

Research in Contexts of Extreme Suffering: Ethical and Existential Questions

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Just after Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America in November of 1998, I accompanied a professional writer and photographer from New York City to Honduras for her investigative research. We visited communities ravaged, crops flooded, infrastructure destroyed, and already precarious houses demolished. People were in shock, still coming to grips with the disaster that left ten thousand dead and countless homeless. We witnessed people ripped suddenly from the few material possessions they had worked a lifetime to acquire, their whole communal landscape in rubble. Photos pictured some still on rooftops waving and waiting for rescue. I will never forget the unease and disorientation produced by assisting in the documentation of that extreme suffering and then jetting back to New York to celebrate a delayed Thanksgiving holiday.

At that time, I asked myself: How can I be part of taking pictures of suffering, listen to stories and produce an article without doing anything directly to alleviate the human pain? It is a question which has haunted me ever since and pushed me to integrate research and writing with humanitarian service and human rights advocacy.

In these current times of COVID-19, when Hurricanes Eta and Iota have destroyed Central America with yet greater force, a series of existential and ethical questions have returned to echo in my mind and heart. The pandemics of hunger and domestic violence that accompany COVID-19, along with the militarization of civil society and widespread violation of human rights, demand deep reflection and discerned response. I write as an exercise and exploration, an attempt to join others in ongoing dialogue and seasoned action.

What ethical frameworks guide our academic research in cases of extreme suffering? What is our primary motive for carrying out the study? What are our secondary and tertiary motives? With whom do we define our methodology and refine our content? Who is our audience? How do the subjects under study receive the research products?

One could argue that investigative research in the social sciences has as its purpose—or at least one of its consequences—the alleviation of human suffering through its impacts on public policy. This can happen through illumination of little known or poorly understood situations of social oppression, and through exploration and definition of root causes with a particular emphasis on structural violence. Still, one could ask: Does the goal of alleviating suffering more broadly justify the sometimes very detached approach to the one researched? Even if so, what are the deeper ethical implications of the researcher-subject relationship in terms of direct responsibility of the researcher toward the one suffering?

Clearly, an intention to alleviate suffering directly does not imply effective relief, especially in situations of violent conflict where directly assisting certain individuals or groups can increase political polarization and conflict (Anderson 1999). Still, that does not justify the elimination of the professional responsibility to ask the important ethical questions; rather, it makes the subtle professional exploration of the questions even more necessary.

A few years after Hurricane Mitch, I learned about the work of Harvard medical anthropologists and sinologists Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman (1997) on cultural representations of social suffering

and their moral complexities. I was surprised, relieved, disturbed, and challenged. The Kleinmans describe the global consumption of images of distant suffering as a form of entertainment that promotes social apathy and reinforces neocolonial imaginaries of passivity and inferiority of non-Western cultures. They interrogate appropriation of suffering which results in professional reward yet often involves moral failure to act humanely to prevent or mitigate the suffering.

Among the examples explored by the Kleinmans is that of white South African photographer Kevin Carter. Carter won a Pulitzer Prize for a photograph depicting a tiny child in Sudan, naked, emaciated, and collapsed on an arid, empty terrain with a vulture peering patiently close by at its possible prey. The photograph riveted the conscience of the world when it was published in the *New York Times* in March 1993 and was reproduced widely. It provoked outrage at the situation of war famine in Sudan, spurring an outpouring of international aid. At the same time, the image catalyzed deep questioning about the relationship of the photographer toward the one child, who faced imminent danger, serving as a classic case concerning the professional ethics of documenting suffering. The Kleinmans (1997, 8) describe: “Kevin Carter won the Pulitzer Prize, but that victory, as substantial as it was, was won because of the misery (and probable death) of a nameless little girl. That more dubious side of the appropriation of human misery in the globalization of cultural processes is what must be addressed.”

It is important to note that Kevin Carter was part of a group of photojournalists who were invited to Sudan precisely to raise awareness and support to alleviate the crisis. He dedicated his career to documenting extreme suffering on the continent, witnessing horrors. A few months after winning the Pulitzer Prize, he shocked the world once again when he committed suicide, writing, “I am haunted by the vivid memories of killing and corpses and anger and pain . . . of starving or wounded children” (cited in MacLeod 1994, 73). With his suicide at age 33, Kevin Carter could no longer be reduced in the public imaginary to a kind of professional predator

but became a victim himself, victim of the very suffering he documented, which left him in despair once the required detachment dissolved.

Recent work on the effects of war illustrates not just trauma from witnessing and perpetrating violence but also moral injury. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini (2012, xv) describe moral injury as occurring with the violation of “core moral beliefs” which eliminates the sense of “a reliable, meaningful world” and the possibility of being regarded as “a decent human being.” When persons realize they have acted against their basic moral conscience, they fall into spiritual crisis and self-rejection, and sometimes resort to suicide. The remedy for moral injury requires something beyond trauma healing: soul repair. Reading the situation of Kevin Carter from the frame of moral injury sheds light on his existential suffering. Even those closest to him “wondered aloud why he had not helped” the starving child (MacLeod 1994, 73).

It is convenient to project onto Kevin Carter the ills of a whole society. And yet, are not all passive consumers, viewers, and readers of extreme suffering also participating in a kind of social voyeurism that ignores the social responsibility to act out of the most basic sense of human compassion? Indeed, Carter’s suicide is a wake-up call to all for greater ethical sensibility. As the Kleinmans highlight, Carter’s suicide made clear the moral complexities: “The suffering of the representer and the represented interfuses. . . . The disintegration of the subject/object dichotomy implicates us all” (1997, 7).

This classic, fraught case from photojournalism can serve to highlight essential questions for our own research methodology in social sciences in these times of crisis. Patricio Guerrero Arias (2018), Ecuadorean anthropologist, has coined the verb *corazonar* to refer to the epistemology of Abya Yala, a way of heart-mind knowing based not solely on analytical understanding but on something much more holistic, reflecting a deeper and broader intuitive wisdom. Embracing emotions as inseparable from knowledge helps to minimize the likelihood of harmful actions (or inaction) toward ourselves or others. How closely in touch are we with our own vulnerability—intellectual,

emotional, physical—in carrying out research in such trying times? When, where, and to whom do we turn for ongoing support for discernment of our ethical rigor? How can we move the relationship between researcher and researched toward greater mutuality, retaining healthy boundaries for the relationship to flourish and interacting from a stance of *corazonar*, maintaining connection to the wisdom of shared emotions of pain and joy?

Modern physics and mysticism both point to the illusion of a separate self and to the profound interdependence of all things. Upon observing, that which one observes changes. Subject and object are interrelated, both transformed through the interaction. What implications does this truth of nonseparation have for social science research?

How can we go beyond the dualism between researcher and subject while still recognizing social power inequalities? How can we transform perpetrator/victim frameworks toward ones of greater human mutuality and reciprocity? How do we shape the methodology and content of our work with respect to the desires, interests, and needs of the communities in which and with whom we work? To what extent do we engage ourselves in those communities, furthering collective goals defined locally? What is our commitment to the well-being of the subjects of our research over the short and long terms? How do we represent them in our writing? How might they represent themselves in our publications?

At the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), Ecuador, a new program for public involvement has created opportunities to connect research to community service and accompaniment even through the multiple pandemics. Multiple teams of professors and staff have created projects of social engagement with communities they have come to know well through their professional pursuits. One initiative by Professor Betty Espinosa of the Public Affairs Department involves supporting work in the Andean Highlands of Cotacachi with Kichwa women leaders Magdalena Fueres and Ines Bonilla and their colleagues. We have held a series of on-site workshops in a large communal center every three weeks for 12 to 20 women and

girls in collaboration with Ibeth Orellana of the NGO Shungo, dedicated to individual healing and collective transformation. The women have welcomed the supportive space for deepening personal and group strength in the face of the current social challenges. Their energetic leadership and creativity continues to inspire. In responding to the food crisis, they quickly moved from food delivery to households in need, to planting home vegetable gardens, to organizing collective gardens of high-protein beans, to planning exchanges of seeds and produce.

The Kichwa women leaders of Cotacachi are part of a broader movement of indigenous and rural women who have responded to the pandemics with courageous collective action. Indeed, a call has emerged within the continent among women defenders of land-body territories, a reminder that they come from a long legacy of women ancestors who maintained and sustained life. Life will continue.

There are many examples of engaged research in Latin America with leaders over the long term which promotes sustained social change, highlighting and supporting their resiliency in the face of social structures which produce and reproduce extreme suffering. That work is more urgent and more challenging now.

One very original participatory research project that has been carried out with indigenous women of the Amazon is “Sacha Samay: Breath of life in times of pandemic.” A multidisciplinary team of diverse women professors, students, healers, and defenders of the Amazon has created a series of seven audiovisual chapters, publically available without cost, on the “power of the jungle to reestablish the cycles of life and heal . . . the will to resist, to live.” The collective work, led by FLACSO-Ecuador professors Lisset Coba of the Sociology and Gender Studies Department and Ivette Vallejo of the Environmental Studies Department, seeks to make visible the knowledge and anti-extractivist struggles of indigenous women of various nationalities, documenting how they are experiencing the pandemic. According to the team, “Sacha Samay is the result of persistence, alliances and flexibility, that is to say of forms of

cooperating, yielding and adapting ourselves to the circumstances as a way of working and as our political research commitment” (Coba et al. 2020; translation mine). All communication was carried out online using various virtual platforms and media vehicles. Researchers conducted interviews based on empathetic listening; indigenous leaders were also invited to produce their own videos and share representations and messages from social media sources.

The Sacha Samay research project was possible because of the strong networks already in place among diverse women and was motivated by a desire to stay in touch and support each other amid the anxiety produced not just by the pandemic but by the large number of new, destructive extractivist megaprojects. Both its content and methodology reflect a recognition of the interdependence of all life and the need to act together across borders and boundaries to save ourselves and our planet. I conclude with the words of the research team: “In our dialogues with wise women defenders of the jungle, we have learned that the pandemic is occurring because the world is sick due to abuse by humanity, we have learned that the world needs to heal and that much of the healing comes from the jungle. The effort to maintain life is the learning. *Samay* or breath is the resistance that maintains the people with life.”

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