

Mindful Ethics: Comments on Informant-Centered Practices in Sociological Research

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Abstract In this article, I introduce the concept of “mindful ethics” to describe my experiences as a feminist qualitative researcher who has confronted ethical dilemmas in my sexuality research. Mindful ethics is informed theoretically by mindful inquiry, grounded theory, ethics in practice, and ethically important moments. Mindful ethics has been useful in dealing with ethical considerations throughout all stages of my sexuality research. Shifting my attention to the taken-for-granted social contexts and circumstances surrounding informants’ life experiences has helped me deal with ethical concerns that otherwise may have resulted in harm to informants.

Keywords Feminist qualitative research · Mexican populations and sexuality research · Ethics and mindfulness

When I submitted a proposal to conduct research on incest in Mexico for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval at my university in 2005, I realized that the institutional requirements could jeopardize the safety of my research participants. The IRB expected informants to sign a form on university letterhead with a detailed description of the study and required from me as a researcher to give informants a copy of the signed document. I became very concerned. What would my informants do with this signed document? Would they have a safe place to keep it? Would those who lived in extreme poverty have a private place to keep things like this document? What if someone in the family found the document, someone who had not known about the abuse? What if the person who committed the abuse found the document? These thoughts led me to realize that the IRB protocol—based on white, middle-class experiences in the United States—actually made my potential informants vulnerable (see Swauger 2009). With this concern in mind, I contacted the IRB director who was receptive to my concern and who presented my request

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for a paperless, verbal-only approval to the IRB board. The IRB board eventually approved my request to interview informants without having to obtain their written signed consent.

While the IRB process helps researchers think about ethical issues and concerns, it is still important to think carefully about the implications of required institutional protocols. When I considered the actual living conditions of potential informants, I recognized ethical blind spots in the IRB procedures. In this case the taken-for granted signed consent form actually turned out to be a “to sign or not to sign” ethical issue. The realization of this specific ethical concern came from my awareness of my informants’ vulnerability: I had to protect them from the potential consequences of complying with an institutional procedure paradoxically designed to protect them.

In general, we are trained to design our research projects without necessarily thinking in advance, or being able to anticipate, the living conditions and social circumstances and contexts that surround the very unique personal histories and actual lives of the people who may potentially participate in our research projects. Traditionally, we are trained to think about the “subjects” who are going to participate in our “research projects” without thinking that our potential informants are more than just “subjects participating in a research project.” Far from being simply “subjects” participating in a qualitative study, the informants who are willing to share their life histories and stories are human beings with complex everyday lives characterized by unique social circumstances. These life contexts not only reflect mundane everyday circumstances, but are also potentially important aspects of the participants’ relationships with us as researchers.

Becoming mindful as a researcher, therefore, has helped me become keenly aware of and present in the social contexts and circumstances surrounding the everyday life experiences of the people who participate in my research. With this in mind, my intent in this article is to examine some of the mundane, taken-for-granted ethical issues that I have encountered while conducting research and to share some of the ways in which these experiences have transformed and expanded my perspective as a researcher. My reflections in this article are based on two studies I conducted over the past ten years: one on sexuality and Mexican immigration (the “Los Angeles project”) and a second project on incestuous relationships in Mexican society (the “Mexico project”).

The Los Angeles project examined the sex lives of Mexican immigrants within the context of immigration, based on in-depth interviews with adult Mexican immigrant women and men in Los Angeles, California. From 1997 to 1998, I interviewed 40 women between the ages of 25 and 45, whom I identified through various inner-city community-based agencies and elementary schools working with Latino immigrant families. From 2000 to 2001, I identified 20 men of the same ages through the same agencies and schools; I also recruited men participants at meetings organized by the Mexican consulate in Los Angeles and through activists representing hometown organizations, and other community organization, including employment centers for day laborers.

The Mexico project addressed Mexican women’s and men’s experiences of incest. The fieldwork took place from 2005–2006 in four urban locations in Mexico: Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Monterrey and included in-depth interviews with 60 adult women and men with histories of voluntary or involuntary sexual experiences within the context of family. I also interviewed professionals who worked on issues related to sexual violence and young women and men I identified through women’s groups, other community-based organizations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that worked to prevent sexual violence.

In this article, I ponder the ethical issues that unexpectedly arise in fieldwork and demand immediate attention as well as the process of ethical self-inquiry that has emerged

for me as a feminist sociologist conducting sexuality research. Through this process, I have become an introspective and critical observer of my own fieldwork experiences, which has helped me become more conscientious and alert to the emotional, physical and political safety and well-being of people participating in my research. I propose the concept of “mindful ethics” to keep researchers keenly aware of the taken-for-granted social contexts and circumstances that shape research participants’ lives. First, I discuss the concept of mindful ethics and its roots. Then I examine how mindful ethics and my relations with local communities shaped my research on incest in Mexico. Finally, I discuss dimensions of the research process in which serious ethical considerations emerged.

Becoming Mindful

Mindful ethics is an ethical consciousness that informs how I have dealt with unexpected ethical concerns. This ethical consciousness is rooted in my understanding of “mindfulness,” which is informed by both Western and Eastern theoretical perspectives. These perspectives include the work of psychologist Ellen Langer, sociologist Inge Bell, cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, and 20th century engaged spiritualities rooted in Buddhist philosophies.

In her classic book *Mindfulness*, Langer (1989) examines mindfulness in opposition to “mindlessness,” the latter identifying human action as being “trapped by categories” that limit and compromise our cognitive process as we engage uncritically in “automatic behaviors” and “from a single perspective” as if there were “only one set of rules” (pp. 11–12, 16). Thus, mindfulness refers to thinking critically beyond rigid typologies and becoming aware of the need to avoid an automatic-pilot mindset. The intent is to remain receptive to new information so as to cultivate fresh, innovative perspectives. Mindfulness goes beyond rational thinking. According to Langer, “Out of an intuitive experience of the world comes a continuous flow of novel distinctions. Purely rational understanding, on the other hand, serves to confirm old mindsets, rigid categories” (p. 117). Mindfulness promotes the “de-automatization” of our thoughts and actions (p. 79).

In her article, “Buddhist Sociology,” Bell (1999) invites sociologists to consider Eastern thought (mainly Hinduism and Buddhism) as she reflected on the possibility of an “enlightened sociology” (p. 295). Bell explains,

Because we are self-centered, we believe that there is a right and wrong to everything, right being whatever makes us comfortable, safe, and happy, and wrong being whatever threatens our safety, pleasure, or desire for control. The Eastern ways tell us that we cannot control the universe to suit our egotistical fantasy. Change is constant and that is the way of the universe. (p. 296).

Like Langer, Bell challenges us to be critical of inflexible categories, such as “right versus wrong,” and rigid, ego-based binaries that posit a social reality that is permanent. Mindfulness, thus, is to be aware of the many social realities that exist beyond our own self-centeredness, and given the changing nature of societies and cultures, to be mindful is to be alert to the urgency of being present at the moment and being cautious about what we take for granted. In addition to these considerations, Gloria Anzaldúa critiques Western systems of knowledge production as subjecting knowledge of the heart or intuition to so-called rational knowledge. She identifies “*un corazón con razón*,” (“a heart with reason”) as being the “mindful heart like what Buddhists advocate about being attentive and aware” (Lara 2005, p. 44). According to American-born Tibetan Buddhist nun, Thubten Chodron (2004),

Mindfulness means being aware of what we are thinking, feeling, saying, and doing each moment. It also means being mindful of our ethical values and of the kind heart, so we live according to them in our daily lives. By cultivating this awareness, we will no longer simply react to things and then wonder why we are so confused and exhausted at the end of the day. If we are mindful, we will notice that we have a kind heart and will enrich it and let our actions flow from it. (p.142).

The practice of mindful ethics is based on three academic contributions: mindful inquiry, grounded theory, and ethics in practice and ethically important moments. Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings on "Engaged Buddhism" provide additional grounding for mindful ethics. These teachings have received considerable recent attention from sociologists who compare his ideas to the sociological imagination (see Tamdgidi 2008). These academic examinations look closely at Hanh's ideas as a pragmatic perspective that connects Eastern philosophies with pressing social problems in Western societies. The approach focuses on a commitment to action in the "here and now," which questions the individualism of modernity while promoting human interdependence of collective well-being. Engaged Buddhism goes hand in hand with "mindfulness training" in examining the complex ways that being mindful nurtures an individual's awareness toward, and appreciation for, others. This "experiencing inter-being" is an important step in preventing harm to others (Adorjan and Kelly 2008, pp. 40–41). According to Hanh (2008),

Engaged Buddhism is the kind of wisdom that responds to anything that happens in the here and the now—global warming, climate change, the destruction of the ecosystem, the lack of communication, war, conflict, suicide, divorce. As a mindfulness practitioner, we have to be aware of what is going on in our body, our feelings, our emotions, and our environment. That is Engaged Buddhism. Engaged Buddhism is the kind of Buddhism that responds to what is happening in the here and the now. (p. 1).

Thus, examining *mindfully* an ethical issue, dilemma, or concern that emerges in the here and now of conducting research is a practice of engaged Buddhism.

Regarding the three related academic traditions, first, I draw on the concept of mindful inquiry, which asks researchers to reflect on their epistemological and ethical ventures. Integrating critical theory, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and Buddhism in their reflections of research processes, Valerie Malhotra Bentz and Jeremy J. Shapiro (1998) promote mindful inquiry based on the importance of mindful thought, the need for tolerance and the ability to inhabit multiple perspectives, an intention to alleviate suffering, and a sense of clearing, or openness, that underlies awareness. These goals guide my efforts to be a mindful researcher aware of interviewees' personal, family and everyday life experiences. They enable me to recognize potentially harmful situations and consequences that I otherwise might take for granted.

Second, I use grounded theory as a basis for mindful ethics. Grounded theory is an approach that accounts for and appreciates how knowledge emerges from fieldwork and ethnographic journeys (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967). Embracing mindful ethics has invited me to shift my cognitive attention and intellectual preoccupation to the actual process of research itself. In the past, I immersed myself in the field with great excitement *after* I had naively "taken care of all" of potential ethical problems or concerns, mainly through the IRB. However, by using a grounded theory approach to focus on the process of research, I realized that most ethical questions emerge after IRB review, especially in studies of sensitive topics, such as emotional trauma and sexual and sexualized abuse.

Finally, I use the concepts of ethically important moments and ethics in practice. Marily Guillemain and Lynn Gillam (2004) define ethically important moments as “the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (p.262) and ethics in practice as “the day-to-day ethical issues that arise in the doing of research” (p. 264). Their emphasis on researcher’s reflexivity is particularly useful for preparing researchers to deal with unexpected ethical issues.

In sum, mindful ethics, as a paradigm with conceptual foundations in mindful inquiry and mindfulness, grounded theory, and ethically important moments and ethics in practice, provides a framework for examining the ethical significance and context of the unexpected circumstances I experienced as part of my fieldwork. In the following discussion, I consider how my relations with local communities shaped the ethics of my recent research project, from its inception to the dissemination of preliminary findings.

In Pursuit of Community Action Research: Some Ethical Considerations

The Mexico project emerged from my particular interest in creating bridges between the professional, personal, and spiritual dimensions of my life by conducting activist scholarship (see González-López 2006, 2010). The stories of sexual violence within the family that were revealed to me as I worked on the Los Angeles project moved me deeply, but remained a puzzle I was not able to pursue. Once I completed the Los Angeles project, I began exploring the possibilities of researching incest with Mexican immigrants and noticed the invisibility of sociological research on this topic in Mexican society. I began thinking about employing an activist research approach.

On a visit to Ciudad Juárez in 2005, I had conversations with activists and mental-health professionals advocating for women’s rights and asked them what was “urgently needed” in the areas of sexuality research in Mexico. I know Mexico well. I was born there and obtained an undergraduate degree from a Mexican university. I migrated to the United States in 1986. In the 1990s, I completed my graduate training in Marriage and Family Therapy in Los Angeles while working mainly with Latina immigrant women and their families. In 2001, I received an invitation to participate at an event in Ciudad Juárez and established a professional relationship with activists and mental-health professionals who invited me to give workshops on gender inequality and sexual violence at two community-based agencies. I then became a long-distance volunteer who visited Ciudad Juárez periodically to share my professional training that I had previously acquired as a couple and family therapist working with Latin American immigrants.

Activists and mental-health professionals in Ciudad Juárez informed me that although the brutal sexual violence against women was a pressing issue, research on sexual violence within the family was completely invisible. They believed research on sexual violence taking place within families was urgently needed. These conversations were deeply motivating and formed the ethical compass that has kept me focused on conducting community-oriented research that is organized around the expressed needs of the communities in which I have had the opportunity to develop my own intellectual career. I hoped to correct what I identify as the “maquiladora syndrome,” which involves “going south as a researcher, gathering data, and then going back north to publish for my own professional benefit and a select group of privileged people” (González-López 2010, p. 570). Some activists and professionals I met when exploring this project confronted me about this issue, asking me if I was like other researchers who had visited their agencies to conduct research but then left and “disappeared” after they finished their projects. These

experiences encouraged me to engage in a genuine, reciprocal collaboration with the communities, agencies, activists, and professionals who supported my research.

After I obtained financial and institutional support for the project, I conducted research in Ciudad Juárez, Guadalajara, México City and Monterrey in 2005 and 2006. In these cities, I met many generous community organizers, activists, and other professionals who were receptive to and eager to assist my research. Their expert support validated the project and helped me to identify informants. For example, some talked about the research project with adult women and men requesting different types of services at their agencies, which offered legal aid, parenting classes, and psychotherapy. Then, they referred and occasionally personally introduced a potential informant to me. We set up a time to meet in a private office at the agency or organization to talk about the project.

My research ethics were further challenged and refined during the process of selecting potential interviewees (see González-López 2010 for in-depth discussion). Many potential participants interviewed me before the actual interview to ensure that I was professionally competent to explore very sensitive aspects of their personal lives. These pre-interview conversations deepened my respect for informants and humbled me with the realization that my academic credentials were not a sufficient reason for these people to share their experiences of incest with me. I became more mindful about trust and safety issues with informants and checked whether potential informants were emotionally prepared for the actual interview.

These considerations, especially my concern for reciprocity with local activist and mental-health communities, also prompted me to think about how best to share my research. As I collected data, I offered seminars and workshops on feminist research exploring gender, sexuality, and other related topics at the request of activists and mental-health professionals who had helped me in each city. After I analyzed the interviews transcripts with the help of a research assistant, I gave workshops and seminars to share my preliminary findings in Ciudad Juárez (summer 2009), Mexico City (summer 2010), and Guadalajara (fall 2010). I have plans to give a workshop in Monterrey, once I secure funding and institutional support and feel safe enough for a visit, given the current wave of violence in the city.

These workshops and seminars have resulted in lively, engaging conversations with bright participants who have taught me a great deal about local forms of knowledge and have also challenged the intellectual colonization that we often overlook in our research experiences. Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, Paolo Freire, Chandra Mohanty, and Chela Sandoval, among other inspirational intellectuals, were some of our invisible guests in these dialogues. Sometimes these conversations left me feeling intellectually vulnerable, but they were also another useful reminder of the importance of practicing humility and genuine receptivity in the communities in which we conduct our research.

In sum, my intent to become more integrated and whole in all aspects of my life led me to explore activist scholarship as a promising possibility. Unexpected ethical lessons emerged as I worked in the same communities where my research has taken place. These lessons included the importance of commitment and reciprocity, my professional and intellectual vulnerability, and my own intellectual colonization—all of which shaped the methodological dimensions of the Mexico project.

Setting Up the Research Protocol: Informants' Motivations for Participating

As I worked on the Mexico project and identified potential informants, I learned that the desire to confide an untold story was a more desperate need among many participants than I

could have imagined. I was deeply moved as I learned about the extreme sacrifices they were willing to make in order to participate in an interview. For many, the interview represented an opportunity to have someone they perceived as an authority figure, namely, the researcher, affirm and legitimate their accounts of abuse. I represent privilege and legitimacy in ways that have significant implications for study participants.

During interviews in the Mexico project, I became the ethnographic witness who listened in a nonjudgmental, respectful manner. In one recent article, I discuss this revelation in detail and note,

I eventually realized that from the perspective of many informants, I was the family adult, the respectful figure whose intention was to do what others had not done when they first experienced abuse and pain. I eventually realized I was becoming some kind of ethnographic, symbolic mother who unconditionally believed; I was becoming the family adult figure who would respectfully and nonjudgmentally finally listen to their stories. (González-López 2010, p. 577).

This was especially the case for individuals who were traumatized as children and who had never shared their stories.

I remember the case of a young woman in Mexico City I was supposed to interview. We had an appointment to meet for an interview at nine in the morning at the agency where we had previously met. As soon as she arrived for the interview, we established an informal conversation and talked about the traffic, a common conversation among people living in Mexico City. She told me then that she had commuted for about 3 or 4 hours to come to see me. When I realized that she had commuted for 3 to 4 hours so that she could participate in my study, I was speechless and deeply grateful. As we began the interview, she told me that she was happy to participate and that she was sixteen. After hearing this, I paused in confusion and recalled my conversation with her days earlier when I had extended the interview invitation. Had I not made it clear that I was interviewing adults between the ages of 25 and 60? I realized that she had misrepresented her age to me. I was very surprised by this, but my intuition was to not question her further about it. The combination of my assertive personality, my state of surprise, as well as my curiosity might have come across as confrontational and inadvertently hurt her especially because of power and privilege differentials between both of us as Mexican women (i.e., a short, dark skinned, adolescent woman trying to explain herself to a tall, light skinned, well-educated, adult woman she barely knew).

Other informants who did qualify for the study (and whom I subsequently interviewed) told me about navigating similar logistical arrangements to meet with me at the agencies or organizations where we conducted the interviews. I always expressed my gratitude for their sacrifices to meet and share their stories, while they similarly expressed their appreciation to me for listening, especially at the end of our conversations. From these informants, I learned that an interview with me as a researcher represented an opportunity to finally have a witness for an untold story. This seems to have been the case as well for the adolescent woman mentioned above: she was willing to navigate distance and traffic just for the opportunity to tell her story to an authority figure. I told her that because of ethical reasons, I could not interview minors. I reminded her of the recruitment statement that specified an age range of 25–60, a requirement I had set up with the hope of interviewing adult people with longer life histories. As I talked to her, I felt terrible, especially knowing that she had gotten up so early and crossed the city navigating traffic and public transportation only to be told that she was not eligible to be interviewed.

Did I consider not telling her that I could not use her interview, but still proceeding with the interview in a way that would preserve her dignity? No. Proceeding in that manner would not have been honest or ethical on my part. In addition, I have plans to publish a book (in both English and in Spanish) based on this research project, which she might want to read. Therefore, I was concerned she might eventually find out that she was not included in the study after all, compromising my honesty as a researcher and giving her additional pain. Instead, I did tell her that although she could not participate in the study, I would listen to her story.

As I continued to identify additional potential participants for the study, I met two assertive men who asked why I was not interviewing younger people. Each had heard about the “not-younger-than-25” requirement to participate in my study, but they wanted me to make an exception. One was nineteen and the other was twenty-two. After considering the situation and pondering the reasons for their desire for inclusion in the study, I submitted an amendment to my original IRB protocol and received permission to include people between the ages of eighteen and sixty. Although these two young adult men had actively challenged my original age parameters of the study, I did not perceive them as challenging my authority because of my gender. Without giving them a definite response, I told them that I would think about their request. This gave me some time to determine whether I would need to establish contact with the IRB and submit an amendment. Ultimately, I decided to reconsider the age requirements for the study and to include them. First, they suggested that they were not heterosexual. As an ethnographic witness to informants’ experiences, I knew it was ethically and politically relevant for me to interview marginalized men. Second, I was interested in learning more about the life stories of a young generation of nonheterosexual men and comparing them with the stories of older gay men I had interviewed earlier.

In the Los Angeles study, a woman enthusiastically looked for me at one of the schools where I identified informants. I was curious about why she would be so excited about participating, but I did not identify anything of particular concern. I decided to interview her. Within the first ten minutes or so of our interview, she sobbed in so much pain while telling me that she had been sexually abused; I realized that her enthusiasm to be interviewed masked her pain. Continuing with the interview would have been unprofessional, especially as I realized that she was not prepared to talk about her sex life at this moment in her life and what she was really looking for and needed was professional help. I told her that I could not interview her for the study, but I listened to her respectfully and offered her contact information of agencies offering accessible psychotherapy services for Latina women in Los Angeles.

Many research participants regarded me as an authority figure, which shaped their motivation for participating in my research. Besides being a professional sociologist who is usually identified as an “expert” in Mexican immigrant communities and intellectual circles on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border, I am a woman with physical features associated with racial and class privilege in Mexico (e.g., tall and fair skin). As such, I frequently represent privilege and authority in these communities. Many Mexican informants who have participated in my two research projects have actually celebrated (with some kind of nationalistic pride) as they perceived me as a Mexican immigrant woman “who made it” in the United States, which has also inspired respect and admiration in our interactions. Informants in the Los Angeles project treated me with a special demeanor of respect when they learned that I was a doctoral student, which was eventually magnified when I became “la doctora de Austin” or “la doctora de Texas,” as some informants I interviewed for the Mexico project identified me. I am keenly concerned about

these power differentials and privileges, and as a feminist concerned about not reproducing inequality, I have become aware of the importance of conveying my gratitude and respect when I interact with research participants.

I learned a valuable ethical lesson from these young would-be informants. We cannot take for granted the underlying reasons informants have for wanting to participate in research projects. One of the biggest research surprises in this study was how informants perceived me as a witness to their often long-buried pain and shame (González-López 2010). In this case, I learned that some informants agreed to be interviewed because they may have been searching for validation from a researcher who, in their eyes, was an expert or professional witness. Other informants were willing to expend great effort to receive this much-needed validation. As qualitative researchers, we should be more aware of what informants may go through in order to participate in a study: how they may misrepresent themselves in order to tell their stories and the effort they may make simply to attend the interview. I have learned the importance of taking these considerations into account when setting research protocol.

Ghosts in the Bedroom

When I was setting up the research protocol for the Los Angeles project in the late 1990s, I was concerned about the safety and comfort of research participants. Accordingly, I had very clear ideas about the physical places and locations where interviews would take place. When thinking about how to schedule these interviews, I sought the support of people working in schools, agencies, and clinics, some of whom offered private offices or spaces for meeting with informants. After this advance set-up, I was somewhat surprised to learn that I needed to be more flexible about spatial arrangements for interviews. Many women identified their homes as the place most convenient for me to interview them. Their choice of interview site led me to question the role of my own comfort in interviewing participants in their homes, often with other family members present. Once in the home, the question was where to conduct the interview. What space could be a site that would feel both private and comfortable for them and also safe and appropriate for me? When I arrived at their homes, I was initially taken by surprise when some women identified their bedrooms as the safest and most private place to discuss their sex lives with me. As I expanded this project and interviewed men, I learned that some also preferred to meet in their homes. These interviews took place mainly in their living rooms or on the porch, spaces that these men considered a safe space to engage in these conversations about their sex lives within the context of immigration. Gender relations clearly shaped these interview arrangements: two women can comfortably talk about sex in the bedroom, while a man and a woman (even if she is a researcher) may not. However, in one case, at the wife's insistence, I did interview a man in his bedroom, which, as it turned out, was basically the only other room available in the small apartment. During the interview, his wife stood outside the door preventing interruptions from their very curious children (González-López 2005, pp. 15–16).

As I began conducting the interviews for the Mexico project, which involved discussions with people about their experiences of sex—coercive and/or voluntary—within the context of family, I was reminded of the striking differences between both groups of informants. In the Los Angeles project, I interviewed Mexican immigrant women and men about their sex lives. In the Mexico project, I interviewed women and men living in Mexico about their histories of incestuous relationships. In the process, I learned an ethical lesson: for some people, the bedroom might be a safe space in which to engage in these conversations. But

this was not necessarily the case for people with histories of sexual abuse. Regardless of where the abuse took place, the bedroom is often symbolic of sexual activity. The ghosts of abuse might still be haunting their bedrooms. As a researcher who is concerned about creating conditions of safety and comfort, now I know that location and space are critical when dealing with people who have experienced sexual abuse in their lives. This lesson has helped me become aware of ways to protect them from potential vulnerability and retraumatization.

The Borders of Intellectual Curiosity: Risks, Silences, and Boundaries

As I worked on both research projects and prepared my proposals for IRB approval, I soon learned that evaluation committees at the three institutions where I had an institutional affiliation never perceived potential participants as “risky,” but they were usually perceived as “at risk.” What does this mean? One illustration comes from my Los Angeles study. I was in my late 30s when I conducted the interviews for this study—interviews consisting of sexuality research with men who live on the margins of society. The IRB at the institution where I was affiliated never questioned whether contact with these informants might potentially be “risky” for me. Although one of my informants openly flirted with me and in another case I was sexually harassed, the IRB never anticipated this potential risk. In contrast, in both studies, the IRB was concerned about protecting potential informants from being “at risk” while participating in my research. In this section I share some examples of the ways in which the latter institutional perception resulted in ethical implications and methodological considerations as I worked on both projects.

An anti-immigrant climate affected my research on Mexican immigrant women’s and men’s sexualities. When I worked on the Los Angeles project at the two institutions I was affiliated with in the mid and late 1990s, I learned how the political climate (i.e., post-Proposition 187 anti-immigrant climate in California) had shaped IRB recommendations and transformed Mexican immigrants into vulnerable informants. The first time I established contact with IRB professionals, they talked to me about protecting informants who might fear deportation and never asking them about their legal status in the country. As a Mexican immigrant and a feminist, I had developed a personal sensitivity to and concern about politics affecting Mexican immigrants living in the United States. It had never occurred to me that a potential informant would be afraid of me, a Mexican woman, deporting her or him. I learned that ethics are shaped, in part, by the current political climate of race relations. In this case, this climate had rendered Mexican immigrants highly visible and this influenced how institutional committees perceived them. In contrast, in a social context where Mexican immigrants have little political visibility or relevance, I wonder, how much ethical concern institutional committees would have about them?

I soon learned about the IRB committees imposed restrictions on research that involves people’s sexual histories and stories, restrictions many sexuality researchers know well. Generally, IRBs have established restrictions about the populations with which researchers are institutionally approved to do research, and both of my research projects posed exceptions to these conventions. In both studies, IRB officials expressed concerns about the potential risks involved in interviewing people about sexual intimacy, especially those with a history of sexual abuse. Accordingly, my potential informants became “vulnerable” and a “protected population,” which invited the IRB to look closely at all dimensions of the Los Angeles project. My experience resonates with that of Melissa Swauger (2009) who has critically examined IRB’s discourses of protectionism as she reflects on her research with

adolescent girls on education and career decision-making. Swauger demonstrates how IRB surveillance may, paradoxically, silence youth (as well as other populations socially constructed as vulnerable by the IRB), and as such, may represent an ethical challenge and frustration for feminist qualitative researchers who are *actually* interested in investigating and exposing injustice, and advocating for populations vulnerable to multiple oppressions.

In both projects, I worked to identify situations that might potentially harm informants. In the Los Angeles project, I deliberately did not ask participants about their experiences of sexual abuse, although I respectfully listened when informants voluntarily offered their testimonies, for example, of the sexual abuse they experienced as children. In the Mexico project, I was better prepared to handle researching individuals' experiences of sexual violence, which was possible because of the professional and personal growth I had accumulated at that point in my life. Now I realize that I would have not taken "the risk" myself to conduct these interviews if I had not been trained as a couple and family therapist. My clinical background helped me to be better prepared professionally and emotionally for my informants as I facilitated a context of safety and respect for another human so willing to share a wide array of emotions and untold stories with me as a researcher. My self-identification as a "consejera," or therapist, not only helped them to feel safe to be interviewed, but also became an invitation for them to talk openly and share more than I had expected. I found myself experiencing again deep gratitude as they shared with me their rich and vast histories and stories.

My clinical training shaped both the methodological and ethical dimensions of my fieldwork. First, I told informants that I had been trained as a couple and family therapist and that I had clinical expertise in the area. My pre-interview conversations with informants helped me to establish rapport with them, and I began the interview only after the person reported that she/he was emotionally prepared to comfortably engage in an interview with me about sex, incest, violence, and family-related themes. Second, I was sensitive to and respectful of any distress informants expressed during the interview. I turned off the tape recorder and stopped the interview at their request or when informants' emotions became intense and did not allow them to talk. Third, I made brief clinical interventions when needed, consisting of two or three heartfelt sentences to express my sensitivity and caring. Fourth, I offered extra time to sensitively listen in case an informant voluntarily exceeded the two-to-three-hour limit I had suggested for the interview. Fifth, with all informants—especially with those who might have disclosed some emotional distress during the interview—I made sure she/he was emotionally prepared to return to her/his daily routine before leaving the office or space where the interview took place. Finally, I kindly explained to my informants that although the interview might potentially have a healing, revealing, or insightful effect, our interview was not a therapy session. However, I made myself available to listen in case the person wanted to talk with me after the interview and explore concerns or questions that might have arisen during the interview. In these cases, I did not offer a professional assessment or opinion, but I was attentive, receptive, and supportive. In case informants wanted to have a session with a psychotherapist after our interview, I made sure they met with one of the professionals at a given organization. I had previously identified names of institutions and contact information in each city where I did my fieldwork so that I was prepared to offer this information to study participants at the end of our interviews. I also gave informants my business card, and I made myself available if, for any reason, they wanted to establish contact with me days or weeks after the interview. I informed them about the dates I would stay in a given city, so they were aware that I might not be available in person, but I always made myself available by phone and email.

When I asked informants for their verbal consent to be interviewed, I told them they could decline to answer any question or discontinue the interview. It was ethically important for me to respect the limits and decisions a given informant made before or during our interviews. This helped them feel in control of the conversation and decide *what* and *how much* about their lives they felt comfortable enough and safe to share with me. This was important given that one theme that emerged during the interviews was that of the secrets and silences surrounding informants' experiences of abuse; my intent was to equally honor an informant's decision to keep a secret or be silent about anything that had emerged in the interview. I always respected the assertiveness of informants who said they did not want to answer a question even when it challenged my curiosity as a researcher. Only one informant discontinued participation in the Mexico study after she told me that she wanted to be interviewed in two sessions, but reportedly work and logistics did not allow her to continue with the interview.

Learning to respect potential informants' boundaries also generated ethically important moments in the Mexico project. As I conducted my fieldwork in my hometown of Monterrey, I visited my family regularly. On one of these visits, I learned that one of my father's best friends, a man in his early eighties, had recently told him that his biological parents were siblings. I knew my father's friend, and when I learned about this, I was blown away while thinking about what an amazing source of information I would have if I could only interview him. My excitement vanished quickly when I felt that something was not right. In the past, I had had brief conversations with my father's friend, and I was once deeply moved by his tears as he talked to me about his fear of dying. As I recalled these conversations, I was confronted by thought-provoking ethical dilemmas. Would it be right for me to interrogate an aging man who was navigating the fear of the last stage of his life just so I could learn more about what it meant to be the child of an incestuous relationship? How would the idea of thinking about an interview, let alone the interview itself, about his parents' relationship affect his emotional and physical well-being? To begin with, would it be right for me to ask my father if he would feel comfortable about me making a request for this kind of interview to his friend? How would the interview potentially harm the friendship between my father and his friend? How would that harm my own relationship with my father? As I struggled with these questions, I decided not to ask for an interview with my father's friend. Out of respect for both of them, I never asked my father anything about the life of his good friend. "This feels just right," was the heartfelt feeling I had in the end. A few months later, I was saddened when I learned about my father's friend's death. Less than a year after I completed all of my fieldwork, I found myself grieving my own father's death. In retrospect, it gives me peace of mind to know that neither one of them knew—or even suspected—that I had grappled with the question of formally exploring the incestuous relationship. Although my father knew I researched family life and Mexican society, I never gave him any details about my past or present research.

I feel both grateful and more intellectually mature as I become more skilled in my abilities to *mindfully* decipher the many ethical surprises and dilemmas I have encountered in the field. In the end, these have been not only research lessons but also life opportunities to grow ethically as the sociologist who is also a human being. In retrospect, I now realize that the IRB policies stressing the vulnerability of research informants coincided to some extent with my interest in designing a methodology (especially for the Mexico project) that had as a priority their emotional safety and well being. As I learned to place my informants at the center of my ethical preoccupations—either while identifying potential study participants or conducting interviews—mindful ethics established clear limits to my intellectual curiosity, which in the end became secondary to the most obvious, but also the

more nuanced and delicate risks informants or potential informants faced. Even as I learned these lessons, however, a new set of ethical considerations unfolded for regarding the organization of my data and the analysis and publication of my preliminary findings.

To Publish or Not to Publish

Deciding whether and how to publish my research has been a challenge. Did I want to publish findings that could harm immigrant men as a social group? What if my findings were misinterpreted and used against them? When some immigrant men who participated in the Los Angeles project and worked as laborers told me that they, or their friends, had been exposed to sexual harassment at work mainly by men employers, I was shocked and motivated to write about their experiences. But when I also thought about how these Mexican immigrants might be perceived as practicing prostitution as part of their complex immigration experiences, I thought twice about the wisdom of publishing this information. In addition, these men often referred to their white employers' harassment by identifying them as "white gay men." I did not want to promote homophobic discourses that might further stigmatize white gay communities or to perpetuate stereotypes of Mexicans. After consulting with more senior scholars about this, I decided to publish about this while following their advice: you need to actually talk about this struggle in the article and/or publication. One lesson I have learned from both projects is that to the extent that we are ethically aware, we will always have concerns and questions regarding the implications of our research and how it is perceived. These are likely to be thorny questions with no simple answers. The ethical considerations may be in our willingness to recognize, admit and discuss these complexities (O'Brien 2010).

In the Mexico project, the question of whether to publish has also been on my mind. Some informants asked me not to publish or talk about specific aspects of their lives. In all cases, I told informants I would respect their requests. I still recall, for instance, a professional who talked to me about young men who had confided in him about being abused at a prestigious private Catholic institution and, with teary eyes, he asked me to promise him that I would not reveal the real name of the college where these boys had been abused by men who belong to this order. As I continue working on the analysis and writing of the Mexican incest project, I will have to grapple with these and other related issues.

Just recently, I had occasion to consider the profound implications of this material as I prepared remarks for a workshop in Mexico City where I had been invited to present some of my findings to activists and other professionals concerned with sexual violence. In thinking about some of my recently analyzed interviews, I realized that I would eventually have to wade into the thorny discussion of the extent to which some girls and boys might be perceived as being willingly engaged in their "abuse." My preliminary analyses suggest that some girls and boys seem to comply with a family member's request for sex for reasons of strategic survival. For instance, some children are vulnerable to potential sexual abuse by a relative due to structural inequalities. In the case of poverty, women are often forced to leave their children in the care of questionable adult relatives while they work. The challenge in this case is to avoid suggesting a "blame the mother" interpretation that is all too easy when people fail to understand the conditions that Mexican women face in trying to provide for their families in a patriarchal system. The same "mother-blame" has been consistently identified in feminist examinations of sexual abuse of children in the United States; but also further examined, for example, with regard to *how* and *why* heteronormative, socioeconomic class and race relations may shape interpretations of mother blaming by parents of children who have been abused (see McGuffey 2005). At this moment, I am only

beginning to think about the contours of understanding, examining, writing about, and reporting these experiences within the context of and in conversation with feminist literature discussing family life, sexuality, and sexual violence in Mexico.

Similarly, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary incestuous relationships (and the delicate subtleties and nuances that may emerge in between) generated unanticipated dilemmas as I conducted my research. In an article titled “Ethnographic Lessons: Researching Incest in Mexican Families” (2010), I examine some of the surprising lessons I have learned regarding consensual and nonconsensual sex within the family. One lesson has involved realizing my own prejudices with regard to consensual sexual and romantic activities taking place within families and my own naïveté as I listened to some informants’ stories about relationships that were conducted in secret but voluntarily (e.g., between cousins or family members of same age groups). So, “What is incest?” was a question I kept asking myself as I learned about extreme forms of coercive sex, violence, betrayal, pain, power and control, but also as I learned about stories of voluntary sexualized contact and relationships and other engagements including romance within families. As with mother-blame, incest is a concept that I still need to examine and understand critically based on the rich narratives shared by my informants as well as the genealogy of knowledge on sexuality, sexual violence, gender inequality, family life and other related topics in Mexican society, within and across disciplines.

On Becoming Mindful: Final Reflections

As academics, we have vibrant and endless philosophical and methodological conversations about ethics, and these are definitely conversations we should be having. I wonder, however, if our moment-to-moment mindfulness and at-the-end-of-the-day introspective reflections aren’t also key sites through which we are able to identify and deal with the most controversial and sensitive ethical issues and concerns. This is especially likely to be the case as we become aware of and receptive to the mundane and everyday life experiences of our informants. The top-down paradigm of ethics—which includes the IRB as well as our vibrant, stimulating, and thought-provoking academic conversations, discourses, and publications—may offer a basic blueprint and some answers to our general concerns and reflections. Through my own research experience however, I have learned that a hidden ethical dimension emerges when I shift my focus to a more grounded perspective on ethics. That is, as I engage in mindfulness, a subject-centered, grounded ethical consciousness emerges. Becoming mindful as a researcher goes hand and hand with “epistemologies of the wound,” a paradigm that I articulated and discussed extensively in previous work, which is inspired by Gloria Anzaldúa’s critique of the production of knowledge and the systematic marginalization of nontraditional ways of knowing in mainstream, long-established academic conversations and publications (see González-López 2006, 2010).

Mindful ethics has become my ethical blueprint and intellectual compass. It allows me to consider ethical issues that arise in the ongoing process of research, from the inception of the project to the dissemination of its results. Mindful ethics requires an introspective dialogue that encompasses intuition and respect for informants, other people involved in my projects, and myself, and is always motivated by a genuine intention to avoid harm and pain.

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