



Ethical guidelines and principles of conduct for anthropologists

Anthropology Southern Africa

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Ethical guidelines and principles of conduct for anthropologists

Ethical concerns arise in the context of anthropology's care for and about local moral and social worlds and the regional and global connections in which they are enmeshed. Anthropology's research questions, methods and approaches give rise to close and often lengthy associations between anthropologists and those with whom we conduct research. Our primary obligations as scholars, students, researchers and consultants are to treat participants as subjects not as the objects of research or as a means to an end, and to ensure our work meets the highest standards of scholarly integrity and accountability.

The nature of our research relationships and the fact that anthropologists often work in contexts characterised by differential access to power and resources imposes upon us a grave responsibility to consider carefully the character of our research and its likely effects for those who participate in it, particularly those in situations of reduced or limited power. Consequently, we need always to be mindful that our research can detrimentally affect our research participants or lead to their feeling they have been harmed by it. It is our responsibility not to embark on research projects that may have such effects, and to discontinue such work if, once begun, it threatens to have such effects.

The following principles are designed as a guide to and principles for research conduct. Ethical guidelines and principles speak to specific contexts and, in order to ensure that they continue to do so, these principles will be revisited by the Association at regular (five-yearly) intervals to update its principles, thereby ensuring that they reflect evolving best practice.

Relations with and responsibility to research participants

Our primary responsibility is to research participants. We have the responsibility to ensure that our relationships with them accord with the highest disciplinary standards and with local understandings of respect and dignity.

(i) Protecting respondents and anticipating harm

Anthropologists should anticipate potential harm, act to protect respondents and to secure their dignity. If a conflict of interests arises, the rights of research participants are paramount.

Research participants should not be exploited. Fair return should be made for their help and services. This should not be understood as direct payment.

Providing adequate protection for participants may require the use of protective devices, giving pseudonyms to both persons and places, or offering anonymity. Where this is the case, we have the responsibility to honour such assurances. Equally, it is our responsibility to ensure that participants are informed that while every effort to secure anonymity will be made, there is a chance of inadvertent exposure.

Our responsibility extends to informing other people who

have access to the data gathered for a research project about any conditions of confidentiality and anonymity that pertain to the material, and to commit them to meeting those conditions.

As anthropologists, we need to recognise that our responsibilities toward research participants may extend in time and space well beyond the completion of the research project.

(ii) Informed consent

It is our responsibility to inform respondents of the purpose of the study, and, where possible and feasible, to include their concerns in the study design and accommodate them in the research method and products.

Researchers are responsible for ensuring that participants have consented to being part of the study. Sometimes this may require the use of signed consent forms, but given that much of anthropological research relies on informal modes of communication, this may not be feasible. Nevertheless, it is essential that researchers ensure that participants understand the research and agree to participate. It is advisable that this is undertaken repeatedly rather than only once.

Researchers have a responsibility to recognise that certain categories of person (such as minors) may not have the legal capacity to act, and to make appropriate arrangements regarding consent if need be.

Participants have the right to withhold their support for the research, to refuse to participate, or to withdraw their consent at any time in the research process, and it is the researcher's duty to remind them of this right whenever it may appear that they are likely to become uncomfortable with any aspect of the researcher's presence. There should be no penalties for withdrawal.

Anthropologists owe it to research participants to consider what will happen to research materials in the long term. Where these are to be made available in the public domain (such as in archives, libraries, etc.), researchers are responsible for securing whatever forms of consent from participants as are necessary for the deposition of research materials. Responsibility for ascertaining the conditions of lodging materials rests with the researcher. It should be noted that material housed in archives may be subject to legal strictures: it is the researcher's responsibility to identify these.

Research materials may not be protected in law and may be subject to subpoena. Researchers have a responsibility to give proper consideration to continuing with research that might incriminate participants, whether immediately or in the long term.

(iii) Vulnerable persons/groups

Research may reveal people's vulnerabilities or render them vulnerable. We have the responsibility to ensure that people are not made more vulnerable by our research or its products. Where either of these outcomes seems likely, we should withhold our materials from publication.

In addition, the vulnerability of specific individuals and groups must be recognised and attention paid to their needs.

Anthropological approaches may be potentially intrusive. It is our responsibility to guard against undue intrusion. The pursuit of knowledge does not justify overriding other social and cultural values.

Some potential research participants may have special standing in law (e.g. children, the aged, people with disabilities, people who have been abused, etc.). In such cases, it is the researcher's responsibility to assess the legal status of potential participants in relation to their research project, and to ensure that the research does not violate potential interlocutors' rights.

(iv) Information dissemination, intellectual property and returns from research

As far as possible, research results should be disseminated to participants. We are responsible to ensure that the findings are properly understood. Findings, publications and, where feasible, raw data, should be made available to participants in national and local languages, after due consideration of the potential harm of disclosure of raw or processed data. Where there are conflicts of interpretation, these should be noted and appropriate action taken.

Where intellectual property rights accrue from research processes, it is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that other research participants' rights are secured and their interests protected.

Where possible, we are responsible for feeding the benefits that flow from the research back into the research communities that participated in the research.

Responsibility to research assistants and students

Where the services of others are employed in their professional capacities in research, anthropologists have a responsibility to ensure that they are properly remunerated and acknowledged in research products.

Anthropologists have a responsibility to act ethically in our interactions with students. We have a responsibility to ensure that students are aware of codes of ethical conduct and we have a duty to assist them work through the ethical dilemmas that may arise in fieldwork and the dissemination of research products. We have a duty to ensure that students are adequately prepared to conduct fieldwork, and are properly guided and supported in their research endeavours.

Where student research is utilised by supervisors, students should be properly informed about this in advance, should give informed consent to the materials being used, and should be properly acknowledged in all the products that draw on their work. The interests of students in their intellectual property rights should be secured, but not to the exclusion of other research participants.

Responsibility to colleagues and the discipline

As anthropologists, we bear the responsibility for our discipline's good reputation and its continuity over time. We need to commit ourselves to act in accord with the highest standards of scholarly integrity and accountability.

We are accountable to our peers (including research participants and scholars both inside and outside the discipline), for our research interactions and products.

A consequence of that accountability is that we will not undertake clandestine research.

Another is that we will ensure that we do not infringe on others' intellectual property, that we do not present materials taken from other sources as our own work or ideas, and that we properly acknowledge the sources of ideas and materials. We will hold our students to the same principles.

We will act in such a way as to ensure that we do not jeopardise other and/or future research in the same research community or place.

Where we engage in collaborative research, we have the responsibility to ensure that our relationships are professional, that roles and responsibilities are properly clarified, that our colleagues are aware of our professional obligations to research participants and that we are aware of their ethical and professional obligations. In the event of conflicts of interest, our primary responsibility is to the subjects of research.

Where research materials are to be shared, care must be taken not to breach conditions of anonymity or privacy.

Responsibility to the public and wider society

Anthropologists are committed to the establishment of a just and humane society based on the principles of anti-racism and anti-sexism.

We have a responsibility to call attention to inequities, injustices, violence and intrusions of freedoms that we may encounter in the course of professional activities.

We have a responsibility to the public and the wider society to ensure that our research questions and data promote these principles, correspond with appropriate research methods and meet the professional requirements of the discipline.

We are responsible for ensuring that we are honest in our representations of what Anthropology's research methods and approach can achieve, and in particular, to understand and honestly represent its limitations.

We have a responsibility to ensure that the products of our research and teaching are not misleading.

Where our research is likely to have bearing on public policy, we are responsible to ensure that we state any significant limitations to our research method, interpretations and findings.

Responsibility to and relations with sponsors

Anthropologists are responsible for clarifying roles, rights and responsibilities and for ensuring that sponsors, funders and contracting agencies are aware that researchers' primary responsibility is to research participants.

We should not undertake clandestine research.

We should not accept funding from sources that are opposed by research participants, or that create conflicts of interest that jeopardise our primary obligation to research participants.

Responsibility to own and host governments

We have the responsibility to be candid with our own and host governments, and are responsible for ensuring that our professional responsibilities will not be compromised as a condition of conducting research.

We should not undertake clandestine research.