**ABSTRACT**

While the ethical problems involved in research with human subjects is not a new phenomenon, the interest in this area has intensified over the past few decades as represented within the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association. Less attention, however, has been given to how research ethics are taught and learned in higher education as a tool for anthropologists to conduct their work while maintaining an ethical framework. This paper uses the AAA Code of Ethics to show that the development of a culture of ethics in a university or college department can be a multi-faceted, historical process that both influences and is influenced by the meaning placed on significant symbols, such as the mentor-protégé relationship. This in turn helps to shape the definition of research ethics. I argue that the distinct culture of an academic department is reflected in the ways that informal networks or relationships are (or are not) utilized, thereby embedding this action (or non-action) into the culture of ethics. Using examples from research conducted in different academic departments located in the social sciences and allied health fields of a large research university, I illustrate how informal and formal mechanisms are used to transmit knowledge of research ethics, and also to develop a culture of ethics or lack thereof in each department.

**KEY WORDS:** ethnography, culture of ethics, departmental context and training

**INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of the *American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Ethics,* last approved in February, 2009, is to “foster discussion and education...to provide anthropologists with tools to engage in developing and maintaining an ethical framework.” While the ethical problems involved in research with human subjects is not a new phenomenon, the interest in this area has intensified over the past few decades as represented within the new Code of Ethics of the association. Less attention, however, has been given to how research ethics are taught and learned in higher education as a tool for anthropologists to conduct their work while maintaining an ethical framework. This paper focuses on two elements of the AAA Code of Ethics to show that the development of a culture of ethics in a university department is a multi-faceted, historical process that both influences and is influenced by the meaning placed on significant symbols, such as the mentor-protégé relationship, which, in turn, help to shape the definition of research ethics.

The AAA Code of Ethics mirrors the three ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report; Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice, in the statement that “Anthropologists have a duty to be informed about ethical codes relating to their work, and ought periodically to receive training on current research activities and ethical issues. In addition, departments offering anthropology degrees should include and require ethical training in their curriculums.” Moreover, it suggests that, “Teachers/mentors should impress upon students/trainees the ethical challenges involved in every phase of anthropological work; encourage them to reflect upon this and other codes; encourage dialogue with colleagues on ethical issues; and discourage participation in ethically questionable projects.” To this end, I argue that the distinct culture of an academic department is reflected in the ways that informal networks or relationships are (or are not) utilized, thereby embedding this action (or non-action) into the culture of ethics. Using examples from research conducted in different academic departments located in the social sciences and allied health fields of a large research university, I illustrate the ways in which informal and formal mechanisms are used to transmit knowledge of research ethics, and also to develop a culture of ethics or lack thereof in each department.
spatial arrangement or physical layout of the department and its impact on interaction; and 3) accessibility of faculty to one another and students.

Scientific research is undertaken with a set of both written and unwritten rules regarding ethical standards. Those standards are based on socially constructed values that reflect ethics in general, thereby creating a "culture of ethics," which is unique to each researcher, research department and institution. Clifford Geertz paraphrases Susanne Langer remarking that "...certain ideas burst upon the intellectual landscape with a tremendous force. They resolve so many fundamental problems at once that they seem also to promise that they will resolve all fundamental problems, clarify all obscure issues. Everyone snaps them up...[and] after we have become familiar with the new idea, however, after it has become part of our general stock of theoretical concepts, our expectations are brought more into balance with its actual uses..." (Geertz 1973:3-4).

This concept can also be applied to the construction of research ethics. While the ideas and underlying guidelines relating to research ethics have not necessarily "burst" on the scene, these "ideas" eventually become the basis of a culture of ethics within a certain discipline such as anthropology. The culture of ethics therefore can become embedded within the sphere of the academic department and ultimately the institution itself. Culture is represented by human behavior, i.e., behavior that has symbolic attachment and action. Geertz reflects that..."culture is composed of psychological structures by means of which individuals or groups of individuals guide their behavior" (Geertz 1973:11). A society's culture then involves the rules and resources, or the structures by means of which individuals guide their behavior to act successfully or appropriately in a manner acceptable to its members. An institution's culture mirrors this process.

I assert that research ethics involving human subjects is transmitted to students and faculty through informal mechanisms that are embedded in the culture through informal networks such as mentoring, collaborative research practices, and a spatial arrangement of close proximity among faculty and students enabling an environment for frequent communication. However, those departments that include a formal component to their curriculum are also those whose faculty and student population are best equipped with the ethical concepts that are the foundation for federal and university regulations of research with human subjects, such as knowledge of the Code of Federal Regulations governing research involving humans, work with an Institutional Review Board, ethics courses, and familiarity with guidelines and best practices necessary for sponsored research.

The methodology for this research included open-ended, in-depth interviews and direct observation of a total of 33 faculty and graduate students from three departments in the social sciences and allied health fields over a period of two years within Midwestern University. Midwestern University is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the institution and privacy of the subjects involved in this study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two anthropological perspectives, praxis and the theory of structuration, informed this research. These theories provide a framework and foundation for analyzing informal and formal modes of communication by accounting for the individual experience, history, and practices among faculty and graduate students, within the culture of ethics of each department. Praxis theory facilitated the connection of relationships between the structures and agency among faculty and students to determine how this process influences the culture of ethics (Bourdieu 1990). Praxis theory accounts for both collective and individual histories and examines how these histories influence and ultimately shape the culture of ethics within the department. In addition, praxis explores how individual action within a day-to-day context (referred to as "agency") is formed and how it shapes practice to transform or reproduce structures, in this case the culture of ethics within each department (Figure 1). Praxis focuses on the nexus of theory, practice, and ethics. Anthropologists have used a praxis approach to analyze the relationship between structure and agency and the process by which these relationships influence one another in the reproduction of social systems. Agency represents the capacity of an individual to make decisions and act upon them, resulting in intended or unintended consequences (Giddens 1979). Giddens makes the point, however, that most social change results from unintended action by individuals who did not know the eventual outcome. The advantage of praxis theory for anthropological analysis is that it does not emphasize the experience of the individual over the entire society, but examines social practices over time and space.

The theory of structuration (Giddens 1984) assists the analyst in breaking down structures into rules and resources, which for my purposes determined how research ethics regarding human subjects were generated among faculty and students and engendered within a department to create a culture of ethics. Giddens' theory describes structures as containing rules and resources that clearly explain their development and elements as opposed to assuming that they are just there without form or intent of originiation. Rules and resources are continuously implicated in the
production and reproduction of social symbols, and are involved in the institutional articulation of social systems or structures. Giddens suggests that these elements cannot be separated from one another but must be regarded as an interactive duality (rather than as a dualism). They complement one another to adequately explain structures.

Giddens holds that there are two types of rules and two types of resources. Normative rules are written and for the most part strongly adhered to; examples include canon law and bureaucratic rules, which are descriptive and sanction social conduct. Codes of significance are the unspoken rules or social rules by which we lead our lives, such as taking turns when speaking or offering food and drink when guests arrive. These rules are expressed through practical consciousness and habitus, and can have a more profound effect on social conduct than normative rules. Rules are the medium and outcome for the production and reproduction of structures handed down from generation to generation without strict definition (Giddens 1979). Two types of resources, according to Giddens, also influence the production and reproduction of structures. Resources are structural properties of social systems. Allocative resources involve the control over formal and material things such as money, buildings, and technology. Authoritative resources consist of relational aspects such as power, prestige, access to power, and informal communication; they derive from the coordination of activity of human agents. Both rules and resources must be used concomitantly in the social analysis of structure and agency.

For this study, the significant symbols are ways in which research ethics involving human subjects of research are transmitted to faculty and graduate students. The significance of these symbols lies in the way this knowledge is transmitted informally, formally, or both. In addition, the level of meaning that academic departments place on the transmittal of research ethics can be examined by the value they place on the transmittal. The culture of a society—in this case, reflected in a university and its departments—involves the rules and resources one must learn to navigate to appropriately behave in a manner acceptable to its members.

METHODS AND SITES

This research explored the culture of ethics within three different departments from three different colleges within Midwestern University. Midwestern University is a pseudonym for a large research and land grant university occupying approximately 5,300 acres, which was established in the 1850s. There are 40,000 students and 9,000 employees, of which 2,700 constitute both full- and part-time faculty members. The libraries at Midwestern have an expanding research collection of over 4,100,000 volumes and present new technologies, which are housed in the main library and in 14 branch libraries. There are 84 different departments within 14 degree-granting colleges, 13 of which offer graduate degrees. These departments represent Agriculture and Natural Resources, Arts and Letters, Business, Communication Arts and Sciences, Education, Engineering, Human Ecology, Human Medicine, Natural Science, Nursing, Social Science, and Veterinary Medicine. Approximately 9,000 of the 40,000 students at Midwestern University comprise the student population of the colleges I investigated. In addition to my use of pseudonyms, some other details have been changed to disguise the identity of the University and its setting.

The three different departments X, Y, and Z were chosen to represent a cross section of the behavioral and allied health sciences. These departments were also chosen because the faculty and students are actively engaged in research with human subjects. A description of each department follows.

Department X is part of an allied health field where the faculty conducts extensive research involving human subjects. There are approximately 10 faculty members and 40 graduate students. The department has a strong record of obtaining research grants from federal agencies such as the National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (AHCPR) and the centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and is known for publishing important scientific research in major peer-reviewed journals. It is a relatively new department, established in the 1990s. The department’s teaching mission is to encourage public health
awareness and sophistication among its students, and to provide students with training that will allow them to participate in disease control. The department’s service mission is to provide consultation, in allied health and biostatistical study design and analysis, for faculty, community health professionals, and public health agencies. The faculty members are a valuable resource of expertise, available to address issues in public health.

Department Y was established in the early 1900s and is located in the College of Social Sciences. It contains approximately 30 faculty members and 70 graduate students. Department Y has formal ties with many of the colleges including Natural Resources, Human Medicine, and Education. Many department members have informal ties with the College of Business and International Development. The graduate program has three main thematic areas of concentration, i.e., education in this department is intended to develop professionals who will be creative research scholars, teachers, and practitioners.

Department Z is also located in the allied health field and contains approximately 25 faculty members and 85 graduate students, the majority of whom are in a master’s degree program. This department was established in 1950 and has recently revised the curriculum to combine a strong clinical and research emphasis to prepare students for both collaborative and independent practice in a variety of community based settings. The primary goal of this department is the promotion, improvement and maintenance of human health with an emphasis upon the needs of all the people in the state. Department Z pursues this goal through its educational, research and service programs in collaboration with other relevant units of Midwestern University.

RESULTS: VIEWS ON COLLABORATION AND MENTORING

One of the overall themes to emerge from the interviews with faculty members is the value both faculty and the discipline place on collaborative research. Faculty engaging in collaborative research was a common thread that ran through departments X and Z, and, to some extent Y. Collaborative research within, and outside of, a department is a process that depends strongly upon informal communication, while at the same time incorporating both formal and informal resources. The interviews demonstrate that faculty members utilize both formal and informal rules and resources in learning about research ethics. Clearly, most faculty have some knowledge of and adhere to the normative rules of research ethics which include federal regulations and Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures. These procedures include applying for approval before conducting research, which can take up to two months before the review committee gives final approval. The way in which this knowledge is imparted among faculty, however, is through informal relational aspects of authoritative resources, such as power, prestige and the coordination of day-to-day human interaction. In conjunction with normative rules (such as federal regulations and IRB procedures), and authoritative resources, allocative resources or the control over material things seem to play an important role. For instance, the faculty in department X generate a significant amount of funding in research grants and must constantly navigate the management and administration of large sums of money. As a result, the faculty has an acute sense that successfully attaining these funds depends upon collaborative and interdisciplinary research teams. Without the funding, the collaborative research teams would not flourish. The teams are also therefore, the creative impetus behind obtaining the funding. Through the day-to-day activity of collaborative research teams, the faculty in department X are creating a culture of ethics that depends extensively upon informal communication which is reinforced through the utilization of allocative and authoritative resources and normative rules.

This suggests that faculty members overwhelmingly perceive informal communication as the most effective tool for learning about research ethics. The particular cultural environments of departments X and Z, which are committed to collaborative research projects in which many faculty members engage in multiple projects simultaneously, provide evidence regarding this reliance upon informal communication. In addition to working collaboratively among themselves, the faculty in these departments also engage in interdisciplinary research within and outside of Midwestern University. This collaborative nature of conducting research has led the faculty to establish what they perceive as an effective communication process, which relies heavily on informal communication.

A faculty member who also collaborates with the social sciences further alluded to the importance of collaborative research when he stated:

Social science policy is stupid in the way they [sic] conduct themselves, as a one man band. This kind of research is finished, all gone, a dead animal. Social science is a bizarre culture in that it is not good to have more than one author on a publication. In our field, the work is collaborative, it makes sense, it saves time and perhaps imparts better knowledge.

This statement indicates that some faculty see collaborative research as the best research practice. My research suggests that this fosters an environment in which collaborators are forced to communicate with one another on projects and that research ethics issues associated with
human subjects are informally talked about often. Most faculty members from department Y who engage in collaborative research overwhelmingly perceive informal communication as the most effective tool for learning about research ethics.

Another interesting component to the analysis of my data is the way in which a positive mentoring relationship among faculty members and students is engendered, further encouraging a culture of ethics. It is important to underscore the differences between the mentor/protégé — advisor/advisee relationship as it may affect the ethical environment for both faculty and student. In academic settings, the term mentor is often simultaneously associated with the term faculty advisor. In many instances, however, the research advisor and mentor are not only two different people, but come from different disciplines. The National Academy of Sciences suggests, “A fundamental difference between mentoring and advising is more than advising; mentoring is a personal, as well as, professional relationship” (1999:15). In addition, positive mentoring requires effort on both parties involved. A motivated student helps the process of mentoring along, while the professor feels that she in not wasting anyone’s time. An advisor, by contrast performs more narrow or technical functions such as “informal advising about degree requirements, periodic monitoring of an advisee’s research work and progress toward his/her degree” (Swazey and Anderson: 1996: 6). In addition, advisors usually serve as the principle investigator and/or laboratory director for the project on which the student is working. In this capacity, the advisor instructs the student on initial proposal, design, methodology, literature review, and other aspects of the dissertation research.

The original concept of mentoring is an ancient one in which Homer describes the first mentor as the “wise and trusted counselor” who is left in charge of Odysseus’ household during his travels. Athena acts as the mentor and became the guardian and teacher of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. Today, mentoring has many different facets in higher education. A primary responsibility of a mentor is to help a student and to take an interest into helping that person develop professionally. This requires patience, trust, effective communication, good role modeling, and understanding from both parties involved. It also requires that both the professor and student fully understand the ethics of research and abide by the federal and institutional regulations and guidelines. Unfortunately, there is not an optimal formula to positive mentoring. Each situation is complex with many different factors entering the formula. Mentoring can differ among disciplines, personality types, gender, ethnicity, knowledge of subject matter, and status of student and professor.

The term “toxic mentoring” (Darling 1985: 43-44) includes four categories of undesirable or “toxic” mentors:

1. “Avoiders” — mentors who are neither available nor accessible.
2. “Dumpers” — mentors who force novices into new roles and let them “sink or swim.”
3. “Blockers” — mentors who continually refuse requests, withhold information, take over projects, or supervise too closely.
4. “Destroyers or Critics” — mentors who focus on inadequacies.

It may not be surprising that research has shown that both faculty and students consider positive mentoring relationships to be the exception rather than the rule (Friedman 1987). Effective communication is paramount to both the mentor/protégé and advisor/advisee relationship. Interestingly, a university-wide survey at Midwestern reported that just over half of all students surveyed (52%, with 40% agreeing and 12% strongly agreeing) believe that there is satisfactory communication between faculty and students. While it was gratifying that 52% found communication between faculty and student satisfactory, it raises questions why 48% found communication between students and faculty unsatisfactory.

Perhaps the most enlightening theme to come from the interviews with both faulty and students from department Z was the importance of a constructive mentoring relationship. There seemed to be an effective informal mentoring program among junior and senior faculty members and among faculty and students. At least three faculty members interviewed mentioned the same person when referring to their mentor. Additionally, during the interviews, all faculty members indicated that the mentoring process was the best way to impart knowledge about research ethics issues and professional values. When asked about how this process worked, one professor stated,

…”if a formal practice or formula [of mentoring] exists, I don’t see it, it’s invisible to me. We don’t meet in seminars or regularly as a group, it’s just incorporated into the relationship between junior and senior faculty.

The spatial arrangement of a department appears to contribute to the value faculty place on informal communication. For instance, a faculty member from department X admitted that he never closes the door to his office so that graduate students and other faculty members will know that he is always available and willing to talk. This indicates that the physical layout of the department also reflects a propensity to engage in informal communication. Every faculty member and project manager in department X has an individual office, and graduate students have their own computer terminal in an area cordoned off separately.
There is a conference room in the center of the department with the individual offices surrounding this room in a circular fashion. This physical arrangement reflects the importance faculty place on communication, by reinforcing and perpetuating an environment conducive to informal meetings. There is a flurry of activity as faculty members are in and out of each other’s offices regularly. Faculty members seem to have direct knowledge of other faculty’s research and talked freely about each other’s projects in our interviews. This promotes the impression that the faculty were kept well aware of each other’s progress and research. It should be noted, however, that many of the faculty members participate in research on the same projects, which would account for their intimate knowledge about the research.

The spatial arrangement of department Y, by contrast, does not reflect a propensity toward informal communication. It is not apparent that the faculty in department Y engage in a lot of informal interactive communication, unless absolutely necessary. For example, one professor admitted to not knowing every faculty member in the department and did not have knowledge about the research each faculty member conducted. When asked how they would find out about research ethics issues, many faculty members indicated that they rely on their professional association for help rather than their colleagues. Many said that they would contact their association before contacting another faculty member about questions or concerns they had about these research ethics issues. This indicates a reliance on normative rules which their own discipline codifies. Therefore, the capacity for effective communication and the relationship to the spatial arrangement of the department appears intertwined.

The faculty offices in department Y are split between two floors and the graduate students are housed in the basement of the building. The faculty offices are also split into suites, so that in many cases, one must go through at least two doors to get to a faculty member. These suites are off a main hall in a large building, and during my interviews, the majority of these doors were closed.

Interviews with faculty members in this department further suggest a culture that is demarcated by individual research projects and that effective informal communication occurs primarily when they are involved in collaborative research projects with other faculty from outside their own department. This is an old department with a lot of history that has resulted in some fractures among faculty members. One member described the department as one in which the faculty has been "atomized and told to shut up by the dean and chairperson". Another referred to a period of time of about 20 years in which "no one talked to each other, and that the succession of departmental chairs simply maintained the status quo". This created a large amount of tension, which still exists in part today. One professor suggested that "this discipline has a history of spinning off in different directions, it’s fractured". While the discipline may focus on one issue, there is disagreement and debate about how to look at the issues. The majority of faculty that I interviewed conducts their research individually, while a small number work collaboratively on projects with other disciplines. One faculty member states that "people tend to go off and do their own thing, and that research ethics is not on the top of their priority list".

Department Y represents a situation where faculty and graduate students choose to utilize neither formal nor informal mechanisms, indicating that their lack of focus on research ethics results in a departmental culture which inadvertently rejects the need for explicit ethical conduct when human subjects are involved. This combines Bourdieu’s notion of reproduction of structures and habitus with the theory of structuration. Therefore, the lack of a culture of ethics is reproduced over time as this statement from one professor concerning others in her department illustrates,

As far as faculty interaction goes, people tend to go off and do their own thing. Research ethics is generally not on the top of the priority list. I can’t remember a single conversation with anyone from my department about research ethics. It’s just something you do yourself.

The formal and informal components of knowledge transmission are interwoven as suggested by Giddens’ model of structuration. The following examples from department X illustrate this model in action by illustrating how both formal and informal methods, embedded or combined together, are used to create a culture of ethics. A group of project managers, data analysts, and project investigators met informally on a regular basis to keep informed of the project’s status. Originally these meetings started out as a "peer contact resource, taking full advantage of one another’s expertise." Over time, however, the subject of research ethics was incorporated into the discussion and members of this group became informed regarding research ethics issues by gleaning information from one another. Some of this information entered into the formal arena, as questions and concerns over human subject issues were brought directly to the IRB institutional official. Eventually these “informal” meetings became a “formal” standard operating procedure. Another result is that they were integrated into the process of research, thereby informally creating a formal component to their culture of ethics. The original informal status of these meetings was developed over time into a formal ingredient of the research process. This supports Giddens’ model, which suggests that both formal and informal aspects of rules and resources must be
used (sometimes unconsciously or with tacit knowledge) in developing structures.

Another example points to the process by which formal and informal facets of knowledge transmission work side-by-side creating a model whereby both are necessary for knowledge transmittal. While interviewing Professor Resourceful in department X, I asked where he would go for answers to specific questions or concerns regarding the protection of human subjects of research. He replied that he would contact his “friend and fishing buddy,” implying the use of an informal relationship with Ted, who is also the formal institutional IRB official. This relationship shows the connection between utilizing both formal and informal mechanisms of knowledge transmittal.

Importantly, most faculty members in department Y do not remember receiving any formal training on research ethics, but have relied heavily upon experience over time and contacting their professional societies. Many senior faculty were in graduate school before federal regulations governing research involving human subjects emerged and had no formal component to their education about these issues. Many reported “not really remembering” when research ethics issues came up, and how they dealt with them. One stated that “it was just something I absorbed through time and experience”.

The fundamental principle that is paramount to these faculty members is the issue of confidentiality. While a few members were cognizant of the federal regulations governing human subjects, more were ignorant of the specific regulations regarding research with human subjects. For example, many faculty said that the kind of research they were involved with only had to do with issues of confidentiality, not larger more intrusive issues, such as drawing blood or conducting clinical trials on experimental medicines. Therefore, a lot of the regulations did not apply to their education about these issues. Many reported “not really remembering” when research ethics issues came up, and how they dealt with them. One stated that “it was just something I absorbed through time and experience”.

The AAA Code of Ethics is available at http://aaanet.org/_cs_upload/advocacy/27668_1.pdf

NOTE

1The AAA Code of Ethics is available at http://aaanet.org/_cs_upload/issues/policy-advocacy/27668_1.pdf

CONCLUSION

I conclude that both formal and informal modes of transmission regarding ethics are best utilized concomitantly, so that the question of which method is best, either formal or informal, becomes moot. However, my research across several disciplines indicates a need for more formal mechanisms of training as many faculty and students rely primarily upon informal means, which do not necessarily address all of the issues regarding the protection of human subjects. As my findings apply to anthropologists, the purpose of the AAA Code of Ethics, to “foster discussion and education...to provide anthropologists with tools to engage in developing and maintaining an ethical framework,” is necessary for providing an additional opportunity to use formal mechanisms to help foster a culture of ethics.

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