“Notes from the Field” piece is a short exploration of some research ethics challenges I have experienced while doing ethnographic field work in a rural community in Cambodia. Issues explored include obligations to research participants, the desire to “give back” to a community, and protection of human subjects in repressive contexts.
Sothy[*] asked me to bring her weight-loss pills from Phnom Penh. This was not covered in any of my research methodology or ethics classes. While I thought I was fairly well prepared for field work, with previous experience in Cambodia and some ability to speak Khmer, at the mid-point of my field research I realize I am facing ethical challenges that I did not fully anticipate, which have quite literally kept me awake at night. What follows is a brief discussion of some of those challenges, which may be familiar to researchers doing similar work.

My field research concerns social mobilization related to land conflict in Cambodia and is supported by a Fulbright US Student award. One of my two research sites, Areng Valley, in the Cardamom Mountain range in the southwest of Cambodia, is one of the most under-developed corners of the country. A planned hydroelectric dam would flood between six and eight villages of Jong indigenous minorities who are currently living a primarily subsistence lifestyle of fishing and farming with no electricity, running water, or phone service. When I first traveled there almost two years ago there were only two toilets for eight villages of 1,500 people. Now, there are about sixteen toilets, which is a dramatic improvement, but is still just over one toilet per hundred people. In most villages, three to five families share each open well. However, it seems to be over-simplifying for me to label the situation in Areng as “poverty”. Rather, the residents of Areng are dealing with the effects of Cambodia’s rapid, uneven development and the shift from a subsistence economy to a cash-based one. In Areng, houses are airy and spacious compared to the urban poor areas in Phnom Penh. Food is adequate – getting hit on the head by a falling coconut is an actual concern – though protein can be scarce. Most families can afford some small luxuries such as sweets for the children and a few cosmetics for the women. The community shares burdens and takes in some cash from ecotourism and long-term guests like me and my NGO partners. But, they are cash-poor and a new metal roof or a trip to the hospital in the provincial capital is out of range for most families without assistance. Residents’ needs are still great and they often appeal to outsiders for help, which, for me, leads to ethical questions.

No one outright asks for money – Cambodian politeness forbids this – though people do bring up illnesses and other problems and the specific amount of money it would take to meet these needs. While I have not given money directly to community members (with the exception of Sothy and her husband, who I live with when I am in Areng and who I pay for my room and board), I have given money to NGO partners with a suggestion that it go discretely to a specific family facing a crisis. I do not want research participants to expect money from me, but I also know I can afford to help them out, and, as I will discuss below, I feel I owe them something. When Sothy’s older daughter developed a persistent ear infection, I paid her mother a bit extra for housing me and suggested that she use some for her daughter rather than pay it all into the community fund. Other requests, however, leave me at a loss. There is no health center or doctor, so people ask
if I can give them medicines. I once brought antibiotics (available over the counter in Cambodia) but the possibility of mis-use worried me so much I did not repeat this. I bring more basic supplies now: acetaminophen, antiseptic wipes, bandages, etc. Because of lack of sanitation and the hot, humid nature of the region much of the year, minor issues such as insect bites and small injuries, which are common among farmers and those who work in the forest, can become major problems. Thus, a clean piece of gauze and an antibiotic ointment can have a real impact. But, weight loss pills? Sothy has become a friend and key informant, so I did not want to refuse a rare direct request. I opted to bring her herbal tea and told her that it is healthy and that I drink a lot of tea (I have lost weight in the time I have known her, which is why she asked me for weight-loss pills, but my weight loss has been a result of exercise and a parasite infection, another challenging aspect of fieldwork). Research participants have also semi-jokingly asked me to take their children and asked more seriously for help sending their children to school. The valley has no secondary school, so most students leave school by or before eighth grade and parents will often lament how difficult it is for their children to study. For the few students who do continue to secondary school, their parents typically send them to live with a relative or rent a room for them in a larger town, which is expensive. Parents will tell me how much it would cost to send a child to school for a year and ask if I know any way for them to get support. Publicly, I tell them the best thing they can do is continue to advocate for better schools and a secondary school so that all the young people can get an education, but privately I am wondering how I can help to send Sothy’s daughters to secondary school and even university, if they want. This, in turn, generates concerns about favoritism: I spend the most time with Sothy’s family, so I feel more of a bond with them and an obligation to them. However, I wonder what does helping one family do to my relationships with other families? More importantly, does helping them benefit the community as a whole?

Many of my concerns over ethics stem from the balance of taking and giving back – as a researcher, I take a lot. People open their homes and workplaces to me, feed and house me, and give me hours of their time. Practically and ethically, what can I give back? At the end of my research I will leave to write a few hundred pages of academic English that, if I am lucky, will be read by other academics, but this is of little to no use to the bulk of my research participants. I may draft a “lessons learned” piece that can be translated into Khmer, for the use of my NGO partners, though it will be a long time before I am able to do this and I question how valuable it will be for my partner. I pay for my room and board and give small gifts when it is culturally appropriate, which seems small in proportion to the access my participants give me to their lives. I cannot meet their actual needs - a school, a health center, or clean water. While in the long-term my research may help my NGO partners working with the community to advocate for these needs, in the short-term I am basically useless to my research participants – an odd foreigner who shows up every few weeks, asks the same questions over and over again, and
has to be taught even the most basic tasks, like how to bathe in a sarong or eat mud crabs.

The close personal relationships that are created by ethnographic research also mean that I am intervening in my participants’ lives in ways I never imagined before I began field work. Dara[*] is a colleague who I met through my research and subsequently developed a close personal relationship with. Privately, over dinner at my apartment, we were discussing the possibility of him being arrested for his work. Dara is not afraid to be arrested, but is worried about the potential impact on his family and career. The Cambodian authorities have been taking increasingly harsh measures against what they perceive to be dissent, and in the year that I have been in Cambodia, at least fourteen activists and NGO staff have been arrested, nearly all of them friends and colleagues of ours. I mentioned Bayard Rustin’s quote that Martin Luther King, Jr.’s arrests “made going to jail like receiving a Ph. D.” A few weeks later I heard Dara repeat what I said to a group of youth activists joining a demonstration protesting the jailing of several activists. I immediately felt conflicted: as a former community organizer and activist, I was proud of these young people for standing up for justice. As an educator and many years their senior, I was worried about what an arrest would do to their chances of going to university and the emotional impact on their parents most of whom still carry trauma from the Pol Pot era murder and disappearance of family members and loved ones. As a researcher, I panicked about my unintended intervention into my research population.

My NGO partners have become my friends, in addition to key informants, interpreters, and guides. In many cases, I have more experience with social mobilization and community organizing, the subject of my research, than they do. Occasionally they ask for advice or assistance. Traditional research ethics say I should intervene as little as possible (though more and more researchers reject this approach). It seems unfair and contrary to the ethnographic project, though, to refuse to share knowledge. I do not want to impose my ideas and views, but neither do I want to keep silent when a colleague is asking for ideas and input. I will sometimes close my notebook, announce that I am speaking as a friend and not a researcher and they know their context better than I do. Then, I give my commentary on the issue being discussed. But, I worry on multiple levels: am I intervening too much when I should be observing? Are my suggestions, based mainly on the American context, suited to the Cambodian context? Are my interventions or even just my presence putting my participants in danger (this is in relation to the previous question in that a social mobilization tactic that is accepted in the West may result in harsh consequences in Cambodia, as was recently the case when eight civil society members were arrested for joining or attempting to join a demonstration in which all the participants wore black shirts)? I rationalize that I am not putting them in any more
danger than they have already put themselves, but still, I lose sleep.

Short-term, it may be impossible to tell what, if any, effect I am having on my participants. Likely, in my fears I am over-emphasizing my own importance – my ten months here will likely matter very little to the lives of my participants. However, regardless of the setting, human science research ethics are rarely simple. Ethnographic research, with the long-term, deep engagement it creates with participants, can be particularly challenging. Thus, at the end of many days in Cambodia, I find myself lying awake, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this was the day that I accidentally put a participant in danger or intervened with my participants in a way that will have lasting effects for them or my research.