

Commentary on “‘Tuning to the dance of ethnography’: ethics during situated fieldwork in single-mother child protection families” by Tessa Verhallen. Forthcoming in *Current Anthropology*.

Whither the AAA Code of Ethics?

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In ‘Tuning to the dance of ethnography’, Tessa Verhallen systematically illustrates what many of us have long intuited, namely, that the AAA Code of Ethics doesn’t provide a particularly helpful tool in navigating the messy reality of fieldwork. One just has to look at the online debate the principles engendered when the Code was last being revised to see varying degrees of skepticism regarding their capacity to speak meaningfully to the issues accompanying ethnographic fieldwork. That said, I think the exercise Verhallen conducts here is a useful one. Drawing on her ethnographic study of single-mother child protection families in the Netherlands, she demonstrates “how contradictory, complicated, and confusing the AAA’s ethical principles are on the ground” and their sheer inadequacy in addressing the ethical issues inhering in ethnographic inquiry.

The larger question this paper raises—although it’s one that Verhallen dances around herself to some degree¹—is whether these kinds of anticipatory ethical principles are so inadequate that we’d be better off abandoning the quest to codify them altogether. What exactly is the AAA Code of Ethics (and the equivalent codes developed by other anthropological societies) trying to accomplish?

The preamble to the Code asserts that its primary purpose is educational, advising that the AAA “does not adjudicate assertions of unethical behavior, and these principles are intended to foster discussion, guide anthropologists in making responsible decisions, and educate”. That the principles are intended to be used as ‘tools’ is also clear: “These core principles are expressed as concise statements which can be easily remembered for use by anthropologists in their everyday professional lives”, the preamble states. Yet, as Verhallen shows, if their intent is utility, they fail on this count. Some might argue that Verhallen’s fieldsite is hardly representative, but while her fieldwork situation was clearly a particularly fraught one,² I suspect that anyone subjecting their own fieldwork to the kind of sustained and thoughtful reflection Verhallen has undertaken here would draw similar conclusions.

Peter Pels (1999) observes that a code of ethics may serve functions beyond traditional professional ones, especially in terms of creating an image of the discipline for those both inside and outside of it. He argues that the ethical duplexity inherent in anthropology means that it’s simply not possible for a code of ethics to be anything more than “a declaration of intent by a small group of academics. It cannot attain the consistency required of a code of ethics that can serve the discipline as a profession” (p. 114). Perhaps this is enough. As Onora O’Neill (2005) observes in her essay on the limitations of attempts to codify human rights,

Perhaps we should view the Declarations and Covenants that promulgate human rights as setting out noble aspirations, which are helpful to articulate and bear in mind when establishing institutions, programmes, policies and activities that allocate obligations. In effect, we would concede that the rhetoric of universal human rights to goods or services was deceptive, but defend it as a noble lie that helps to mobilize support for establishing justiciable rights of great importance (pp. 429-30).

Likewise, the AAA Code of Ethics espouses values that, in the abstract at least, I think most of us find laudable, even if in reality they operate more along the lines of a “noble lie”. And in an era where professional codes of ethics are both expected and ubiquitous, they unquestionably have a degree of “PR value” (Pels 1999: 114). However, if the general consensus is that a code of ethics is inevitable and necessary³ *despite* the inherent deficiencies that Verhallen identifies, her arguments suggest that we could do a better job of formulating it.

Given that anthropologists are an obstreperous bunch, we are unlikely to gain any kind of consensus on what form a code of ethics should take (as those responsible for the last attempt to revise the AAA Code of Ethics can surely attest) but I think there is a great deal of value in continuing to ask ourselves honest questions about what exactly we are trying to accomplish with a code of ethics. If it’s to be anything more than a “noble lie” then we first need to acknowledge what the code is and *isn’t* and can and *can’t* do; only then does it stand any chance of being more than aspirational rhetoric.⁴

Notes

¹ She never explicitly comes out and says that the AAA Code of Ethics should be jettisoned; instead the discussion is limited to its “inadequacies”. However, this is one potential reading of her arguments.

² In North America, this kind of project would have experienced numerous difficulties in obtaining institutional ethics approval, given the notoriously risk-averse nature of most ethics committees.

³ If the online discussions that accompanied the proposed revisions to the Code are an accurate barometer of anthropological opinion, this does seem to be the prevailing view—the vast majority of debate centered on its form and content as opposed to whether it should exist at all. (Then again, those opposed to a formalized code may simply have chosen not to engage in a process that took its necessity as given.)

⁴ For example, I think if there is value in a disciplinary code of ethics, it resides primarily in its ability to speak back to what Rena Lederman (2016) has labeled the ‘Standard Model’ of research and research ethics. However, the current code does little to advocate a distinct disciplinary sensibility because so many of its principles are drawn from and retain the language of the Standard Model itself (e.g., ‘do no harm’ and the doctrine of ‘informed consent’).

References

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