The Ethics of Engaged Ethnography

Applying a Militant Anthropology in Organs-Trafficking Research

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Three years into the Organs Watch documentation and medical human rights project I realized that I had to change my modus operandi. I could never discover what was going on in the transplant trafficking underworld using conventional means. Both the AAA Code of Ethics and my university’s institutional review board required transparency, full disclosure of research goals, and signed informed consent from all research subjects, but how do you ask permission to study illegal and criminal behavior? With other forms of criminality and organized crime, anthropologists can rely on historical and criminal justice data, and can avoid confronting involved parties face-to-face (see Block’s The Mafia of a Sicilian Village and Peter and Jane Schneider’s Reversible Destiny). But I had chosen to study a field without data, without statistics, without a history, and without criminal prosecutions and records. Not even human rights organizations or the UN anti-trafficking office had data on organs trafficking. To the contrary, they looked to Organs Watch to provide them.

I had run into previous dilemmas with institutional ethical guidelines when conducting research for an NIMH-funded project on schizophrenia and family dynamics in Boston (1979–80). Most of the patients I spoke to were incapable of giving informed consent, understanding my wish to compensate them for their time, or fully comprehending that I was not a psychiatrist. My current project, however, was not concerned with protecting vulnerable mental patients, but learning about the predators behind international human organs trafficking schemes. The UC Berkeley Faculty Committee on Human Subjects granted me an exemption to conduct the Organs Watch project, which required me to go “undercover” at times in order to document illegal traffic in human organs. Thus, on my next trip to Turkey, I went to a minibus station and flea market in Askaray, a dilapidated immigrant section of Istanbul, accompanied by a Turkish journalist disguised as an organs broker wearing heavy gold jewelry, sunglasses and a tiny camera in the “diamond” stud of his tie.

We approached undocumented day laborers who had just arrived from rural Moldova and Romania and mingled among poor Turkish locals selling junk, cigarettes and counterfeit French perfume. Although local sentiment ran strongly against traffickers and brokers, some near the station were looking for a windfall by whatever means necessary, even selling a kidney. Flanked by my faux broker, I sat primly at a small table in a café across from the flea market having a cup of tea with Saltimis K. After he lost his job at a commercial bakery in Istanbul, Saltimis’s wife left him and he spent time living in the street. “I never thought it would come to this,” Saltimis said, referring to his current work as a junkman, wheeling his heavy wooden cart past cheap hotels and discount leather shops in Askaray, collecting scrap metal and empty soda cans. There among the open stalls of the flea market he heard about brokers in Armani suits who prowled the area looking for kidney sellers.

My counterfeit “broker” introduced me to Saltimis as an American lady looking to “arrange” a kidney transplant for her deathly ill husband. Mr K nodded his head and quickly set an opening bid for one of his kidneys: “$30,000, left or right, your choice.” “That is impossible,” I replied, “I am not a rich woman and my husband’s medical bills have eaten away our savings.” Saltimis replied that he was a reasonable man and he reduced the price to $20,000. Did he know (I countered) that there were many Moldovan day workers across the street who were prepared to sell a kidney for $3,000 or less? That may be, Saltimis said, “but Turkish citizens sell for more. This is our country and we set the price.” Saltimis was a cautious seller and he wanted to know who the surgeons would be and the name of the hospital where the operations would take place. He wanted a kid of $3,000 or less? That may be, Saltimis said, “but Turkish citizens sell for more. This is our country and we set the price.” Saltimis was a cautious seller and he wanted to know who the surgeons would be and the name of the hospital where the operations would take place. He wanted

On the Adoption of Heretical Methods

Human trafficking for organs and tissues is an extensive billion dollar industry that links elite surgeons to the activities of an organs mafia from the lowest reaches of the criminal world. These transactions involve (and are often protected by) military police, immigration officers, state pathologists, tissue bank managers, lab technicians, airline companies, hospital administrators, and transplant coordinators. What began as a conventional exploratory field research project led to the adoption of heterodox, even heretical, methods that transgress the discrete boundaries of anthropology, human rights activism, political journalism and detective work.

Thus, as I discuss in “Illegal Organ Trade” (Living Organ Transplantation 2007), I have had to rethink the “ethics of the craft” as opposed to the bureaucratic ethics of the IRB and human subjects panels. How does one investigate covert and criminal behavior as an anthropologist? To whom does one owe one’s divided loyalties? Under normal conditions anthropologists proceed with a kind of “hermeneutic generosity” toward the people they study. By training we tend to accept at face value—and not to second guess—what we are told. We think of our anthropological subjects as friends and research collaborators rather than as “informants.” Our method requires building trust that will allow access to “back stage” scenes. Whether we work in villages, street corners, slums or hospitals, we expect to win our research subjects over to what is often a mutually rewarding experience. But in studying human trafficking for transplant organs

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Taking the Next Step

Why We Should Continue Strengthening the AAA Ethics Code

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A recent article in the New York Times profiled the work of Kelly Peña, a market researcher employed by the Walt Disney Company. According to the author, Brooks Barnes, “Peña and her team of anthropologists have spent 18 months peering inside the heads of incommunicative boys,” aged 6 to 14 years old. In her efforts to understand the typical American child, Peña is engaged in what the Times calls an “undercover mission: to unearth what makes him tick and use the findings to help the Walt Disney Company reassert itself as a cultural force among boys.” The article describes a series of covert techniques employed by Peña, including some that would never be approved by any university human subjects review board. For example, her team concealed from research participants (both the boys and their parents) the fact that Disney was employing them. Furthermore, the team didn’t share their results with those studied; instead, they only provided results to Disney. The entire process seems designed to manipulate children and their parents for profit, while keeping research participants largely in the dark.

If the Times piece is accurate, Peña’s “team of anthropologists” is conducting research that blatantly violates various precepts of the AAA’s Code of Ethics, and that illustrates a widening regulatory black hole. What, if anything, can the AAA do about people who call themselves anthropologists (because they have anthropology degrees) but aren’t subject to the regulatory authority of a university or government agency because they work for a private company or for themselves? On a similar note, what about those who have advanced anthropology degrees, but who teach in other university departments (such as political...