibilities of valid results should be high/sure before the research is worth conduction – especially with research in sensitive issues
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Ethical guidelines…

• Do they help?
Ethical considerations for an anthropologist I

• Remember the general guidelines
• Pay attention to ethical questions through out all phases of the project
• Be aware that our research interest often changes or expand while in the field – did the informants give consent to the new directions of your project?
Ethical considerations for an anthropologist II

• Do your informants remember that you are a researcher and use your interaction as data?
• How to balance the anonymity of informants and at the same time live up to the anthropological ideals of context-rich and detailed descriptions?
• When should your informants have access to your data/writings?
Remember – ethical questions are also data

- It is important ethnographic insights to know:
  - If and why a topic is sensitive in a given context
  - When things are told and when things are hidden
  - Whom can be present during a conversation on sensitive topic
  - How to behave ethical in a given cultural and social context
"We must remember that women living with violence are already at risk. Researchers cannot eliminate this reality, just as they cannot fully eliminate the possibility that further harm will be caused by their study. The obligation of the researchers is to carefully weigh the risks and benefits of any study and to take every measure possible to limit possible harm and to maximize possible benefit. At the very least we must ensure that when women take risks to share their stories, we honor that risk by using findings for social change” (Ellsberg & Heise 2005: 45)