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*‘Fieldwork is
not a justification
for turning one’s
back on the
suffering of
human beings.’
Yet, fieldwork is
not social work,
and as my case
study
demonstrates,
well-meaning
efforts to help can
easily go awry.*

ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS AND A DEAD MAN

Ethical Decision Making in
Ethnographic Fieldwork

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This article provides a narrative of the author's research on Clay, a teenage cocaine dealer, the author's efforts to help Clay's family, and of events that culminate in Clay's murder of his mother's friend. Following the narrative, the author reflects on the relationship of this case study to questions and concerns raised in previous discussions of ethical decision making during fieldwork. These include the extent of responsibility researchers have for the safety and well-being of research subjects, the emotional costs of researching drug users and sellers, and fear of exploiting research subjects. The author concludes that, while no recipe for ethical fieldwork can be written, a review of dilemmas faced by previous ethnographers can enable researchers to anticipate difficulties and to establish useful guidelines before entering the field.

Keywords: *research dilemmas; ethics; ethnography; vulnerable population*

In the course of ethnographic research, I inadvertently provided the funds a teenage cocaine dealer used to buy crack from his supplier. This may have begun a horrific sequence of events that included several drug deals, a murder, the arrest and imprisonment of my subject, and the ruin of his mother. In fact, my subject shot two men in nearly as many weeks, wreaking havoc in several lives, including my own. Initially shocked, I grew furious with him and then, as anger passed, bitter. The bitterness was displaced by a more profound sense of despair over his life, my efforts to help his family, and the two years I had spent on this project, which I completed as my dissertation (1995) and then abandoned.

My subject, who liked to be called "Clay," was recently released from prison, having served half of a twenty-year sentence for manslaughter. He wrote me while in prison; I dreaded these letters but answered them, sending him books and money but resisting his many requests to help him petition for parole. Yet Clay's parole, when it did occur, somehow freed me from the lock I had placed on these experiences. It also severed our communication. Paroled, he no longer writes me and I have no address for him though, ironically, I find I can now write about him.

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I've written elsewhere about the methodological hurdles I faced in my research on Clay (2003). In this article, I present a narrative case study of my participant observation within Clay's family and of my attempts to intervene and help them. The case study frames my decisions within the context of my fieldwork and the relationships I formed there, illustrating the effect that the emotional stress and "secondary trauma" (Singer et al. 2001, 394) of studying mercurial, drug-addicted, and drug-selling subjects may have on the ethical conduct of research. The article includes a review of the place of ethical case studies within the larger field of research ethics and discussion of the relationship of this case study to questions and concerns raised in previous discussions of ethical decision making during fieldwork. These include the extent of responsibility researchers have for the safety and well-being of research subjects, concern over the exploitation of research subjects, and Eder and Corsaro's (1999) assertion that the dialectical "self-correcting" features of ethnographic theorizing provide a sound basis for ethical decision making in the field.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS AND CASE STUDIES

The modern field of research ethics can be traced to the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials and worldwide condemnation of the treatment of research subjects by Nazi doctors. Subsequent research horrors, such as the Tuskegee syphilis study, led to the expansion of research protections, including guarantees of consent, personal agency, and uncoerced participation. Concern and outrage over the use of deception in studies by Milgram (1963), Humphreys (1970), and others helped spur requirements for yet more detailed descriptions of informed consent. Reflecting this history, current codes and standards for the ethical conduct of research, such as those maintained by professional associations, institutional review boards, and federal funding agencies, focus on the safety, well-being, privacy, and informed consent of research subjects.

Case studies of fieldwork dilemmas expand the range of issues to be considered in discussions of the ethical conduct of research, raising concerns that extend beyond protecting subjects while highlighting subtleties obscured in the "generality" (Punch 1994, 89) of ethical

codes of conduct. In contrast to the more infamous cases mentioned above, wherein stark abuses bring outside attention to a researcher's transgressions, case studies of fieldwork dilemmas more typically rise out of a researcher's own reflections on fine nuances of judgment in circumstances he or she faced. An attempt to formalize the kind of personal knowledge and stories ethnographers share among trusted others, case studies of ethical dilemmas concern emotion as well as logic and the interstices in which they meet. In a case study of his research in a state mental hospital, for instance, Taylor (1987) describes the dilemma he faced when observing guards abuse patients, slapping them, hitting them, making them perform sexual acts, and compelling one to eat burning cigarettes. Professional codes of ethical conduct proscribe harming subjects, but what of watching research subjects harm others? Were such observations a requirement of studying illegal behavior? Or did they ethically require Taylor to intervene to stop the abuse—even if doing so meant breaching confidentiality or abandoning the study? Taylor's dilemma shares features with my own, and I later return to his reflections on his choices in evaluating my ethical decision making.

Other case studies of fieldwork dilemmas that bear upon mine include Singer et al. (2001) and Singer, Huertas, and Scott (2000). Singer et al. (2001) contrasts the importance of qualitative research on the role of violence in the culture of illicit drug use with the challenges such research presents to "our personal, intellectual, emotional and ethical capacities" (p. 365). Anticipating my experience, Singer et al. caution that fieldwork in such settings may result in a kind of "secondary trauma" for researchers, which should be recognized as a "possible injurious consequence of ethnographic research on violence" (p. 399). Separately, Singer, Huertas, and Scott (2000) recounts the case of "Tony," a longtime research subject killed by police while participating in a study of AIDS prevention and risk among IV drug users. Reviewing what they might have done to prevent Tony's death, they ask, "Am I my brother's keeper?" That is, does the prohibition against harming subjects suggest a larger responsibility for their well-being? If so, does this responsibility extend to protecting subjects from risks that "*do not originate with and are not the direct consequence of participation in research?*" (p. 391, italics in original).

TWO LINES OF REASONING

Scholarly requests for the documentation and discussion of ethical fieldwork dilemmas typically break down along two lines of reasoning, reflecting sharp differences over whether such questions can ever be fully answered. In the first, scholars seek case studies of fieldwork dilemmas to build a knowledge base in ethical decision making that will one day guide researchers in making ethical decisions. For example, Christensen and Prout (2002) envision "a set of strategic value orientations for conducting ethical child research" resulting from scholarship, wherein "researchers' encounters with ethical dilemmas, and their ways of confronting them" are "documented, reported and discussed" (p. 494). Reviewing this line of reasoning in the context of an ethnographic study of syringe use among drug addicts, Buchanan et al. (2002) assert that, in keeping with many utilitarian frameworks, such efforts ultimately reduce ethical dilemmas to the determination of "one triumphant principle that overrides other concerns," such as the assertion that "protecting confidentiality is more important than preventing harm" (p. 39). Buchanan et al. counter that, while typical of graduate training courses on ethical considerations within research, such determinations are impossible within actual field studies like theirs where fine distinctions in circumstances render a stable rank ordering of values impossible. Yet, Buchanan et al. are no less supportive of the documentation and discussion of ethical dilemmas. They argue that case studies of ethical decision making heighten the ability of fieldworkers to anticipate ethical dilemmas and to handle those they encounter, fostering wisdom and courage but not certainty. Other arguments for ethical case studies employing this second line of reasoning note that such case studies foster a useful "wrestling" with ethics (Coy 2001) that advances the field—even if the ethics of fieldwork remain a swamp for which there can be no map (Punch 1994). Similarly, Taylor (1987, 297) cautions that, while "abstract rules are hard to apply in the field," case studies of ethical dilemmas promote professional honesty in discussions of fieldwork, permitting "clearer ways of thinking" about the ethical conduct of research. Ethical dilemmas presented within this context typically focus on the case itself, raising questions about the researchers' choices but reserving judgment. Singer, Huertas, and Scott (2000),

for instance, leave unanswered the question of whether they did or did not have “a moral responsibility to intervene in Tony’s life” (p. 397).

My case study draws more from this line of reasoning than the first. This may be evident in my use of narrative. Narratives serve to “show” more than they “tell,” providing a vicarious experience of events too rich and complicated to be neatly summarized or resolved via a single overriding principle or conclusion. The circumstances of ethnographic fieldwork call into question other features of utilitarianism as well. “Act utilitarianism” in the tradition of Jeremy Bentham ([1871] 1996) and John Stuart Mill ([1861] 1969) reduces morality to consequences, framing ethical decision making as a series of cost/benefit problems.¹ Decisions are morally right to the extent that they maximize “happiness” or produce the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people, a determination typically said to require a neutral viewpoint, such as that of an impartial observer. In this way, act utilitarianism conflicts with several principles of ethnographic practice, including the cultivation of a subjective “insider” viewpoint and the special obligations researchers bear for the well-being of research subjects. Yet, the question of the “good” likely to result from a decision is too useful a tool to abandon entirely, and the search for principles to guide ethical decision making need not be abjured because it can be overdone. While a stable rank ordering of values may be impossible to achieve, building a consensus concerning guiding practices is both beneficial and possible, and I offer my concluding reflections to this end.

ENTERING THE FIELD

THE SELF I BROUGHT TO THIS STUDY

I did not set out to study urban teenage violence or the cocaine trade. A Ph.D. candidate in an interdisciplinary language, literacy, and culture program within a large college of education, I was interested in the changing nature of the relationship between schools and the juvenile justice system. At this point in my career, I had taught high school for seven years, working in urban, rural, and bilingual settings. For five of those years, I worked summers on an oral history of homeless people, conducting fieldwork in cities across the country. As part of this larger project, published in 1992 as *Street Lives: An Oral History of Homeless*

Americans, I interviewed homeless teenagers in a variety of urban centers. This experience, together with my teaching career, convinced me of the need to conduct educational research that accounted for the expanding role of juvenile justice within the lives of urban students. The number of youths formally processed through the juvenile justice system nearly doubled over the period 1985 to 1995. Had this expansion come at the expense of school authority, suggesting a shift in the social control of teenagers? I wondered. What happened to the schooling of youths placed under the authority of the juvenile court?

This was my orientation, the self I brought to my dissertation, and the questions I hoped the research would answer. I began it via a pilot study of a youth court, which I observed daily for a month. This experience confirmed the importance of describing the larger web of social interactions and power in which school, court, and neighborhood combined for many urban teenagers. It also allowed me to build rapport with juvenile court judges, counselors, and other court personnel. Working with my adviser, I designed a study to compare the narratives that urban boys adjudicated as delinquent tell about their schooling and juvenile justice experience with those told about them by their teachers, parents, court counselors, and judges. In this way, I hoped to achieve what Peter Metcalf (2002, 107) would later call "mobile positioning," shifting my vantage point in a qualitative portrait that placed delinquent boys' understanding of their experience against that of the adults in each of their institutional worlds. The study, eventually titled *Bad Kids: Narratives of Schooling, Delinquency and Youth Violence in Drug City* (VanderStaay 1995), was approved by my university's human subject review board and endorsed by the county juvenile court and local school district.

CLAY AND SERENA

As is often the case in research with children, I could not directly seek subjects myself. Instead, court counselors explained my project as part of the intake procedure they enacted each time a teenage boy was sent to the court. I met the youth only after he and his parent agreed to speak with me. In a month of refusals, only one boy agreed to such a meeting; he declined after I explained the consent I would need to study his school and court records and to interview him, his teachers, and his family members over the next year.

Then I was referred to Clay, a small and muscular 17-year-old whose detention hearing I happened to have observed the day before. Clay was accused of stealing a car and threatening a witness. In court, he was calm and steady, almost emotionless. He wore a black Oakland Raiders jacket, loose clean jeans, and Air Jordan basketball shoes. My first impression of him was so strikingly negative that I disregarded it as a matter of stereotype and prejudice. Yet, trained to attend to such judgments, I recorded it in my field notes. "He seems to me a boy who could kill someone," I wrote.

Citing Clay's extensive record, his youth court judge ruled that he would be detained until his hearing. I met him in the small six-by-eight-foot cell that would be his home for the month he spent waiting for his hearing. He remained seated when I entered and gently shook my hand. Instantly comfortable with him, I grew ashamed of my harsh first impression. I explained my project and he said he would participate. His mother, who I'll call "Serena," agreed. Surprised, I explained the project once more, reading the consent forms out loud and describing the access I would need. In return, I explained, I would help Clay study for his GED and place a letter in his court file describing his participation in my project. "Sounds alright to me," he said, adding, "I ain't got nothing else to do in here" with a wry smile.

Only one other youth would ever volunteer to participate in my dissertation research—a tiny, mercurial boy, "JJ," who disappeared shortly after I met him, following the arrest of his mother and other family members for selling cocaine. Looking back, I see now that I offered paltry compensation for the time, information, and access to private records I requested. As a rule, delinquent teenagers require generous cash incentives to participate in projects like mine (Williams et al. 1992). Delinquent youth have little reason to trust adults and less reason to want to be supervised, agree to formal contracts, or have their privacy invaded by a stranger. I didn't fully understand this at the time. Moreover, while common in sociology, paying research subjects is rarely necessary in education and somewhat frowned upon. My advisers seemed as surprised as I was that I could interest so few subjects.

I had wanted 3 to 5 subjects. Instead, I had one. By this point, I had most of a year invested in the project and a young family of my own to provide for. There seemed little choice but to reframe the research as a single case study and to carry on, entirely dependent on Clay and his

mother. I don't think they ever realized this, but I never forgot it. While there is much about this story that I remain unsure of, this much I know: our entire relationship was marked by undercurrents of the deep gratitude I felt toward them. They made possible my future and I knew it.

Why did Clay participate? As I eventually learned, he had been matched with a "big brother" through a church program as a young boy and had had a long and positive relationship with this man, who was white like me. It's likely that memories of that arrangement made him open to mine. In fact, Serena told her neighbors and friends I *was* "Clay's big brother." This had two functions. First, it explained my presence to neighbors. In Clay's view, this was absolutely necessary. Otherwise, he told me, "everyone gonna think you a narcotics agent." In this way, the big brother role linked me to the family via an urban kinship tie of sorts that bridged our many differences in a manner recognized as culturally appropriate by Serena, Clay, and their community. Second, the designation framed Serena's hopes for my relationship with Clay. After all, I was a teacher studying to be a professor. She understood that I needed to write about Clay to complete my dissertation. But she also reasoned that, inasmuch as teachers and universities serve and teach, I would be of help to her son. I had in fact been a big brother in an urban big brother/big sister program and was familiar with the role and the expectations it assumed and did not find them incompatible with my research. Indeed, the big brother role made possible my position as a participant observer, facilitating a much greater degree of engagement with the family than I had thought possible. Yet this engagement, by heightening my participation, confronted me with more ethical decisions than I would have faced had the family been less open to my participation. In this way—and this has been true of other ethnographers—the ethical challenges of the research rose in proportion to the success of the fieldwork.

In the interest of a full disclosure, I must admit that my connection to Clay and Serena had familial dimensions for me, too. Slight, small, and alcoholic, Serena reminded me of my own mother, who was successfully treated for alcoholism when I was a teenager. Externally, my relationship with Clay shifted according to the dual nature of our relationship as researcher/researched and big brother/little brother—stances I consciously maintained throughout our relationship, even after he began to appear in my dreams as my son.

ETHICAL PARAMETERS AND GUIDELINES

Establishing ethical parameters and guidelines for this research was necessarily difficult. As background to this effort, I surveyed the ethical stances employed in other ethnographies of teenage delinquency, including Jankowski (1991), Williams (1989), and Sullivan (1990). Each of these writers established broad confidentiality agreements with their subjects and stated that they would not engage in illegal activities themselves. However, Jankowski and Williams did seek to observe illegal behavior, and Sullivan wanted to hear about it. I had no interest in observing illegal behavior and many reservations about hearing of it. Such observations were not necessary to my topic and, because my subjects were minors, would have made my institutional review board process extremely arduous. Moreover, Clay and I lived in a city renowned for its street gangs, teenage murder rate, and cocaine trade. He knew I had written a book, and he sometimes asked if I would write one about him. Given the glorification of a gangster lifestyle in the rap music of the period, I worried that Clay might commit a crime in an attempt to impress me. Taylor (1987) cautions ethnographers about such indirect contributions to violence, describing them as "reactive effects."

Consequently, I resolved to conduct the research in as safe and conservative a manner as possible. Following Van Maanen (1983), I sought to avoid those elements of the field—such as Clay's late-night street life—where I would be most apt to encounter volatile legal and ethical dilemmas. Specifically, my participant/observation would be limited to the youth court, its detention facility, Clay's home, or his great grandmother's home. I would not attempt to observe illegal behavior. Interviews would occur in the detention facility or my office. When interviewing Clay, I would downplay any stories he might tell me of crime or violence by responding without emotion, attending only as proved necessary to understand his life and schooling. I pledged never to ask about drive-by shootings, murders, or his participation in violent crime, unless the question was directly pertinent to my research goals—which proved rare. If such a question had to be asked, I would ask it in a dry, medical fashion. I pledged never to say or to suggest that crime or violence was ever justified.

To the best of my knowledge, I broke these pledges only once when, during one of our first interviews, I laughed at a story of car theft that had become so absurd I thought he must have been joking. The conversation went like this:

"Whoa," I said, holding up a hand to stop his story. "Let me make sure I've got this right: you and your partners stole a car to go to a movie, but when you came out of the movie you found someone had stolen the car you had stolen?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"So how did you get home?"

"We stole a car someone else had stolen."

It was then that I laughed. "You're kidding me," I chuckled.

"No."

"Come on, how could you know the car you stole to go home in was stolen?"

"Cause the steering column was already broke where you stick a screw-driver in to crank it. We didn't even need to bust it."

I knew then that he wasn't lying and that I shouldn't have laughed. Yet the laughter did something for us—I suppose it proved my confidentiality. Our relationship was easier, more relaxed, after that moment. Later, watching Clay lie in court, I knew he never feared I would testify against him. I never did. I did hope he would get sentenced to an institution, preferably Job Corps, however. And once, when a cross-town gang threatened to kill him, I hinted to Clay's counselor that sentencing him to Job Corps or the training school would keep him safe. I did not think this violated our confidentiality, but he would have. That incident is indicative of the manner in which even explicit ethical guidelines—like written confidentiality agreements—become complicated and sticky in practice. And it begs the question of whether a researcher is more ethical to honor a confidentiality agreement or to break it if doing so may save that subject's life.

EXPLOITATION AND THE RESEARCH "BARGAIN"

Acquaintance with Clay's family further complicated these concerns. Serena lived a desperate life, plagued in equal parts by poverty and her addictions. On my first visit to her apartment, I found that she and Clay's third-grade sister, "Silk," had been living without water for a month. There was little food in the home and no books. By contrast, I lived a life of comparative luxury—even on half an income. Moreover, my study coincided with the publication of several critiques of racial and colonial "Othering" (e.g., Pratt 1992; Spivak 1988), raising doubts about the legitimacy of my position vis-à-vis my research "subjects."

These doubts, combined with my gratitude toward Clay and Serena and the divisions in our circumstances, engendered a fear of inequity that increased steadily as I spent more time with the family. If successful, this research would complete my Ph.D. and help me attain a university position. What did I offer in return? A file letter, help with Clay's GED, and a vague sense that the family's assistance could one day improve schooling for students like him. While this research "bargain" appeared fair on paper, the actual work of the project in the context of such concerns made it seem inequitable.

I was persuaded to persevere with the project by two factors. First, I found in Serena a model of how to be aware of Clay's activities without condoning them—a position cemented in both my case and Serena's by the glue of confidentiality. Second, Serena immediately began to make small requests of me—typically to ask for rides to appointments and youth court hearings. Her willingness to ask for such small favors and her frequent assertions that the study would be "good for Clay" or "good for the family" gave me hope that I could conduct the study in an equitable and nonexploitive manner. Comforted by this assurance, I began the research on four fronts: conducting fieldwork with Clay's family, researching his school and court records, interviewing him in juvenile detention, and interviewing the juvenile court personnel who worked with him.

FIELDWORK

Serena and Silk lived in a small, second-floor apartment on a narrow street tucked just inside one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. On our first visit, she wore a long, wrap-around skirt and an African fez, tan with green and red markings. While characteristically prompt and neat herself, Serena's apartment was as often unruly as tidy. Walking through the apartment on my first visit, I was struck by a poster-sized velvet portrait of an African-American woman crying. Walking into the next room, I saw another, then another. "I know," she said, watching me. "My home is full of crying black women. I can't help it—I see a picture of a black woman crying and I buy it."

Serena saw the demise of her family's men in its prosperity. The grandchildren of landowners, she and her brothers never picked cotton or worked like the other children she knew. "So when they moved to the

city the boys in the family learned to steal, 'cause it was easier than doing that hard work," she told me. "And Granmomma had to sell off all her land, piece by piece, to pay for their bonds."

"Granmomma" was Clay's great-grandmother and the family matriarch. She lived a few blocks from Serena in a "shotgun" house built by freed slaves. Like Serena, she was extremely thin but tall. She had a bright, animated face and short salt-and-pepper hair. Clay typically slept at her house and she was routinely furious with him for "worryin' her to death." This enraged Serena who, like all the family, adored Granmomma. "That boy may ruin my life but he's not going to ruin Granmomma's," she would tell me. "I won't let him. I won't."

I had been to Granmomma's on several occasions with Serena, and the neighbors, children, and cousins who collected there became used to my coming and going. If I stopped by to meet Clay and found him gone, Grandmomma would sometimes ask me to sit in one of the folding metal chairs, wrapped in carpet scraps, she had on her porch. I learned that if I waited long enough on the porch she would eventually tell me something about her life or the neighborhood. "Couple a boys burned down a house right over there last night," she once told me. Or, more typically, "Can you believe it? All these kids running and shooting all nights. I can't make no sense of it." The neighborhood, which anchored the most violent precinct in one of the ten most violent cities in the nation, seemed almost pastoral from Granmomma's porch. My field notes from one such visit noted the lack of traffic, the sound of a breeze through neighboring trees, and the intermittent clap of acorns falling to the street.

Just inside the door to the house was a wall of photos and paintings. A portrait of Jesus on wispy onionskin paper hung at eye level, a photo of Martin Luther King tacked slightly above it on the wall. I looked at them one day while Granmomma boiled noodles, which she ate without butter or seasoning of any kind. "My children give me that," she said, pointing with a fork at the picture of Jesus. "These children?" I asked, pointing at a row of photos. She turned the stove's one burner off and approached me. "Not this boy," she said, indicating a high school-aged boy, smiling and broad shouldered. "He's dead. My youngest son. They killed him in his car as he was driving right out here in front of the house." She gestured toward the street, fork in hand. "He's dead, too," she added, pointing to another photo. "He was killed in Chicago." She turned from these portraits to one of herself and her husband in their

early twenties, faces brilliant with hope and youth. "Now this is my husband," she explained. "Had all sorts of jobs. Worked here, worked in Chicago. We come up in the country. That's where we met, little country school." She liked the country, but her husband "wanted to come to the city so the kids could go to high school," she told me. She shook her head at this, remembering. "And now everybody shooting each other. I can't make no sense of it."

Some members of Serena's extended family—men as well as women—had conventional jobs and lived conventional lives. Serena herself was a licensed beautician who had worked for most of her adult life. When Clay's father, arrested for robbery, was sent to prison she moved in with a barber who worked in her shop. Clay, she said, grew up in the shop, watching them work. In her view, Clay's problems were a result of inherent laziness, the stigma and torment he suffered as a special education student, and the power, attention, and money he earned selling drugs. "Kids picking on him [for being a special education student] in the hallways, on the bus. That's when he began to get withdrawn," she explained. "Keeping to himself and quiet-like all the time. I hired a private tutor, but pretty soon even the tutor couldn't reach him. He'd just sit there." She later told me that Clay had been offered a job at a lumberyard by the big brother from the church program he had been matched with. "But Clay turned it down," she said. "He always have to have a gang of boys around him, always have to be shinin' and wearin' all that gold."

While she had always struggled with alcohol, Serena said she was pushed over the edge by Clay's delinquency. The shame of it all—meeting with the principal because he was in trouble at school, being recognized as his parent in youth court hearings—drove her to drink, she said. "The first time I saw my baby in [prison] jumpers I cried," she told me. "A lot of women do that. They see their baby in jumpers or handcuffs and all they can do is cry." Sitting up all night and worrying about him heightened these problems. Hearing gunshots in the street, she wondered if he were dead. Drinking, she lost her job and partner. Now, alcoholic and on welfare, she alternated between a conventional lifestyle and a resourceful street life. One day, she would be prim and proper, complaining about Laura and Robert, kindly addicts who lived in a crack house down the street. On another day, I would find her depressed and confessional, scolding herself for getting high or drunk with Laura and Robert.

Pooling resources from AFDC and a man she saw, Serena had managed to buy alcohol while maintaining the apartment and keeping Silk in clean clothes. Then, a nephew ransacked the apartment (a regular occurrence), and Clay took the money she had put away for the water bill. Clay was ruining her life, she told me, pulling her hair and crying in despair. "Ruining my life!"

INTERVIEWING CLAY

Clay, while more firmly rooted in "the code of the street" (Anderson 1999) than his mother, also alternated between that world and a conventional lifestyle. Or at least he aspired to. He remembered growing up in his mother's shop and liked it. He wanted to be a barber himself, he told me. It was his dream to have a little shop near Granmomma's house. He would go to beauty school like his mother did, he said. This was the story Clay told youth court judges. It was persuasive because he believed it, or a part of him did. But to go to beauty school he needed to complete his GED and that was almost impossible. As best as I could tell, Clay had not been to school since ninth grade. His school record was a collage of psychological testing and failed special education placements. The stigma he associated with school was so great he wouldn't read for me or let me help him in any academic way. He always changed the subject when I mentioned the GED. Violating a host of federal laws and guidelines, the detention center, locally called the "jail for children," provided no schooling or educational services.

I interviewed Clay several times over the month in which he was held in the detention center, waiting for his hearing. Many of these early interviews focused on my attempt to build a portrait of how he understood the onset of his delinquency and violence (VanderStaay 2003). Clay had multiple explanations for his delinquent career. Sometimes, he blamed an older girlfriend or his cousins for leading him astray. At other times, he said he began selling drugs to buy nice clothes and impress girls. On other occasions, he simply told me that everyone had always said he would grow up to be a drug dealer, and it didn't surprise him that he had. In contrast, he saw no "onset" to his violence because he could not remember a time in his life in which he didn't have to defend himself. He said he learned this from his mother, who carried an open knife to defend herself, hiding it in a sleeve, when she walked to the store with him when he was a young boy.

I found Clay an odd mix of attributes. At home, Clay worked hard to look the part of a drug dealer: he wore huge gold rings shaped like dollar signs and pendulous earrings; his front teeth were plated in gold gang symbols. Yet he was almost preternaturally calm and gentle in person. Detention center guards told me they had never seen him angry. When tempers blew and fighting broke out, Clay simply sat on the sidelines and watched. Clay told me he had a temper, but I never saw a sign of it. One afternoon, stopping by to visit him at Granmomma's, I found he was still asleep. Granmomma said she'd been hitting him with a stick but hadn't been able to wake him. Then, to my astonishment, she picked up an actual stick and began to thrash him as he lay in bed. The sharp "whup" of the stick on his thigh echoed through the room and I leapt back, expecting to see him fly out of bed in rage and pain. He winced and rolled over, still sleeping, and she continued to beat him. Then, his eyes opening in comprehension and pain, he gently said, "I'm awake now, Granmomma. I'm awake."

Attempting to wed Clay's gentle demeanor to his stated views on retaliation and his criminal record as a drug dealer, I tentatively decided that in the limited possibilities of his world, dealing cocaine was the most nonviolent of his choices. While he might have wanted to become a barber, in the street culture of his neighborhood, he sought immediate status and authority, and dealing cocaine allowed him to achieve it. Moreover, while an illicit occupation, selling cocaine did not require that he rob anyone. In Clay's view, drugs existed because people wanted them: selling cocaine was no different than selling cigarettes.

Contrary to popular images at this time, there was nothing lucrative about Clay's drug dealing. Although he liked to brag of rolling in money and living in hotels, I never knew him to own a thing. He stole cars because he couldn't afford one. Corrupt police officers routinely robbed him when he did have money or drugs; business could be good and he could come away with nothing. Even his clothing was temporary. "Jackets and rings, that kind of stuff comes and goes," Serena once told me. That's why Clay liked his teeth plated: When gold's on your teeth they can't take it, he told me. Yet, selling cocaine forced Clay into occupational circumstances in which violence was necessary. A cocaine dealer is in constant risk of being taken advantage of, he told me. An addict will rob you or take the drugs and run or drive off without paying if there's any chance at all of doing so, he explained. As Clay

saw it, a reputation for instant, violent retaliation was the only way to ensure you would be paid in a drug transaction.

INTERVENTIONS

THE PEOPLE COULD FLY

When I think of the consequences and complications of my participation within Clay's family, I think of the gifts we exchanged for Christmas. Serena made some cookies for me, and I bought a hardback copy of *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton 1985), a collection of African American folktales, for Silk but, uncharacteristically, didn't inscribe it to her. Silk loved the book, which might have been the first she had ever owned, and brought it with her to school when classes resumed following the winter break. I visited Serena that afternoon and found her in a fit, storming about her apartment and pulling her hair. Silk's teacher, she told me, had taken the book, accusing her of stealing it. The teacher said Silk must have stolen it because a child like her had no way to get a book like that, Serena explained. Silk had yelled and screamed for the teacher to give the book back to her. When she refused, Silk had sworn at her and run from the room.

Serena experienced shame in many different contexts, but none was greater than the shame she felt in the presence of a professional African American woman she thought looked down on her. Having once had a profession herself, she couldn't bear to be looked upon as a welfare mother or alcoholic—especially by someone who represented the kind of status she had once held. This was one such incident, compounded by the additional shame and frustration Serena felt over her children's school experience, and she became almost hysterical as she explained it to me. Silk, she said, was in a crying fit of her own at Grandmamma's. I said I would go to the school and tell the teacher I had given the book to Silk, but Serena said that would make matters even worse.

In this way—and just as I had feared—even small acts of intervention, well-intentioned, apparently innocuous, and well within the context of my participant/observation and designated role as a big brother, could have surprisingly deleterious consequences. My presence also changed things. At other moments, my inaction or failure to intervene

permitted a sequence of events that might have been averted if I had acted. These effects occurred in all arenas of the research, including the juvenile court, the neighborhood, and the family.

INTERVENTIONS WITHIN THE JUVENILE COURT

My very presence changed the juvenile court experiences for JJ, who was released from detention for agreeing to work with me. I learned of this when his hearing was cancelled. Visiting his counselor, I asked her what had happened, and she told me she'd had his charges dropped. Astounded, I asked her why. "Look," she explained. "You're the first decent male to be interested in that boy. He's likely to end up no good no matter what I do, but he's got a much better chance out there with you than locked up here."

Although I followed her reasoning (when studied, juvenile court placements often appear to do more harm than good), the responsibility it implied terrified me, and I asked her not to release him on my account. She persisted, however, and to this day I wonder where JJ went when he disappeared and how his life might have been changed had he been referred to Job Corps or the training school.

My effect on Clay's court experiences began with the water bill. Serena asked me if I knew of a church or charity that might help her with her water bill. I said I would try and did, phoning a local minister and a few agencies. Unable to find anyone to help with the bill, I paid it myself but told Serena a church had done so. I mentioned this to "Daniel," Clay's restitution officer. A newcomer to the youth court, Daniel had expressed interest in my research and had spoken to me at length about his hopes for his new position and his own work with Clay.

"Do you know you did that family a great disservice?" Daniel began. "You merely enabled them to continue to shuck their responsibility." Daniel, one of the court's only white employees, held to a strict 12-step philosophy and said that I was codependent with the family. He had been a drug addict himself, he explained, and knew from experience that Clay and his mother would not change until they hit rock bottom, a process my assistance had postponed. It was because of people like me, he said, that there was a ghetto in the first place. Daniel closed the door to his office and began to shout. His speech became a tirade. He said I was obviously having sex with Serena. He said my research had to be

cancelled. He said he'd be calling my university to turn me in. "It's not your job to try and help that family: it's your job to document their collapse and self-destruction," he concluded.

Daniel had no authority over my dissertation, but he did have authority over Clay's restitution, established to pay for damages to the car he'd stolen. Later, apparently to punish Clay for my excesses, he put a warrant out for his arrest after Clay failed to make scheduled restitution payments. While such warrants weren't unusual, the aggressiveness with which Daniel pursued Clay was. "I just talked to Daniel and he is out to lock Clay up," Clay's court counselor, Jerome, told me at this time. "And if he can't do that he says he'll hold contempt of court charges over him until he turns 18, when he can get him sent to the prison farm."

NOT INTERVENING

Clay was adjudicated "delinquent" at his hearing but not sent to reform school or, as I had hoped, to Job Corps. Instead, he was released on parole with a responsibility to make restitution payments of \$25.00 a month. Essentially, Clay's case was heard by the most lenient judge—a situation Clay made the most of by lying through the entire hearing. Watching, I was reminded that choosing not to intervene in such circumstances is to intervene because an ethnographer's failure to object to such practices encourages a subject to continue them (Taylor 1987). What did this make me: an accomplice to perjury? A stalwart defender of confidentiality? In either case, in this and future hearings, my decision not to intervene was a key ethical decision, among the most consequential I have ever made.

The judge began the hearing by asking Clay about school—which he had not attended for several years. He told the judge that he was earning Bs and Cs in high school and that he helped take care of his sister after school. Not wanting to overdo it, he said he only did half an hour of homework a night. "Is that enough?" the judge asked him.

"No," Clay said.

The judge then discussed Clay's situation with his social worker and Daniel. Then, turning to Clay, he asked what he thought should happen. Clay said he wanted to go home. The judge looked at him for a moment and said,

"You're going to turn over a new leaf?"

"Yes."

"When's it going to start?"

"Now."

"What about the grades in school?"

"I'm going to pull them up."

"Up to what?"

"As."

"And you can do that, can't you?" the judge asked.

"Yes," Clay assured him.

RESTITUTION AND A NEW RESEARCH BARGAIN

Thinking about Clay's restitution, I began to form a plan to pay him for the time he spent in interviews with me. My intention was twofold. First, I suspected that I would lose contact with Clay once he was released from the detention center and saw a stipend as a useful means of encouraging him to continue to meet with me. Second, payment seemed a good solution to the problem of inequity created by his refusal to let me help him study for his GED. Otherwise, the benefits of the relationship appeared entirely mine. I let the plan sit a day or two and then proposed it to Clay: I would pay him \$10.00 an hour for the time we spent in interviews. I would not directly pay him. Instead, I would contribute this money toward his restitution. This would be retroactive. Given the 8 hours of interviews we had conducted in the detention facility, I owed him \$80.00. There was one caveat: Clay had to make the first payment on his own. Daniel was insistent that Clay take responsibility for his restitution, I explained. "He won't like this plan, but he'll probably accept it if you step up to make that first payment," I told him. Clay agreed to the plan, saying that it sounded fair to him.

Unfortunately, the \$10.00 an hour fee did not motivate Clay to continue to meet with me. Contact with Clay outside the "jail for children" was extremely spotty—I think we actually managed to meet only twice. He also made no effort to pay his restitution.

INTERVENTIONS WITHIN THE FAMILY

While my time with Clay was spotty, I continued to meet with Serena. One day, a month or so later, she called to ask for a ride to a job interview and I agreed, pleased to hear she was looking for work.

Serena was always ready and prompt when I gave her a ride, looking for me out her window and meeting me at my car before I had even parked. But on this day, the curtains remained closed and she didn't appear. I waited and waited. Then, as the time for the appointment came and passed, her curtains brushed open and Laura looked out at me. She came down the stairs a minute later, Robert close behind her. Robert was about 6 feet, 4 inches, extremely thin, like most crack addicts, but relaxed. Easy. The edges of his shoulder bones were clearly visible through his jacket.

"The thing is, man," he began. "I thought you was a cop. But Pee Wee says you're cool so hey, I'm Robert." He reached out to grab my hand and we rocked there for a long moment, fingers entwined, and I realized he was high. Then Serena called from the balcony, asking me to come up and waving goodbye to Laura and Robert. When I reached her door, she turned toward me, flushed and drunk, reaching for a hug. She wore a tank top and red bicycle shorts, her pencil-thin arms and legs spindly and childlike. This was the first time I had seen her on drugs and/or alcohol and I was startled and disoriented, as if I had just been hugged by this stranger, "Pee Wee," when I had expected Serena.

"Why were you waitin' down there when you could just have come on up?" she asked, collapsing weak-kneed onto a chair against a wall. Silk padded down the hallway after her, cowering between her mother's knees and looking up at me, her nose leaking like a drip. "She was up last night with a fever," Serena explained, stroking the girl across the forehead and caressing her tight, black braids.

So I was late getting up. I wanted to call you but couldn't find your numbers. Clay came home and I asked him to watch her while I went with you to check on this job, but he just walked on past me into his room and closed the door. He in there sleepin' now, don't care 'bout my chance to check on this job or nothin'!

She sped up as she spoke, wiping away tears and crying between gasps for breath as the monologue became desperate, sliding into a plea.

I just can't keep livin' like this! I've always worked. Clay came up in the shop with me working. I need work. But I been without work for two years now and I just can't take it. I'm not right when I'm not working! These walls just start closing in on me and I can't take it. I can't handle it! People coming in and out all the time, bringing their beer. . . . When I'm

working, I'm fine, just have two at night. Without work, I just can't help it, Laura and Robert always over here, hanging out. I'm not like them. I'm a worker! You've got to help me, Steve. If you know of anything, even if it's sweeping floors, watching a building at night. . . . I just can't keep living like this! Steve!

Later, collecting myself, I called a woman's shelter and asked about state-funded alcohol and drug treatment centers. They gave me another number and I called it, learning that the state had two 30-day treatment programs that accepted Medicaid patients.

"What's the wait?" I asked.

"There are beds in each of them."

"Are they any good?"

"We are fortunate that they are both very good."

I gave myself a day to let the idea sink in, to make sure this was the step I wanted to take. Convinced that it was, I drove to Serena's and bluntly asked her if she would enter a 30-day drug and alcohol treatment center if we could find someone to take care of Silk. "I might could get Silk's daddy to care for her," she said. "Let me think about it."

A week later, a warrant was issued for Clay's arrest. There were two charges: shooting at an occupied dwelling and failure to pay his restitution. I stopped by to urge him to turn himself in and found the neighborhood strangely festive. A group of people sat on the steps, drinking beer. As I walked up the stairs, a teenage boy burst out of Serena's apartment, his arms full of clothes. Serena waved me in and collapsed into a chair. "That Clay's cousin," she explained. "Just robbed us again." Serena looked the worst I had ever seen her. Not drunk, just exhausted. Clay had come home and woken her up in the middle of the night, she explained, telling her the police had robbed him. "He said the police knew his name, called him over to the car and took all his money." She held her face in her arms. "Then Clay left and JJ burst in here."

"JJ?"

"Yeah, his momma in jail. He ask me what I been tellin' you about her, make like he gonna smack me around. I tell him if he touch me Clay kill him. And now it's a payday weekend," she added. "Know I won't get any rest. 'Cause either Clay'll be coming in here all hours of the night or I'll be worryin' about him all the rest." Serena pulled her knees

up to her chest and rocked back and forth. "He gonna be the death of me," she repeated. "'Cause I just can't take it any more. He killing me. I'm an alcoholic and a drug addict. An alcoholic and a drug addict. And I can't take it any more."

I heard nothing from or about Clay or Serena for a week. Worried, I stopped by, finding the deadbolt broken off the door. "Clay kicked it in," she told me. "He thought I was inside, passed out." She explained that he had come by in a rental car with some friends. She had decided to enter treatment and wanted to tell him so. "I talked to Silk's daddy, though, and he says he'll take her. So can you come by tomorrow? I need a ride to the Housing Authority."

I showed up the next day to find Serena in her prompt business mode. She met me in the parking lot, her paperwork prepared. We drove to the Housing Authority, which paid her rent under a state welfare program. It took about three minutes to clear Serena for a month's absence from her apartment. We stopped by a locksmith on the way home and I bought Serena a deadbolt. I was struggling to attach it to the broken door when Laura stopped by to visit. She and Serena pulled up chairs and I learned that it was the birthday of a son of Laura's who was shot to death while snitching a Girl Scout cookie from a neighbor's kitchen. Serena asked if he wasn't buried in a particular cemetery and Laura said he was.

"It wasn't until a few years back that they started letting us in there," she added.

"Letting you in?" I asked, tightening the screws on the deadbolt.

"Black folks," she explained. "It be all white before that."

URGING CLAY TO TURN HIMSELF IN

I continued to leave messages with Serena for Clay, urging him to turn himself in. Surprisingly, he did. Knowing he would be safe and locked up for the month she would be in treatment, Serena became even more set on going. A few days later, I drove her to a clinic where she was to catch a bus to a hospital across the state and watched her walk through the door, head down and determined, her tiny hand clutching a single suitcase.

The interviews I conducted with Clay during this stay in the detention center were decidedly different from the first. He had had a clash

with boys in a neighborhood across the city, beginning with an argument over a girl he had dated, that had escalated into a gang conflict. They had come to his neighborhood, looking for him, he told me. Things were tense; he found himself always on edge. Then the police had called him by name, shook him down, and robbed him. He was about to turn eighteen and this sobered him. "I don't want to do nothin' to get sent to jail," he repeatedly told me. I remembered that he'd visited his father in prison as a boy and was pleased to think he had no illusions about what prison would mean.

Clay spoke often about beauty school during these interviews, saying that he had heard that once he turned eighteen he could enter the program without a GED. His mother said there were people who could read the assignments to you if you couldn't, he told me. That was his dream, he said, to get a little shop—he and his mother could work there—by Granmomma's. Could I check on it? He asked me. I said I would.

MY CIRCLE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Phoning the school, I found out that a GED was still required. Clay glazed over as I told him, his expression once again emotionless and blank. "But there's a GED program this summer," I told him. "Two blocks from your house." He stared at his feet, hopeless, and I continued, grasping for something he could hold on to. "Look, I could help you," I said. "And if you can't make it, we might be able to get you in on a special waiver. Sometimes there's a way around these things."

From this point on, Clay's fatalism was palpable; every moment I spent with him was charged with a sense of impending catastrophe. He clearly foresaw no future but crime and prison—unless the boys from across town got a bullet in him first. He had been told since he was a boy that he would go to prison "just like his daddy," and now he believed it. At one point, a rescue fantasy flashed across my mind: I would go to the beauty school and make the case myself. His schools may not have taught him much, but they had repeatedly tested him and I had copies of all the results. At three, Clay had been hospitalized with spinal meningitis; I could easily argue that he was learning disabled, even brain injured, I decided. I could also prove his rights to an education had been illegally violated by the juvenile court itself. We might have to sue, but we could do it.

My awareness of the ridiculousness of this scheme followed fast upon its conception. Clay's future was not my concern, I decided. But doing what I could to help keep him alive was. To Singer, Huertas, and Scott's (2000) question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" I had answered yes. I had redrawn the scope of my obligations, accepting responsibility for both the risks of participating in my research and for those risks I had learned of through my research—such as the risk of being shot by cross-town boys. Keeping him alive required keeping him off the street, I decided. Fortunately, I did not expect this to require any intervention on my part because this time he was sure to be adjudicated delinquent and sent to Job Corps or the training school. I mentioned this hope to Jerome, Clay's counselor, hinting that a placement would at least keep him safe and off the street. Jerome raised his eyebrows at the suggestion but said nothing.

News from Serena was decidedly better. She called each week, leaving short messages on my answering machine. "They're feeding me like a turkey!" she said one day, "fattening me up." On another day, she laughed into the phone, jubilantly announcing, "I'm so sober I don't know what to do with myself!" Upon graduation, she called for a ride and I met her at the clinic where I had dropped her off a month earlier. She burst out the door, suitcase swinging: confident, healthy, sober, and ecstatically proud.

Clay told me that he had not "fired at an unoccupied dwelling." I believed him but nevertheless expected him to be adjudicated delinquent. Daniel would be pressing for a placement, and the judges had to be losing patience with Clay. But the case was a sham, and the judge who heard it was angry with the prosecutor for bringing it forward. A jilted girlfriend of Clay's had made the charge. There were no other witnesses and no bullet holes. The hearing ended like this:

"No bullet holes?" the judge repeated.

"None that I know of your honor," the prosecutor admitted.

"You have no physical evidence that the house was in fact fired upon?"

"Uhh, no, your honor."

"Then there can be no charges!"

Of course, there was evidence that Clay had failed to make his payments. A week later, Clay was back in court for his restitution hearing. The hearing fell to the court's most conservative judge—a coincidence I assumed Daniel to have had a hand in. He told her that Clay had failed

to make payments for four months and owed one hundred dollars. Clay had made no effort whatsoever to take responsibility for his restitution, Daniel explained. He had not even bothered to call and say he had no money. Daniel recommended referral to the training school, and I prayed for his success. The judge paused, then turned to Clay.

"Now where have you been since you got out of detention?" she asked him.

"School."

"School? Where?"

"Gardenia Community."

"And what have you been studying?"

"Barbering."

"You mean to tell me you're in barbering school?"

"The class starts in the fall. Now I'm in summer school."

"You're taking classes?"

"Yes."

"Well you better be 'cause I'm going to check and if you're not you're going to jail," she told him.

I was elated. Finally, a judge would catch Clay lying. He would be pulled off the street and sent somewhere safe. "He is to remain in detention until the hundred dollars is paid," the judge concluded.

I sat with Serena at the hearing and drove her to Granmomma's afterward. She met Granmomma on the porch, asking her for the money. Granmomma glared at her a moment and then went into the house, returning with an old black purse. She counted the money out and angrily thrust it into Serena's hands. Serena, shamed but steadfast, took the money and returned to my car. "That boy gonna be the ruin of us all," she said, rubbing tears from her face with an open hand. We returned to the youth court, paid the money, collected Clay and his things, and drove to Serena's apartment in silence. Dropping her off, I pushed the image of Granmomma's purse from my mind and told myself that everything would now work out. The judge would call the school and lock Clay up, keeping him off the street and out of his neighborhood for at least a year.

But the judge never called. She never checked. I heard nothing from Clay or Serena for a week. Each morning, I opened the paper in fear, scanning the headlines for Clay's name and photo in the macabre celebration the paper made of the city's record-breaking murder count. One night, I dreamed Clay was my son. We stood in the entrance to my

home, arguing. "You don't know nothin' about it!" he yelled at me. "You don't know nothin'!" I stood, speechless in agreement, and he left, slamming the door shut after him.

Then Serena phoned. Things were bad, she said. People were always knocking on her door, bringing alcohol by, offering her drugs. There was a guy, "Tommy," who was always following her, asking for a date. Clay was edgy and out all night, the boys from across town still cruising through the neighborhood looking for him. Serena missed a power payment when she was in treatment and they had turned off her electricity. She had no lights and couldn't cook. There was no hot water. Could I take the \$100.00 I owed Clay and give it to Granmomma so she could pay the bill, she asked. "Clay told me to ask you. He says it's okay." I agreed to do this, and did.

WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED

A week or two later, Serena put on her best dress and went out, thinking a walk in the spring sunshine would brighten her mood. Tommy approached her and asked for a date. They argued until, grabbing her, he pulled her dress off her shoulders. Serena screamed and tore away just as a car full of neighborhood teenagers drove by, slowing down to watch. Recognizing Serena, they raced off. Serena ran to a pay phone and dialed 911. "I told 'em, 'Please, oh please! Come here, quick, before my boy Clay do something!'" she later told me. But the police were too slow. The boys found Clay and raced back, handguns blazing. Serena rode with Tommy in the ambulance to the hospital and called me for a ride home, giddy with panic and shock. "You don' mess with somebody's momma! No, you don't!" she repeated. "Oh, but Clay, what they gonna do to Clay?"

I waited for a warrant to be issued for Clay's arrest. I waited a day. Then a week. Tommy was alive but apparently not pressing charges. Did this mean I had to go to the police? Then the phone rang. There were no words, just sobs. It took me a moment to realize it was Serena. The sobs were absolute, abject. She whispered something but I couldn't hear her.

"Serena," I said. "Serena."

"My boy Clay," she muttered, "My boy Clay. Oh God, my boy Clay." He's dead, I thought. This is it. It's happened. Clay's dead.

"My boy Clay," she repeated. "My boy Clay done killed somebody."

What exactly happened I never found out beyond the key details: that Clay took the money I had given Granmomma; that he shot and killed Serena's friend, the tall, thin Robert, in an argument over a drug deal; that Serena had had a nervous breakdown and returned to drinking and drugs in absolute hopelessness.

Clay turned eighteen in jail and was tried as an adult. To kill a man in the commission of a crime is to commit murder in the first degree. But first-degree murder would mean a trial, and neither the prosecutor nor Clay's defense attorney wanted one. Pleading guilty to manslaughter, he agreed to a plea bargain that resulted in a 20-year sentence.

I never saw Serena sober again. All that remained of her was "Pee-wee," her drunken alter ego. But this time, there was no laughter to her addictions, and no tears. She was, as homeless people sometimes put it, "gone." She seemed hardly to recognize me. On my last visit, I asked if she would return to treatment. She sat motionless on her steps, her gaze empty, vacant. I waited a long minute and then asked her again. She needed to, I told her. She needed to for Silk. She closed her eyes at the mention of her daughter's name and paused for a moment, as if thinking. Then, eyes still closed, she turned her head toward the street and simply waved me away.

DISCUSSION

BALANCING SAFEGUARDS AND RESEARCH GOALS

Discussions of ethical guidelines within ethnography often assume a zero-sum game, wherein safeguards are balanced against the goals of research, suggesting that we emphasize one at the expense of the other. Elements of my research did fit this model. For example, restrictions on my right to seek subjects myself, or even to build rapport with youths before discussing my project, severely reduced the pool of subjects I had to work with. But this was the exception and not the rule. In nearly every other instance, neither my participant observation nor the ethical parameters and guidelines I followed impeded my capacity to pursue my research questions. In many ways, these choices expanded the research, pushing me to insights I would not have gleaned otherwise. This was most clearly the case in my participation within the family and in my efforts to help. These interventions, undertaken in the context of

the big brother role the family gave me, led me to “acquire empathy for local ways of acting and feeling” (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995, 4) exactly in the manner described by those who argue for a highly participatory stance wherein researchers actively engage in the community studied. Most important, I developed empathy for Serena’s view that Clay had ruined her life and that the delinquent boys in the family had ruined it. The images of crying black women that adorned her apartment, so strange to me at the beginning of the project, made perfect sense afterwards. And mothers’ complaints, common in many of the youth court hearings I observed, that a family’s dysfunction was attributable to the stress and havoc caused by a delinquent teenage son, now seemed perfectly plausible. Conversely, I now understood why those members of Serena’s family who lived conventional lives kept her at such a distance.

It would have been to my benefit to pay more attention to that distance. Aware that Clay and Serena lived in a setting culturally foreign to me, I knew to take a skeptical view toward my own instincts. I also knew that Serena’s sister and brother who held jobs did not try to help her and maintained firm boundaries that extended even to Silk. Recognizing this stance as a position they had come to with reason proved an effective foil to my own instincts, though it didn’t ultimately stop me from intervening. They were no longer participants in her life; I was. More important, they didn’t owe her anything, and I had decided that I did. Indeed, my sense of the enduring imbalances in my relationship with Serena and Clay continued to haunt me for some time. The balance sheet seemed egregious: I left the relationship with a dissertation, a Ph.D., and a job offer; they left the relationship jailed, drunk, and drug addicted. And what would happen to Silk? My dissertation rarely mentioned Clay’s sister and with good reason: thinking of her raised yet another set of ethical concerns, including the unavoidable question of how much neglect a researcher can observe before placing the health and welfare of a child above all other priorities.

EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AND “SECONDARY TRAUMA”

It was in response to these concerns that I abandoned the project. While I had heretofore sought to balance emotion and instinct against research and analysis when making ethical decisions, abandoning the dissertation was an entirely emotional act, a desperate attempt to assuage

my guilt. I could not undo my dissertation, but I could at least ensure that I made no more profit from my subjects' misery, I decided. This was surprisingly easy to do. Reflecting on the dissertation was painful and abandonment brought relief, albeit temporary. Eventually, I was able to forget about Clay and Serena for weeks at a time; then Clay would write and the issues I've wrestled with here would come crashing down on me. My tenure and promotion materials made no mention of the research.

Reflecting on the emotional stress occasioned by his observations of abusive guards, Taylor (1987) cautions, "People who cannot deal with moral ambiguity probably should not do fieldwork" (p. 294). Such statements are not uncommon in ethnography, which has long been known for the suffering and sacrifices its practitioners endure in dangerous and far-off settings. Yet, Taylor's logic is belied by his response to the moral ambiguities he faced. By his own account, Taylor's capacity to negotiate the emotional trauma and ambiguity of his fieldwork did not so much depend on his fortitude as it did on his capacity to locate these challenges within the larger context of his fieldwork and its goals. Making a utilitarian wager, Taylor determined that the "good" that would result from observing the abuse, writing about it, and (once he could do so without breaching the confidentiality of the guards he had befriended) eventually acting to stop it was greater than that which would result from intervening during the specific instances he observed. "Conducting fieldwork is not a justification for turning one's back on the suffering of human beings," he notes. That is, the question isn't whether one should do something. "The question is what one should one do" (p. 299).

My circumstances were arguably more acute than Taylor's: as I saw it, Clay was not at risk of being abused, he was at risk of being murdered. In this way, my situation resembled Singer, Huertas, and Scott's (2000) moral reflections upon their subject Tony, but with another key difference: I knew Clay's life was in danger. The ambiguity I faced lay in balancing my responsibility to protect his life while studying it—and doing so while upholding our confidentiality agreement. Yet, despite the many differences between my situation and that faced by Taylor (1987) and Singer, Huertas, and Scott (2000), I would have benefited greatly from their capacity to place a particular moral dilemma within the broader context of research goals. In weighing the consequences of

my choices, I did not take into consideration the goals of my project and the “good” my findings might contribute to. This short-sightedness helps explain my abandonment of the project: focused on my subjects’ well-being, I failed to imagine the research beyond their dissolution.

Writing now, at a distance of ten years, my abandonment of my dissertation also strikes me as selfish and self-serving. “The only value which is central to research is truth,” Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 263) tell us. “However, this does not mean that all other values can be ignored,” they caution. Rather, it means that, in attending to the broad range of values and concerns that can come into play while in the field, one must not lose sight of the fact that “the goal of research is the production of knowledge.” Admittedly, I lost sight of this fact. In abandoning the project to assuage my guilt, I appeased my conscience at the expense of the much greater responsibility to share what I had learned. A simple utilitarian assessment of the consequences of my abandonment of the dissertation makes this abundantly clear: what “happiness” or “good” did my decision to abandon the dissertation bring about? Stuck on a shelf in my office, my dissertation did nothing to improve the education of students like Clay, to better our understanding of families like Serena’s, or to describe the great dignity of Granmomma. Nor did it help other ethnographers prepare for work in such settings. My silence also helped perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings. For example, crack cocaine research in the 1990s emphasized the “incredible degradation” of female addicts in inner-city settings, typifying their description in portraits of forced hypersexuality and lives lived as “virtual slaves of the crack house owner” (Inciardi, Lockwood, and Pottieger 1993, 39). Neither Serena nor Laura fit this description. Laura was “out there walkin’ the street every night, lookin’ for that crack,” as Serena put it. But by day, her life was much more conventional than the literature suggested was possible. Neighborhood parents sometimes hired her to babysit, for instance—a responsibility she accepted in a relatively sober and serious fashion.

EXPLOITATION AND FEAR OF EXPLOITATION

I now view my fear of exploiting Clay and Serena as similarly problematic and, ironically, patronizing. After all, Clay and Serena never expressed dissatisfaction with the research “bargain.” In determining

that the relationship had become inequitable, I presumed the right to speak for them. In this way, my overarching fear of exploiting my subjects proved counterproductive to the work of treating them as equals.

I suppose I should not have been surprised by this concern. Questions of power, exploitation, and equity were among the most debated topics within ethnography during the period in which I completed my dissertation. And a long list of ethnographers—beginning with James Agee (see Agee and Walker [1941] 1960)—have wrestled with the fact that they have more to gain from their research than their subjects do. However, while academically acquainted with such concerns, I wasn't prepared for the emotional intensity with which they affected me once I had established personal relationships with Clay and Serena. The emotional stress and "secondary trauma" (Singer et al. 2001) I experienced affected me at nearly every stage of my fieldwork, obscuring my focus on the concerns and goals that first led me to initiate the study while inhibiting my capacity to make sound judgments in difficult circumstances. In this sense, my emotional distress was not subsidiary to the research itself. That is, it was not something that could be bracketed and postponed until the project was completed, as doctoral candidates are sometimes advised to do. A feature of many fieldwork settings and a shaping force within ethical decision making, emotional stress and secondary trauma warrant planning and preparation before one enters the field. I believe the same to be true of the ethical decisions likely to be encountered in fieldwork.

GUIDELINES FOR ETHICAL DECISION MAKING DURING FIELDWORK

Traditionally, ethnographers have viewed fieldwork as its own teacher. Maurice Punch (1994) locates this view in the "somewhat pragmatic, if not reductionist, tradition" exemplified by the learn-by-doing approach of the Chicago School. Conversely, notes Punch (1994, 83), others see in the "inherent moral pitfalls of participant observation" and the "essentially 'political' nature of all field research" ample reason to require "careful consideration and preparation before someone should be allowed to enter the field." Steven Taylor (1987) has argued this view, which is assumed by the human subjects review process (Sieber 1992, 1998). Despite his own struggles with ethical dilemmas encountered in fieldwork, Punch (1994) argues "forcibly for the

'get out and do it' perspective," fearing that a "highly restrictive model for research" would "prevent academics from exploring complex social realities" (p. 83). Among researchers who have discussed the ethics of ethnographic research on juveniles, Eder and Corsaro (1999) make the strongest case for the "learn by doing" or "get out and do it" position; following Taylor, I now oppose it.

Eder and Corsaro (1999) maintain that ethical decisions made on the basis of a reflexive participant observation are necessarily more valid than decisions governed by preexisting guidelines. In making this claim, they quite deliberately extend the "dialectical" and "self-correcting" nature of theorizing within ethnography to ethical decision making. They write,

This ethical dilemma is related to another aspect of objectivity. An important aspect of science is learning to follow systematic procedures in data collection, coding, and analysis. However, ethnography provides the opportunity to be flexible regarding these procedures as our understanding changes during the course of a study. We have already discussed the value of this flexibility for the development of theory. It is important that we extend this same flexibility to other aspects of ethnography. By training ethnographers to modify their behavior based on the needs of the situation, both ethically and theoretically, we can better address ethical dilemmas as they arise. A variety of solutions to each dilemma could be explored at the time, arriving at the best solution for that particular situation. (p. 528)

My experience challenges the efficacy of this advice, which represents a specific version of the widely recommended "judgment in context" position endorsed by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 277). When viewed pragmatically in terms of their consequences, my decisions were best when I broke from this advice and worst when I followed it. Notably, given the tragic upshot of my study and Clay's status as a juvenile, it proved enormously important that I had (1) reviewed similar studies with an eye to the ethical dilemmas encountered by previous ethnographers and (2) established conservative guidelines before entering the field.

My review of the ethical dilemmas faced by Jankowski (1991), Williams (1989), and Sullivan (1990) acquainted me with much more than precedent. Reading these accounts, I was able to place myself in the position of each author, imagining my response to the circumstances

they described. Doing so convinced me that my research questions did not require the observation of illegal behavior and, more important, that my background and persona as a teacher rendered me professionally and personally unsuited for such observations. This points up the value of case-study collections of ethical dilemmas, such as those collected in the American Anthropological Association's *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology* (Cassel and Jacobs 1987), and the importance of expanding scholarly discussion of "researchers' encounters with ethical dilemmas, and their ways of confronting them" (Christensen and Prout 2002).

These reflections were of enormous significance to my fieldwork, heightening my caution while helping me establish ethical guidelines before I entered the field. Most important, I significantly reduced the ethical dilemmas I faced by deciding in advance not to observe Clay's criminal activities or street life. While ethnographers often become forced to "avoid certain parts of the field" (Taylor 1987) for ethical reasons, this typically happens only after they've experienced an acute dilemma themselves, as Van Maanen (1983) did when observing violent police officers. Determining in advance how I wished to limit my observations of Clay helped ensure the feasibility of my study by enabling me to avoid such an experience. Similarly, given the violence that occurred over the course of my research, I am thankful to have pledged never to say or imply that illegal behavior was ever justified. These guidelines made possible the "mobile positioning" (Metcalf 2002) I sought, enabling me to simultaneously engage in fieldwork within Clay's family and the juvenile court. More important, they brought order and stability to an ethnography otherwise rife with complexity and chaos, making possible my exploration of the mercurial social reality of Clay's life.

Consequently, following Sieber (1992, 1998), I believe ethnographers should establish ethical guidelines and parameters before entering the field and that institutional review boards are justified in demanding that they do so. An ethnographer might require sustained participant observation—say, over the course of two years of ethnographic study—to be sufficiently prepared to make valid ethical decisions on the fly. Prior to that point, researchers would do well not to base ethical decisions on their study. We don't expect ethnographers to be able to generate valid scholarly findings while conducting fieldwork. Why would we expect

them to be able to make valid ethical decisions at the same point? Consider my decision to give the hundred dollars to Granmomma.

My decision to give Granmomma this money struck me as decidedly valid given her role as the family matriarch and money holder. Serena had made the request assertively, and I understood it as part of the kinship obligation I had entered into as a “big brother.” Moreover, I saw Clay’s request that we use the money toward the electricity bill as generous, an indication that he had begun to put his family’s needs ahead of his own. This action confirmed statements he had made in our last series of interviews. Finally, Clay had repeatedly made clear that Granmomma was the most important person in his life, a woman he said he loved even more than his mother. That is, my decision to give the money to Granmomma was grounded in the very kind of reflexive participant observation Eder and Corsaro (1999) recommend ethnographers employ in making ethical decisions. Indeed, I could not have imagined a circumstance in which Clay would deliberately defy or steal from Granmomma—yet that is exactly what he did.

Once again, this decision did not impede the research. It too was instructive. It made possible my finding that the combined pressures and excitement of late-night drug selling—intensified within the local culture of masculine street life in Clay’s neighborhood—proved so great that he would sacrifice anyone and anything to maintain his standing within it. Yet, despite all it taught me, and despite its basis within my reflexive participant observation, the decision may have been a small part of a larger sequence of events that led to a man’s death because Clay apparently used that hundred dollars to buy the cocaine he sold that night. Having grieved over that decision, I can say that on this point, Eder and Corsaro (1999) are markedly wrong: ethical decision making is decidedly unlike conceptual theorizing exactly because it is not self-correcting. There is no correcting for a dead man.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Determining the extent of my responsibility in the events I have described is necessarily difficult. These events—or events much like them—might have occurred had I never met the family. And my discussion of these events may be influenced by an exaggerated sense of my

importance to them. I may also have constructed a false binary in framing my argument for establishing ethical guidelines prior to beginning fieldwork against the learn-by-doing position. While noting that his position is to “argue forcibly for the ‘get out and do it’ perspective,” for instance, Punch (1994) adds that “no one in his or her right mind would support a carefree, amateuristic, and unduly naïve approach to qualitative research” (p. 84). The question is one of balance, of determining to what extent ethnographers can prepare for ethical and emotional challenges prior to entering the field and to what extent they can depend on knowledge derived from an ongoing study to resolve dilemmas encountered in that study. I believe the balance between these two bases of decision making should be shifted toward preparations made before entering the field—particularly in the case of research on vulnerable populations, including juveniles and illegal drug users and sellers. Knowledge derived from ongoing fieldwork is necessarily tentative and often unsuitable for decisions that may affect the lives of vulnerable research subjects. Conversely, a thorough literature review of ethical dilemmas faced by previous ethnographers, such as this case study, can provide a vicarious experience of the dilemmas and circumstances a researcher should be prepared to encounter. These include perennial questions—such as the extent of responsibility researchers have for the safety and well-being of their subjects—and commonly encountered emotional difficulties—including “secondary trauma” and anxieties over the fair treatment and compensation of research subjects.

Given the importance of small details within ethnographic contexts, no exact recipe for ethical fieldwork can be written. Certainly, as Taylor (1987) notes, “Conducting fieldwork is not a justification for turning one’s back on the suffering of human beings” (p. 299). Yet, fieldwork is not social work, and as my case study demonstrates, well-meaning efforts to help can easily go awry. Wedged between these assertions, many ethical and emotional dilemmas remain open to multiple readings. I now believe that I should not have abandoned my dissertation and that I should not have given Granmomma the hundred dollars I had set aside for Clay’s restitution. I am also convinced that I should have established resources and procedures for dealing with emotional distress before I entered the field. But was I wrong to have arranged Serena’s drug and alcohol rehabilitation? Was this outside the circle of my responsibility for their well-being or too close to my experience of arranging alcohol rehabilitation for my own mother? Should I have

interpreted the dream in which Clay appeared as my son as proof that my emotional involvement in his life had become excessive? Should I not have paid their water and electric bills? Should we not have exchanged Christmas gifts? Many ethnographers establish fictive kinship relationships with their subjects (Delgado-Gaitan 1994), and I saw my interventions as well within the scope of my appointed role as a big brother to Clay. Yet, their consequences beg the question of their appropriateness. Hence, I must also ask whether I would have done better, as Daniel advised, to have observed but not participated, standing aside and documenting the family's self-destruction?

On these questions, I am undecided. I am sure, however, that a researcher who considers these and other dilemmas ethnographers have faced will be better prepared for fieldwork than I was. A reflexive familiarity with such questions and a tentative delineation of ethical guidelines and emotional safeguards can bring order and consistency to a researcher's response to chaotic events and ethical difficulties, heightening the good likely to result from his or her decisions. As researchers, we build on the knowledge generated by our predecessors and our peers. Why should it be any different for our ethical decisions?

NOTE

1. A separate form of utilitarianism, rule utilitarianism, focuses not on the consequences of any one action but on the consequences of general rules. Within this ethical system, individuals make their decisions in terms of rules selected on the basis of the general consequences of their adoption. Problematically, debate and discussion of the ethical conduct of ethnographic field research draws from both systems. Confidentiality agreements rely on the logic of rule utilitarianism, for instance, whereas arguments about the uniqueness of each situation and the necessity of each ethnographer to make a "judgment in context" (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 277) rest on the logic of act utilitarianism. In many ways, the "two lines of reasoning" I've traced reflect distinctions between these two forms of utilitarianism.

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