



Ethics and Visuals:

A Brief Overview of Reciprocity in Media-Based Research

Digital tools, such as high resolution cameras and state of the art audio recorders, have the potential to improve the internal validity of field work in the social sciences. However, working with digital media also comes with added responsibility. Researchers working in this vein of the social sciences must think carefully about the potential consequences of turning on the record button. Ethical and moral decision making in the field should include the following considerations:

- The expectations of the research subject(s)
- Confidentiality and anonymity
- The personal ethics and moral value system of the researcher
- Legal norms and potential copyright infringements

Informed Consent

As with more traditional forms of research, informed consent is key to conducting media-based research. When considering whether or not to record an interaction in the field, there should be no doubt in your mind that your interviewee (1) is willing to be interviewed and (2) is willing to have the content of their conversation with you revealed to a wider audience. If the former is not true, you should not conduct the interview. However, even in the case that the individual is willing to be interviewed, you still need to be extremely clear as to whether they are willing to express their views publically.

The best way to ensure full consent is by discussing the nature of your work with the subject prior to turning on the camera or recording device. Then, once you do begin recording, remind your subject that you will be recording the session and ask them whether they would still like to proceed. Make sure you ask permission in such a way that the subject is able to verbally respond. For example,

“Thank you for sharing this time with me. Before we begin I wanted to remind you that I’ll be recording today’s session. Is that still alright with you?”

“Muchas gracias por compartir su tiempo conmigo. Antes de empezar quería recordarle que, por cuestiones educativas, voy a grabar nuestra conversación. ¿Está bien?”

The order in which you ask for permission may seem like a mere formality but it is a fundamentally important step toward full consent. Talking to your subject prior to taking out your equipment gives them the opportunity to say yes or no without the pressure of a recording device in front of them. In turn, asking them for permission again once the recording device is running ensures that there is a verbal record of their consent.

Finally, even if the person agrees to be interviewed, and doesn’t mind having the content of their interview revealed to others, you must be crystal clear regarding whether they want their real identity to be exposed through your research. Within the social sciences researchers frequently use

pseudonyms to protect their interviewees but whether you use a pseudonym or not depends on the context of the study as well as the expectations of the interviewee. Be sure to discuss this issue with your interviewee. For example, prior to leaving your interview, ask the subject:

“Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me. Please know that if you’d like I can retract your real name from my study. That is, I can use a pseudonym to protect your real identity. Which would you prefer?”

“Muchas gracias por compartir su perspectiva conmigo. Si le gustaría, puedo retractar su nombre real de mi estudio. Es decir, puedo usar un seudónimo para encubrir su identidad. ¿Cuál prefiere usted?”

Reciprocity in Research

All too often, research is a one-way street in which the researcher(s) gain(s) recognition for their work and the subjects of the research are overlooked. However, the very purpose of research is to place the social world under a microscope with the aim of improving the social conditions that define the spaces we inhabit. To this end, it is vital that you consider potential avenues of reciprocity within your work. As you begin thinking about your research you should ask yourself, how can I give back to the subjects of my research?

Reciprocity comes in many forms, most of which can be categorized as either informative or proactive. *Informative reciprocity* might include creating a public showing of your work so that a wider audience can appreciate the results of your study or drafting a written report of your work that is made available to the public. Within media-based research, reciprocity might also include making edited videos of your interviews publically available as a means of creating a direct avenue between your work and the general public. In turn, *proactive reciprocity* involves more direct intervention within the subject matter of your work. For example, if you researched the shortfalls of public education within a specific school in Managua, then you might find yourself interested in using your findings to inform curriculum changes within the education facility you worked with. This would be a worthy goal but obviously, impossible to commit to within the parameters of your ISP. This leads to an important point. Regardless of the type of reciprocity that you build into your project, the most important part of reciprocity is your follow through. That is, if you commit to giving back to the community, then you must follow through. Remember, it is far better to follow through with a simple form of reciprocity, then it is to promise something that you cannot deliver.

While studying with SIT Nicaragua, you will be encouraged to pursue ways to give back to the communities you have the privilege of visiting. For example you will:

- Present your ISP to a public audience
- Host an open house at the SIT Study Center where you can share your work with the community
- Creating digital podcasts of your interviews that can be shared with your interviewees

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