Ethics and the American Anthropological Association

Samantha Kirby
Department of Anthropology

Ethics: an ever changing, ever adapting, moral code; a philosophical minefield. There is no definition of ethics that has withstood the test of time and/or the wrath of a logician. Unfortunately, this leaves naught but a gray area where the guidelines of anthropological application should be. Twice now, a formal document fleshing out ethical guidelines for researchers to abide by has been created and released to the public by the American Anthropological Association, and twice now, its goals have been both unfocused and unclear.

It is my opinion that a document discussing and outlining every ethical issue that needs to be addressed in anthropology would take an unfathomable amount of time to create and, even then, it would satisfy neither every person nor every moral code. The need for a revised ethical code every few years is not surprising with such an unstable topic of discussion; there will never be a code that encompasses every corner of the broad field that is anthropology. That being said, perhaps the American Anthropological Association has done all that it can in order to put together a more effective statement on ethics. While the original, published in 1998, covers a wide array of ethical issues, the second, released in 2012, treats key points in greater detail (AAA 1998 and AAA 2012).

The introduction to the 1998 Code of Ethics concludes by stating that the code will “address general contexts, priorities and relationships which should be considered in ethical decision making in anthropological work” (AAA 1998:2). This is extremely vague. Granted, the vast borders of ethics are not easy to reach with a solitary sentence. That being said, the goal of
the American Anthropological Association seems to be an unattainable one. The focus of this code is to create a system of guidelines which can be applied, very loosely, to all anthropological endeavors and require the researcher to use these nebulous concepts to structure and justify the ethics of his or her research. The American Anthropological Association appears to recognize the unlikelihood of such an outcome as its code of ethics excuses “misunderstandings, conflicts... [and choices made]...among apparently incompatible values” (AAA 1998:1). Frankly, there is no clear divide between what falls under any of these categories and what does not.

The revised Statement on Ethics released in 2012 attempts to combat ambiguities in the 1998 code by focusing on, and stressing the importance of a few key principles. These are referred to as the “core principles” of anthropology that are shared by all fields within the discipline (AAA 2012:2). “These principles are intended to foster discussion, guide anthropologists in making responsible decisions, and educate” (AAA 2012:3). Fortunately for the authors of this statement, these goals do not seem to be measurable. It is difficult to claim that a goal cannot be reached when it is entirely too difficult to measure. At the very least, one would have to assess the content and value of discussions that arise in response to this statement as well as the ethical soundness of the research that follows. Unfortunately for the field of anthropology, it is nearly impossible to keep up with all of the research projects that are being carried out. The problem of how to monitor the degree to which ethical standards are being met has yet to be solved.

With assessment of the degree to which the individual standards are being met next to impossible, both ethical codes attempt to prevent unethical research from being conducted by requiring the anthropologist involved to get informed consent from his or her participants before the research is conducted (AAA 1998:3 and AAA 2012:5). Hypothetically, informed consent
prevents the withholding of information from participants and limits deceit and harm. If a participant were to be informed of the purpose and methods of the research as well as any possible harm that might result, she or he may use this knowledge to make an informed decision as to whether or not to participate. Unfortunately, this is only hypothetical. There is no way to monitor the accuracy or even the provision of any information given to a potential participant. Further, both codes demonstrate leniency when faced with the question of what exactly informed consent might be. Both statements claim that “it is the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant” (AAA 1998:3 and AAA 2012:7). In societies where the people do not read or write, it is obviously unreasonable to expect a written and signed form of consent. The American Anthropological Association’s Briefing Paper on Informed Consent suggests audio or video recordings of consent being given, but neither the statements nor the briefing paper suggest a method to strengthen this ‘requirement’ (AAA 2000).

In her 2009 *Anthropology News* article, Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban brings to light the fact that membership in the American Anthropological Association is neither required nor serves as a license to conduct fieldwork (Fluehr-Lobban 2009). Thus, any ethical code or statement produced by the Association can and will go unnoticed by many. Fluehr-Lobban suggests that ethical codes should not need revision; instead, all researchers should have “sensible and sustainable guiding principles promoting a public moral system for anthropology” (Fluehr-Lobban 2009:8).

One of the most significant problems with both of the American Anthropological Association’s ethical statements is that the principles that they lay out are not enforced. Fluehr-Lobban’s best solution for this problem is education. Education is discussed in depth in the 1998 Code of Ethics, however, it is barely mentioned in the 2012 statement and, other than a solitary
sentence, only touches on the responsibility of the researcher to encourage ethical discussion amongst his or her students (AAA 1998:4 and AAA 2012:13). Education is not a means of enforcing a set of principles or guidelines. Education is the means by which these ethical principles will become embedded in the minds of anthropologists and in our society as a whole. Unfortunately, the “improved” 2012 Statement of Ethics fails to recognize this process of education as anything more than the relationship between a researcher and all other individuals (AAA 2012:13). The Code of Ethics covers education in no less than an entire section where not only the teaching of ethics is highlighted, but the constant improvement of teaching techniques is, as well. Section IV in the 1998 Code of Ethics not only stresses the passing down of ethical codes via teaching, but the idea that these principles can be problematic and worth discussing, as well (AAA 1998:4).

Lastly, the 2012 Statement on Ethics was written in a manner that attempts to sound authoritative, definitive, and impersonal. However, as Fluehr-Lobban states, “the AAA Code of Ethics is not a code of law, nor can it be” (2009:8), though the 2012 Statement of Ethics attempts to prove her wrong with its tone. The voice of this document is vastly different from its predecessor, as the 1998 Code of Ethics is much more inviting and reasonable in nature. The 2012 statement marks certain practices as failing to “satisfy ethical requirements,” (AAA 2012:5) yet provides no insight as to how these ‘requirements’ will be enforced; obviously, this is because there is no way to enforce them. Further, the Statement on Ethics goes on to state that researchers are “obligated” to report “evidence of research misconduct” (AAA 2012:13) when it arises. The term ‘obligate’ is an evaluative one which implies that there is a legal or moral code in place that one must abide by. As noted previously, there is nothing legally binding about the American Anthropological Association’s 2012 Statement of Ethics (Fluehr-Lobban 2009 and
AAA 2012). There does, however, seem to be something morally binding when it comes to anthropological research. Still, there is no clear definition of right and wrong. The difference between what is moral or immoral is simply an expression of one’s personal values.

Perhaps my view of society is overly pessimistic, but I find it hard to believe that a written code will succeed in eliminating unethical research practices. Even with the implication of law, someone who is determined enough will find a way around that, too. It is because of this that I fail to see how either the 1998 Code of Ethics or the 2012 Statement on Ethics will achieve the goals it sets out. No matter how many times the ethical guidelines change, the practices of society may not. Perhaps the only way for society to see to it that these ethical guidelines are regularly met is for them to become somehow embedded in those practicing anthropological research.
References

American Anthropological Association


Fluehr-Lobban, Carolyn