

From: Claudia Huerta

To: Abraham J. Briloff Prizes in Ethics Committee

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The Briloff Prize in Ethics: Application Essay

Migration Research: On the Borders of Europe and Ethics

ABSTRACT:

The global refugee crisis is a moral challenge immense scope faced by governments, NGOs, and individuals around the world. However, many of those involved in the study of the crisis, especially researchers and academics, lack the ethical training that is necessary to both study and protect the vulnerable populations it consists of. This essay expands on the author's personal experiences with a lack of ethical training while she was researching NGOs and asylum applicants in Athens as part of a winter course in January of 2019.

ESSAY:

As of June 2018, the UN Refugee Agency reported that there were 27.5 million refugees and asylum seekers around the world, of which 85% reside in developing countries¹. The scope of the global refugee crisis around the world is unprecedented in the post WW2 world². But all is not gloom and doom, thousands of NGOs, volunteers, researchers, and academics around the world have descended on border cities and refugees camps around the world, seeking to help the cause. The concept of voluntourism, when an individual travels abroad for pleasure and also does a small volunteer project, is not new, nor is it my own, as extensive research on this exists³. However, while voluntourism is often thought of in the context of vacation travelers, it also applies to academics and researchers who volunteer with vulnerable populations as a way to work on their own personal projects.

What happens then when this multitude of researchers and academics, many of whom have no significant ethical training, begin to work with some of the world's most vulnerable populations? This

¹ United Nations. "Figures at a Glance." *UNHCR*, www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html.

² "Refugees at Highest Ever Level, Reaching 65m, Says UN." *BBC News*, BBC, 20 June 2016, www.bbc.com/news/world-36573082.

³ Rosenberg, Tina. "The Business of Voluntourism: Do Western Do-Gooders Actually Do Harm?" *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 13 Sept. 2018, www.theguardian.com/news/2018/sep/13/the-business-of-voluntourism-do-western-do-gooders-actually-do-harm.

January, while partaking in a winter course on migration and refugees in Athens, I came to experience this first hand.

The same passion that pushed me to apply to the Master of International Affairs program at Baruch pushed me to travel to Athens in January of this year. My parents are both immigrants, from Spain and Colombia respectively, who came to the US in search of opportunity. Seeing firsthand how difficult the life of an immigrant can be, I've chosen to dedicate myself to working in migration affairs. As such, I decided that my Masters capstone project would be a case study analysis of migration reception policies around the world. So after two weeks of researching migration policies and humanitarian conditions on the border of Colombia and Venezuela independently, I flew to Athens to partake in the two week 'Migration on the Margins of Europe' course hosted by the Netherlands Institute in Athens.

The course was fantastic, and I highly recommend it to anyone who might be interested in working in migration affairs. A mix of lectures and fieldwork, it is stimulating, immersive, and exciting. However, it is the same fieldwork that makes the program so exciting is what also makes it so ethically challenging. You see, for the two weeks that students are in the program, they are placed into groups and conduct a group project on a topic of their choosing, based on the results of their fieldwork. So suddenly, all the students in our course, the majority of which had no ethical training (including myself), were sent out into Athens to conduct academic research on Athens' most vulnerable population. The group project I worked on focused on the role of NGOs in helping refugees apply for asylum on the Greek mainland. In Greece, once a migrant is on the mainland, they must apply for asylum by calling a Skype line at a designated time. However, many migrants are unaware of this and need technological help, which is provided by NGOs, given that the wait times for a response are long (an average of 81 days) and the chances of getting through to the line are reduced to pure luck. While would-be asylum applicants wait for a Skype call response, they are forced to live illegally in Greece, subject to deportation at any moment.

Working on this project was an intimidating challenge for my group, we cared deeply about the people we were interviewing and wanted to be sure that we didn't emotionally harm anyone while we worked on this project. In our quest to develop the best academic project possible in the most ethical way possible, we saw many obstacles.

First and foremost, our greatest concern was our lack of ethical training given that our fieldwork would study asylum applicants, one of the most vulnerable populations in Athens. We knew what the pitfalls were, from misrepresenting our subjects in our project to re-traumatizing them with insensitive questions. Our lack of fieldwork experience heightened this concern for us. The language barrier was also

a cause for concern. We were a team of three, consisting of a German, Dutch, and American (me) student, but we were interviewing predominantly Middle Eastern migrants in Athens. Thankfully, English served as our common language.

Our short term stay in Athens also presented us with an ethical dilemma. As we interviewed different NGOs and the asylum applicants using their services, we struggled with how involved to allow ourselves to be. Our sense of compassion pushed us to want to volunteer and to sit in as many conversations as we could. However, we knew that our short stay would mean that our desire to deepen our involvement could seem fake to those permanently in Athens, given that we would drop in and then fly out, back to our far away homes, only two weeks later.

These ethical concerns only escalated when many of the asylum applicants we met with and spoke to asked us how our project would help them. How ethical was it that all our research was built around a project whose biggest benefit for asylum seekers was the *potential* ability to raise awareness for the humanitarian consequences of the Greek government's asylum process?

I left Athens with many things, nice gifts for my family and an incredible academic experience, but I did not leave with a satisfactory answer to that question. What I did leave Athens with was, at the very least, the certainty that my group mates and I had thought exhaustively about the ethical implications of our work and strived to always do what was ethically correct in our research. We were explicit in explaining who we were and why we were conducting fieldwork in different NGO offices. We explained that our project's aim was to build awareness, never promising anything more, that we were only Masters students, that we were in Greece for only two weeks. To prepare for the NGO interviews, we built an exhaustive list of questions that were reviewed for ethical transgressions by our professors and fellow students with more fieldwork experience. We only spoke to asylum applicants if an NGO representative and translator was present. At every stage of our fieldwork, we allowed ample time for questions to be asked of us and our work by both the NGOs and asylum applicants.

On a small scale, our project was a success. We built close, friendly relationships with NGOs and asylum applicants alike, who appreciated our work and approach, and our project was well received in the institute. However, the reality is that we, as inexperienced academic researchers, presented a risk to the well-being of the migrants we studied in Athens. In a larger sense, the global refugee crisis is made up of thousands of these instances: well-intentioned individuals, either seeking to volunteer or to research, who due to a lack of ethical training, present a risk to their subjects. While there are many urgent needs in the global refugee crisis, ethical training for all individuals working within its scope is certainly one of them.