

# Collaborative Anthropology as Twenty-first-Century Ethical Anthropology

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Since 1991 I have argued that collaborative research—that is, research that involves research participants/collaborators as partners in the research process—is “ethically conscious” research (see Fluehr-Lobban 1991, 2003). Not only is collaborative research ethical, and thus morally preferable to historical models of research, but it is better research because its methodology emphasizes multiple, polyphonic perspectives, which will leave a richer heritage of ethnography to subsequent generations of ethically conscious researchers.

Collaborative research involves the people who are studied in an active way, as individuals or groups having vested interests in the project through their participation in the research design, execution, publication, and outcomes potentially related to community or individual improvement of well-being. Collaborative studies can potentially inform or affect social policy. Often, jointly directed and jointly authored projects replace the older, more hierarchical model of research planned, executed, and published by the anthropologist alone. Community or individual collaboration in research—with partnership incorporated in every phase of the research—becomes a condition for its success, not simply a fortuitous by-product of work with communities. This newer model of research presumes, for the most part, a literate, socially conscious set of partners who not only participate in research but read and critique drafts of publishable results. However, literacy among research participants is not essential to its viability or success, as openness and mutual exchange of research ideas and outcomes can be communicated without the ability to read.

Collaborative research stands in dramatic contrast with most his-

torical models of Boasian anthropology—especially those with emphasis on “informants,” “ethnographic subjects,” and a central objective of data collection. It also contrasts sharply with European social anthropology methods with their linkages to colonialism and latter-day postmodernism. Uniquely, the subfields of applied anthropology in the United States and development anthropology in Europe have recognized and embraced the value of collaboration in research, as it is necessarily attached to applications of anthropology to institutions and agencies—governmental and nongovernmental—whose mission is to promote the well-being of humans. It is this mission of research designed to promote human well-being that has led critics to view collaborative research as advocacy, confusing anthropology with social work (Gross and Plattner 2002). Others view collaborative research through the lens of the same history of anthropological research and would argue that the approach reflects an increasing decolonization of the discipline.

Neglected by the Euro-American dominance of the discipline and profession of anthropology are the numerous examples of practice by indigenous anthropologists, many trained in the Euro-American “classical” tradition but who are active as collaborative anthropologists in environments where, of necessity, researcher and researched are co-citizens with a shared heritage and common futures. Anthropological practitioners approach research with a greater emphasis on national priorities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where practical outcomes favoring improvement of societal well-being replace older colonial and neocolonial models. Examples of collaborative projects reflect national interests, such as the status and rights of native peoples to land and resources; conflict resolution and the condition of internal displacement of peoples; and public health, family planning, and the well-being of women and children. For example, Ahfad University for Women in Sudan has mobilized an interdisciplinary research group of social scientists, with key roles played by local anthropologists, who design and carry out research focused on women as peace-builders, to ultimately assist with the development of policy initiatives. This research is grounded in models of feminist, collaborative research and is part of a long-term project titled *Building Peace through Diversity Series*. Their recent projects have been in conflict-ridden regions of South Sudan and Darfur. The funding of such projects may be external—in this case, Oxfam, the

Netherlands—but the research and publications outcomes are decidedly local (Badri, Jamal, and Martin 2005). Indigenous anthropologists are also employed providing vital cultural and linguistic links between humanitarian aid organizations and vulnerable local communities.

In the twenty-first-century, postcolonial, “emerging markets” global context, collaboration is the key to the sustainability of anthropological fieldwork and research, and perhaps for anthropology as a discipline. Voluntary, informed, negotiated, open, reciprocal research, based on locating a common ground of mutual interest and benefit between researcher and research populations, is increasingly supplanting the individual, self-generated, and externally funded research of previous generations. The unequal-partners-in-research model, with its top-down approach and hierarchy between researcher and “subject,” is shifting substantially toward greater equity in the research relationship. This is not necessarily a result of moral or political motives, but it is emerging as an increasing imperative for garnering research permission and the conduct of research between the traditionally unequal researcher and “the researched.”

### Feminist Pioneers in Collaborative Research Models

A debt of acknowledgment and thanks must be paid to “second wave” feminist methodology and epistemology for the novel approaches in research methods and outcomes generated by collaborative anthropology. Feminist methodology employs inductive strategies to elicit voices, narratives, and perspectives of the historically suppressed collective voice of women in the West and elsewhere. A classic synthetic work in feminist methods, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, features chapters on feminist ethnographic and interview strategies, cross-cultural research, oral history, and action research (Reinharz and Davidman 1992). Indeed, feminist research and collaborative anthropology offer multiple areas of mutually reinforcing approaches. The weakness of Western feminism has been its Euro-American centrism, thus a feminist anthropology had an opportunity to step into this ethnographic vacuum. Collaborative anthropology benefits from the dual strengths of an infused feminism for its non-Western research and the transformation of the research relationship that it represents. A majority of American anthropologists are women, and this demographic transfor-

mation is also a factor in the increasing use of feminist, more collaborative models of research that are gradually displacing older, hierarchical—“masculinist”—research models.

Central to a feminist approach to research is its egalitarian, nonhierarchical methodology that tends toward a view of “informants”—who were often women like the researcher—more as “participants” with whom the researcher engages in mutual exchange and sustained trust-building conversations. This groundwork of trust and mutual confidence can readily evolve into long-term, trusting relationships in which research codesign, execution, and publication embrace both community-based as well as theoretical interests. The latter result is both desirable and potentially transformative.

For example, years ago I began collaborating with the Rhode Island Coalition Against Domestic Violence, where we discussed research and approaches to non-Western cultural ideas and practice of violence against women in order to offer more appropriate interventions. During the last two years, the coalition has explicitly requested more theory so as to develop strategies that address the root causes of the social-historical roots of patriarchy and violence against women.

Novel approaches are guaranteed to result. Feminist sociologist and ethnographer of Inuit women Janet M. Billson has practiced for some time a collaborative method of data collection and analysis, and standard procedure includes her collaborators reading and approving the final drafts of manuscripts for publication, including material for both ethnographic monographs and more summary and analytical books (Billson and Mancini 2007). Co-researching, co-theorizing, and ultimately co-authoring works based on a mature collaborative anthropology methods are destined to result.

### From Subjects and Informants to Participants and Collaborators

If a central goal of collaborative research is to work *for* as well as *with* research communities and to develop reciprocal relationships that allow projects to be initiated, discussed, reviewed, and evaluated through a process of continuous consultation and collaboration, *then* the language of the research relationship needs to evolve and change. At the core of collaborative research is informed consent in the broad-

est meaning and application of the concept. I have written elsewhere about the resistance among anthropologists to informed consent (see Fluehr-Lobban 1994, 2003), which has happened in part because of the perceived nonapplicability for the social sciences of biomedical models of research, where the concept originated. Although widely adopted by the social sciences, anthropology lagged behind and did not adopt language on informed consent until it formulated the 1998 American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Ethics. The reason for the slow pace may be our tendency toward anthropological exceptionalism—the notion that anthropology fieldwork ethics are unique—or from a latent paternalism or maternalism among anthropologists suggesting that the researcher knows what is best for the research population. The obvious lack of agency afforded to the research population from this foot-dragging was less of an issue in finally adopting the informed consent doctrines than the necessity for anthropologists to comply with federal guidelines regarding informed consent. Critical discussion of mechanical forms of applying informed consent in biomedical research—especially as used in research among vulnerable, non-Western populations—justifies some of the reservations by anthropologists that consent is a one-way street, where unilateral, signed forms are used more to protect the researcher rather than the human participants.

Such forms have conventionally reflected a one-way strategy empowering the right to conduct the research, in a formulaic way promising confidentiality and anonymity (usually without asking the “informant” if he or she desires this) and self-defining the project as involving “minimal risk.” This language suits the federal regulators more than the interests of the researched and appears designed to meet the concerns of the members of institutional review boards (IRBs) over those of the research population.

The powerful alternative of collaboration in research is embedded in *reciprocal informed consent*, which would establish the mutual interests, rights, responsibilities, and potential joint outcomes of the research reciprocally and collaboratively. Confidentiality and anonymity, for example, would be negotiated as desirable or unnecessary, if a joint publication is to result. “Risk,” if it exists at all, would be neutralized as an issue, as the mutual right to withdraw from the research would be negotiated, together with the mutual responsibility to design, conduct,

and publish the research. It is self-evident that reciprocal informed consent presupposes an environment of openness; mutually informed agreements as to the conditions, timetable, and expected outcomes of research; and dynamic, sustained conversations about all phases of the research project.

This spirit of informed consent is reflected in the terminology that defines the nature of the research relationship. In traditional and still extant models, the researcher is powerful and in charge, and the “subject” is structurally acted upon and is relatively or absolutely powerless. Traditional hierarchical models emphasize the agency of the researcher and the passivity of the research population. Indeed, federal regulation of research is monitored by mandatory university and institutional “Human Subjects Committees,” dreaded by graduate students and some anthropologists so much that gaining the requisite approval brings relief not unlike that felt after a successful rite of passage or dodging a bullet. Unfortunately, the IRBs, structured and composed by institutions, are often driven by a narrow view of informed consent as obtained mechanically through a signed form. This reinforces the coercive, “one-way street” idea of the researcher informing the “subject” of the terms of research. The standard language of a form may include the “right” of the subject to withdraw from the project at any time, or state that the subject’s identity is absolutely protected, a right often not sought by the researched, either the relatively vulnerable or more empowered.

The standard anthropological reference to information providers as “informants” has not been subjected to much debate. “Informant” conjures notions of a special, proprietary relationship between researcher and researched, akin to spying and devoid of the “covenantal” relationship that some admire in the anthropological fieldwork experience (argued by Murray Wax and reflected in the 1998 AAA Code of Ethics, A.5). However, a terminological and thus ideological shift from “informant” to “collaborator” or “participant” may be underway, spearheaded by such journals as *Collaborative Anthropology*. But the fundamental paradigmatic change in research methods and analysis that is represented by this shift is fundamental and radical, and is therefore not to be seen as easy or inevitable.

The process of this change is both moral and political, though. About fifteen years ago, while I was chair of my institution’s IRB, I was allied

with an activist group of medical practitioners (nurses and health care professional educators) to change the name of our committee from Human Subjects Committee to Committee on Human Participants in Research. It is worth noting that for years after the name change the committee continued to be referred to by my colleagues as “Human Subjects,” not, in my view, simply because of institutional lag but because of a wider federal and disciplinary view of the nature of the social scientific research relationship.

### Better Research, Better Ethics, a Better “Product” for Applications

The practical applications of collaborative research are not difficult to imagine, and if their effect is realized as a twenty-first-century standard of research practice, it could be transformational. New centers could offer services, especially in the field of public health research, to assist agencies and contractors with collaborative initiatives in complex multicultural, cross-cultural communities. Entrepreneurial efforts in collaborative anthropology are capitalizing on the value added by this approach and are filling a void left by a general failure of the discipline and profession of anthropology to adequately train the latest generation of anthropologists either in theoretical or professional ethics—in all of its present complexity—or in the alternative of collaborative anthropology.

Collaborative research may be becoming a decisive trend for American and global anthropology in the twenty-first century. This historic shift results from the feminization of anthropology; from decolonizing theories as well as methods; and from a growing recognition that collaborative research methods result in not only more ethical research but better, more reliable research results. The benefits of collaboration in terms of social scientific reliability and authenticity of voice are already evident, but the benefit of developing better theory from collaborative research can only be imagined.

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translation 2004), *Historical Dictionary of the Sudan* (1991, 2003), and *Race and Identity in the Nile Valley* (2004); and the textbooks *Race and Racism: An Introduction* (2005), *Female Well-Being* (2006), and *Islamic Societies in Practice* (1994, 2004). With Haitian collaborator Asselin Charles, she published in 2000 the first major work of anthropology by a scholar of African descent, Antenor Firmin's *The Equality of the Human Races*, originally published in 1885 in French as *De L'égalité des Races Humaines*.

This essay expands upon a commentary on papers offered in the Presidential Session titled “Collaborative Anthropologies, Public Engagement, and Epistemologies of Equity,” chaired and organized by Luke Eric Lassiter, at the 2007 annual meeting of the AAA in Washington, DC.

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