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 ethnically 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 emergent (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 became 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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experience may have had, while providing a more accurate account of the research rationale.

Methodological adequacy in psychology demands that researchers control observer effects and other confounding factors so that relations among study variables can be isolated. It is achieved by controlling the research subject’s experience (eg, by withholding information). An ethic of consent that privileges respect for personal autonomy is a poor fit with the methodological demands of good behavioral science. An ethic that empha-
sizes harm/benefit calculi instead allows more weight to be given to the social value of research. Consequently, the APA code section on informed consent forbids deception “unless [the psychologists] have determined that the use of deceptive techniques is justified by the study’s significant prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and that effective nondeceptive alternative procedures are not feasible.” Despite decades of controversy over its use, deception continues to be “an integral feature” of many experiments; consequently much creative energy is invested in designing post-experiment debriefing techniques “to ensure

the participants’ understanding of the reasons [for deception] and to restore the quality of the relationship with the investigator.”

Aspirational Priorities and Enforceable Sanctions

From this comparative vantage, the priority that the AAA code places on informant wellbeing seems freshly meaningful. There is no “unless” qualification preserving the scholarly bottom line in the 2009 version’s four-field wording about anthropologists’ “primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work.” The clarification that follows is no hedge: “These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to deci-
sions not to undertake or to discon-
tinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities.” This is not to say that the APA’s position is ethically crass. On the contrary, as an association whose twentieth-century membership expanded far beyond college teaching to include practitioners with broadly public clinical, testing and therapeutic responsibilities, the APA takes ethics seriously. Its code was developed through a remarkably democratically process that drew widely on members’ experiences and involvement. The code defines sanctionable offenses and procedures for adjudicating cases of alleged misconduct. Revisions since the 1980s have introduced the specificity necessary for workable enforcement. The association has periodically published and updated ethics casebooks; contemporary position papers and debates are publicly accessible on its website.

Particularly relevant to the AAA’s struggles around anthropologists’ involvement in the Human Terrain System, these papers include passionate arguments over the adequacy of the APA’s current code in the face of its extraordinarily specific and absolute resolu-
tion banning the involvement of psychologists in military and CIA interrogations involving torture. The fact that the code carries sanctioning weight adds to the heat of these exchanges. It should be noted that the APA and ASA are among the very few behavioral, social science and humanities associations to have enforceable ethics codes. But while the APA code is widely praised, the ASA code has been criticized for insufficient specificity about implementa-
tion to sustain legal challenges. The vast majority of ethics codes have no sanctioning powers. They are aspirational statements aimed at educating new members about professional values, repre-
senting disciplines to the public, preempting external regulation, and—not inconsequentially— providing members with profes-
sionally principled rationales in employment and consultancy contract negotiations.

Additionally, there appears to be a trend away from adjudicating cases among those asso-
ciations (eg, the AAA and the American Historical Association) that previously did so. The AAA is in the mainstream in this regard; the American Political Science Association, American Statistical Association, Society of American Archivists, American Library Association, Linguistic Society of America, American Folklore Society, and many others also do not adjudicate cases.

In conclusion, the ethical structuring of disciplinary epistemologies matters when researchers with different disciplinary back-
gounds evaluate one another’s work on grant committees and Institutional Review Boards, and in promotion cases and numerous non-academic contexts. Cross-disciplinary ethics differences can have consequential effects even when the question at issue (eg, the adequacy of “participant obser-
vation” as a research method) is not overtly ethical. Being aware of the local disciplinary meanings of apparently standardized terms like “informed consent” is a step toward managing multiple, poten-
tially competing sets of ethics in interdisciplinary work.

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2009 AAA
Photo Contest

Accepting Entries through October 1

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For submission tips, see April AN (p 9). For other questions, contact Amy Goldenberg at agoldenberg@aaanet.org.