
UNIT 3 ETHICS IN WRITING

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Learning Objectives

After studying the unit, you will be able to:

- understand what ethics are and their importance in anthropology;
- be acquainted with the historical origin of ethics in anthropology;
- know about the various types of problems that arise during anthropological work; and
- be familiar with codes of ethics which one should remember.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In general sense, people define ethics as ‘norms of conduct’ or ‘rules of governing behaviour’. These ‘rules’ are those that differentiate between right and wrong (or acceptable and unacceptable). Groups (like family, school) are considered as the agencies where most people learn ethical norms. Although most people acquire their sense of right and wrong during childhood, moral development occurs throughout life and human beings pass through different stages of growth as they mature in various social settings.

However, very often we come across disagreements on various ethical issues. The reason being that in a particular society people recognise same ethical norms but their application is subjective i.e. different individual infer, apply, and balance these norms in different ways in light of their own values and life experiences. Moreover, at a global level, every society has its own system of values and ethical norms. So it becomes difficult for the individuals belonging to different societies to agree on the same issue of ethical norms.

‘Ethics’ can be defined in another way that is in the domain of academic disciplines and their research. **Disciplines like anthropology, sociology,** philosophy, theology, law, or psychology that study standards of conduct in the society have their own set of ethical norms.

There are various codes of ethics, rules and policies in research and disciplines which have been recognised by various professional associations, government agencies, and universities. In general, these include honesty, objectivity, integrity, carefulness, openness, respect for intellectual property, confidentiality, responsible publication

and mentoring, respect for colleagues, social responsibility, non-discrimination, competence, legality, animal care, human subjects protection and many others. (Shamoo and Resnik, 2009)

Reflection

David B. Resnik (2009) defines ethics as a **method, procedure, or perspective** for deciding how to act and for analyzing complex problems and issues. For instance, in considering a complex issue like global warming, one may take an economic, ecological, political, or ethical perspective on the problem. While an economist might examine the cost and benefits of various policies related to global warming, an environmental ethicist could examine the ethical values and principles at stake.

However, the nature of research in every discipline has been defined by its subject matter. Anthropology is a science that looks at different human aspects—archaeological, biological, socio-cultural and linguistic. Human beings with all aspects of their lives remain in the centre of anthropological inquiries. So it becomes obligatory for anthropologists to examine the ethical, social and political consequences of each piece of research and writings. An anthropologist is expected to keep the socio-economic, political and ethical aspects of human life in mind.

Joan Cassell and Sue-Ellen Jacobs (1980) write: “Many anthropologists perceive ethics as an abstract and, on occasion, intimidating set of injunctions. Discussions of moral principles--such as autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, and justice--seem to have little relation to our daily activities as researchers, teachers, students, and practitioners.”

Anthropology is fieldwork-based science where a researcher, very often, comes across various uncontrolled situations. The situations may vary in terms of people, environment, circumstances, location, position and researcher may find himself stuck in a variety of duality. In the field especially, situations may be so complex, involve so many parties and so much factions that it becomes difficult to decide what may be done.

V.K.Srivastava (2004) argues that ethical questions start surfacing as the research work begins. He raises various ethical questions ranging from ‘investigative social research’, use of pseudonyms, payment to the respondents, issues regarding the gender of researcher to seeking for the ‘informed consent’. He further adds that each researcher has to address these issues and questions afresh with every research, keeping in view the contextual specific situations.

Moreover, anthropological researcher, practitioner and teacher belong to various communities, religion and cultures which have their own values, morals and ethics. So they have moral obligations towards their own group and culture. On the other hand, they also have certain obligations towards the scholarly discipline. Since human beings remain at the centre of social research, while dealing with ‘subjects’ in their own adobe, an anthropologist should be very careful towards their culture and practices and their autonomy as a human being should be respected.

During their fieldwork, many a times, researchers develop a strong empathy for people they are studying and start feeling a sense of personal responsibility for their welfare. This affiliation not only prompts them to neglect many other factors but also goes against the spirit of the discipline, i.e. objectivity. Besides, it also hampers the basic nuances of ethnographic writings which demand accounts of cultural relative nature. Here the issue of ethical adequacy rises in anthropological practice and writings.

3.2 ETHICS IN ANTHROPOLOGY: HISTORICAL REFLECTIONS

Murray Wax (1984) claims that from its emergence as a distinct discipline, anthropology has been oriented toward ethics and social policy. Edward B. Tylor (1958[1871]:539) concluded his survey of human culture with the remark that “the science of culture is essentially a reformer’s science”. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown would claim that he was moved to initiate his studies of simpler people on the advice of the celebrated Russian anarchist, Prince Peter Kropotkin, for whom such people manifested a system of organisation which could prove an exemplar in a world dominated by autocracy and nationalism (Srinivas 1958: xviii).

During mid 20th century, most of the anthropological literature on ethics and code of conduct was very much influenced by philosophically oriented ethnology. Later the discipline was dominated by linguistic formalism in the service of a positivistic worldview (MacIntyre 1981). All through this period, many interdisciplinary ethnographic studies were published where one scholar was an anthropologist and another used to be a philosopher. For example Bidney (1962), a professor of both anthropology and philosophy, clarified the notion of “value”; Abraham Edel (1955), a philosopher, collaborated his studies with May Edel (1959), an anthropologist; Brandt (1954) studied Hopi ethics; and many others.

So far as “ethics” were topics of serious concern among fieldwork anthropologists while the central issues were relativism and intervention. The issues provoked considerable discussion among professional philosophers (e.g., Krausz and Meiland 1982; Wellman 1963) and anthropologists (e.g., Redfield 1953 and Herskovits 1973). The issue of intervention was whether or not, or how, to assist the people with whom one was involved as a fieldworker. For many fieldworkers, working under colonial influence, the problem was intensified because of the notion that each culture was an integrated whole whose harmony might be damaged by casual intervention. Likewise, many felt constrained by the methodological ideal of the natural scientist, who was intrinsically detached from the objects of study (Wax, 1984).

With the rise of totalitarian and autocratic powers in various parts of the world, which conquered, enslaved, or massacred many people, it encouraged anthropologists to serve in a variety of capacities. The wave of ‘free world’ was raised all around and because of their cross-cultural training; in United States a number of anthropologists were recruited for numerous services including military intelligence. Even in post-World War II situations, anthropologists accepted these roles and regarded their conduct as simply the logical extension of their earlier benevolent roles as cultural broker or mediator. Federal agencies and private foundations of U.S. started encouraging anthropological fieldstudies even in the far corners of the world but their disillusioned writings were not perceived with open arms by these agencies. Moreover, confrontation of ‘native’ Americans with the federal agencies became exciting events for the media but troublesome cases for anthropologists, because it was not clear what was desired by--or desirable for--the larger aggregate of Indian communities (Washburn, 1985). As a result, federal agencies along with the military agencies restrained their sponsorships within limits that excluded much of the comparative studies that were the province of anthropology and this became a source for regret and concern to the younger generation of researchers.

By the time, United States had become militarily involved in a conflict in Southeast Asia, the pendulum had thus swung far in the direction where “ethics” were defined as a refusal to have any dealings with the military side of government, or with any aspect of government that seemed to sustain an imperialistic orientation (Berreman et al, 1968). As this movement, anthropological fieldworkers found themselves confronting Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), whose existence was mandated by

the federal government as a condition of institutional eligibility for participation in the economy of grants, fellowships, and contracts (Wulff 1979).

Since the relevant commissions had taken no testimony from anthropologists about the moral issues of their research, the regulations were framed to control the activities of biomedical researchers, and so applied but clumsily to the process of fieldwork. Meanwhile, university administrators were using the regulatory system as a device to regulate or even suppress such activities as public opinion polls conducted by student newspapers. The resulting institutional friction generated not only movements of protest but of inquiry and research that have helped to illuminate the ethical issues in anthropological fieldwork (Wax and Cassell 1979).

In this process, “ethics” for anthropologists became redefined as having to do with the nature of interaction between the fieldworker and the hosts, and, in particular, with such issues as “informed consent” and with whether or not benefit (or harm) might issue from the project (Cassell and Wax 1980). The morality of covert field research remains a key issue; it is noteworthy that this issue could not and cannot arise in many traditional anthropological contexts (e.g., Raymond Firth in Tikopia; Jean Briggs among the Utku of Chantrey Inlet), but it can and does arise when fieldwork is attempted among modern urban populations (Bulmer 1982).

This upheaval of social scientists forced federal agencies to change their ethical policies and to make them more suitable for fieldwork based sciences rather than biomedical sciences. As an incidental consequence, the research writings of many philosophical social scientists, like Alasdair MacIntyre (1966, 1981), started emerging in anthropology.

3.3 ETHICAL ISSUES

3.3.1 Ethical Issues While Working for Funding Agencies

Barnes (2004), a well known scholar in the field of ethical writings, says that when a book or monograph appears reporting the result of an empirical inquiry in social sciences, the author often says little about how he collected his data and less still about the ethical problems, if any, that he had to face during the various stages of his research. In those instances where these matters are discussed, the reader is in a better position to assess the report, to interpret its retentions and omissions and to be alert to its likely biases.

Barnes (2004) compared six case studies and drew attention towards the various ethical issues which were paid less attention before. Firstly, he pointed out the differentiation of problems between studying of one’s own society and to study a society with a different culture from its own.

Reflection

J.A. Barnes has compared following six cases in his paper titled ‘Problems in Practice’ in *Methodology and Fieldwork* (2004) edited by V.K. Srivastava:

1. The Wichita Jury Study: Research and the Public Interest
2. The Glacier Project: The Scientist as clinician
3. Street Corner Society: The Limits of Participation
4. Kashmiri Pandits: Scientist or Fellow Citizen?
5. Hindus of Himalayas: Telling all or only some?
6. Zuni: Passing on Information

Situations in the field vary from place to place and society to society. So it becomes very complicated to draw a single line of code of conduct. The researcher has to reconcile the 'pursuit of knowledge'- conclusions backed by facts and good arguments- with short term and long term interests of the people under study, the sponsors of the research, the wider public and the readers of the research conclusions (Srivastava, 2004).

More importantly, the cultural gap between the sponsors and the researcher and between the researcher and the respondents create a situation where the researcher has to make choices by his own keeping the moral as well as professional obligations in mind. This is the problem with which every researcher has to deal with very carefully. Impact and reaction of the final conclusion of the report and research may call appreciation as well as agitation from both the sides, i.e. paymasters and public. This is one of those ethical issues where an anthropologist has to behave subjectively without hampering the objective spirit of the discipline. Dealing with the condition of duality between objectivity and subjectivity becomes a herculean task for a researcher.

3.3.2 Ethical Issues Related to Identity

As we already know that once a researcher goes to the field the first step one is expected to take is rapport establishment. The problem of ethical code of conduct begins from here itself. When a researcher introduces him/herself to the respondents or any other person of the field, sometime situation arises whether he/she should reveal his/her own identity or should work with a 'mistaken identity'.

In most cases, it is observed that people, in rural or tribal areas in India, start assuming the researcher either as a governmental official or an aid provider from one of the NGOs. In that case, the very purpose of data collection hampers. People start expecting some sort of aid in terms of monetary gains or in kind. They start complaining about their poor economic conditions, health problems, low life order and other socio-economic problems.

However, situation goes worse when the researcher reveals his identity and tries to make them understand that his only purpose is to know their culture and way of life. Respondents lose interest in talking to the researcher and most of the time think it is a waste to talk to researcher as it would not mean any gain to them.

Here the issue of identity plays at the ethical ground. Anthropologist, as per the ethical code of conduct, is expected to reveal his identity to the people of fieldwork area. But, many a times it obstructs data collection as people try to avoid the conversation with the researcher or give him the coloured version. Here, the whole purpose of finding the realities behind the social fabric goes in vain and this is also considered as an impediment in rapport establishment with which a researcher has to face the ethical issue related with his identity.

Another ethical dilemma arises at the time of writing the ethnography or about the fieldwork experiences or making the report based on fieldwork. The first and most important issue is the use of 'pseudonyms' in the report. Using the hypothetical names, in place of their original names, for the village, organisation and/or the concerned respondents is seen in relation with maintaining confidentiality in the research. Majority of the funding agencies insist to give respect for the anonymity and privacy of those who participate in research. Personal information concerning research participants should be kept confidential. One of the reasons of using 'pseudonyms' seems to be an outcome of such demands.

Anonymity and practice of 'pseudonyms', at times, become a matter of subjectivity for researcher. It would be clear after reading the two cases given in the boxes. Here one case deals with the declination of anonymity while another case talks about the revisit of anonymity.

In both the cases, anonymity was, finally, maintained and pseudonyms were used. Moreover, it is felt that it is the fieldworker's responsibility to assure that informed choices are made. A researcher is obligated to make the final decisions in terms of serving the best interests of the community well and the interests of the discipline. One should protect the anonymity of the community but should acknowledge the support and assistance of specific community people (by name).

Case 1

Mira Walton conducted fieldwork for two years in a rural village of Melanesia with a population of about 1,500 people. Outcome came in the form of a monograph focusing on specific instances of conflicts of interest and dispute settlement in a variety of contexts. Following the conventions of the AAA, Walton decided that the village and its location should be disguised and that pseudonyms should be used for all individuals mentioned in the published ethnography. Three years later, she returned to the community of study, taking along copies of the book; she asked and received permission to conduct further study in the village.

Six months later, a meeting was called by one of the elders in order that the community members might discuss the book about them with Walton. Walton was surprised by the remarks concerning the book; namely that, the name of the village is given wrong, name of the individuals are not accurate. Furthermore, she was explicitly told that in the next book she should be more careful to use the correct village name and use the correct names of villagers.

Walton's quandary revolves around two issues: firstly, whether she should go with the villagers' instance that she would publish the correct name of the village and villagers or she should rely on anthropological conventions and cautions and should use the pseudonyms.

Reference: *Source: Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology. Special Edition of the American Anthropological Association number 23. Edited by Joan Cassell and Sue-Ellen Jacobs, 1980*

Case 2

Mary Jones worked as an applied medical anthropologist in an urban black community in the United States for three years. Her publications included sensitive materials concerning specific epidemiological problems faced by members of the community as well as strategies and tactics used to improve health care delivery by the local community. Before submitting her articles for publication, Jones asked specific members of the community if they would read the papers for comments and criticism. Individuals from the community health center who had been part of the applied project did so and set up a meeting for discussion of the contents of the manuscripts.

In the discussion, she was asked for not using the accurate name of town, community health centre and people of the centre as well as community. Jones countered with explanations regarding anthropological conventions which specified the use of pseudonyms in certain types of anthropological reporting. The participants insisted her at least, if not the name of health centre, using correct name of some of the people who had helped her.

These arguments put Jones in ethical dilemma regarding whether she should defer to the community health center members' desire that she publish the name of the health center, the town in which the health center was located, and or the names of individuals who had asked or given permission for their names to be published (during the meeting described above)? Or, she should retain the use of pseudonyms throughout her papers?

Reference: *Source: Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology. Special Edition of the American Anthropological Association number 23. Edited by Joan Cassell and Sue-Ellen Jacobs, 1980*

3.3.3 Ethical Issues Related to Methodology

Fieldwork has been the primary methodological tool for anthropological inquiries. Anthropologists have been talking about various ethical problems which they have faced during their fieldwork from time to time. The range of these ethical issues is large and most of them are subjected to the context of the study. But, there are some issues on which almost every anthropologist comes to agreement and believes that there are certain conditions which necessarily influence the results and writings.

V.K. Srivastava (2004) argues that ethical and fieldwork problems that precipitate in the study of women or a lower stratum of society are different from when the focus of study is on the entire society in which some perspectives may remain in a haze. Here, he has referred to the androcentric nature of social sciences. There are a number of works available showing the experiences of female fieldworkers are different from male fieldworkers. Mead (1970) reflects that in most cases fieldwork is 'lonelier for women than for men'. However, many fieldworkers think that in most situations, women are able to achieve good rapport with both male and female respondents in a short period of time because of their less threatening quality, and better communication skills (Warren, 1988). Further, Peggy Golde's edited volume *Women in the Field* (1986) also show that the host communities of people with whom fieldwork is carried out are more likely to protect women fieldworkers.

Moreover, it is felt that there are many topics of study where female anthropologists are found to be in a better position to obtain the indepth information rather than their male counterparts. For example, various inquiries related to women health or the practices of child birth in a tribal community. Female fieldworkers find themselves comfortable in collecting data on the issues which are exclusive to women and their personal lives. More importantly, female respondents also relate themselves and feel at ease in responding to the female fieldworkers on their personal issues.

Another set of ethical and methodological problems come in the study of one's own society. Srinivas (2004) considers that fieldwork in one's own society is far more difficult than fieldwork in an alien society. While Leach (1982) thinks that when anthropologists study facets of their own society, their vision seems to become distorted by prejudices which drive from private rather than public experiences.

A crucial difficulty confronting the anthropologist who wants to study a segment of his own society is the imperative need to achieve some distance from it. Not only is the anthropologist a part of his own society but carries it along with him as well. The involvement of anthropologist with his own society may be so deep that he might fail to recognize the presence of the disrupted forces around him (Srinivas, 2004). But, these drawbacks can be removed by giving anthropologist a training to study a community of his own locality but other than his own. However, one cannot ignore the immense advantages that an insider enjoys, which are denied to outsider. Command over the language is one of those privileges which an insider enjoys.

Conclusively, it can be said that insider and outsider both have advantages and disadvantages. It would be intransigence to consider one more privileged than the other because a culture has multiple facets and can be defined with multiple dimensions. Srinivas (2004) rightly says that in the kind of universe that anthropologists study, all that we can have are multiple views of culture. There cannot be a single correct or all embracing view.

Another issue related to ethics and methodology comes when people start getting influenced with gender, caste, class, ethnic affinity and life style of the researcher itself. Many of the communities behave and react sensitively towards the affinity of the fieldworker. Patnaik (2011) has pointed out that while working with a tribal group in Madhya Pradesh, some of his female student fieldworkers has faced the problem related to their ethnic affinity. These students were from north-east India. The tribal

people thought that these female fieldworkers were from some other country and refused to talk to them. Moreover, in Indian context, caste of the fieldworker plays an important role while collecting. The respondents, at times, give the details only after confirming the caste and religion of the fieldworker.

One more important ethical problem which comes up during fieldwork pertains to payments made to respondents. Bernard (1994) notes that many a times, friends made during fieldwork have approached the anthropologists to help their children get into college or university. Whyte (1984) writes that he never paid his respondents and as a general practice, making payment to informants for time and information should be avoided. However, in some cases, payments needs to be made, especially when the respondent is not wealthy and is considered to make a 'financial sacrifice' to spend time with the researcher. When an informant is interviewed for several hours, perhaps cash payment becomes an expected category (Srivastava, 2004).

Even, The Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice issued by the Association of Social Anthropologists of the Commonwealth (1987) considers that individual respondents and research participants should not be exploited and should be given 'fair return' for their help.

3.4 CODES OF ETHICS OF AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Since anthropology is a science which involves complex participation, obligations and compulsions, rise of misinterpretations, conflicts and subjectivity of making choices becomes inevitable. In order to grapple with these issues and to eliminate them at the maximum level, American Anthropological Association (AAA) developed a Code of Ethics for research in anthropology. The main purpose of the code is to make research more compatible with the principles of the discipline and to foster discussion and education. However, the AAA does not adjudicate claims for unethical behaviour. The principles and guidelines in this Code provide the anthropologist with tools to engage in developing and maintaining an ethical framework for all anthropological work.

The code of ethics defined by the AAA is applicable for its members and other interested persons for making ethical choices in the conduct of their anthropological work. Still, these have been followed and viewed as guidelines for anthropological works globally and provide a framework for making decisions in complex situations. Furthermore, for moral and practical reasons, the generation and utilization of knowledge should be achieved in an ethical manner.

However, no code or set of guidelines 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. The guidelines can only provide the general contexts, priorities and relationships which should be considered in ethical decision making.

The guidelines provided by the AAA about the ethical code of conduct are largely on three points: firstly, responsibility towards the people with whom anthropologist work and whose life and culture they study; secondly, responsibility towards the discipline and science and thirdly, responsibility towards the public.

Sjaak van der Geest (2011) writes that the AAA code refers to three parties to whom the researcher bears responsibility: to the people (and animals) they study; to their discipline; and to the general public. She further adds one more issue to it, i.e. obligation to inform the population about the findings and conclusions of the research. Finally, in her article she has discussed four ethical issues that come in

anthropological works: exploiting or 'using' people for the sake of research; informed consent; not harming; and sharing research results. She concludes that the AAA code of ethics shows sensitivity to situational variations and does not impose a judicial type of ruling. The Code wants to provide the anthropologist "with tools to engage in developing and maintaining an ethical framework." But the way in which some players in the academic powerhouses apply the Code shows a remarkable lack of sensitivity to local, social and methodological conditions, up to the point of acting unethically and potentially harming the participants in research.

3.5 SUMMARY

Ethics are general rules of conduct and behaviour and when we see these rule of working in the context of any discipline, they define a manner in which research should be carried out. It also tells the expectations that a discipline seek from a researcher with honest spirit. Peter Pels (1999) calls anthropology a discipline of duplexity where anthropologists serve two masters. In different contexts these demands from both the 'masters' changes with time and create a difficult situation for the researcher. At one hand, they have to build good rapport with the people they study while on the other hand, they also carry the burden of collecting best data which could be appreciated by funding agencies as well as academics.

Nature of anthropology also presents, most of the time, an unpredicted situation for the fieldworker. So an anthropologist has to make choices during fieldwork itself where he comes across a number of contextual circumstances. At this point of time, an anthropologist seeks for guideline which may help him deal with the situation without losing the spirit of the discipline.

Here, we have discussed a number of issues related with the ethical problems especially during the fieldwork. But apart from these issues, there are a number of problems which arise during fieldwork. All of them cannot be discussed here due to the subjective nature of fieldwork and diverse nature of human sensitivity. However, codes of ethics are there which are supposed to be followed by every anthropologist. But we should remember that every field situation is unique and every anthropologist may have their own way of dealing with it. While knowledge of ethics and codes of conduct help researcher in defining their own path of dealing with the situation, if arises, and also helps in writing their works.

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Sample Questions

- 1) Describe the ethical issues related to identity in fieldwork.
- 2) What are the codes of ethics in American Anthropological Association.