

ETHICAL GUIDELINES

Dutch Anthropological Association / Antropologen Beroepsvereniging (ABv)

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Introduction: ethical guidelines for anthropological research¹

The aim of this Code of Ethics is to provide anthropologists with guidelines for making ethical choices in the conduct of their research. The ABv wishes to present this Code to researchers as a point of departure for making decisions, and to other persons or institutes to provide insight in the ways in which ethics, scholarly integrity and data protocols are guaranteed within the anthropological discipline.

This Code is organized around four important pillars of anthropological research: 1) the ethical obligation to avoid any harmful impact on the people, non-human species and materials studied or otherwise related to the research context, 2) the need to obtain the consent of the research population and guarantee confidentiality, 3) scholarly integrity, and 4) secure data management, ownership and access to data.

1) Avoiding harm

Anthropologists have ethical obligations to the people, non-human species, and materials they study and to the people and non-human species with whom they work. In all stages of the research, from design, through fieldwork and analysis to dissemination, anthropologists need to respect the well-being (safety, dignity, and privacy) of humans and other species. They need to avoid harm or wrong to the people, non-human species and materials they study or work with (or that are in any other way related to the research context). Anthropologists need to ponder the impact that the disclosure of research findings may have on them. These ethical obligations may be in conflict with the goal of generating data and seeking new knowledge, and, in such cases, anthropologists should consider to refrain from or discontinue a research project, or to exclude particular data from disclosure. In the case of vulnerable populations, e.g. people in precarious and marginalized positions, anthropologists need to be extra careful as disclosing data that relates to them may lead to their increasing discrimination or marginalization.

2) Confidentiality and informed consent

Before carrying out their research, anthropologists should, optimally, obtain the free and informed consent of research participants. The degree and breadth of informed consent will depend on the nature of the project and may be affected by requirements of other codes, laws, and ethics of the country, organization or community in which the research is carried out.

¹ This ABv Code of Ethics has been inspired by the current versions of the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association and the Code of Ethics of the Australian Anthropological Society.

Conditions under which research is carried out, as well as relations between anthropologists and their research participants may change over time, so anthropologists should view informed consent not as final once given. Anthropologists have the obligation regularly to renegotiate informed consent. When doing research in or on organizations, or other formalized settings, anthropologists should obtain permission from any relevant authorities or management, as long as this does not (potentially) endanger the direct research participants. Informed consent does not necessarily imply a written or signed form.

Anthropologists must determine whether their research participants wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and make every effort to comply with those wishes. They must present to their research participants the possible impact of their involvement and their choices regarding anonymity. If the assurance of anonymity is given, special attention should be paid to the inclusion or exclusion of details that may disclose the identity of research participants, even when data are anonymized, e.g. identity markers that may appear in government records or social media.

3) Integrity

Anthropologists bear responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their discipline and of science in general. They should be able to provide transparency about their methods, the choices made in the research process, and their analysis. This transparency can be provided in their publications, or when asked for by their peers or other persons who, given their position, can legitimately require this (e.g. journal editors). Anthropological researchers are subject to the general rules of scholarly conduct: they should not deceive or knowingly misrepresent (i.e., fabricate evidence, falsify, plagiarize), or attempt to prevent reporting of misconduct, or obstruct the scholarly research of others.

Anthropologists should publish and otherwise disseminate their research findings in an appropriate fashion, both to the scholarly community, sponsors, students and others. In so doing, they must consider carefully the possible implications of the information they disclose and, to the best of their abilities, see to it that it is well understood, properly contextualized, and responsibly utilized.

4) Data management, ownership and access to data

Anthropologists are responsible for storing their data securely. In case of digital or digitized data, these should be stored on secure, password-protected and encrypted drives, to which only the researchers have access. Non-digital data such as handwritten notes and printed documents should be stored in secure lockers, during all stages of the research. Laptops, computers and recording devices should be encrypted and password-protected.

In order to guarantee the safety and privacy of their research participants, anthropologists should be the owners of their research data. Researchers should make every effort to avoid the transference of this ownership to other persons or institutes, or to open access data bases, and, hence, to prevent the disclosure and use of data that could be harmful to research participants. Since this may be at odds with the codes or regulations of sponsors and host institutes, the importance of keeping the ownership over data should be explained in terms of researchers' ethical obligations towards research participants.

Due to potential sensitivity of data and the possible impact of their disclosure, even when anonymized, no access to the raw data can be granted to any other person or institute other than the directly involved researchers and, if applicable, their appointed supervisors. In principle, to protect the anonymity and safety of their research participants, the only reason to consider granting access to the data to others than the researchers, or their supervisors, is when reasonable doubts concerning the scientific integrity of the research are raised. In such cases, one or more experienced anthropologists, selected in consultation with the researcher(s), may be granted confidential access to research data.

Because of the aforementioned sensitivity of research data, anthropologists should carefully consider if and how their data can be stored for future use, e.g. for analyzing developments over longer periods of time.

Ethical intervision

In complying with these ethical guidelines, the ABv is in favour of a form of ethical intervision. The ABv encourages researchers to discuss among each other, on a regular basis, their ethical choices and decisions, and to provide transparency about their methods, research process and data analysis. Especially for researchers who work on similar topics or in similar fields discussing not only the contents of their studies, but also the ethical considerations involved could be very valuable.

Should you have any questions or suggestions with regard to this Code of Ethics, please let the ABv know at bestuur@antropologen.nl.

Various sub-disciplines, types of research and types of data have their own ethical concerns and guidelines, for instance in the case of medical anthropology, of visual ethnography, in research with children or with respect to visual material. Anthropologists are responsible to inform themselves about these concerns and guidelines.