



## *The Ethics Minefield: issues of responsibility in learning and research*

**PETER VUJAKOVIC**, *Canterbury Christ Church University College, UK*

**JOANNA BULLARD**, *University of Loughborough, UK*

### **Introduction**

Discussions about ethics in undergraduate geography courses tend to focus on independent research projects or student conduct on field trips. This *Directions* considers these perspectives, but also provides a guide to dealing with ethical issues and sensitive topics within the wider context of undergraduate learning in geography. The issues raised here can be followed up in detail using the *annotated* reading list at the end of this article.

This guide is *not* designed to cover wider issues of academic integrity, or matters such as ‘bullying’ and harassment (sexual or racial). If you are unfortunate enough to encounter such problems, you are advised to seek help and guidance from the student support services at your college or university. Most higher education institutions now have clear codes for student conduct and policy statements (charters) regarding student rights and responsibilities (check your institution’s Internet ‘home page’), as well as effective procedures to deal with the mistreatment of individuals by other students or staff.

### **Ethics: responsibility to whom and for what?**

For practical purposes ‘ethics’ is here regarded as dealing with “the standards established within a profession [or academic discipline] for the conduct of its members” (Homan, 1991, p. 1). Ethics in this practical sense is linked to the concept of *responsibility*. Responsibility ranges from issues of academic honesty and integrity to the ways in which you conduct interactions with your peers, members of academic and support staff, or your impact on other people and the environment (e.g. during fieldwork).

As an autonomous learner you have a responsibility *to* yourself to make the best use of your time as an undergraduate, to further your own personal, academic and career development. You are also responsible *for* your words and actions as they affect the

physical and psychological well-being of others, both directly (e.g. your peers, or participants in your research project), and indirectly (e.g. by generating or recycling images that may reinforce negative stereotypes of specific social groups or communities).

## **Ethics in General Teaching and Learning Contexts**

It is surprising how many ethical issues are pertinent to undergraduate learning activities that are ‘taken for granted’, especially when working with others. Ethical dilemmas take many forms. If, for example, you are aware that specific students are stealing texts or removing individual papers from journals, what is your response? Do you speak up against them, and perhaps see them expelled from the course—or do you remain silent about something that has an impact on the rights of others? This example is not specific to geography, but does highlight the wider issues to which you are *inevitably* exposed.

### *Working with Other Students*

Most geography programmes now encourage active participation by students ranging from traditional student-led seminars to more novel formats (e.g. role play). This brings with it responsibilities ranging from choosing the appropriate format and content of learning materials to the manner in which you interact with fellow students and with academic and support staff. Geography deals with many inherently controversial subjects, from population control to environmental change. During class discussions you will inevitably find yourself disagreeing with some of the views expressed by other students and academic staff. An ethically responsible stance involves treating others with dignity and respect, even when you feel they are being deliberately confrontational or that their views are offensive. You should listen to the views of others and be prepared to voice your own *considered* views in an assertive manner, but must avoid letting the debate become personalised.

When giving presentations you have a responsibility not to expose other students to material that they may find morally offensive or unduly shocking. You may feel that ‘shock tactics’ (e.g. showing a documentary on elephant culling as an approach to landscape management) are an effective means of expressing an idea or of challenging perceptions. Whilst this may be academically justifiable you may need to issue a prior warning concerning content, and use such material only after negotiation with the course tutor. What may not upset you may upset another. Be sensitive to the views and *personal experience* of others—in some cases forewarning and the opportunity not to participate in the session may be considered (e.g. where graphic material concerning abortion is included in a documentary on population control).

Use of material produced by organisations which hold extreme views should also be handled with care. Again, it may be academically relevant to introduce such material, for example a racist group’s views on immigration policy, but you should ensure that the material is presented in a critical manner and that a balanced discussion of issues is allowed for. If you are leading a seminar and have set the learning agenda, you will also need to consider your response to individuals who set forth views that are clearly offensive to the majority of students in attendance. You may wish to discuss this with your tutor prior to the session.

Higher education is, at its best, concerned with challenging assumptions and prejudices, but under no circumstances should you deliberately set out to undermine

individuals, to treat their deeply held beliefs with disrespect, or to create conditions in which individuals or groups of students feel intimidated or inept.

When working in a team or group you are responsible not only for your own academic development and assessment but for that of others in the group too. It is essential that you contribute *fully*, and that when others are not ‘pulling their weight’, you are prepared to assert your rights as well as your responsibilities. There are practical steps which can be taken to overcome some of the ethical issues associated with group work such as to guarantee equity of treatment and workload, to mediate between fractious elements within the group and to ensure that the full personal and academic potential of all team members is being cherished and developed (see for example, Vujakovic *et al.*, 1994; Kneale, 1999).

### *Writing and Related Presentation*

A major ethical issue in writing involves acknowledging your sources. As well as being poor academic practice, failure to acknowledge sources means that you are not giving due credit to the hard work and intellectual rights of authors. You may even be accused of ‘plagiarism’—the intentional presentation of the work of another as your own—a form of *intellectual theft* (the term derives from the Latin word for ‘kidnapper’ (Mills, 1994, p. 263)). This unethical practice can easily be avoided by ensuring proper citation. Most study skills texts provide clear instructions on the conventions for acknowledging sources (see for example Mills, 1994; Kneale, 1999). All information sources must be acknowledged including Internet sites, leaflets and the work of other students (e.g. dissertations) as well as journal articles and books.

The provenance and content of sources of information should also be considered. In the past tutors and librarians acted as ‘gatekeepers’ to knowledge by ordering library materials which they regarded as academically credible and non-offensive. However, with greater access to electronic sources of information, such as the Internet, it is far more likely that you will be exposed to unmoderated material of dubious origin. Responsibility for critically evaluating such sources is now falling more fully on you. Always check the origin of material and ensure that you are not simply recycling material published by organisations or individuals whose ulterior motives may be deemed unacceptable both academically and ethically.

Finally, ensure that you avoid using offensive language or images in both oral presentations and writing. While ‘political correctness’ can descend into absurdity, you must be sensitive to the power of words and images to construct negative perceptions of particular groups within society or to reinforce inequitable relationships (e.g. gender roles). Concern is generally focused on *sexist* or *racist* language, but Kitchen and Tate (2000) remind us that the way in which other social groups are ‘labelled’ and characterised (e.g. the use of the homogenising term ‘the disabled’ for people with a range of disabilities) also needs careful consideration. In visual presentations your use of graphics—photographs in particular—should be carefully selected so not to give offence or to reinforce social and cultural stereotypes. This can be done unwittingly if you do not make a conscious effort to avoid misrepresentation (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996).

### *Field Study*

During your undergraduate career you will probably undertake a variety of fieldwork, some local and some involving residential visits, occasionally overseas. It is important

to respect the customs, traditions and moral and ethical codes of the societies you encounter, and to treat both people and the environment with respect. While tutors have a responsibility to ensure your safety and to inform you of key issues that you are likely to encounter, it is incumbent on you to be properly informed, especially if going abroad.

During most fieldwork you are ‘strangers’ rather than ‘guests’ in the communities visited. In some instances your presence will have minimal impact (e.g. a small-group exercise in a city in your own country), but when working in larger groups, or in a village or other small community, your presence will inevitably be intrusive. In such circumstances you should (adapted from Workman *et al.*, 1997):

- minimise intrusion into the private life and spaces of the community;
- be discrete and respectful at all times and be sensitive to the feelings of local people;
- avoid working or moving in large groups *where possible*;
- acquaint yourself with local customs (e.g. with regard to entering places of worship);
- ask before video-recording or taking photographs of people or property;
- avoid exploiting hospitality.

If working abroad you should buy or consult an appropriate travel guide; most publishers now provide sensible advice to tourists on behaviour. Many of the new guides aimed at ‘ecotourists’ are particularly concerned to provide clear and appropriate codes of conduct (see also Nash, 2000). Always bear in mind that your behaviour will affect the response of local people and institutions to any future visits by your college or university. Make sure you act as a ‘goodwill ambassador’. For more specific and detailed discussion see Madge (1997) on ethics and geographical research in developing areas, and Workman *et al.* (1997) on the environmental responsibilities of expeditions.

### **Ethics in Undergraduate Research**

In most undergraduate geography programmes a supervisor or tutor will be responsible for ensuring that you have taken the appropriate ethical issues into account when undertaking independent research. Do not, however, take this for granted—you still have a responsibility to ensure that you have addressed the ethical issues inherent in your chosen field of study (especially the protection of the rights of any participants). It is in your own interests to find out what policies or codes of practice your department or higher education institution has in place regarding ethics in research. Some higher education institutions may require a *research proposal* to be passed by an *ethics committee* before work can be undertaken. This is common practice, for example, in subjects in or allied to medicine. If your work involves, for example, discussion with medical workers, patients or hospital employees, you may even be required to submit a proposal for vetting by the local health authority’s ethics committees. It is better to check such matters at the start, rather than have access delayed or refused at a later stage. Mitchell and Draper (1982) point out that the key ethical issue to be addressed in most geographical research involves balancing the wider benefits of the research against possible harm to individuals. Always bear in mind that undergraduate research is essentially a training exercise, and that any harm generated by your research is unlikely to be balanced by major benefits. Harm can range from undermining future undergraduate work (e.g. by alienating an organisation) to jeopardising a person’s livelihood or safety (e.g. by failure to protect anonymity).

A major issue you must consider before starting research relates to *conflicts of interest*. Who will gain from your research? Is anyone being exploited? The latter could include *you*—many outside organisations are keen that students undertake ‘free’ research in which they are themselves interested. This can sometimes lead to students undertaking work that may not be appropriate to their degree programme, so be careful! One of the main ways that you can ensure that you are not exploiting others is to provide feedback to participants on the results of your work. Clearly this may be impossible in large-scale questionnaire studies, but it is feasible when a few in-depth interviews have been undertaken, or where particular organisations have contributed significantly to your work. Obtaining information from, or undertaking research for, people or institutions that you distrust or disagree with on moral grounds raises another conflict of interest issue. Kitchen and Tate (2000) use the example of tobacco companies, but it could equally relate to non-governmental organisations (NGOs), special interest groups (e.g. hunting or anti-hunting organisations), or even academics with whom you do not agree.

### *Studying People*

Nearly all research in human geography involves some consideration of ethics. How you obtain, interpret and represent material concerning specific populations or social groups will need careful thought, especially if the results portray people in a negative light, or if sensitive subjects are being studied (e.g. health, crime or unemployment). Research with vulnerable or disenfranchised groups (children, the elderly, the homeless etc.) requires especially careful consideration (Sieber, 1992; Matthews *et al.*, 1998; Matthews & Tucker, 2000). Always seek advice from appropriate bodies before undertaking research with vulnerable groups and whenever possible work *with* relevant institutions (e.g. schools, health centres). If you undertake ‘streetwork’, take extra care and always inform the relevant authorities of your work.

Two of the most important considerations when undertaking any form of social research in geography are the concept of *informed consent* and the need for *confidentiality* and *anonymity*. *Informed consent* involves treating the participants of social research with respect, using clear, easily understood language to inform them of the nature of the research and any risks and benefits of their involvement. This is particularly important when undertaking in-depth interviews or ethnographic research (e.g. participant observation), but even in large-scale questionnaire surveys respondents should be fully informed of the true nature of the work and their consent sought. Coercion should never be used to impel individuals to participate (ASA, 1997). Many students now undertake independent research with groups such as schoolchildren and others in institutional settings (youth clubs, sheltered accommodation, day centres). It is especially important that you avoid coercion in these settings, including peer pressure from other participants, or pressure from ‘gatekeepers’ (teachers, carers etc.). Never pester individuals once they have made known their unwillingness to be involved in your research.

In some cases it may be beneficial to keep a formal record of consents, especially if vulnerable groups are involved (e.g. written consent from parents or guardians to work with their child). Consent is not usually needed for research conducted in public places or where information about people is publicly available (e.g. public records, archives) (ASA, 1997), but you are advised to discuss the issue with your tutor prior to undertaking the work, especially if it involves naturalistic or covert observation in ‘public’ places. You will have carefully to consider what constitutes a public place/

space; this will vary from culture to culture, and with social and temporal setting. You should avoid all forms of intrusive behaviour when undertaking your research.

Another issue that you may wish to consider is the degree to which you are honest with participants about the wider reasons for your research. One of the authors of this guide, for example, is explicit about the career advantages of publishing research findings, as well as the importance of academic and personal interest in the topic. This openness can be advantageous; it releases the participants from spurious feelings that they are indebted to the researcher, and allows for a more honest understanding of the role of researcher, for example, as ‘advocate’ or ‘facilitator’. Experience shows that honesty can strengthen the working relationship between all involved. It is certainly dangerous to suggest that your work is selflessly aimed at benefiting a particular group, as the debt we owe as researchers is often greater.

*Confidentiality and anonymity* cannot always be guaranteed from a *legal* perspective, but this is unlikely to be an issue in most undergraduate work. In general, all reasonable effort *must* be made to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants when this has been offered by the researcher. You should also ensure that you do not intrude on people’s privacy or use deception in an effort to obtain your research data (ASA, 1997). Geography students are often involved in detailed, local case studies, and it can be easy to identify participants unless efforts are made to ensure anonymity (e.g. by changing names—with a *clear statement* explaining that this has been done!). Very often those who have helped you (local government officials, voluntary organisations) may (justifiably) wish to see your dissertation/research report, and if you have not maintained anonymity and confidentiality, it may be relatively easy for individuals’ views and opinions to be identified, sometimes to their detriment. In a recent case, one of the authors was able within minutes of reading a student’s research project to identify a participant by name and obtain, via the Internet, that person’s telephone number. This respondent had made negative remarks regarding a named institution and had the report been allowed to enter the public domain the respondent’s relationship with the institution, and ultimately his/her livelihood, could have been jeopardised.

### *Environmental Ethics*

A wide range of ethical issues pertains to research in physical geography (e.g. geomorphology, biogeography, environmental science). You must be aware of your general ethical responsibilities for the environments in which you operate and the need to leave sites as undisturbed as possible. Unintentional damage can be caused if work is poorly planned. For example, you should consider whether a particular environment or habitat type is essential to your work, or whether another, less vulnerable or fragile site might be just as appropriate. You may be required to consider the impact of your work on the environment as part of your project risk assessment (Higgitt & Bullard, 1999). Workman *et al.* (1997) provide a useful checklist of issues that is applicable both for planned expeditions and for fieldwork undertaken locally:

- Do not remove any biological, soil or geological samples unless vital to the research (landowners or other parties (conservation bodies) may limit your sampling; do not abuse their trust). If you have to move large stones or boulders, always replace them as you found them and with care.
- Seek expert advice on sampling and trapping techniques and always remove equipment safely and carefully at the end of the research period.

- Avoid working in large groups.
- Avoid marking sites if possible, but ensure that the markers create no long-term damage if they are deemed essential.
- Be aware of the damage or harm that might be done at specific periods (e.g. nesting time) or under particular conditions (e.g. after heavy rain).
- Minimise the effects of noise, stick to marked paths where possible, and take advice on the susceptibility of vegetation and soils to damage from trampling, etc.
- Consider the effects of any transport used (e.g. drive slowly, think carefully about where you leave any vehicle, avoid loss or spillage of fuel etc.).
- Observe the Countryside Code and other local rules of conduct at all times.

You should think carefully about the validity of causing discomfort and trauma to, or destruction of, individual organisms in the pursuit of academic knowledge. Harm done to animals by trapping or injury induced by ‘marking’ (e.g. toe-clipping of small mammals) may be justified if the results contribute directly to improved conservation of the species or habitat protection. You will need to consider such matters very carefully, and ensure that you have been adequately trained by an expert in the use of collecting equipment and procedures. Similar concerns relate to the removal of samples or individual organisms for later identification. Where possible all identification should take place *in situ*, with mobile species being released as quickly as possible back to the environment after identification or measurement.

If you have been given privileged information or access (for example, to the location of rare colonies of plants or animals) ensure that your report does not provide information that may compromise security. Clearly it would be unethical to include photographs, a site map or map reference that might lead unscrupulous collectors directly to a carefully protected site.

### *Reporting Research*

Issues of confidentiality and anonymity and site security have been addressed above. Another issue that you should consider is the extent to which you need to disclose the assumptions behind your research. While it is clearly good academic practice to set out your theoretical position and the methods you have used, you may also feel it ethically appropriate to disclose your own interests in the research; for example, many students choose projects based on work or voluntary experience (e.g. work with people with learning difficulties or physical disabilities) which may affect their approach to the research. You are advised to discuss such issues with your tutor, who will be able to help you to avoid bias in your research and reporting.

It is important that you acknowledge the help or sources of funding given you during your research; however, you must again be careful not to provide any information that might jeopardise confidentiality or anonymity; for instance, listing the names of local government officers who provided aid or contributed to your research may provide sufficient material for individuals and their views to be linked.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In summary, ethical learning and research can be characterised by:

- the protection of the rights of individuals and communities;
- responsible and sensitive use of environments;

- a reasonable balance between costs (including time and effort, as well as more obvious environmental or social costs) and the benefits of a particular learning activity or research project;
- effective procedures to guarantee rights (e.g. security of records and data protection).

If in doubt, always discuss your ethical concerns with a tutor or with an expert in the field of learning or research in which you are involved.

*Correspondence:* Peter Vujakovic, Department of Geography & Tourism, Canterbury Christ Church University College, North Holmes Road, Canterbury CT1 1QU, UK. Email: p.vujakovic@cant.ac.uk. Joanna Bullard, Department of Geography, Loughborough University, Loughborough, Leicestershire LE11 3TU, UK. Email: j.e.bullard@lboro.ac.uk

## FURTHER READING AND REFERENCES

- ASA (1997) *American Sociological Association Code of Ethics* (approved by ASA Membership spring 1997), online resource: <http://www.asanet.org/ecoderev.htm>
- HIGGITT, D. & BULLARD, J. (1999) Assessing fieldwork risk for undergraduate projects, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 23(3), pp. 441–450.
- HOMAN, R. (1991) *The Ethics of Social Research* (London, Longman).
- KITCHEN, R. & TATE, N. J. (2000) *Conducting Research in Human Geography: theory, methodology and practice* (Harlow, Prentice Hall).
- This book contains specific discussion of research ethics, political correctness and conducting research on sensitive issues. The authors present examples of common ethical questions encountered by researchers, questionable practices and politically correct and incorrect language as well as considering how to avoid leading or biased questions whilst collecting primary data.
- KNEALE, P. (1999) *Study Skills for Geography Students—a practical guide* (London, Arnold).
- A comprehensive guide to making the most of your time as a geography undergraduate.
- KRESS, G. & VAN LEEUWEN, T. (1996) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (London, Routledge).
- This provides numerous examples of how bias and stereotyping can be introduced (both intentionally and unintentionally) into graphic representations. Scrutiny of the copious illustrations and accompanying explanatory text in the book will certainly help you to make more responsible choices.
- MADGE, C. (1997) The ethics of research in the ‘Third World’, in: E. ROBSON & K. WILLIS (Eds) *Postgraduate Fieldwork in Developing Areas*, Monograph 9, Developing Areas Research Group (London, Royal Geographical Society & Institute of British Geographers).
- Using examples from the author’s own research, this chapter discusses some of the challenges and debates surrounding research in developing areas.
- MATTHEWS, H., LIMB, M. & TAYLOR, M. (1998) The geography of children: some ethical and methodological considerations for project and dissertation work, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 22(3), pp. 311–324.
- MATTHEWS, H. & TUCKER, F. (2000) Consulting children, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 24(2), pp. 299–310.
- The two articles above should be read in conjunction with one another and provide useful discussions about the ethics of working with children. Many of the points raised are also relevant to studies with other groups of vulnerable people.
- MILLS, C. (1994) Acknowledging sources in written assignments, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 18(2), pp. 263–268.
- This Directions uses examples taken from two research papers to demonstrate good practice in acknowledging sources and help readers to avoid accusations of plagiarism.
- MITCHELL, B. & DRAPER, D. (1982) *Relevance and Ethics in Geography* (London, Longman).
- NASH, D. J. (2000) Doing independent overseas fieldwork 1: practicalities and skills, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 24(1), pp. 139–149.
- This Directions includes a discussion of the ethics of overseas fieldwork and raises some issues to consider both at the planning stage and whilst undertaking the work.



SIEBER, J. E. (1992) *Planning Ethically Responsible Research: a guide for students and internal review boards* (Newbury Park, Sage).

VUJAKOVIC, P., LIVINGSTONE, I. & MILLS, C. (1994) Why work in groups?, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 18(1), pp. 124–127.

A useful guide indicating how to organise groups for maximum effectiveness and some ‘tactical tips’ for minimising the impact of lazy or disruptive students.

WHICKER, M.L. & KRONENFELD, J.J. (1994) *Dealing with Ethical Dilemmas on Campus* (Thousand Oaks, Sage).

This US-orientated text is specifically designed for academic staff and research students; however, it offers some useful material for undergraduates too.

WORKMAN, C., GIMMINGHAM, A. & JERMY, C. (1997) *Environmental Responsibilities for Expeditions: a guide to good practice* (prepared and published by the British Ecological Society & the Young Explorer’s Trust, updated March 1997), online resource: <http://www.demon.co.uk/bes/ereguide.htm>  
Developed in response to concerns over the increasing number of expeditions leaving the UK to work overseas, this guide focuses on ecological research but offers useful advice that all geographers should follow.

Copyright of Journal of Geography in Higher Education is the property of Carfax Publishing Company and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.