

Debates on Ethical Practice

A Perspective from the Association of Social Anthropologists

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The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA) developed its Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice in 1987 and adopted them in their current manifestation in 1999. These guidelines frame anthropological ethics in terms of a series of relationships with, and responsibilities toward, a range of actors and institutions with whom professional anthropologists interact, namely: (1) research participants; (2) sponsors, funders and employers; (3) colleagues and the discipline; (4) own and host governments; and (5) wider society. These guidelines provide a starting point for thinking through questions of the ethical. The way in which they promote discussion has been key to the ASA's work in the realm of anthropological ethics.

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Creating a Discussion Space

During Ian Harper's tenure as the ASA's ethics officer (2004–07), association members conveyed that our ethical guidelines needed to be revisited and revised. In part, this was in response to criticisms and concerns that the code should be updated to reflect emergent shifts in the discipline, with more anthropologists involved in interdisciplinary work in increasingly complex environments, including

those of conflict and "studying up." To stimulate discussion on this, Ian Harper and Alberto Corsín Jiménez presented a paper at the 2005 ASA conference in Aberdeen, proposing that the ASA develop what we thought of as a "wikiethics."

Concerned with the rise of "audit culture" (Strathern 2000) and the tendency to focus rather prescriptively on "informed consent" at the expense of a broader ethical understanding and engagement with society, the idea was to create an interactive space on the ASA website to discuss ethics. Here, we argued, colleagues and students in the field could develop and debate a more ethnographic ethics, constructed from experiences and "case studies" and through broader social engagement. We posited that a thickly descriptive ethics could thus be created to mitigate one of the key problems we perceived was developing in the US: a tendency for ethical concerns to be reactive and for ethics codes to be legalistic and prescriptive.

In his introductory statement on the ASA website (www.theasa.org/ethics.htm), then-ASA Chair John Gledhill stated that the ASA, with its voluntary membership, cannot and should not act in a juridical way. He emphasized that adjudicating claims of ethical transgression was not the ASA mandate, but ASA members should still be concerned to comment upon publicly and speak out about any set of issues that "threaten to compromise the ethical foundations of our discipline." The early ASA ethics blog (www.theasa.org/ethics/discussion.htm) was thus inaugurated by a piece by John Gledhill on the Pat Roberts Intelligence Scholars Program (PRISP), and its implications for the discipline.

Subsequently, we decided to hold open meetings at every annual

ASA conference to further debate key ethical issues. Central to these discussions were the changing context of research governance and the increasingly prescriptive way that the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) drove the question of ethical review. The ESRC acts as the interface between the UK government and research institutions in dispensing research funds and training in social and economic issues. Of primary concern here was the obvious and powerful influence that medical ethics was exerting on the process, among other changes that leaned toward greater prescriptive institutional review.

COMMENTARY

The Military Engagement Debate

In recent years, anthropological engagement with military and intelligence agencies has been widely debated at AAA meetings and by ASA committee members, in conversation with research councils and their funding programs. Nayanika Mookherjee's tenure as ASA ethics officer (2007–12) started with the setting up of the wider, new ASA blog (<http://blog.theasa.org>) and coordination of a discussion on the role of social scientists and their involvement in government counterinsurgency programs on the blog, one of several efforts through which ASA sought to vigorously inject anthropology into the public sphere on controversial issues. A group of 11 bloggers wrote on the theme of counterinsurgency from January through April 2008. The main debates within the blog centered on the core ethical issues that arise when anthropologists use their discipline and ethnographic knowledge to support warfare or counterinsurgency.

The problem, as David Price highlighted it, is that the social engineering intrinsic to this process on the part of occupying, invading forces is not aligned with the long-term interests of studied populations, and thus it would seem to conflict with ethical principles stating that anthropologists should strive to not undermine the inter-

ests of those studied. At the same time, Anjan Ghosh reminded us that in India and other nations of the global south the government is a leading employer of anthropologists and collaboration with the government is routine in terms of policy and planning. However, as Kriti Kapila pointed out: "When does professional expertise cease to be expertise and move into the shadowy area of collaboration?" This is an important question given that work with governments can be channeled toward counterinsurgency efforts, as was done in regard to armed Maoist insurgency in the 1970s India. More recently, anthropologists outside the realm of government employment are contesting in India's Supreme Court the Chattisgarh state government's counterinsurgency strategy of setting up vigilante groups (Salwa Judum) and "stra-

tegic hamlets" against Maoist guerrillas. Irfan Ahmed, an anthropologist working among Indian Muslim minorities, suggested that when the state's penetration into society is so pervasive, it is perhaps more meaningful to link ethics with the ways in which power—domestic as well as global—plays out and is internalized among minority groups.

Within Europe, the proliferation of programs and funds available for social scientists to study Islam, religious leaders and Muslim youths is also notable and worthy of debate. Caroline and Filippo Osella discuss, as one example of this, the "Challenging Terrorism by Countering Radicalization" program—a joint initiative of the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Economic and Social Research Council that drew substantial criticism from ASA and was eventually withdrawn. This program was reframed first in terms of "radicalization and violence" and then "global uncertainties." This move does not simply try to deflect criticisms by subsuming "war on terror"-oriented research within a broader framework, but also effectively reduces issues such as poverty, political dissent and even environmental degradation to simple matters of security. ASA meetings and the ASA blog have been key sites for debating the value and dangers of such programs and the ways in which they are framed.



International Concerns

ASA discussions have emphasized time and again the variable, sometimes conflicting views generated by diverse voices in the global anthropological community and across the social sciences, depending on local interests, concerns, research and education structures, and ethics review processes. For example, many who attended the ASA association governance meeting in April 2008 were sympathetic to the international pledge of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists, but viewed it as not sufficiently applicable to anthropologists in the global south who have to work collaboratively with governments. As another example, although the issue of military engagement has been widely debated within anthropology in multiple international venues, other social sciences have considered this conversation to be predominantly irrelevant.

For the anthropology community in the UK, this debate is clearly not over as government influence on research councils remains sufficiently strong (evidenced by the new Global Uncertainties website). This opens up space for further interventions and debate, and the ASA plans to remain highly engaged in discussion around the implications of these issues. As events unfold in our assorted wars, and as anthropologists become drawn into new schemes, we will be entitled to revisit and update our association's ethical code as we see necessary, particularly as the consequences of anthropological involvement in these conflicts becomes clearer.

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Comparing Ethics Codes and Conventions

Anthropological, Sociological and Psychological Approaches

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A first step in understanding how anthropologists can manage multiple, potentially competing sets of ethics in interdisciplinary work is recognizing that ethical conventions do in fact differ across disciplines. Distinctive ethical presuppositions concerning the researcher–researched relationship structure disciplinary methodologies and epistemologies. The histories and overall configuration of research in particular disciplinary cultures give apparently similar methods (eg, interviewing) contrastive ethical resonances. These structural differences are echoed in professional association ethics codes.

Participant Observation in Anthropology and Sociology

"Participant observation" refers to sociocultural anthropology's longstanding default research style: it needs no special methodological justification. The validity of its findings is conventionally based in ethically admirable field relationships characterized by intimacy, reciprocity and trust. In sociology, by contrast, the same term refers to a *minority* approach that requires justification relative to the methodological mainstream (sample surveys and interviews) and that is widely considered ethically *problematic*. As conditions of both ethically and methodologically sound practice, the normative research roles of interviewer and interviewee are construed as definable and delimitable by the researcher. Relative to that sociological norm, participant observers' social identities are inevitably undefined, uncontrollable and prone to role conflicts and misinterpretation.

From another angle, while anthropological fieldworkers expect their social identities to be marked—the legacy of research in contexts where they inevitably stood out—sociological participant observers can often blend in as "full

participants." Insofar as they do not clearly and persistently mark themselves as researchers, their work can slide into the ethically treacherous terrain of "disguised observation." Prominent public controversies during the 1950s and 1960s about instances of more or less intentionally deceptive fieldwork, together with threats of federal regulation, prompted the American Sociological Association (ASA) to adopt its first formal ethics code in 1970.

Nevertheless, acknowledging that deception can be "an integral feature of the design and conduct of research," the "informed consent" section of the ASA code preserves a clear, albeit constrained, place for deception. Sociological participant observers take pride in a history of exposing social problems (eg, "deviance," abuses of power). They continue to argue that one cannot study up "meekly": that covert research is sometimes necessary for gaining access to secretive behavior. This rationale for deception converges with mainstream values that these sociologists share with their quantitative colleagues. Whether exposing shrouded corners of society ethnographically or revealing unseen social patterns statistically, the specific value of sociological science is the critical demystification of "personal" experience.

Informed Consent in Anthropology and Psychology

Like participant observation, "informed consent" is construed differently in neighboring fields of study. Apparently similar assurances about informed consent now exist in many professional ethics codes. However, the term's connotations are far from standardized; therefore, assurances about consent in ethics codes and elsewhere cannot be taken at face value.

Anthropologists are wont to treat consent as processual and socially dynamic: field research questions and activities are emer-

gent (rather than known in meaningful detail beforehand); they may be negotiated and co-produced with informants. Therefore, determining appropriate agents of consent and precise topical emphases about which they might be informed may not be possible until the research is underway.

In contrast, psychological research often takes place in controlled laboratory settings corresponding to defined project aims; participants typically read and sign consent forms before experiments begin. However, problems arise around *what* participants can be told about the goals and nature of the research without undermining its validity. During the twentieth century experimenters came to rely heavily on the systematic deception of research subjects—an emphasis that persists today despite heated controversy during the 1960s that resulted in an extensive revision of the American Psychological Association (APA) ethics code. Even when misinformation is not actively presented to engender the particular states of mind (eg, anxiety, competitiveness) that the investigator hopes to study, psychologists agree that the central hypotheses motivating an experiment cannot be revealed for the data to be scientifically meaningful.

Ironically, once formal consent procedures were required by Institutional Review Boards, consent forms—which must contain informative descriptions of prospective research—have themselves become key media for deflecting participants' attention *away* from true research goals. Ethical practice in this context depends on judgments researchers make concerning the potential for harm to participants relative to the benefits of the knowledge that might be acquired. It also depends on *post*-research "debriefing" procedures designed to undo whatever negative effects the research

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