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Ethics Analysis
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Case 3: Negotiating the Social Relations of Research in an International Context

Facts of the case:

- The World Bank distributed project development funds to the Amazonian state of Rondonia Brazil to help disadvantaged groups of small farmers, rubber tappers, and indigenous peoples.
- The funds were channeled through a state government agency, that was supposed to fairly distribute the money.
- A (presumably) American researcher travels to Rondonia to study whether or not the funds have been fairly distributed.
- In order to conduct research, the researcher will assess how the fund distribution has facilitated “political change” by studying both dependent and independent variables.
- Dependent variables are based on changes in voting. This is done through assessing the percent of votes that are for the leftist candidates at various levels of government. This information is available on the internet.
- Independent variables include details of how the project development funds were disbursed, and the particular community groups that were funded. Legally, the details of the project funds should be available to interested parties in “public documents” held by the state government agency.
- The state government can, and does in this case, block access to the documents through foot-dragging, demanding bribes, etc.
- The researcher is able to gain access to the information through personal contacts in the particular state agency holding the documents.
- The researcher is aware that if these contacts knew the research was on the political impacts of World Bank fund distribution they would most likely deny him access in an effort to appear politically neutral.

Ethical Issues:

- Is it ethical for the researcher to withhold information on his research from his personal contacts at the government agency in question in order to gain access to government documents, even though he knows the contacts in the government agency would block his access to requested information if they knew what his research purpose was? This is particularly challenging because if the researcher does gain access to the documents, he may be able to expose corruption in the government and ensure that the funds are fairly distributed. However, this does not necessarily make withholding the truth ethical.
- Is it ethical for the government agency to block access to documents that are supposed to be public?

Affected Parties:

- Government Agency: If the documents are made available and the researcher finds that funds were distributed fairly, it will reflect well on the government agency, which they can use to promote themselves and possibly to secure future funding and votes. If the documents are made available and the researcher finds that funds were distributed unfairly, it will reflect poorly on the government agency. If these negative findings are made public, it could have serious repercussions for the agency, in particular it could greatly affect voting patterns in future elections.
- Contacts from the government agency: If the documents are made available and the researcher finds that funds were distributed fairly, there will probably be no repercussions for the contacts. If the documents are made available and the researcher finds that funds were distributed unfairly, it could have serious repercussions for those contacts if it is made known that they provided the information. These could include their dismissal from the agency and shame from the community.
- Researcher: If contacts find out how the information they provided to the researcher were used, it could ruin the researchers reputation in the community. Furthermore, if word gets out that the researcher withheld important information from his primary contacts, it could have serious repercussion for his career in general.
- Community members: If the research shows that funds were distributed fairly, it will probably have very little impact on the community members who were supposed to receive the funds. If the research shows that the funds were not distributed fairly, it could create tension or conflict within the community, particularly if people find out that they were not receiving much needed money intended for them.
- World Bank: The World Bank most likely will not be affected by this research. If it is found that there is major corruption in the government agency, they may change their policies of distributing funds, but this seems unlikely.

Obligations:

- The researcher is obligated to be honest with his contacts about his research intent. This is the only way to ensure that research is ethically sound, even if it makes the research more challenging to conduct.
- The government agency is obligated to make public documents available to the researcher.
- Of less important, the World Bank may have an obligation to follow up to make sure their money was dispersed in the intended way, though again, this seems unlikely.

good.

Character and Integrity:

- Government Agency: The government agency is clearly lacking in integrity by blocking access to public documents. This presents a frustration, but cannot necessarily be changed by the researcher.

- **Contacts:** The integrity of the contacts is also questionable. If it is likely that they will withhold information that should be public when told about the intent of the research, then they are clearly acting with a lack of integrity. There is potential that they would provide the needed information no matter the research purpose, but this seems unlikely based on the description.
- **Researcher:** The researcher still has the option to act with or without integrity. If he withholds the truth about his research project, then he compromises his integrity, even if the research is for the greater good. However, if he is honest, then he may limit his potential for success, but he will be acting with integrity.

Alternative Actions:

- The researcher could clearly identify his research purpose to his contacts, knowing there is a strong potential that they will deny him access to the documents in question.
- The researcher could go through higher up government agencies (national, for example) to try to get them to pressure the state government agency to release the documents. However, it seems likely that if the state government is corrupt, other offices may be also.
- The researcher could change his research to an interview-based study to assess who the funds have been distributed to, and how much has been distributed. He could attempt to double-check his findings with the World Bank's intended plan for the funds.

Gut Feeling:

- While it would be easy to suggest the researcher hide his intentions from his contacts, particularly if the agency in question is acting corruptly, it does not sit well with my gut. Instead, the researcher must reformulate his plan so that he can find his information in an ethically sound way.

Specific Ethical Action Plan:

- I think the best option is for the researcher to first attempt honesty with his contacts. If that does not work, I then think he should change his study to an interview-based study. He could interview community members on who has received funding, how much they have received, and where they feel funding is lacking. Clearly this research will be difficult, as individual community members may feel differently about who should get the World Bank money. However, if he is able to check his interview findings against the voting patterns available online, he should be able to discern some patterns. Furthermore, he can then attempt to cross-reference his findings with the World Bank's original plan for the project funds (which I believe are made public). In this way, the researcher will hopefully find the information he is looking for in an honest manner that will not harm his reputation as a researcher or ruin his relationship with contacts that may be important for future research. This research plan, though more difficult to conduct, sits much better with my gut.
- This plan does not deal with the issue of the government acting unethically by withholding "public documents." However, this may be out of the realm of

possibility for the researcher to deal with effectively. While disappointing, it should be noted and moved past.