

# ANTHROPOLOGISTS, ECONOMIC RETRIBUTION AND INFORMANTS: NOTES ABOUT ETHICS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** This paper disserts about the link between ethics in social anthropology and economic retribution to informants during fieldwork. After feeling guilty to use money and gifts in our work as a ‘technique’ to establish, to keep, to build and to rebuild relationships with research subjects we also noticed that there is a contradiction between what it is said and what it is done among co-workers. They condemn publicly the use of incentives, compensations or rewards to approach research subjects; nevertheless, they use them. Hence, we did a research and found that it is not only an insufficient debated issue, also a taboo. Moreover, none of the ethical codes revised offer guidelines to conduct ethically the process of economic retribution to informants. We begin the essay by comparing experimental and social sciences while recruiting informants for their researches. Then, we present some evidence about the use of money and gifts to recruit participants, as some anthropologist, such as Malinowski and Rabinow, have done, to show that it has been a useful technique during history of social anthropology. Finally, we discuss differences between voluntary, altruist and paid and unpaid informants.

**Keywords:** ethics, social anthropology, economic retribution, Latin America

## INTRODUCTION

The mandatory obedience to codes of ethics in diverse branches of experimental sciences has emerged in a particular historic context and, subsequently, it has been established as an unquestionable condition for research on human subjects. Ethics for experimentation on humans

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have its origin in the process of awareness raising associated with abuses committed –principally but not exclusively– by doctors in concentration camps during the Nazi Germany (Achío 2006). In this regard, it is understandable the existence of international organizations whose commissions and codes of ethics control, rule and watch those experiments. Nowadays, ethical codes aim, in substance, at protecting research subjects, avoiding harming them or compensating them for injuries caused, as well as at promoting respectful practices.

Comparatively, in social sciences, the question of ethical dilemmas and its solution has taken a different way. At present, according to Santi (2013), there are not norms of ethics shared worldwide; the dynamic of codes and ethical committees varies from country to country, in some of them are inexistent, or –as in the case of the United States and Canada– the same criteria are applied to experimental and social sciences. In Latin America –Santi holds–, it is even debated whether social research could harm communities, groups or participants. Most of the time, social inquiries are considered innocuous and the ethical problems faced are thought minimum. In countries such as Mexico, to follow minimum ethical norms remains at social researchers' discretion, due to the lack of ethical codes, committees and organizations, which examine and sanction ethical development of social investigations.

In the particular case of social anthropology, it is common that codes of ethics are linked to universities, regional or national organizations, although there is still few of them. Some of the associations and schools around the world that have ethical codes are: the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in the United States; the Association of Social Anthropologist of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA); the School of Anthropologist of Chile (CACH); and the Brazilian Association of Anthropology (ABA) (Villa, 2010). In 2014, the School of Ethnologists and Social Anthropologists of Mexico (CEAS) also published the first Code of Ethics of the country. Nevertheless, those codes contain *guidelines* for anthropological practice, which violation does not imply institutional sanctions –except for the possible expulsion from the associations–. They are structured in terms of responsibilities or good practices that researcher should consider (Iphofen 2012).

The main problem is that ethical dilemmas are usually part of the 'hidden archive' of social researchers, instead of being objects of reflection and discussion. By considering them a 'personal matter' they

are not socialized because “it is inconvenient to admit neither weaknesses nor doubts as a researcher; it compromises the acceptability of the inquiry” (Figueroa 2005, 69). Private issues are named as “non-anthropological”, “non-pertinent” or “trivial” (Barley 1989, 21); fact that contributes to keep the issue in silence and out of social debate. This is the case of economic compensations offered to informants, in experimental and social sciences, in order to attract and keep their interest in collaborating with their studies.

Besides its hidden and personal distinctive feature, economic compensation seems to be also a taboo (Fernández 2003). Indeed, none of the codes of ethics mentioned above offer information about this matter, albeit there is enough evidence about the practice in history of anthropology (i.e. Barley 1989; Malinowski 1989; Rabinow 1992; Guber 2013). It is assumed, uncritically, the altruistic, voluntary, and unpaid participation of informants. Granted that, the present paper exposes germinal reflections about ethical implications of a possible monetary ‘reward’ to informants, reflections that are a result of a difficult process of self-analysis about our own experience during fieldwork.<sup>1</sup> We begin our line of argument by comparing some characteristics of experimental and social sciences while recruiting informants. In our opinion, the main difference is that the first ones work *on* human beings, whereas the second ones conduct their researches *with* them. Then, we present classical authors who suggest the importance of gifts and money during fieldwork. Finally, we discourse on the characterization of altruism, voluntary participation and paid/unpaid informants.

## RESEARCH *ON* HUMANS AND *WITH* HUMANS

According to international ethical norms, experimental inquiries during human experimentation stages must follow an indisputable condition: the *voluntary* participation of people interested in collaborating. Their explicit and free willingness to volunteer must be stated by an *informed consent*, expressed in writing and signed after the explanation of the experiment, its risks and consequences. In those phases, one of the most important debates are economic incentives, rewards or compensations offered to people for their enrolment in research.

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<sup>1</sup> Cajas has looked into violence associated with drug trafficking in Mexico and the United States; Pérez has enquired into sexual consent among college students in Mexico City.

Following McNeill (1997) and Abadie (2015), to offer economic compensations is unethical because it constraints and influences people's motives to sign up for experiments, wounding the altruism of voluntary participation and, consequently, vitiating informed consent. Offering a monetary compensation could influence the willingness of people to take unnecessary risks. Risks which, given different circumstances, they would not take under any payment.<sup>2</sup> Money, for other authors (Wilkinson and Moore 1999; Stones and MacMillan 2010; Talukder 2011), is necessary to compensate participants for their time, their efforts and inconveniences caused, in addition to the risks they are exposed during their participation. Even though a lot of experimental researchers 'pay' to volunteers; laws, regulations and international ethical guides provide scarce specific information to conduct this process (Bentley and Thacker 2004).

Arellano, Hall and Hernández (2014) argue that some people find in tests or experiments a way to live; they assume their participation as a professional job, calling themselves 'guinea pigs'. They are paid volunteers who look for opportunities in universities and laboratories. Recourse to human beings and ask them to participate voluntarily in life-threatening experiments –under the promise of a greater good to humanity–, releases opposite opinions: "Laboratories know that they cannot recruit people without paying them. Bioethists habitually think that people should collaborate as an altruistic act. Guinea pigs believe they must be better paid" (Arellano, Hall and Hernández 2014, 59). In defence of monetary inducements, the European Union adduced the following points:

There are lots of areas of life (notably employment and shopping) where modifying people's behaviour through monetary reward is thought to be unproblematic. So why should research be any different? Researchers themselves normally get paid for doing the research so why should the research subjects remain unrewarded? There are many occupations where people get paid, or paid extra, for undertaking especially dangerous work (e.g. diving, military, mining). Why should research be any different? Rewarding research subjects is often good for them, especially if they really do need the

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<sup>2</sup> There are not enough researches to affirm a positive relation between the quantity of money and the level of risks that people are ready to take for an exorbitant sum of money. As stated by Bentley and Thacker's inquiry (2004), payments have positive effects on students' willingness to take part on clinical experiments despite risks. However, higher monetary payments did not appear to blind respondents to risks.

money or the medical treatment that is on offer. If research participants are paid too little (or not paid at all) would this not be a form of exploitation, or a case of unjust underpayment? (2010, 38).

Stones and McMillan (2010) contend that there is nothing unethical in inducing or compensating people participation in experiments; the problem emerges when the promise of a good economic reward constitutes a way of obtaining their informed consent. In a moral sense, Talukder (2011) states, inducements could be adequate or excessive; the quantity of money offered is the key. In contrast, not to compensate economically at all would be, indeed, exploitation.

In social sciences, in contrast, it is uncommon to talk about inducing, compensating or rewarding voluntary collaboration of research subjects, although, in Latin American social anthropology, ‘retribution’ is a strong ethical element of good practices –despite the lack of specific guides to manage this issue during fieldwork–. Likewise, formal consent (oral or written) is advised, but the impossibility of always obtain it is recognised.<sup>3</sup> The Association of Social Anthropologist (ASA) of the UK and the Commonwealth hold the necessity of a ‘faire return for assistance’ in the following words: “There should be no economic exploitation of individual informants, translators, groups and research participants or cultural or biological materials; fair return should be made for their help and services” (2011, 6). Notwithstanding, the ASA does not offer more guidance about possible ways to compensate or reward participants. Discussions, usually, come down to advise the ‘adequate return of results’ (Gómez 2013), without discussing or proposing alternatives to do it.

That said, it is clear that to induce, compensate or reward informants for their collaboration with material or economic ‘gifts’ is a

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<sup>3</sup> This formula has proved to be an unfeasible solution and hardly ever effective in social anthropology, because the majority of ethical dilemmas cannot be solved by a form. Ethical dilemmas are contextual and depend on the relationship that each researcher establishes with people during fieldwork; consequently, there are not universal answers (Del Olmo 2010). The problems with applying standard ethical criteria to experimental and social sciences equally have commenced to emerge in countries such as the United States, England and Canada (Santi 2013). Usually, ethical committees do not consider particularities of ethnography and participant observation, turning into legalistic spaces not adjusted to practice of anthropology. Furthermore, the formality of ‘requirement’ ignores the numerous techniques used by anthropologists to obtain information: corridor talks, informal interviews, listening to talks by coincidence, etc.

difficult and silenced matter. It appears as anecdotal information, lost between the lines of anthropologists' field diaries. Paradoxically, to give gifts or money to people in communities to obtain information has been a functional technique –even necessary– over the course of history of social anthropology. Malinowski, for example, suggested the importance of gifts to facilitate rapprochement to Trobriand people and to push them to help: “Ahuita and I took a walk around his garden and I visited inside the houses. I regretted not to having with me tobacco and candies, since that makes more difficult my contact with people” (Malinowski 1989, 40). Barley, in turn, argues that economic negotiation is a complex process, intricate with relations between anthropologists and informants:

When [the witch] started to question about the convenience of allowing that a non-circumcised man approaches to the containers I knew that he only wanted to put obstacles. It is unnecessary for foreigners to be circumcised to witness Dowayo rituals; even woman presence is tolerated. We commenced to talk about money. I was one hour shaking my head with horrify expression each time that he told me a number. At the end, we reached an agreement on a price. It did not seem to me a swindle to pay eight pounds for the maximum secret of Dowayo country, quantity that, at the same time, gave me the right to half a goat (Barley 1989, 207).

In the same way, Esther Hermitte (2013) relates –referring to her fieldwork with Tzeltal people in Pinola, Chiapas, Mexico–, the numerous times she had to buy alcohol for her informants, offer them gifts, provide them with medicines, lend them money or pay them directly; with the purpose of building, knitting and keeping bonds of trust and reciprocity. Moreover, when she entered into the community, she had to adopt locally significant roles, such as being godmother or *comadre*, acquiring at that moment unavoidable economic responsibilities with members of the community:

My *compadres* or my *comadres* or my goddaughters or anyone else visit me (in my house) to borrow me money... And, by the way, talking about money, my *compadre* Alberto Ga. is one of those who have chosen me as a local branch of Bank of Mexico par excellence... In recent weeks, almost at the same time that the *compadrazgo* has been established he has started to exploit me. At the beginning with gentleness and respect, always adults used to

come. And of course they were right, they needed the money (Guber 2013, 240).<sup>4</sup>

Usually, according to Fernández (2003), to give money to informants or members of a community is an imperative of local norms. Learning such norms, as the economic compensation, constitutes an essential part of the access to the possibility to learn from them. Just as the *comensalidad* (to drink and to eat together) represents a typical rite of aggregation in some groups –Fernández asserts–, offering money to people according to their social rank is also a sign of respect and prestige; it is the case of the *potlach*. To indigenous people, anthropologists (white or mixed) represent opulence and richness, then “informants know that whether we are interested in conducting fieldwork is because we obtain some type of benefit; that benefit requires reciprocity and in all cultures there are ways to compensate” (Fernández 2003, 164).

At the same time, in opinion of Rabinow (1992), the economic matter supposes a negotiation between researcher and informants; frequently, both of them have different points of view about the same bond:

Ibrahim was pressed to see if I was ready to pay his travel. When, after many confusion and insecurity for my part I rejected it (principally because at that time I did not have enough money), Ibrahim backed out and took out his wallet. He was maximizing his forces, exploiting the situation economically... We had been working together for more than a month and he felt now that he could push our contractual limits more in his favour... Basically, I considered him a friend because of the apparently personal bond we had established. Ibrahim, however, less confused than me, considered me a resource base (Rabinow 1992, 45).

One of the essential differences between experimental and social sciences is that the formers work *on* human beings and the latters work *with* them (Ramos 2004). This suggests, in anthropological terms, that

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<sup>4</sup> In this context, godmother/godfather and *comadre/compadre* are different concepts. The first one refers to the person who presents a child at baptism and promises to take responsibility for their religious education (definition taken from Oxford dictionary), whereas the second one is a ritual bond established in other celebrations, such as 15<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration or weddings. In both cases, there are ‘godmothers’ and ‘godfathers’ of alcohol (beer, tequila, mezcal), cake, meal, hall, and etcetera. Finally, *compadrazgo* is the relationship resulting from that ritual bond.

intersubjective bonds are built and rebuilt between researcher and informants in particular conditions of time and space. Those bonds are dynamic and they are never selfless, neither for anthropologists nor for research subjects. ‘To pay or not to pay them’ is a negotiation matter, on account of non-static social relationships (Mallimaci and Giménez 2006). Economic compensation is an intrinsic part of fieldwork and of the familiarization with *otherness* and *other’s* rationality, as well as a condition of possibility to gain access to cultural capital of the community studied; fact that, nevertheless, does not assure certainties to researchers. They choose their key informants, consider samples of the group and discriminate information, to the same extent as informants choose how, when and to whom give information. Considering this, it is necessary to look for “activities socially meaningful, which provide information” (e.g. civic and religious celebrations and birthdays) (Guber 2013, 256). Certainly, we are not talking about ‘buying’ information, but about using economic compensations as an instrument to access to informants and to information they possess; as a vehicle to build social bonds, reactivate them and keep them.

#### VOLUNTARY, ALTRUISTIC AND UNPAID INFORMANTS

The problem in social sciences, in general, and in social anthropology, in particular, is that ethically it is promoted, not only a voluntary participation of informants, but also unpaid, as a way to build equitable relations with research subjects. Money, it could be inferred, corrupts relations of trust, solidarity and friendship; relations that should be built between researchers and informants. Juan Guillermo Figueroa (2005) proclaims that informants’ participation must result from *altruism*, due to researchers’ moral authority or from recognition of research relevance; besides, he insists on promoting a ‘meaningful return’ of information. In his opinion, one of the ethical conditions of studies should be the selfless collaboration of people and the reciprocity of the researcher on the same terms. From this point of view, altruism and return would be two concepts closely related. Nonetheless, it is necessary to say that, during fieldwork, that does not happen in that way: even when there is no money, we are always thinking about compensating informants with a ‘gift’.

In accordance with Oxford dictionary, the term ‘altruism’ means acting disinterested and selfless for the well-being of others. This goal would be reached, for example, at participating in experimental and

social inquiries, which redound in benefit of a community, a village or Humanity in general. Guinea pigs or informants are directly or indirectly –and with independence of their own motives–, altruistic people, inasmuch as their participation contributes to scientific advance or to the enlargement of the universe of human discourse, as Clifford Geertz would say. Social and scientific advance is an aim of researchers, not of the people we work with or people we work on.

Altruism does not seem to exclude an economic compensation or other type of rewards. A person could cooperate for philanthropic motives and to receive, simultaneously, a gift card with money (Jozkowski 2013); extra points in a grade (Babin 2013); or cash for their time (Vannier and O’Sullivan 2010). All of them are ways to encourage voluntary participation of informants. The same applies when anthropologists, in order to attract or keep the interest of research subjects, offer them cigarettes, alcohol, nylon to knit fishing nets, materials and other ‘ethnological quotas’. We could agree that there are paid and unpaid altruists, and that the voluntary participation does not exclude an economic return –monetary in this case–. Actually, economic compensations are not the only determining factor of the moral acceptability of a research (Talukder 2011).

A non-significant return neither solves the ‘debt’ contracted for the anthropologist with informants. Often, the problem, at least in Latin America, is that compensations are paid by giving participants articles and books –including flowery thanks–, which contains the inquiry results. This option, in reality, does not appear to be useful to volunteers (especially, whether we consider that some of those people are illiterate). Perhaps, it merely satisfies the researchers’ positivist and empty ethical principles, but it results meaningless to informants (Gómez 2013). In the majority of cases, the biggest interest belongs to social researchers, scientific community and funding enterprises, not to informants. In this regard, we are convinced of the necessity of compensating through ‘gestures’ –or ethnological quotas– adequate to contexts, cultures and research subjects.

We would also like to point out that anthropologists have a tendency to develop thick ethnographies, resulting from extended research time periods, after a process of immersion in Other’s culture. As a consequence, bonds of trust, friendship and, more importantly, dogged solidarity are created between them. Anthropologists, in opinion of Shoshan (2015), have a predisposition (more or less missionary) to work with people they feel identified with, normally,

vulnerable, discriminated or subordinated groups. Under this assumption, empathy process is almost natural. Nonetheless, whether the object of research changes, for example, to the extreme right-wing groups, neo-Nazis –among whom Shoshan conducts his research–, a kind of moral hygiene emanate from what it could be considered ‘undesirable groups’. In consequence, proclivity to act as defender of those groups is abandoned. In other words, the compromise with Other’s situation is neither a *sine qua non* condition to ethnographic studies, nor sufficient to guide oneself ethically during the inquiry. Inclinations of solidarity for Others do not generate, automatically, equalitarian relationships or mutual respect.

Another essential difference between experimental and social sciences is the lack of funding of the second ones –in particular when we refer to thesis, dissertations or researches subsidized by public institutions, as universities–. Generally, social inquiries do not have enough financial sources and, then, it is impossible to ‘compensate’ all informants. We are not trying to make apologia for economic compensations in social research, but to make them visible as a common strategy and to reflect on it; *grosso modo*, we attempt to develop arguments about a subject insufficiently discussed and unfairly silenced. The stance we support about returning ‘something’ (money in this case) is not about rewarding or remunerating a service; and we are aware that we are not exempt from responsibilities with people and information gathered. On the contrary, the compromise with voluntary and informed participation is a central ethical consideration in all inquiries, experimental or social (Kottow 2007).

## CONCLUSION

We are sure that relations between researchers and research subjects do not need to be economic to be unethical. As we said, the techniques used to obtain information are not the only determinant of good scientific practices during fieldwork, because, for example, to give money as a gift could be an imperative of the group or research subjects’ culture. Neither anthropologist nor people act selflessly. Considering particular circumstances, specific contexts, type of relationships and both interests –researchers and informants’ interests– could help to conduct this process in the most ethical way we can. At the same time, we must not confuse a volunteer and an altruist; an informant could be a ‘paid’ or ‘unpaid’ informed volunteer and act disinterested for the well-being of others, or not. We can also consider

a paid but not altruist participant (not interested in improving others' situations) someone who, nevertheless, will help, for example, to develop medicaments or cancer cures. These two concepts are linked but they are not the same.

Finally, we would like to remember Adorno (quoted by Judith Butler) when he says: "We can probably say that moral questions have always arisen when moral norms of behaviour have ceased to be self-evident and unquestioned in the life of a community." (2005, 3). Paraphrasing him, we would affirm that ethical questions about economic compensations emerged when moral norms (which made us feel guilty) stopped to be normal and natural in our anthropological community. And after a process of reflection, we realized that, in fact, those moral norms are less evident than we taught at the beginning.

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