

Documentary and Ethnography: Exploring Ethical Fieldwork Models

Daniel Koehler*

*Media Arts and Entertainment
Elon University*

Abstract

Conducting fieldwork frequently sparks ethical challenges as researcher and environment clash. This paper seeks to address these challenges, using documentary and ethnography methodologies as a lens to illuminate different ways of thinking about fieldwork ethics. In line with its more qualitative nature, this paper will accomplish its task via meta-analysis and historiography, analyzing past texts as well as introducing new thoughts through interviews with professionals. The key to confronting ethical challenges lies within one's understanding of obligations. Despite a heightened sense of importance placed on ethics in recent years, not enough dialogue has been contributed to this topic. Further conversation may help fieldworkers realize the importance of considering ethics before confronting the grit and dynamism the world has to offer.

I. Introduction

Personal engagement with the subject is the key to understanding a particular culture or social setting. Participant observation . . . interviews, conversational and discourse analysis, documentary analysis, film and photography, life histories all have their place.

—Dick Hobbs¹

Conducting fieldwork that necessitates prolonged human interaction will spark ethical concerns, if not dilemmas. Documentary and ethnography are serious disciplines that place the portrayal of people's lives in the hands of the researcher. These fields of study are not about testing in the lab; they are not about reading in the library; but they are about real life, including the grit — the complex and uncomfortable realities that may bring unforeseen consequences to the subject. These fields of study are about piecing together human stories in a volatile world inhabited by an often-volatile people. How does one successfully navigate the challenges that arise from operating in so dynamic an environment? How does one remain true not only to story and truth but also to one's convictions? The answers are not always clear. This paper seeks to address these challenges, transcending methodological lines to illuminate different ways of thinking about fieldwork ethics. In so doing, it hopes to strike a relative balance, providing a moral compass for future researchers operating in the gritty world that is the field.

This paper, by its very nature, assumes qualitative characteristics. There is nothing hard and fast

Keywords: Fieldwork, Ethics, Filmmaking, Documentary, Ethnography.

Email: dkoehler@elon.edu

¹ Victor Jupp, ed., *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (London: Sage Publications, 2006).

about the study of ethics under ideal conditions, let alone under unpredictable ones. Fieldwork takes researchers across cultural, religious, and socio-economic lines as they immerse themselves in the natural environment they choose to study. This hands-on approach to research frequently creates unpredictable conditions as researcher and environment clash. Fieldwork ethics, therefore, becomes complicated and elusive relatively quickly, sometimes tripping up even the most experienced fieldworkers. Generally speaking, fieldwork ethics encompasses how researchers interact with a new environment on moral grounds: deciding an appropriate course of action founded not only on personal belief but also on a greater sense of responsibility to individuals and society.² It also incorporates post-fieldwork interactions, including the dissemination of material. As distinct disciplines, documentary and ethnography tend to handle — or, at the very least, to perceive — these interactions differently, and this paper will explore those differences.

In line with its more qualitative nature, this paper will accomplish its task via meta-analysis and historiography, analyzing past texts as well as introducing new thoughts through interviews with professionals. This approach will help document common ethical challenges in the field and how different fieldworkers have addressed those challenges. Thus, a significant part of this paper will be based on anecdotal evidence. These sections will describe specific situations, recounting the background information needed to understand the ethical concerns at stake. Other parts will synthesize these anecdotes, processing lessons learned as well as advocating certain methods to handle ethical concerns. However, the desire is not to suggest a rigid list of rights or wrongs. To do so would defy the elusive nature of fieldwork ethics. Rather, the desire is to help guide future fieldworkers as they struggle through ethical concerns of their own. The sooner that future fieldworkers are forced to process ethical issues, the more likely they are to handle appropriately the grit and dynamism the world has to offer.

II. Definitions and Perspectives

I'm open for anything . . . I will do anything that I think needs to be done to get them to open up . . . I don't have any what-I-will-do and what-I-won't-do.

—Barbara Kopple³

Anthropologists . . . have obligations to the scholarly discipline, to the wider society and culture, and to the human species, other species, and the environment.

—American Anthropological Association⁴

Documentary and ethnography share similarities, but at the core of each of these disciplines lies a profoundly different spirit. Documentary embodies an art form, a modern incarnation of the age-old tradition of storytelling. Like oral and written stories of the past, documentaries seek to take their viewers on an unforgettable journey, observing and consequently preserving what makes humanity human: hope and fear, comedy and tragedy, compassion and cruelty. When grounded in factual evidence and the sometimes-seeming impossibilities of everyday life, these narratives can be both compelling and meaningful, challenging viewers “to think about what they know, how they know it, and what more they might want to learn.”⁵ Documentary takes many forms: a celebration of humanity, a tool for social activism, a method for preserving the past or even projecting the future. But above all else, documentary is about truthful and compelling storytelling. Romanticism aside, documentary films often carry a journalistic predisposition, operating as a check on power run amuck in line with what Alan Rosenthal calls documentary’s “strong reform or social purpose.”⁶

2 Brooke Barnett et al., *An Introduction to Visual Theory and Practice in the Digital Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 49.

3 Liz Stubbs, *Documentary Filmmakers Speak* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002), 212.

4 “Code of Ethics,” <http://www.aaanet.org>.

5 Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling* (New York: Focal Press, 2010), 2.

6 Alan Rosenthal, *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 4.

Ethnography, on the other hand, is first and foremost a science, a method of research that aims “to explore and examine the cultures and societies that are a fundamental part of the human experience.”⁷ Ethnography emerged as a discipline within the realm of academia and, more specifically, anthropology, which christened it in a strong sense of scholarly responsibility. It is therefore a research strategy bound not only by a list of tested methods and techniques, including household surveys, mapping, and kinship charts, but also by a centralized document on ethics, provided by the American Anthropological Association. Moreover, ethnography advocates a standardized, scholarly language, which informs its methodology, whether that be in describing the concept of *building rapport* or the process of becoming a *participant-observer*. Ethnographers “tend to spend long periods of time with their subjects, develop a rapport seldom possible with traditional documentary methods, and seek feedback as a means of verification.”⁸ This perspective is not to make ethnography sound cold or calculated. It, too, deals with the grit and emotional complexities of fieldwork. However, the point is to reveal how ethnography’s background has given the discipline a more codified perspective than that of documentary when it comes to unpacking ethics.

As evidenced by the Barbara Kopple quote that introduces this section, there is little consensus among documentarians when it comes to ethics. Some say documentary is about crafting a strong story, no matter the ethical repercussions. Others say a filmmaker must balance story and ethics, which tends to be the less extreme and healthier perspective. That said, there is truth to documentarian Marcel Ophuls’ confession that filmmakers, by their very nature, are professionals in exploitation: “As a filmmaker you’re always exploiting. It’s part of modern life. It’s a con game to a certain extent.”⁹ Filmmakers specialize in exposing peoples’ lives using an easily manipulated medium. The filmmaking process sometimes unravels into a parasitic, selfish endeavor where the filmmaker momentarily enters into the lives of the subjects, documents them, and soon thereafter abandons them, taking the footage and manipulating it with an exhaustive array of tools. There is no surprise, then, that “the relationship of ethical considerations to film practice is one of the most important topics in the documentary field.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, many would contend that ethical considerations are the least discussed topic in the documentary field as evidenced by the continued influx of documentarians oblivious to their moral obligations.¹¹ Such disregard of ethics tarnishes efforts to make documentary film a serious and respectable pursuit.

Perhaps this pinpoints the problem. Despite a heightened sense of importance placed on ethics, there is no consensus on the topic within the documentary community. Instead, an endless babble of opinion, which can be particularly daunting for emergent filmmakers, clouds hopes for clarity. Lacking guidance and discouraged by the elusive nature of fieldwork ethics, these filmmakers may adopt subpar scruples, mistaking legal protection for adequate ethical standards. No single entity or organization like the ethnographer’s American Anthropological Association has moved above the chaos to champion what it means to be ethical in filmmaking. This is where documentary and ethnography most often collide: uncertainty versus clarity concerning matters of ethics and codes of conduct. Ethnography is steeped in the language of ethics. Before immersing themselves in fieldwork, ethnographers study and confront ethics head-on, grappling with the difficult realities of interacting with people, including deception, misinformation, privacy, and confidentiality.¹²

Not surprisingly, there is a growing demand for the convergence of documentary and ethnography methodologies, which makes this paper both timely and appropriate.¹³ Video ethnography has emerged as a

7 Julian Murchison, *Ethnography Essentials* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 4.

8 Jay Ruby, “Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 7 (2008): 57.

9 Calvin Pryluck, “Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking,” *Journal of the University Film Association* 28 (1976): 22.

10 Rosenthal, *Writing, Directing, and Producing*, 363.

11 Alan Rosenthal and John Corner, *New Challenges for Documentary: Second Edition* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 209.

12 Tom Mould, interview by author, Elon, NC, November 17, 2011. Despite a standardized code of ethics for anthropology, there is admittedly some debate within the ethnography community. Tom Mould, associate professor and folklorist at Elon University, described an instance of conflict during a national conference when fellow ethnographers questioned the pillars of their discipline, including the practicality and functionality of building rapport.

13 Amanda Ravetz, “News from Home: Reflections on Fine Art and Anthropology,” in *Visualizing Anthropology*, ed. Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005), 69.

serious discipline and gained popularity across the country, attracting people concerned not only about the human experience but also about ethics in filmmaking. Crafting a compelling story is not a license for irresponsibility and negligence. Many researchers desire a healthy balance of documentary's visual storytelling principles with ethnography's centralized code of conduct since "the moral and ethical concerns of one can be applied to the other."¹⁴ In the past, scholars have focused on these fields of study as separate entities and often in the theoretical realm. This paper will attempt to move past the theory of ethics to address real life situations. In so doing, it supports a healthy convergence of documentary and ethnography methodologies in the attempt to guide future fieldworkers as they navigate ethical concerns of their own.

III. Experiences in the Field

You can read a book about ethics, or you can go out with an executive producer who'll tell you what you can and can't do. If you invent everything, people are going to figure it out quickly.

—Nicolas Fraser¹⁵

In order to understand better some of the ethical concerns a fieldworker can expect to confront, this paper showcases the experiences of two professionals: Brooke Barnett and Tom Mould. If nothing else, their stories reveal the stakes involved in fieldwork, even in seemingly uncomplicated, everyday life scenarios. Brooke Barnett is a documentarian with particular emphasis on social issues, which informs her ethical perspective. This emphasis is important to note given the lack of consensus in the realm of documentary. A documentarian whose primary focus is entertainment rather than social issues, for example, is going to approach the same scenario using a profoundly different ethical lens. Tom Mould is an ethnographer with particular emphasis on folklore. His background instills within him a heavy sense of responsibility toward culture and character. This section compiles first-person interviews into easily accessible scenarios and patterns of thought applicable to any fieldworker operating in these disciplines.

The Ethics Continuum

This is my personal code of ethics. It's just pre-thinking — deciding where you stand beforehand rather than making decisions on the fly.

—Brooke Barnett¹⁶

Barnett stresses the importance of intentionality when considering ethics. As this paper has emphasized, ethical questions, by their very nature, elude an easy list of categorized solutions. These questions require serious research and pre-planning in addition to a healthy dose of self-reflection. In the end, despite the professional standards and experiences of others, ethics are founded on a personal code, unique to each fieldworker. Failure to pre-plan invites poor decision-making during the process of fieldwork, miring potentially simple ethical situations in complication, perhaps even risk. Barnett takes great pride in knowing her decisions made while conducting fieldwork have consistently coincided with her moral compass. This consistency is due in part to her dedication to pre-planning: simply put, researching ethics before launching the process of fieldwork is as important as having a strong understanding of story, character, and place. Intensive research may help a documentarian or ethnographer predict or, at the very least, respond more appropriately to ethical problems likely to emerge during fieldwork.

Several years ago, Barnett produced a film about people living with HIV in isolated rural areas in the United States. In these areas, poor access to healthcare in addition to a strong, small-town stigma — people frequently dismissed HIV as a big city or gay disease — made living there very difficult for anyone diagnosed with HIV. The person to emerge as the film's main character was not only HIV positive but also the father of

14 Rosenthal and Corner, *New Challenges*, 211.

15 Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling*, 292.

16 Brooke Barnett, interview by author, Elon, NC, November 16, 2011.

four children. During an interview conducted by Barnett, one of the main character's children started sobbing; Barnett decided to keep the camera rolling in order to capture this emotionally charged moment. This sequence of events presented a moral dilemma to Barnett as she entered the postproduction stages of filmmaking. Would it be ethical for her to use this footage in the final cut or would doing so expose and subsequently exploit the child's emotional vulnerability? The decision was made more difficult by the interview's unquestionable potential as an emotional peak in the film's narrative.

Many filmmakers would not hesitate to use this footage. Capturing someone crying on camera often makes for a powerful moment, the ultimate appeal to pathos. A signed talent release already gave Barnett the legal right to use the interview. Despite being legally covered, however, Barnett made a conscious decision — founded purely on ethical concerns — to use the content of the interview but cut away before the child started crying. The program director responsible for the documentary had caught glimpses of the emotionally charged interview and insisted that cutting away was the wrong choice; the viewer, he argued, needed to see this moment in order to understand the stakes associated with having HIV in a small, rural town. Barnett was nevertheless resolute, referencing her ethical obligation according to a relative continuum of personal dignity afforded to her subjects. The program director stood on one end of the continuum, conflating legal protection with ethical appropriateness. Barnett describes herself as standing somewhere in the middle. She is less concerned for wrongdoers' or political figures' dignity but more affording to ordinary people with whom she works: "This is real people's lives," she says. "The key is that the people in the film see it as honest."¹⁷

This scenario embodies only one of the many ethical challenges faced by Barnett as she navigated interviews and daily life encounters. The frequency with which moral dilemmas were experienced indicates the importance of encouraging an open dialogue on ethics for serious fieldworkers. Grit is everywhere, whether researching in developed or underdeveloped countries with privileged or underprivileged peoples. Barnett confronted another ethical challenge during production that is worth noting given her course of action, one employed across methodological lines as this paper will show. Barnett knew how the main character contracted HIV. According to Barnett, including this component of the story was not only unnecessary but also ethically questionable. Viewers want to know such information as a means by which to judge the main character, which hopelessly misses the point of the film. She therefore approached the question in a novel direction, asking why people are curious about the method of contraction. As the main character described the uselessness of passing judgment, Barnett effectively shamed anyone who wanted to know this information into no longer seeking to know.

Celebrating Culture over Crafting Story

The real dilemma emerges when your ethical obligation to one group runs counter to your obligation to another group.

— Tom Mould¹⁸

Mould raises an interesting question, one that may very well define the heart of fieldwork ethics: where do a fieldworker's loyalties lie? Is there a greater responsibility to the audience — viewers inherently trust documentary films and ethnographic studies to champion unbiased truth — or to the characters being studied? Does withholding information to protect the characters violate the tacit trust between fieldworker and viewer, thereby diluting the power of these studies? Should personal gain factor into questions of loyalty? Mould teaches the Video Ethnography course at Elon University, a small liberal arts institution in North Carolina. While there is nothing particularly exotic about a story framed within the university context, one of Mould's student groups encountered a moral dilemma while conducting fieldwork on campus. Once again, this indicates the ubiquitous nature of the ethical challenges associated with conducting fieldwork. Problems emerge in small, rural towns and universities alike; one cannot avoid moral dilemmas when interacting with people. Although he was not directly involved in this study, Mould provided the necessary faculty mentorship to encourage the student group to adopt accepted ethical standards throughout the course of fieldwork.

This particular student group studied Elon University's women's rugby team, which had been sanctioned the year before for alcohol abuse. The stakes were high; the team would lose official status if it received another infraction. Drinking is a part of rugby culture and, from an ethnographer's perspective, conse-

¹⁷ Barnett, interview by author.

¹⁸ Mould, interview by author.

quently forms a crucial component of the study. The student group sought to compile a broad ethnography, so the importance of drinking could not be ignored despite the topic's sensitivity. According to techniques employed by the ethnography community, a practical solution to handling potentially damaging information is to reframe the question, much as Barnett did in the previous example. Using this strategy, the student group asked about the role of alcohol generally before moving on to address the specifics of the team sanction. They avoided questions linking alcohol to recent developments within the rugby community; although answers to these questions may have made the story more compelling, they were not necessary to understanding the culture in question. This scenario represents a balancing of the fieldworker's ethical obligation to the audience as well as to the characters. Perhaps more importantly, it represents ethnography's commitment to celebrating culture and character over crafting strong story.

Mould indicates a profound difference between documentary and ethnography stemming not only from the practical realities of the respective mediums but also from the overarching objectives of each discipline. Video does not provide subjects with the same opportunity for immunity as do written studies. In ethnography, troubles revolving around sensitive issues are often resolved through simple fixes such as assigning pseudo names. "In video," Mould said somewhat jokingly, drawing a comparison, "you can't put grey, dancing dots over everyone's face."¹⁹ According to Mould, though, the difference between the disciplines is even deeper. Documentary tends to be more issue oriented, assuming a journalistic stance often associated with controlling power run amuck. There is little to no expectation that a documentarian is working to establish a deep rapport with the subjects involved. An ethnographer, on the other hand, spends years with a community in order to understand the culture and characters in question. Ethnographers tend to approach fieldwork differently in terms of relationship expectations, which influences the character-centric way these researchers approach ethical situations.

IV. Conclusion

I take that trust seriously and understand that I must show people fairly and respectfully. That doesn't mean hiding conflicts or negative issues, but it means showing things with context and humanity and sense of humor — because we all have negatives.

—Marshall Curry²⁰

Understanding ethical challenges in relation to different disciplines boils down to acknowledging the ethics continuum described by Barnett in the previous section. Journalism tends to fall on one side of the continuum, embodying hard-hitting news where subjects are respected but not necessarily protected. On the other side of the continuum lies the realm of academia, represented by anthropology and ethnography where culture and character trump everything. Here, subjects tend not only to be respected but also protected. There is veracity to Mould's assertion that documentary harbors a journalistic predisposition, but this disposition stems more from the discipline's flexible spirit. As this paper has described, documentary can be a celebration of humanity, a tool for social activism, or a method for preserving the past or even projecting the future. Documentary, therefore, tends to float; it is a hybrid, landing anywhere on the continuum according to an imprecise combination of the fieldworker's personal ethical obligations and an overarching duty to compelling storytelling. Fieldworkers need to be intentional about asking themselves where they stand on this continuum.

The key to confronting ethical challenges lies within one's understanding of obligations, not only to the subjects of the study but also to a wider audience. Ethnographers tend to be keenly aware of this fact. Many documentarians, however, fail to grasp the value of acting ethically and do not confront issues of obligations before plunging into the gritty world that is the field. For this reason, this paper advocates a healthy balance of documentary's visual storytelling principles with ethnography's centralized code of conduct. This convergence may help promote documentary as an increasingly serious and respectable undertaking, a discipline parallel to ethnography. If nothing else, one should constantly submit one's understanding of ethical obligations to reevaluation. Doing so involves decisions about what kind of people deserve protection and whether compelling storytelling is more important than celebrating character and culture. A fieldworker should also remember

¹⁹ Mould, interview by author.

²⁰ Barnett et al., *Visual Theory and Practice*, 54.

useful methods for confronting ethical challenges such as reframing problematic questions in a way that is sensitive to the study's subjects.

Documentary and ethnography place the portrayal of people's lives in the hands of the researcher. This is a tremendous responsibility. Despite a heightened sense of importance placed on ethics in recent years, not enough dialogue has been contributed to this topic. Emergent researchers, overwhelmed and perhaps disillusioned by the elusive nature of fieldwork ethics, too often overlook questions of obligations and plunge into the field ill-prepared. This is an avoidable reality, and further conversation may help fieldworkers realize the importance of considering ethics before confronting the grit and dynamism the world has to offer. At the very least, one should remember Barnett's encouragement for intentionality: pre-plan, struggle with difficult questions, and study professional codes of ethics, regardless of whether they fall under a particular discipline. One should not be caught in ethically challenging situations without the direction of a strong moral compass because poor decisions affect not only the fieldworker but also the subjects of study.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Dr. David Copeland at Elon University for his supervision and advice, without which this article could not have been published; Dr. Brooke Barnett and Dr. Tom Mould at Elon University for their willingness to share their respective experiences in the field; and all reviewers who have helped to revise this article.

Bibliography

- American Anthropological Association. "Code of Ethics." <http://www.aaanet.org>.
- Barnett, Brooke, David Copeland, Harlen Makemson, and Phillip Motley. *An Introduction to Visual Theory and Practice in the Digital Age*. New York: Peter Lang, 2011.
- Barnett, Brooke. Interview by author. Elon, NC, November 16, 2011.
- Bernard, Sheila Curran. *Documentary Storytelling*. New York: Focal Press, 2007.
- Jupp, Victor, ed. *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Mould, Tom. Interview by author. Elon, NC, November 17, 2011.
- Murchison, Julian. *Ethnography Essentials*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.
- Pryluck, Calvin. "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking." *Journal of the University Film Association* 28 (1976): 21-29.
- Ravetz, Amanda, "News from Home: Reflections on Fine Art and Anthropology." In *Visualizing Anthropology*, edited by Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, 69-80. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2005.
- Rosenthal, Alan. *Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002.
- Rosenthal, Alan, and John Carter. *New Challenges for Documentary: Second Edition*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005.
- Ruby, Jay. "Speaking For, Speaking About, Speaking With, or Speaking Alongside: An Anthropological and Documentary Dilemma." *Visual Anthropology Review* 7 (2008): 50-67.
- Stubbs, Liz. *Documentary Filmmakers Speak*. New York: Allworth Press, 2002.
-