



The Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth

Extraordinary Annual General Meeting

15th September 2011, 13:30-14:30

Lampeter, TSD

Present

28 delegates were present. Members included Candea, Strang, Staples, Fairhead, Fairweather, Shankland, Ellen, Houtman, Blain, Janeja, Krause, Strathern

Introduction

James Fairhead (Chair) introduced the revision process of the ethical guidelines, explaining the months of edits, feedback and iterations that these have gone through, both involving communication from members and the wider community. JF acknowledged the work Nayanika Mookerjee has put into this revision.

JF mentioned various key areas of the revisions, which have included rewording some of the guidelines to make them accessible to the ethics committees we rely on for approval outside the discipline. Material on fieldnotes has been updated in relation to pressure on anthropologists by research councils to make them public, and changes have been made in response to the shifting contexts in which we work, offering ethical guidance on work with large demonstrations, video footage, new technologies, situations of occupation and so on.

He asked the AGM to comment on the revisions, but pointed out that the aim of the meeting was to endorse the document, more or less as it stands, excepting some agreed fine edits.

Comments

Marilyn Strathern gave her emphatic endorsement of the document. In 1a) and elsewhere she referred to the phrase 'study of people', asking it be replaced with a 'study of the cultures/societies'. In 1a) replace 'Most anthropologists would maintain' with 'The ASA maintains'.

Douglas Farrer asked how the guidelines (1a) handle situations of conflict and 'dirty data'. JF pointed out that these guidelines do not override legal obligations; he acknowledged that there are other more grey areas, and that the guidelines cannot answer all situations but provide guidance concerning how to balance the ethical dilemmas of specific situations.

Mitch Sedgwick asked if the language of 1a means that these guidelines actually allow/endorse covert work for states. JF explained the toing and froing that has gone on with this paragraph, and the problem a fully prescriptive form of words would give, for example, for

those seeking to engage with the security apparatus to avert genocide. It was suggested and agreed that 'under most circumstances' be deleted.

Jenny Blain pointed out the need to change 'are covert' and 'are esp. problematic' to 'is' in the state/non-state sentence.

Veena Das asked about the commitment from anthropologists to the communities they work with in the context of modern fieldwork where such commitments may be divided and incompatible or even ethically problematic. JF stated that it is in a reading of the guidelines as a whole that addressing such very real ethical dilemmas might be addressed in specific circumstances.

David Shankland queried the meaning of the final sentence (overt) – feeling it was more of an opinion than an ethical statement. Discussion agreed that the key is whether the coercing power is the 'only' gatekeeper, or not. Examples raised were the forcibly resettled or prisoners,

Douglas Farrer suggested removing the final clause, replacing it with 'care should be taken'.

JF agreed it needed some re-wording and reduced wording to meet these concerns.

A suggested revision was adopted: 'Overt work that is made possible only through coercion is also likely to breach ethical standards.' No need to mention local forces, as all coercion problematic.

Thus "Overt work that is only possible because the participants are subject to coercion by local forces or an occupying power is also likely to breach basic ethical standards, as well as unlikely to produce results of scholarly or scientific value"

Should read:

Overt work that is only possible because the participants are subject to coercion ~~by local forces or an occupying power~~ is also likely to breach basic ethical standards, ~~as well as unlikely to produce results of scholarly or scientific value~~

Ian Fairweather asked about the capacity to maintain confidentiality in face of Freedom of Info (FOI) requests. JF could not give precision and suggested that lawyers would need to be consulted. Roy Ellen suggested consulting the ESRC data archive which surely faces these issues. JF suggested journalists also face similar pressure on confidentiality. Will Rathouse suggested lobbying for a legal exemption. JF responded that the ASA could take this up if members requested it. Veronica Strang pointed out that ultimately (in the Australian) context, anths and journalists cannot protect their fieldnotes to the fullest extent. This then raises a practical issue as to how data is recorded.

JF suggested maybe we should include a sentence or paragraph alerting anthropologists to this practical issue when recording data. Dimitrina Spencer stated that psychotherapists separate their notes in two ways, which is convention but does breach the data protection laws. Jennifer Clarke has come across situations of practitioners keeping different sets of fieldnotes.

Will Rathouse raised the issue of subsequent withdrawal of consent. Do we need to relax the rules on 'continuing informed consent'? JF responded that relaxing this is problematic given that 'continued consent' is necessary if we are to maintain, as we do, that we cannot specify

participants and methods in advance of our research. The ASA guidelines are guidelines, and specific exceptions could be articulated and defended in front of ethics committees.

Conclusion

The Chair thanked Nayanika Mookherjee for her considerable work on organising the difficult operation of re-writing these guidelines.

The Chair asked for an endorsement of these guidelines. There were no dissenters and 15 ayes.

David Shankland gave the RAI's thanks to the ASA for this valuable work.

Jenny Blain pointed out what a great teaching tool the guidelines have been and how this will improve that.