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Notes on institutional research ethics: experience of fieldwork in the garment sector of Bangladesh

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In 1976, James Spradley initiated a column titled "Ethics and the Anthropologist" in *Anthropology Newsletter*. Since then, anthropologists have become deeply engaged in discussions and debates on ethical dilemmas in field research. There is a twofold outcome of such engagement. In the first place, the idea that the social science is a "moral science" as propagated by the British Enlightenment scholars gained currency. And in the second place, the philosophy of the "moral science" contributed in construction of moral tools to regulate behaviour of social science researchers. Thus, in the course of recurring modifications and adjustments, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has succeeded to formulate a relatively universally applicable code of ethics in research in the late nineties.

Ideally, the code of ethics in research establishes the idea of professional responsibility, honesty and obligations of researchers in field research. The guiding principle of any research is that course of actions would not harm, hurt or endanger others. In practice, a researcher is obliged to consider and regard possible existence of numerous invisible limiting factors in the field, as well as assess probable unforeseen consequences of to-be taken research actions. However, primary ethical obligations often supersede the objectives of research. In some practical cases, conflicts of ethics and research strategies lead to contestation of ethics guidelines. Referring to the

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experiences of research in a complex field situation of Bangladesh, I question in this paper the practicability of formal "informed consent" and "anonymity and confidentiality" ethics.

Context of the Bangladesh Garment Sector Study

The fieldwork to study *Garment Workers in Bangladesh: A* Study of Labour Commodification, Social Solidarity and Forms of Social Action in Response to Globalization was started in June 1999. The study was conducted mainly on impoverished, unskilled and uneducated young women workers who have migrated from rural areas to the cities in search of employment in garment factories. The study was done in two phases: Phase one of our researches was to provide a baseline for more in-depth research among women workers in Dhaka city. Phase two concentrated on individual case histories of selected informants for a fuller understanding of dynamics of worker's livelihoods.

Ethical Dilemmas in Field Research: Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality

At the outset of the study, we vividly informed the informants of the intents of research, as well as our strong ethical commitments to safeguard their individual identity. As a strategy to build good rapport with target informants, we tried to be as much informal, friendly and spontaneous as possible. As well, we distributed among them written undertakings with clearly defining out professional obligations for mutual trust. Seemingly, these strategies developed informant's confidence in researchers, and the informants allowed us to spend months in meeting, eating and chatting with them on their ways to and from factories, and in their residences. Yet, when approached, none agreed to sign on the formal informed consent form. Upon consent and suggestions of most informants, we recorded responses on micro-cassette tapes. Soon we discovered through several cross-examinations that the agreeing research participants concealed or misreported personal information like their name, age, marital

status, number of children, salary, present and permanent address, and migration history, i.e., all of the variables that typically make up the opening section of conventional standardized interview schedules.

The initial setback intrigued and inspired us to probe a question: why do the respondents welcome the researchers with friendly and cooperative gestures while deliberately hiding their identity? In our pursuit to find the answer, we revealed that our request to informants for written or oral consent contributed in deliberate faking of information by informants for following reasons.

1. The factories prefer unmarried and young tender girls. Such young tender girls also are most preferred as brides. Consequently, both employed informants and prospective brides tended to hide their actual age and marital status for perceived job security reasons.

2. Women garment workers of Dhaka live in extremely harsh realities of mistrust and suspicion of "outsiders". An informant asked: "Are you both spies of the factory malik (owner)"? Another informant asked with suspicion: "Do you earn money selling our stories to foreigners?" Two informants uttered their annoyance, saying that they had faced many such "well-dressed" men and women researchers before, and that they only had wasted their valuable time and disrupted their normal life-style in the name of "so called research". A worker cautiously requested us to confirm that her mother's suspicion that we were members of a racket of women-traffickers or pimps was incorrect. Four workers denied talking with the lone male researcher in fear of community rebuke and gossip, and out of shyness. All of these reasons tempted them to hide their identity by

misreporting personal information- their names, age, salary, addresses and migration history.

3. Despite assigning pseudonyms to each informant and coding their names; actual names always appeared to be essential to follow-up informants for extended probing, and resolution of unfinished sections of the study. Due to intense relocation of workers, the study suffered from high rate of dropout of workers. In the Phase One, 198 of 397 primarily selected informants dropped off the study prematurely, and the study was confined on 192 women workers only. After a year, 188 informants relocated, thus, only four of them could be traced. Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality have largely contributed in the failure of tracing back of these relocated informants.

We observed in the in-depth study that the women garment workers of Dhaka are transient and migratory for various reasons. These reasons affect their livelihood decisions, as well as behaviour and reactions to an "outsider's" request for written or oral "consent". Residing in slums for a lengthy period of time often leads to their victimization by crime rackets that force them to engage in various illegal and immoral activities. They frequently change their residences and workplaces in order to escape rape, sexual abuse and forced involvement in prostitution, as well as drug and arms trafficking. Relocation also takes place due to dismissal from jobs, financial distress, defaulting on house-rent, slum eviction, and changes in workplaces of their husbands. Often relocation occurs as a desperate means of "escaping" from authoritative husbands or other family members, relatives and co-workers, and moneylenders and home-renters that they owe arrears. Due to these vulnerabilities, they remain as

much cautious as possible for not leaving any traces of personal information behind. Therefore, garment workers have a strong tendency of falsifying their identification, and are reluctant to provide formal consent.

4. Informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality interfered with the research among the available and traceable informants too. Intense ethical dilemmas arose periodically as some workers had denied that they had earlier provided "oral or informal consent", and rejected validity of evidence. Some of them did not permit researchers to retain backup copies of audiotapes that contained their voices. Consequently, we had been being frequently forced to decide whether to abandon significant sets of verified and finalized information, or to explore "actual" names of informants in a spy-like fashion that would otherwise compromise ethical obligations. It was revealed in the Phase Two in-depth study that these responses of workers are often outbursts of overwhelming physical and emotional stress, and may not reflect their "real" opinions. Since institutional bureaucratization of research ethics in the form of formal "informed consent" left little space for researchers to adopt pragmatic solutions uncompromising of the workers, frustration often overwhelmed enthusiasm for research, and normal course of progress of fieldwork was substantially slowed down.

5. Some informants considered documentation of written or oral consent synonymous to mistrust by the researchers of information they provided. A worker reacted more directly- "as soon as you wanted to record my consent on tape, I started not to consider you a well-wisher. A friend never behaves this way!" Therefore, in case of our research, formal

informed consent appeared as a potential means of obstruction in rapport building, as well as stimulant of mistrust of researchers and fear of spying, intimidation, humiliation and blackmail among women workers.

6. Those among them who could not write their names either felt shy or considered our request for their verbal consent as an insult. A few informants perceived that their names were too old-fashioned to put on paper. Some of them recorded different names in different sessions after names of popular heroines in Bengali films. As a consequence of fake and multiple naming, the very notion of informed consent became useless. Therefore, we placed mutual trust above everything else. However, we were further forced to repeatedly assure them that their privacy, anonymity, confidentiality of information, and freedom of voluntary involvement and withdrawal had been protected. As a result, interactive character and spontaneity of the field research was threatened. As well, it has turned into rather a mechanized, bureaucratized, and boring and mindless formality. In fact, it appeared as a time-consuming, distractive and counterproductive process.

7. Each respondent tended to speak more about "experiences of others" than "her own" experiences, especially regarding sensitive information, e.g., involvement in off-factory prostitution, premarital and extra-martial affairs, contraception and abortion, diseases and health problems, drug use, or illegal activities. Such tendency reinforces self-defensiveness in their responses that tended to lead to refusal to allow documentation of their consent. Despite our reassurance of safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality,

most informants rejected our justification of formal informed consent.

Conclusion

The ethics guidelines of the American Anthropological Association hints that informed consent does not necessarily refer to a written consent, rather implies needs of documentation of consent in any accessible form which serves as a proof of professional trust between researchers and informants, as well as that of ethical behaviour of social science researchers. I argue that institutional research ethics, especially informed consent, and anonymity and confidentiality should not be regarded as strictly as it is viewed and necessitated in medical sciences as reflected in the tri-council guidelines. The Bangladesh garment sector study teaches us a lesson that over-bureaucratization of research ethics in the form of informed consent interferes with the very notion of the "in-depth" nature of contemporary anthropological research perspective. Therefore, I argue for a through and thoughtful reviewing of formal "informed consent" ethics, and suggest for reconsideration and reformulation of a more flexible and pragmatic "researcher-informant agreement" ethics.