



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# What We Have Here is a Failure to Collaborate

## Year

2006

## Body

Julie Heliotrope is an anthropology Ph.D. graduate student at a major university in North America. She has spent several years in remote and isolated regions of the Amazon collecting data for her dissertation. Because she has spent many months in several communities, she has made many friends throughout the region and is acutely aware of the debt she owes the people in the Amazon. In turn, she has provided each community she has visited with much needed supplies. Because there are no roads or electricity and these are non-monetary societies, Julie knows that equipment and medical supplies are especially helpful. She has also been very careful that the items she brings will benefit entire communities, rather than individuals.

Julie returns to the United States and finishes her dissertation. In the years following her dissertation fieldwork, she publishes several journal articles, finds a job in academia, and eventually publishes a book. Almost all of her academic achievements, most notably her PhD degree, are directly attributable to the information shared with her by the indigenous groups in Amazon Basin. Now considered one of the few experts in the cultures of the Amazon, Julie strongly believes in the important role she can play in North America by increasing the general knowledge and awareness of a way of life so completely foreign in North America. In addition to teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, Julie is also actively involved in public outreach. She volunteers to give public lectures and teach

at local public schools.

Five years after her first trip to the Amazon Julie returns to the same region of Ecuador. She is anxious to see her old friends and possibly collaborate in new projects. Upon arriving at the small airport where Julie plans to fly into various regions, she is immediately denied access. The airplane pilots have no further information for her. They will only remind her that they will not fly anyone into any community unless they have permission to do so from the community members. Needless to say, she is baffled. Over the next few days, she is unable to find out why this has happened. Finally she finds someone in town whom she recognizes as the daughter of a woman she lived with for many months. The young girl explains that they have been told by a boy who is now attending at a university in a larger city that Julie had published many things, including a book, and claimed this information as her own. The boy said that nowhere in any of these publications was there any mention of the individuals who shared stories, traditions, and experiences with her.

She tells the young girl that she did thank the communities that she worked with in the dedication of her book, but did not mention names because she has been taught to protect participants by keeping them anonymous. Julie then realized that she had not even brought a copy of the publications or books that she had written. These items would have been useless anyway because no one in the region speaks or reads English.

In her absence, this information has spread throughout the region. At this moment Julie knows that her chances of ever working in the area again are very slim.

## Questions

1. What could Julie have done to avoid this situation? Why do you think Julie did not know to do these things?
2. Did Julie do enough to compensate the people in the Amazon? How would Julie know if she had?
3. Is Julie obligated to share her results with the people in the Amazon? Given that these are remote communities and a second visit to each community would cost thousands of dollars, is she still obligated? If Julie cannot come up with the research funds to do so, should she work somewhere else?
4. Is there an effective way for Julie to share her results, given that the participants cannot read her work?

## **Contributor(s)**

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