

The “Frankfurt Declaration” of Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology

Preamble

This declaration by the German Anthropological Association (GAA) (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde – DGV e.V.*) is intended above all to promote ethical judgement and contribute to the critical reflection of professional practice. It is directed at members of the GAA and at those persons from diverse academic or non-academic fields who employ any of the skills or competencies of social and cultural anthropology (*Ethnologie*) in their professional settings.

The fundamental challenge of a declaration of ethics in the field of social and cultural anthropology emerges from the particular situation of the discipline itself: Anthropologists do not only study cultural diversity as a neutral object; they also recognize its continued existence as a matter of principle. The professional activities of an anthropologist take place in a wide range of contexts. The questions that arise about professional ethics are different in academic research than in applied contexts, and different in the study of source material than in contexts that study power structures.

The GAA acknowledges that the ethical design of research and professional practice in the field of social and cultural anthropology has to be generally ensured via individual accountability. The role of the GAA is to provide a forum for the discussion of any ethical problems that emerge during anthropological work. Its influence is limited to the sensitisation of ethical issues, public discussions and recommendations of tools for reflexive engagements with ethical dilemmas. The GAA actively takes on this role for its members, for associated institutions of social and cultural anthropology, as well as for the general public.

The relevance of this declaration and its ability to provoke adherence is ultimately dependent on the discussions, reflexions and ongoing applications and further developments of anthropologists. Key to this approach is the sensitisation of new scholars of social and cultural anthropology about questions of ethics as a part of their training.

Fundamental Issues

1. Fundamental to the present declaration of ethics is the disciplinary necessity to mediate between varied or contradictory concepts of social and cultural values. Despite the general recognition of culturally diverse norms and life-worlds, ethical responsibility to every individual is a priority in theoretical and applied anthropology. This is especially relevant for those in an economically, socially, psychologically or physically disadvantaged position.

2. The GAA’s declaration of ethics thus builds on the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights – fully conscious of its culturally specific perspectivism – and recognizes the primacy of individual dignity and accountability over collective interests. GAA members are aware that, from an intercultural perspective, this approach presupposes a conception of the human that may seem limited in as much as it privileges the individual as the main criterion of ethical decisions.

3. Social and cultural anthropology is positioned in an irresolvable contradiction between the

claim of universality of its own culturally specific norms and the appreciation of other value orders. Its specific responsibility suggests an active and self-critical engagement with this ethical dilemma. This includes the willingness to critically assess and demonstrate in which ways universal ethical tools, such as the Declaration of Human Rights, are to be re-interpreted in particular cases from an intercultural perspective – and how they can respond to potentially arising contradictions.

4. Because these contradictions and dilemmas concern the responsibility of all professional anthropologists, ethical decision-making processes should be part of public debates within and beyond the boundaries of the discipline. This does not only demand the ability to analyse culturally distinct values and norms. Beyond this, the responsibilities of anthropologists require a willingness to understand the implications and consequences of one's own research praxis and data within the context of local and global power relations.

5. The goal of the present declaration of ethics is thus not to decree universal ethical norms that ignore the concrete contradictions of culturally heterogeneous interactions and research. It aims instead to contribute to the formation and improvement of the ethical judgement that mediates between key fundamental principles and culturally complex requirements. To accomplish this it is helpful to have, not rigid normative rules, but instead the self-imposed avowal to meet subjective randomness and non-binding cultural relativism with a minimum of ethical standards, the contradictions and aporiae of which should be discussed within the field of social and cultural anthropology. To this end, a stronger public discussion about ethical issues in research, teaching and applied anthropology should be sought according to which normative guidelines feed back into the anthropological ability to change one's cultural perspective so as to enable a self-critical engagement with the core problems of one's own discipline.

Ethical Aspects of Ethnographic Work

Bearing in mind the specific constitutive framework of all ethnographic activity, the following subject areas should be considered with particular sensitivity. They are to be understood collectively as a proposal for a differentiated engagement with the ethical dilemmas of ethnographic work, and are thus intentionally formulated as questions:

1. Does the documented cultural and social group receive sufficient respect in the selected topics, methods and form of documentation?
2. Were the needs for protection and interests of informants and other persons who participated in the documentation and interpretation processes adequately considered?
3. Does the documentation resulting from the ethnographic work enable enough transparency so that one can recognize the process of its knowledge production? Was the possibility for feedback during this process adequately considered?
4. In which form was the necessary reciprocity established between the participants of the ethnographic work?
5. Were the scientific principles of holism, the avoidance of unconscious bias, and accuracy adequately taken into account?
6. To what extent are the insights that have become available with the documentation suitable

for commentary vis-à-vis the general public? Might it be necessary to inform the general public about certain relationships?

Comment

As per a decision from the 2 October 2007 GAA general assembly, a specific working group was created. This working group prepared this declaration. Its groundwork has been a process of reflection about previous engagements with ethic guidelines that began in the GAA during the 1980s and at times provoked controversial discussions. The varied discursive threads (of the GAA board as elected body, the anthropology of development working group - AGEE, the working group on ethics and public relations) were incorporated into the declaration through the participation of various workshop participants. The objective of the workshop was to develop this declaration, which was reached by consensus among all participants and distinctly recognizes the GAA's responsibility for the ethical aspects of professional practice. The working group met on 4 April 2008 at the Goethe University Frankfurt. The participants were: Christoph Antweiler, Frank Bliss, Hans Peter Hahn, Annette Hornbacher, Kirstin Kastner, Richard Kuba, Markus Lindner, Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, and Michael Schönhuth.