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Anthropology Op-Ed

The air that engulfs me is hot and sticky. I find myself shuffling alongside my burly father trying, without much success, to find refuge from the sun. It is August 8, 2008 in Oneida County. We are fixing cattle fence as part of cooperation between dry-land farmers, cattle ranchers, and the Bureau of Land Management. Of all the things that happen during the blistering hot project, one stands out more vibrant than the others. It isn’t the heat, it isn’t even seeing a rattlesnake, it is finding the photo of myself in the newspaper the following morning.

I felt, as many of the people studied by anthropologists do, deceived. I hadn’t seen one single camera during the entire project. I had not been asked if my picture could be taken and yet, there I am, red flannel shirt and all, on the front page. What the photographer did was legal; however I was never asked for my consent. Money and recognition would be gained by the photographer, but wasn’t that ME in the picture? How could I know if laws and ethics were to be maintained in regards to my photo? Simply, I couldn’t. I felt as if a bit of me had been stolen, and there was nothing I could do about it.

The idea of a “common rule” is not new in anthropological research. Since 1991 such a rule has, in fact, been a law governing how ethnographic research is gone about. Just as in the example above, laws and regulations are necessary to protect the liberties and rights of any subject being considered and studied.

There are many benefits to having and adhering to such regulation as the common rule. The syphilis experiments in Guatemala from 1946 to 1948 would not have had their eventual negative outcome. In fact, a large number of those affected negatively by the experiments could have been helped if strict regulations had been in place.

In the case of the Yanomami, blood samples were collected from many without even informing them as to why it was necessary. Donors were promised that the research being collected would eventually be used to help fight disease. It was not. If regulations had been specific and followed up on afterwards, progress could and would have been made. In the cases of both the syphilis experiments in Guatemala, and collection of blood samples of the Yanomami, the results were frankly embarrassing. Focus should however, not be put into blaming of individuals or groups, but into learning from our past mistakes and not repeating them.

While the advantages of a common rule greatly outweigh the disadvantages, there are certain aspects of the current policy that could potentially slow down important research. A lag in the anthropological community will be had if these issues are not promptly dealt with. One such potential aspect that common rule establishes are institutional review boards, which a potential study must go through before being approved. Many of these review boards have lost their initial focus. Said boards and members of them, may begin to put their own political and personal bias into their judgment instead of trying to see if a study will benefit the scientific community and world at large. We cannot place a large amount of blame on such committees seeing as how they consist of imperfect humans just like ourselves, however a call for bipartisanship can be made.

It will be necessary for both anthropologists and those who regulate how they study to come together. Not come together merely to trifle with trivial pursuits, but to engage in serious compromise, one with the other, for the benefit of scientific knowledge everywhere. It is high time that we, as a race who consider ourselves “intelligent”, put aside the petty banter of those who have a view we find different from our own. Only when these changes are considered and put into effect will real progress be made.

Experiments with potentially harmful effects can be averted. Native peoples can gain trust once again that researchers value their promises and keep them. The often slow, weighed down committees can become more efficient and understanding. Regulation by means of the common law is necessary to achieve these benefits, but it will take everyone, working together, to turn it into the quickly functioning, protecting system it is intended to be.

When and if life decides to give me the fortune of meeting my sneaky photographer again, things will be different. I expect that he or she will walk up to me, ask my name, and politely ask if I would consider being in a photograph. My reply will be “Sure, no problem.” Just as I expect adherence to rules by my future photographer, I hope they will expect the same of me.