

Case 23: Slow Code

Francis Johnson was the first anthropologist to be hired for a newly created position of Clinical Social Scientist in a medical education program at a community teaching hospital. As part of a team research project, Johnson conducted ethnographic observations of "Code 99" events occurring on the evening shift. When "Code 99" was announced over the hospital loudspeakers, this was the signal for a team of doctors, nurses, and technicians to assemble to make strenuous attempts to resuscitate a dying patient. Although hospital policy demanded "coding" all patients who expired without a "DNR" (do not resuscitate) order on their charts, Johnson soon realized that residents in internal medicine, in advance and among themselves, were selecting patients who would receive a "slow code" on the night shift (a "slow code" being one that was intentionally conducted too slowly for resuscitation to occur). The residents offered three justifications for designating a "slow code" (one or more might be cited by different house officers to explain a decision about a particular case): (a) the patient was being kept alive by technology alone and should, as a moral decision, be allowed to die; (b) the patient had a chronic disease, which the residents found uninteresting, and from which they felt they could learn little; (c) the chronic disease the patient suffered from was beyond the resources of internal medicine, and the use of technology to prolong the patient's life was a waste of time and effort.

The consequences of documenting this slow code would bear most strongly upon the house officers, who found themselves under considerable professional pressure and competition. Johnson had been hired as part of a new program to upgrade the hospital, which included an affiliation with a more prestigious hospital, and an attempt to rid the hospital's residency program of its longstanding reputation of being composed primarily of graduates of foreign medical schools. At least half the current residents were, in fact, graduates of foreign medical schools, several had been fired since the new program was instituted, and all were uneasy about the renewal of their yearly contracts. In addition, residents feared an interrupted relationship with the cardiology department, whose letters of recommendation were influential for obtaining fellowships for residents who wanted further subspecialty training. A new cardiologist and director of the Cardiac Care Unit was counting "successful codes," (those resulting in resuscitation) as an index of his success, and would surely consider slow codes inappropriate.

Johnson felt a conflict. A decision to formally document the occurrence of slow codes bore not only on the welfare of the residents, but also on professional relationships within the hospital. Would documentation further polarize and politicize the uneasy relationships between professionals within the hospital? Would Johnson be perceived as an informer, a management "fink"? Would documentation betray his research population? Who, indeed, was his research population? Who was his "client"? And to whom did he owe primary loyalty?

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Case 3: Witness to Murder

Mary Thompson had been conducting fieldwork in a Southeast Asian community for 18 months. Her house was ideally located on the edge of the village plaza, allowing her to readily observe daily activities that took place in the plaza. In addition to gatherings of women who shared food preparation tasks and talk, and groups of men working individually on carvings, the plaza was regularly a gathering place for men at night.

One night while Thompson was working up some statistical problems in her house, she was distracted by loud, seemingly argumentative discussions in the plaza. When the noise of the argument reached a high pitch, she decided to investigate the situation. Just as she stepped from her doorway, she saw one of the men in the group of five, angrily raise his machete and deliver a deadly blow to another--Tom--in the group. Stunned silence fell over the other three men, as they watched their companion quickly bleed to death before their eyes. Moments later people from the other homes began moving into the plaza in response to the wailing that came from the man who had wielded the machete. Mournful crying and wailing was carried throughout the village. The family members of the dead man carried him to their home and began funeral preparations. The next evening, Tom was buried. The man who had dealt the deadly blow was allowed to participate in the funeral and to make a death payment to the family of the deceased.

Two days after the funeral, three regional policemen came to the village. As part of a new governmental program designed to reduce blood feuds, the regional authorities now regularly sought to arrest and jail people who were involved in killings. They had heard about the recent death.

They began questioning the villagers in an attempt to determine if Tom had been "murdered." Thompson had written a detailed description of the events of the night of Tom's death in her notebook which contained a running record of village activities.

Thompson's Dilemma: *(1) Since she knew the police would question her, should she quickly tear out and destroy the pages in her notebook where the events were recorded? (2) When questioned by the police should she, like the other villagers, plead ignorance concerning the killing?*

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Case 9: "Hot" Gifts

Rose Stone moved into an urban ghetto in order to study strategies for survival used by low-income residents. During the first six months of research, Stone was gradually integrated into the community through invitations (which she accepted) to attend dances, parties, church functions, and family outings, and by "hanging out" at local service facilities (laundromats, health centers, recreation centers, and so on). She was able to discern that there were two important survival tactics used by the community residents which she could not engage in: the first was a system of reciprocity in the exchange of goods and services (neither of which she felt she had to offer), and the second was outright theft of easily pawned or sold goods (clothing, jewelry, radios, TVs, and so on).

One night, a friend from the community stopped by "for a cup of coffee" and conversation. After they had been talking for about two hours, Stone's friend told her that she had some things she wanted to give her. The friend went out to her car and returned with a box of clothing (Stone's size) and a record player. Stone was a bit overwhelmed by the generosity of the gift and protested her right to accept such costly items. Her friend laughed and said, "Don't you worry, it's not out of my pocket," but then she became more serious and said, "Either you are one of us or you aren't one of us. You can't have it both ways. "

Stone's Dilemma: Suspecting that the items she was being offered were probably "hot" (e.g., stolen), she was afraid that if she wore the clothes in public, or had the record player in her apartment, she would be arrested for "accepting stolen goods." At the same time, she knew that "hot" items were often given to close friends when it was observed that they could use them. Still, this implied that there would be reciprocal giving (not necessarily in kind) at a later date. So, should she accept or refuse the proffered gifts?

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