Research Ethics in Real Time: Scholarly Research and Black Lives Matter

We are engaged in research at a remarkable moment. Incubated during a history of academe that includes valuable advances in knowledge and practice and also unequal opportunity, respect, and burdens based on race, gender, nationality, and other attributes, #shutdownacademia and #shutdownstem movements have been birthed by the recent tragic killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor (https://www.shutdownstem.com/).

In addition to other forms that your reflections and actions based on ethics might take, I invite you to devote time tomorrow, **Wednesday, June 10**, to practicing the tools introduced in my research ethics presentation, combined with what you already have learned in coursework, mentored research, and lived experience. To facilitate that practice, I offer three exercises:

1. **Make a values-based decision**: #shutdownacademia/#shutdownstem organizers ask that on Wednesday, June 10, scholars do not do “business as usual.” Is disrupting your research tomorrow the right thing to do?
   - Which of your five highest values bear most directly on that decision? How do you prioritize them?
   - What are the relevant facts? Who (other than you) are the stakeholders?
   - What is at stake if you suspend business as usual tomorrow? If you don’t?
   - Who might you consult about your decision? Is that everyone whose voice matters? Who else might be helpful?
   - **Action**: Make a decision. Does it feel different from going with your “gut,” complying with a regulation/policy/rule, or conforming with a norm? Does taking action (whether that is business as usual or suspending your research – both are actions flowing from a values-based decision) feel different from having an opinion?

2. **Consider a case study on structural racism in STEM**: The US Public Health Service Syphilis Study in Tuskegee, AL. Basic facts:
   - Study of untreated syphilis in poor black men began in 1932
   - The men were misled about the study and were not treated with penicillin when it became available 1947
   - Study was discontinued in 1972
   - US Office of Minority Health established in 1986
   - President Clinton apologized in 1997

   Beyond “bad apples” exercise: How might we understand why a large number of scientists and health professionals were involved in this study for decades? Were they “bad to the bone”? Or were shared professional and societal values at play in their ethical decision-making? How does this study relate to current discourse about the legacy of anti-Blackness in government and in academia? What is the evidence that anti-Blackness persists in research, more so in some disciplines than in others?
   - **Action**: What can be done at Oxy to improve ethical engagement in scholarship? Identify one way that you can participate in that change.

3. **Going deeper**: In my primer on research ethics, constitutive values (inward-facing values in scholarship) were distinguished from contextual values (outward-facing values reflective of communities and cultures). Let’s connect them: How do contextual values influence constitutive values and vice versa?
   - Identify one or two aspects of how you are doing your research that have been shaped by constitutive values in your research field (i.e. are linked to value judgments about research that is “good” or “bad,” important or unimportant).
   - Historically, who has populated your research field? Who has been absent? How might the demographics of the field give rise to what is (de)valued within it (what counts as progress or a valuable contribution)?
   - Identify global or national events in recent history that have influenced the kind of research that is seen as vital in your field. Whose interests set the priorities in your field? What contextual values have influenced how research gets done?
   - **Action**: What action might you take, alone or with others, to improve the alignment of your values with your research, the research community, and/or the relationship between the research community and society more broadly? What is the first step? What resources do you need to take that step? Make a plan for taking that step.