

I. Preamble

Anthropology—that most humanistic of sciences and scientific of humanities—is an irreducibly social enterprise. Its practitioners work in the widest variety of contexts studying all aspects of the human experience, and face myriad ethical quandaries inflected in different ways by the contexts in which they work and the kinds of issues they address. What is presented here is intended to reflect core principles shared across subfields and contexts of practice.

These core principles are expressed as concise statements which can be easily remembered for use by anthropologists in their everyday professional lives. Each principle is accompanied by brief discussions placing that principle in a broader context, with more detailed examinations of how each affects or may be helpful to anthropologists in different subfields or work contexts. These examinations are accompanied by resources to assist anthropologists in tackling difficult ethical issues or the new situations that inevitably arise in the production of knowledge.

As a social enterprise, research and practice always involve others— colleagues, students, research participants, employers, clients, funders, among others—and anthropologists must be sensitive to the power differentials, constraints, interests and expectations characteristic of all relationships. In a field of such complex rights, responsibilities, and involvements, it is inevitable that misunderstandings, conflicts, and the need to make choices among apparently incompatible values will arise. Anthropologists are responsible for grappling with such difficulties and struggling to resolve them in ways compatible with the principles stated here. These principles provide anthropologists with tools to engage in developing and maintaining an ethical framework for all stages of anthropological practice - when making decisions prior to beginning projects, when in the field, and when communicating findings and preserving records.

No principles can anticipate unique circumstances or direct actions in specific situations. The individual anthropologist must be willing to make carefully considered ethical choices and be prepared to make clear the assumptions, facts and issues on which those choices are based. These principles address *general* circumstances, priorities and relationships, and also provide helpful specific examples, that should be considered in anthropological work and ethical decision making.

Ethics and morals differ in important ways. The complex issues that anthropologists confront rarely admit to the simple wrongs and rights of moral dicta, and one of the prime ethical obligations of anthropologists is to carefully and deliberately weigh the consequences and ethical dimensions of the choices they make -- by action or inaction. Similarly, ethical principles and political positions should not be conflated; their foci of concern are quite distinct. Finally, ethics and law differ in important ways, as well, and care must always be taken in making these distinctions; making ethical and legal decisions involves different processes. While moral, political, legal and regulatory issues are often important to anthropological practice and the discipline, they are not specifically considered here. These principles address ethical concerns.

While these principles are primarily intended for Association members, they also provide a structure for communicating ethical precepts in anthropology to students, other colleagues, and outside audiences, including sponsors, funders, and Institutional Review Boards or other review committees.

The American Anthropological Association [does not adjudicate](#) assertions of unethical behavior, and these principles are intended to foster discussion, guide anthropologists in making responsible decisions, and educate.

1. Do no harm

Avoidance of harm is a [primary ethical obligation](#) shared by all anthropologists. It is imperative that, before any anthropological work be undertaken -- in communities, with non-human primates, at archaeological and paleoanthropological sites -- each researcher think through the possible [ways that the research might cause harm](#). This includes not only the [avoidance of direct and immediate harm](#) but implies an obligation to weigh carefully potential consequences and inadvertent impacts of an anthropologist's work. This primary obligation can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a project when this primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities. Determining harms and their avoidance in any given situation is complex and must be sustained throughout the course of projects.

Anthropologists may choose to move beyond research to a [position of advocacy](#). While anthropologists welcome work benefiting others or increasing the well-being of individuals or communities, determinations regarding what is in the best interests of others or what kinds of efforts are appropriate to increase well-being are complex and value-laden and should reflect [sustained discussion with those concerned](#). Such work must similarly reflect deliberate and thoughtful consideration of both potential [unintended consequences and long-term impacts](#) on individuals, communities, identities, tangible and intangible heritage and environments.



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2. Be open and honest regarding your work

Anthropologists should be clear and open regarding the purpose, methods, outcomes, and sponsors of their work. Anthropologists must also be prepared to acknowledge and disclose to participants and collaborators all tangible and intangible interests that have, or may reasonably be perceived to have, an impact on their work. Transparency, like informed consent, is a process that involves both making principled decisions prior to beginning the research and encouraging participation, engagement, and open debate throughout its course.

[Compartmented research](#) that by design will not allow the anthropologist to know the full scope or purpose of a project is ethically problematic, since by definition the anthropologist cannot communicate transparently with participants, nor ensure fully informed consent. Researchers who mislead participants about the nature of the research and/or its sponsors; who omit significant information that might bear on a participant's decision to engage in the research; or who otherwise engage in clandestine or secretive research that manipulates or [deceives research participants](#) about the sponsorship, [purpose, goals or implications of the research](#), do not satisfy ethical requirements for openness, honesty, transparency and [fully informed consent](#).

Anthropologists have an ethical obligation to consider the potential impact of both their research and the communication or dissemination of the results of their research. Anthropologists must consider this issue prior to beginning research and throughout the research process. Explicit negotiation with sponsors/clients about data ownership and access, and dissemination of results, may be necessary before deciding whether to begin research.



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3. Obtain informed consent and necessary permissions

Anthropological researchers working with living human communities must obtain the voluntary, prior and informed consent of research participants. Minimally, informed consent includes sharing with potential participants the research goals, methods, funding sources or sponsors, expected outcomes, anticipated impacts of the research, and the rights of research participants. It must also include establishing expectations of [anonymity](#) and [credit](#). Researchers must present to research participants the possible impacts of participation, and make clear that despite their best efforts, confidentiality may be compromised or outcomes may differ from those anticipated. Anthropologists have an obligation to ensure that research participants have freely granted consent, and must avoid conducting research in circumstances in which consent may not be truly voluntary or informed. In the event that the research changes in ways that will directly affect the participants, anthropologists must revisit and renegotiate consent. The informed consent process is necessarily dynamic, continuous and reflexive. Anthropologists should initiate this process as a part of project design and continue through implementation as an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with research participants. Informed consent does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant.

Anthropologists working with biological communities or cultural resources have an obligation to ensure that they have secured appropriate permissions or permits prior to the conduct of research.

Consultation with groups or communities affected by such research should be an important element of the design of such projects and should continue as work progresses or circumstances change. It is explicitly understood that defining what constitutes an affected community is a complex, dynamic and necessary process.



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4. Balance competing ethical obligations due collaborators and affected parties

Anthropologists must balance competing ethical obligations to research participants, students, professional colleagues, employers and funders, among others.

These varying relationships may create conflicting, competing or crosscutting ethical obligations, reflecting both the relative vulnerabilities of different individuals, communities or populations, asymmetries of power implicit in a range of relationships, and the differing ethical frameworks of collaborators representing other disciplines or areas of practice.

Anthropologists have an obligation to distinguish the different kinds of interdependencies and collaborations their work involves, and to consider the real and potential ethical dimensions of these diverse and sometimes contradictory relationships, which may be different in character or change over time. When conflicts between ethical standards or expectations arise, anthropologists need to make explicit their ethical obligations, and develop an ethical approach in consultation with those concerned. Anthropologists must balance these competing ethical obligations while recognizing their obligation to avoid harm to those they study. Anthropologists should not agree to conditions which inappropriately change the purpose, focus, or intended outcomes of their research, nor should they mislead sponsors or collaborators about the nature of the work or its outcomes. Anthropologists remain individually responsible for making ethical decisions.

Collaborations may be defined and understood quite differently by the various participants. [The scope of collaboration, rights of the various parties, and issues of credit, acknowledgment and data access should be openly and fairly established at the outset.](#) Collaborations normally involve compromise, and anthropologists must be sensitive to relationships of power and whether such compromise is freely given.



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5. Make your results accessible

The generation of knowledge presumes that results of anthropological research will be made accessible in a timely fashion. These results are complex, subject to multiple interpretations, and susceptible to differing and unintended uses. In some situations, limited dissemination may be appropriate where such restrictions will protect the safety, dignity, or privacy of participants; or protect cultural heritage and/or tangible or intangible cultural or intellectual property.

Limited dissemination poses significant risks. [There may be equally great risks associated with dissemination itself.](#) Once information is disseminated, even in a limited sphere, there is great likelihood that it will become widely available. Thus, anthropologists should consider situations where preventing dissemination may be the most ethical decision.

Anthropologists should not normally withhold research results from research participants when those results are shared with others. Restrictions on disclosure may be appropriate and ethical, however, such as where participants have been fully informed and have freely agreed to limited dissemination.

Proprietary, classified or other research with limited distribution raises complex ethical questions which must be resolved using these ethical principles. [Anthropologists must weigh the intended uses of their research and work to evaluate potential uses of their research and the impact of its dissemination now and in the future.](#)



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6. Protect and preserve your records

[Anthropologists have an ethical responsibility for ensuring the integrity, preservation, and protection of their work](#) . An anthropologist's ability to protect and use the materials collected may be contingent upon [complex issues of ownership and stewardship](#) .

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to take precautions that collected data and materials will not be used for ends [other than those specified at the time the data were collected](#) . These issues are not always clear at the time of data collection, but the researcher is responsible for considering and communicating [likely or foreseeable uses of collected data and materials](#) as [part of the process of informed consent](#) or obtaining permission. Researchers are also responsible for consulting with research participants regarding their views of generation, use and preservation of research records. This includes informing research participants whether data and materials might be transferred to or accessed by other parties; [how they might be transformed or used to identify participants](#); and how they will be stored and [how long they will be preserved](#).

Researchers have a responsibility to use appropriate methods to ensure the confidentiality and security of field notes, recordings, samples or other primary data and the identities of participants. Ethical decisions regarding the preservation of research materials must balance obligations to maintain data integrity with responsibilities to [protect research participants against future harmful impacts](#) . Given the multiple constituencies for and new uses that are often made of anthropological research, such as by heritage communities, the interests of preservation ordinarily outweigh the potential benefits of destroying materials for preserving confidentiality. Researchers generating object collections have a responsibility to ensure the preservation and accessibility of the resulting materials and/or results of analyzed samples, including associated documentation.

In the absence of other agreements or obligations, an anthropologist is presumed to own her/his notes and records, and has an ethical responsibility to ensure their [integrity and continued accessibility after the anthropologist's death](#) . Other factors (source of funding, employment agreements, or negotiated agreements with collaborators, among others) may impact ownership of records. Anthropologists should determine record ownership relating to each project and make [appropriate arrangements](#) accordingly as a standard part of ethical practice. [Researchers should be aware that records may be subject to legal claim based on applicable laws and jurisdictions](#).



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7. Maintain respectful and ethical professional relationships

There is an ethical dimension to all professional relationships. Whether working in academic or applied settings, anthropologists have a responsibility to maintain respectful relationships with colleagues. In mentoring students, interacting with colleagues, working with clients, or supervising staff, anthropologists should comport themselves in ways that promote a [supportive](#) and sustainable workplace environment.

In their capacity as researchers, anthropologists are subject to the ethical principles guiding all scientific and scholarly conduct. They must not [plagiarize, nor fabricate or falsify evidence](#), or knowingly misrepresent information or its source. They must also be alert to [the potential of bias to compromise the integrity of anthropological work](#); anthropologists may gain personally from their work, but they must not exploit individuals, groups, animals, or cultural or biological materials. [When they see evidence of research misconduct, they are obligated to report it.](#) They must not obstruct the scholarly efforts of others when they are carried out responsibly.

In their role as teachers and mentors, anthropologists are obligated to provide instruction on the ethical responsibilities associated with every aspect of anthropological work. They should facilitate, and encourage their students to engage in, [dialogue on ethical issues](#), and discourage their participation in ethically questionable projects. Anthropologists should appropriately acknowledge student contributions to their research and writing, and compensate students justly for any assistance they provide. They are [obligated to give students appropriate credit for the authorship of their ideas](#), and encourage the publication of worthy student work.



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Supporting Materials

<http://www.aaanet.org/cmtes/ethics/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-to-Review-the-AAA-Statements-on-Ethics.cfm>

Levy, J. E. (2009), [Life is Full of Hard Choices](#): A Grievance Procedure for the AAA?. Anthropology News, 50: 7–8.
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.50607.x

Fluehr-Lobban, C. (2009), [Guiding Principles over Enforceable Standards](#). Anthropology News, 50: 8–9.
doi: 10.1111/j.1556-3502.2009.50608.x