# Case studies

Adapted from **Aspiring Academics** by Iain Hay and Mark Israel, Chapter 12 resources

## Case Number 1: Whose Turn Is It?

Hornblende is a graduate student with an interest in geomorphology. He is taken to a field site by Professor Volatiles who believes that Hornblende might think the area was worth researching for his thesis. Another professor, Feldspar, from a different university meets Hornblende and Volatiles at the site. All three inspect the area. Hornblende decides he is not interested in the area for his thesis, but nevertheless he works with Volatiles to produce a conference poster on the area. Volatiles includes Feldspar’s name as one of the authors on the poster because the two professors almost always co-authored work, simply switching senior author (i.e. first author) from paper to paper. Hornblende feels aggrieved because it seems to him that, in this case, Feldspar had contributed very little, if anything to the project.

## Case Number 2: The ‘Right’ Projections

In Oldport, USA, the mayor commissioned a firm of planning consultants to develop a comprehensive twenty-year strategy for urban renewal and for the provision of housing, schools, and social service facilities. The planning consultants’ preliminary report projected moderate population growth, but pointed to the likelihood of a substantial change in racial composition. It was estimated thatminority groups would make up more than half of the city’s population within twelve years. The planners also predicted that there would be an African-American population majority in the public schools within five years.

The mayor reacted very strongly to the preliminary report. She felt if the findings were released, they could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Her hopes of preserving an ethnically integrated school system, maintaining stable, mixed neighborhoods, and developing an ethnically heterogeneous city could be dashed.

The mayor asked the planners to reconsider their population estimates. They agreed to use the lower range of their projections. These suggested minority dominance in the public schools after eight years and a majority in the city in sixteen. The mayor was not happy. She told the planners to change the figures orto leave them out of the report. The planning consultants refused, arguing they had bent their interpretation of fact as far as they could. They also thought that without a discussion of those population projections, the rest of the report would be unconvincing.

In private, the mayor criticized the planning consultants for their professional arrogance. She went on to ask a member of her own staff to rewrite the report without the projections and ordered the consultants not to make public their findings under any circumstances. The mayoral staffer initially refused to write the report, but eventually agreed. The consultants kept quiet about the results, completed the formal requirements of their contract, and left. After this experience, the mayor never used professional planning consultants again. (This example is drawn from Marcuse [1985, 5] and has been presented earlier in Hay and Foley [1998]).

## Case Number 3: Whistle Blowing

In the course of her own PhD research in the US, Descartes uncovers a thesis proposal submitted by a degree candidate at another university in another country. A third of that proposal has been taken without any attribution from Descartes’ own work. She is hurt and angered by the plagiarism and yet when urged by her supervisor to be a ‘whistle blower’ and write to the department in question, she refuses (Kates 1994, 2). (This case has been presented earlier in Hay [1998a]).

## Case Number 4: Out of the Blue.

As a young university graduate, Coral found herself working for a scientific research organization studying pollution damage to Australia’s Great Barrier Reef. The organization had a problem common to much scientific research – how to get enough funding to carry on the work. All their worries appeared to be solved when quite out of the blue one of the large multinational corporations operating in the country offered significant ongoing financial support. There was a hitch, however. The company had recently suffered adverse publicity through an article claiming they were themselves responsible for some of the pollution. In return for the financial support they not only wanted the research company to refute these claims, but also to study a section of the reef where there were no pollution problems.

## Case Number 5: Grass?

Ethnographer David Fetterman was conducting field research in a US inner-city area for a contract research corporation by which he was employed. One of the research ‘subjects’, known by Fetterman to have an extensive knowledge of illegal drug dealing in the local area, asked Fetterman out for something to eat. In the course of that interaction, the researcher was confronted with a number of dilemmas. Fetterman (1983, 216-7) describes the situation:

“We walked down the main street of the inner city for a few blocks until he pointed to a health food store. ... We entered the establishment and my friend asked the clerk to give me a granola [muesli] bar. I said thanks and reached for the bar. The patron handed it to me with a smile and a small envelope underneath it. I looked down at a ‘nickel’ bag of marijuana. ... My [feeling of] discomfort was compounded by two policemen walking by viewing the exchange. The policemen saw the transaction, smiled and continued walking. When I asked my friend why they didn’t bust us, he said, ‘they don’t need the money right now.’ I asked him to clarify his response and he explained:

They only bust you if they need the money. They get paid off regular. But if they’re hurting for money, then well, that’s another different story. They’ll come right in and bust ya, take money out of the cash register and take your dope too. If they’re on the run and gotta show that they mean business then they’ll bust your ass. Otherwise they just look the other way.” (from Hay and Foley [1998b]).

## Case Number 6: Who’s For a Beer?

As part of a research project a British geographer joins a residents’ association to gain an insight into how residents respond to their public sector rental accommodation and its environs. After attending a few meetings of the association, Dr Adiabatic is offered some half-price cans of beer. It is evident from the comments made at the time of the offer that members of the group had imported the beer illegally for sale to local residents.

## Case Number 7: Geckos for Sale

Scientists have found that their publication of new plant and animal species descriptions in scientific journals are effectively advertising those species for commercial exploitation (Stuart et al. 2006, 1137). For instance, following Grismer’s 1999 publication in the Journal of Herpetology of details of a gecko (Goniurosaurus luii) found in southeastern China, individual animals were not only reaching prices of $1500-2000 on the international pet trade but the species had been completely eliminated from its home range.

## Case Number 8: Work and Stigmatized Places

A geographer conducting work on job-seeking in a stigmatized suburb of a major US city finds that many people looking for work believe their scarce opportunities for employment to be adversely influenced by their address. That is, they believe that they are discriminated against by prospective employers on the basis of their supposedly ‘undesirable’ home address. In response to this problem, job-seekers are found to have adopted a number of coping strategies, such as furnishing the more up-market address of a friend or relative in job applications, using a Post Office box number, or adding ‘Heights’ or ‘Hills’ to their home suburb’s name. In the public arena (e.g. classes, conferences, publications, media coverage), the researcher chooses to downplay the extent of these practices, for fear of alerting business and employer groups to marginalized job-seekers’ successful strategies for coping with one form of discrimination.

## Case Number 9: The Power of Maps

Dr Tropic has recently commenced work as a post-doctoral fellow with a research organization applying GIS (Geographical Information Systems) to illustrate and resolve significant social problems. This position could allow someone to lay the foundations of a noteworthy academic career. However, this depends on producing good results and publishing in reputable journals. Tropic decides to work on environmental carcinogens (cancer-producing substances) in a major metropolitan area. He spends about two months of his two year fellowship conducting background research to assess the need for, and utility of, the work. After this early research, Tropic resolves to use GIS to produce maps which will illustrate clearly those areas in which high levels of carcinogenic materials are likely to be found. At a meeting of interested parties to discuss the proposed research, one of the participants makes the observation that, if broadcast, the results of the study may cause considerable public alarm. For example, there may be widespread individual and institutional concern about public health and welfare, that may be fuelled by the media; property values in areas with high levels of carcinogenic material may be adversely affected; past and present producers of carcinogenic pollutants may be exposed to liability suits; and local government authorities might react poorly to claims that there are toxic materials in their areas. Tropic is cautioned against proceeding by senior managers and researchers in the organization (from Hay [2003]).

## Case Number 10: Government Papers

A government space saving and paper recycling scheme requires that many government documents of varying degrees of sensitivity be routinely destroyed. One employee, Arroyo, who is also a PhD student, secretly holds back from this process a line of papers that might be relevant to his academic research. Singly, the documents have little more than intrinsic value but when they are aggregated they provide a large body of evidence to support Arroyo’s current PhD research thesis that public land-use planning and management is often driven by political expediency and commercial imperatives.

## Case Number 11: Dam Consents

Mr Harmattan was conducting a geomorphological project in rural Idaho for his PhD research. Due to the unusually low water levels in road-side dams/ponds in the area at the time, he was able to hasten and make easier some of his work by examining soil profiles in dams/ponds. Harmattan considered getting written approval from the relevant land-owners before checking the dams/ponds. However, the pre-fieldwork tasks of identifying the dams/ponds, checking land records to identify the owners, and then contacting the owners to ask their permission is likely to have extended his project an extra year. It would also cause some other problems with his work too. Overall, it would be quicker and easier to conduct the observations without landowner consent. Harmattan discussed the situation with the chair of his PhD committee. They decided that Harmattan should adopt a ‘common sense’, no-consent approach, as long as there were no complaints or adverse reactions from residents or landowners. If there were, all fieldwork was to cease and the situation was to be reviewed. Harmattan proceeded with the project. If dams/ponds were within 10-12 feet of boundary fences, he examined them through the fence. He sometimes entered properties to examine dams/ponds. He purposely did not examine any dams/ponds within sight of houses. If he saw someone working in the field, he asked permission to examine the dam/pond. That permission was always granted.

## Case Number 12: “They Did That Last Week”

Ria, a Masters student, carefully prepares a questionnaire survey for distribution to two groups of sixteen-year old students in ‘home groups’ at two local high schools. The survey is central to the comparative work Ria is conducting as part of her thesis. In compliance with her state government’s requirements, Ria secures permission from the students’ parents to conduct the survey. She also gets ethics clearance for his work from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB requires her to include a cover letter to students which states that their participation in the study is voluntary and that no-one is obliged to answer any of the questions asked. A few weeks before she intends to administer the questionnaire survey, Ria leaves near-final drafts of it with the students’ teachers for comment. The draft copy of the questionnaire does not include the cover letter. It is Ria’s intention to revise the questionnaire in the light of each teacher’s comments and then return to the schools to administer the questionnaire during ‘home group’ meeting times. About a week after she leaves the survey forms with the teachers Ria calls them to find out if they have had an opportunity to comment on the questionnaire. The first teacher has just returned the questionnaire - with no amendments - by post. However, Ria finds that the second teacher had already made multiple copies of the forms and had administered the questionnaire to her student ‘home group’. He asks Ria to come along to collect the completed forms. Ria scuttles off to the school immediately. She finds that the questionnaires had been completed fully by every student present in the home group. Only one student from the class of 30 had been absent so the response rate was 97% - a remarkably high rate. Ria feels she cannot ask the teacher to readminister the survey because he has already indicated several times that he is tired of his requests for assistance and access to the class (from Hay [2003]).

## Case Number 13: Abused Wives

Australian social geographer, Dr Gibber, is conducting research into the ways physically abused wives adjust to life after they have fled their marital home. As part of her work she becomes a volunteer worker in an inner city women’s refuge. Although her input is valuable to the refuge, Dr Gibber is more interested in gathering research information than she is in providing succor and sustenance. No-one at the refuge is aware of her real purpose for being there. Gibber deliberately becomes friendly with those people who might offer information useful in the research and some of the women in the refuge grow to like her. Once the research work is completed, Gibber leaves the refuge, and leaves no information as to her location. No-one at the refuge ever hears from her again. No-one is ever told of her real reason for volunteering to work in the refuge. No-one in the refuge is ever likely to see the products of Dr Gibber’s work.

## Case Number 14: My Best Friend?

In the course of a lengthy research project a geographer working overseas with an indigenous group forms a friendship with one person who has privileged access to information about that society. Seeing the friendship as an opportunity to gain access to information that might not otherwise be accessible to her, the researcher chooses to cultivate the relationship and is eventually provided with valuable information that no other visitor has seen (from Hay [1998b]).

## Case Number 15: Situation Vacant

In the course of PhD research an interviewee tells the research-student of a job vacancy in the company he manages. This occurs shortly after the student had interviewed someone else who expected to be retrenched very soon from a job similar to that which is vacant. In an introductory letter provided to all respondents before interviews, the PhD student had stated quite clearly that they would remain anonymous and that all information they disclosed would be confidential.

## Case Number 16: Fairly Recognized?

A major multi-author geological report is published by a national geological survey. Authorship of specific chapters is not indicated anywhere in the publication. Most of the fifteen chapters were written by Goode and Mercator. Miller was the ‘editor’ who brought the volume together and was heavily involved with production details (e.g. communicating with the printer and drafting personnel). Despite these individual contributions, authorship on the title page of the report is listed as Lambert, Miller, Goode, Mercator and Peters. The publication is commonly referred to as ‘Lambert and others’. Lambert was the principal geologist in the section of the state geological survey that produced the volume. He had written one chapter of the book.

## Case Number 17: Over a Port or Two

An economic geographer is conducting a study for a proposed port development in a small island state. If completed, the port will be the second one in the country. The geographer is part of a consortium including the group of civil engineers who hope that a favorable report will allow them to get the contract to build the new port. Indeed the engineers need the contract if that part of their operation is not to be severely ‘downsized’. The geographer is advising on the economic viability and value of the development. The port will undoubtedly be built since the President promised the town the development and made it clear that international money was available. But the geographer finds that there is no economic rationale for the port. The existing port could be upgraded at a fraction of the cost and the new port is not really in the best location given the existing transport network (from Hay [1998b]).

## Case Number 18: Shops in Space

Dr Moraine is a retail geographer who has just been asked to advise a major supermarket chain about possible locations and sites for town edge superstores. The construction of these supermarkets is more or less inevitable. The simple question is where should they be located? One almost inevitable consequence of the chain’s policy is blight in city outskirts where property values close to the proposed sites would fall. Additionally, the policy is likely to lead to the disappearance, or reduction in number, of inner suburban shops which, in turn, are likely to leave the predominantly poor and the elderly people in those areas with only high price ‘convenience stores’. (from Hay [1998b]).

## Case Number 19: A Little Bit of Espionage?

Professor Barchan is in a foreign country on a research visit sponsored by the host nation and the US government. At an appointment with US Embassy officials, Professor Barchan is asked to look for special information on some local activities the US wishes to stop. Embassy officials point out to Barchan that her position as an academic researcher will allow her to move freely all over the country whereas Embassy personnel are under constant surveillance. Although no-one mentions it, Barchan is aware that this intelligence gathering exercise could be life-threatening. To refuse will mark her as uncooperative in the eyes of the US officials. Barchan also relies on the Embassy and its various extensions for information and assistance she needs for her work. (This case has been presented earlier in Hay [1998b]).

## Case Number 20: Hot On Their Heels

To describe patterns of pedestrians’ use of inner city Seattle, a group of researchers employ a technique called ‘tracking’ in which they follow a sample of pedestrians in the downtown area and record their movements and activities. The study involves observation of behavior in public places and the study is concerned with aggregate rather than individual patterns of behavior (Grey et al., in Mitchell and Draper 1983, 13) (from Hay [1998b]).

## Case Number 21: A Small World?

For several years in the late 1960s, Barbara Harrell-Bond conducted fieldwork in Sierra Leone. Her work focused on the experiences of those people with professional qualifications who were working in the country. There were 754 people so qualified. While she realized that these people were often closely connected through kinship and that most knew one another, it was not until very late in her research that she came to understand just how much they knew of each other’s personal affairs. In the first report outlining her research findings, Harrell-Bond found that some readers could identify almost everyone discussed in the report and, moreover, that they could provide other details about those people such as their political affiliations, the spouse’s ethnic background, educational qualifications, and other, more intimate, details. This occurred despite Harrell-Bond’s attempts to conceal the identity of the individuals concerned. After careful consideration, Harrell-Bond could see that there was no way she could disguise the identity of individuals in her report adequately (from Harrell-Bond (1976)).

## Case Number 22: Can I Buy You a Drink...?

In work on geographical aspects of brothel prostitution in Nevada, Richard Symanski apparently did not explain the reason for his research when he talked with prostitutes in brothels. In a footnote to his published work on the topic, he wrote that he wanted:

“to thank the many prostitutes who unknowingly gave me insights into prostitution in Nevada for little more than the price of a drink. I owe them an apology for deceiving them as to my true intentions and, in some cases, of depriving them of time with a prospective client.” (Symanski 1974, 357)

## Case Number 23: Students Faked Survey

In 2004, Scott Peterson was charged with murdering his pregnant wife and unborn son. Prosecutors in California sought the death penalty.

An Associated Press story (Associated Press Newswires 2004), claimed that the trial was moved by the judge from Modesto, partly as a result of a survey conducted by 65 criminal justice students from California State University, Stanislaus. The survey apparently revealed that jurors without bias were more likely to be found in the San Francisco Bay area or Southern California than in Stanislaus County, the area which includes Modesto. Several students involved in the survey told the local newspaper, The Modesto Bee, that they had faked some of the survey returns because they had found it too difficult to run the survey properly.

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