

Ethics in Anthropological Research: Responsibilities to the Participants

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ABSTRACT:

Today, in anthropological research, ethics has become more relevant, more meaningful as well as structured in nature. In USA, specially after World War II, American Anthropological Association enacted code of ethics for anthropological research. However, in India, we have no such ethical guidelines from any of the association of anthropology; rather promote a space where researcher can create and evolve their own code of ethics.

Ethical issues for anthropologists are manifold- their relations with research participants, with institution and colleagues, with own and host government and with society and funding agency of the project. Among these, the first one is most important, and present paper intends to identify ethical issues related with research participants; which includes informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, vulnerability, risk-benefit, deception, compensation and so on.

The present work also intends to identify issues for which anthropologists criticize some components of bioethics because of their abstract principles derived from arm-chair philosophy, ethnocentric view and lack of cross-cultural analysis for that they prepare a readymade ethical code of conduct which may differ significantly from culture to culture.

Keywords: bioethics, informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, vulnerability, risk-benefit assessment

I

Today, in anthropological research, ethics has become more relevant, more meaningful as well as structured in nature; specially after World War II, when not only Nuremberg code came into existence but also some anthropologists who worked for department of Defense (of USA) criticized by fellow anthropologists. Even long before World War II, in 1919, Franz Boas communicated a letter to 'The Nation' to protest the role of U.S. government to use anthropology

as a cover for spying (Spradley and Rynkiewich, 1976). However, during 1960s American anthropologists took part to share their expertise to study counterinsurgency in Latin America which sometimes described as spying. The outcome of these was severe criticism which leads to the first statement of ethics by American Anthropological Association in 1967. According to Kapoor (2014) “the major fears of much anthropology were twofold: (1) that anthropology’s resultant bad reputation would close off future field opportunities abroad, and (2) that the information being gathered would be used by government or others to control, enslave, and even annihilate many of the ‘third world’ communities that were being studied”. However some anthropologists even served department of defense during Vietnam War and AAA in 1971 published formal code of ethics for anthropological research. As per 1998 version of AAA “in both proposing and carrying out research, anthropological researchers must be open about the purpose(s), potential impacts, and source(s) of support for research projects with funders, colleagues, persons studied or providing information, and with relevant parties affected by the research. Researchers must expect to utilize the results of their work in an appropriate fashion and disseminate the results through appropriate and timely activities. Research fulfilling these expectations is ethical, regardless of the source of funding (public or private) or purpose.” However, Bernard (2006) opined that even today anthropologists are once again working for the department of defense.

In UK also, Association of social anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (1999) enacted ‘Ethical guidelines for good research practice’. Where they stated “as professionals and as citizens, they (anthropologists) need to consider the effects of their involvement with, and consequences of their work for; the individuals and groups among whom they do their fieldwork (their research participants or 'subjects'); their colleagues and the discipline, and collaborating

researchers; sponsors, funders, employers and gatekeepers; their own and host governments; and other interest groups and the wider society in the countries in which they work”. Australian Anthropological Society (2003) also formulated its own code of ethics which ‘aims to exemplify the best standards of ethical practice and human rights’.

This statement does not identify previous anthropological research as unethical. Even lot of exposure to the people and observing them in proximity always promote ethics during field work as well as at the time of publication. Wax (1980) stated that “in classical ethnographic fieldwork with exotic communities, researchers (typified by Malinowski or Mead) required not merely passive consent but active cooperation, for they had to contrive to arrange housing, supplies of food and personal assistance. They needed assistance in learning the language; they sought to be allowed to observe ceremonials and other activities; they required all manner of guidance.” Anonymity or changing the name of the village or subjects concern probably a part of ethics which cannot overruled even today. Mukhopadhyay (2014) stated, “one may wonder to know that the original name of the much acclaimed village studied by M. N. Srinivas in Mysore was Kodagahalli and not Rampura. Possibly Srinivas assigned this fictitious name to his study village on ethical ground”. However, ethics followed in structured form is the product of recent development of bioethics.

In India also, during British area, the main objectives of anthropological research was to gather ethnographic data for the sake of administrators. However, after independence the paradigm shifted from colonial legacy to the journey of action research, socio-psychological, demographic research, which is classified as analytical period of Indian anthropology. Even then, the journey of Indian anthropology was influenced by both British and American anthropologists. In India, until late 1970s, physical anthropology was concerned about

anthropometric, dermatoglyphic and in some cases ABO blood group as serological studies. Some of them who went abroad to work with eminent scholars in the field of biology, explored other traits of serology and biochemical genetics. Later on during 1970s they also expand their research in the field of molecular anthropology (Srivastava, 2000). Unlike USA, UK or Australia, different association of anthropology in India did not enact any ethical guidelines for anthropology as a whole or for anthropological research in particular. The issue of ethical guidelines has been given less importance in India, but promotes a space where researcher can create and evolve their own code of conduct during field work or publication. (Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

However, credit goes to Indian council of Medical Research, for thinking seriously about ethics in research in India. In early 1990s they identified cases where blood samples were collected from Indian participants by international scholars ignoring ethical norms. (Kapoor, 2014). As early as 1980, ICMR published 'Policy statement on ethical considerations involved in research on human subjects' which was revised many times and finds its present form as 'Ethical guidelines for biomedical research on human participants' (ICMR 2006). A similar type of initiative was found from National Committee for Ethics in Social Science Research in Health (NCESSRH, 2000) to publish 'Ethical Guidelines for Social Science Research in Health'.

It is also true that, unlike medical or health sciences, Indian anthropology has been given less importance to the dominant bioethical issues of western world. The reason may be manifold. Practicing bioethics in Indian field context is challenging. Lot of non-literate people and external pressure like social-political-religious influences make it difficult to introduce the project before study participants and having informed consent. However, a trained anthropologist can somehow manage the situation. The other part is somewhat complex in nature. Anthropologists criticizes

some component of bioethics because of its (bioethics) abstract principles which is derived from arm-chair philosophy and ethnocentric view by which they prepared a readymade ethical code of conduct which lacking cross-cultural analysis. Rey and Jesus (2009) opined that “Cultural relativism recommends not to prejudge the ways of behaviour which describe a society”. It also be noted that ethics may differ significantly from culture to culture even within it.

II

Ethical issues for anthropologists are manifold- their relations with research participants, with institution and colleagues, with own and host government and with society and funding agency of the project. However, Jorgensen (1971) opined that the most important among those is relations between anthropologists and the people they study. In arena of recent development of bioethics, the primary responsibilities of an anthropologist to participants are clear- inform them about purpose of research, obtain informed consent (written or verbal), protect them from any kind of harm (physical, psychological, social, legal etc), ensure participants privacy and sharing benefits of the project.

The anthropological research should be carried out only when participants (or society if it is their property) are agreeing to work with them. The term informed consent is not merely signing (or agreeing) a consent form, but researcher have to explain objectives of the research along with information like funding and undertaking agency, benefit and harm because of the research, why it is being undertaken and how the data will be disseminated and used . Therefore, informed consent includes not only an explanation of data collection methods but a detailed explanation of the research topics that will be examined with the data collected from a study subject. Fluehr-Lobban (1994) opined that “informed consent is ultimately viewed as a process

that encourages greater openness and disclosure on the part of researchers, empowers voluntary participants in social research, and engenders a more collaborative relationship between researchers and researched.”

Anthropologists are familiar with the term rapport establishment which has an inherent ethical dimension not only to collect data but also process of informed consent. That's why anthropologists often obtain no informed consent for their studies, but assumes that if the community tolerates their presence it implies informed consent. However, modern bioethics does not share same sentiments and urged for informed consent. Even funding agency and journal editors also sought for proper clearance of ethics committee as well as informed consent for funding of the project and publication of the paper respectively. Informed consent now-a-days are ethical-legal construct specially in respect of human experimentation where a potential harm as a result of research existed.

The questions that can arise in the course of informed consent are privacy and confidentiality as well as conditions under which information is used. Jorgensen (1971) argued that “it seems sufficiently simple and obvious to say that the anthropologist should obtain from his subjects consent to invade their privacy. The anthropologist should appraise his subjects to the intensions of his research and of the uses to which the information will be put”. As anthropologists usually conducted his/her research among non-literate or semi-literate people, it is difficult to explain them about intension of the work. Whatever, one should clarify his position as simply as possible, the information should be planned and presented such a manner that they (research participants) can understand.

The issue ‘privacy’ become a right to every society and varies from country to country, culture to culture and even among individuals of same culture/ society. However total privacy is

virtually nonexistent whether in a society or in case of research. The issue of privacy depends on sensitivity of data and should be treated accordingly. Data such as genetic makeup, HIV/AIDS status or even sexual preferences are sensitive under any circumstances. Some information is less sensitive and can be published with approval from participants. Still there is a third group – situationally sensitive information like age, height, weight, income etc, that can be divulged under certain circumstances and obviously with approval from participants. The question of storing raw data and future use is again an important aspect of bioethics, which may be taken care of. In anthropology, a case study also finds an important ethical dimension, whether to use the name and other personal details of an individual/ village/ group/society or to anonymize/change the name. Taking/publishing of photographs/videos without consent is another unethical practice which is in no way acceptable in today's bioethics.

However, as per American Sociological Association (1999) guidelines “confidentiality is not required with respect to observation in public places, activities conducted in public, or other settings where no rules of privacy are provided by law or custom. Similarly, confidentiality is not required in the case of information available from public records.”

Here, a few points are important in respect of ethics. The participants should be legally competent to participate voluntarily. Many individuals deemed incompetent and in need of special protection are thought to be unable to give consent on their own. They may be lacking in capacity because of cognitive or emotional disabilities, or because they are legally too young (Drew et al 2008). In case of a minor, consent from guardians is necessary besides assent from participants.

The method of obtaining consent may vary from culture to culture even at the individual level within a culture. Consent may be obtained less formally as verbal consent where study demands

little or no risk to the participants as well as potential invasion to privacy is also low. In this situation participants may be informed verbally about the project and can also give consent verbally. Fluehr-Lobban (1994) opined that anthropological studies also may not exempt for informed consent, however, advocated for Informed Consent without Forms where “spirit of informed consent can be fulfilled without the intrusive and unnecessarily legalistic use of a signed form.” But, where potential harm is above minimal or substantial invasion of privacy is higher, consent should be obtained in writing, i.e. with verbal information of the project researcher should provide written documents to the participants, and participants respond his/her willingness by signing specified form.

The next question which is most important in ethics is probably ‘do no harm’. The basic concern for all anthropological research is that no individual is harmed due to participation in the study. As stated earlier, it may be physical harm, psychological harm, social harm, economic harm or even legal harm for a person or society as a whole. Even it can extend to future generation also. Special care shall be taken for the study among vulnerable populations or individuals. Anthropologists working among vulnerable population must follow extreme care and highly vulnerable population should not be taken in the name of scientific or social science research, unless it is too important for the benefit of vulnerable population. The benefit should not be provided to other population only with experiment from vulnerable groups. Now the question is who are vulnerable? According to Levine (1988) “those person who are relatively or absolutely incapable of protecting their own interests through negotiations for informed consent”. Kipnis (2001) has identified six types of vulnerability – cognitive vulnerability, vulnerability to authority, deferential vulnerability, medical vulnerability, allocation vulnerability and infrastructural vulnerability.

Anthropologists sometimes face question regarding degree of vulnerability as well as degree of risk (or harm) - potential, substantial or significant risk. Now, regarding harm the first question is ‘how much (harm) is harmful for the participants?’ Potentially harmful research can only be undertaken when the participants have ‘effectively’ consented, i.e. they have the capacity to understand potential risk and full information of the same. According to Sieber and Tolich (2013) “risk is a potential statement about a possible harm that may occur”. They have also identified two statements about ‘risk’, the first one is ‘the degree of harm that might occur’ and the second one is ‘the probability that it will occur’. Thus, they explained, that “a very harmful event that occurs with an extremely low probability is no riskier than a very minor harm or inconvenience that occurs with an extremely high possibility”. On the basis of magnitude of harm Rid et al (2010) have identified seven harm scales viz. (i) negligible (where social research harm is humiliation), (ii) small (high stress), (iii) moderate (major loss of opportunity), (iv) significant (stigma), (v) major (psychotic episode), (vi) severe (depression) and (vii) catastrophic (suicide).

The approach to address or repress the issue of harm is benefit or risk-benefit assessment. According to Drew et al (2008) “this approach involves a comparison of the potential benefits of a given study with the potential risks to the participants. Presumably, if the benefit of the study outweighs the potential harm, the study is considered ethical, and the opposite would also be true”. Now the question arise that, who will assess the risk-benefit assessment? If assessment were made by researcher himself, a conflict of interest could affect the decision. Therefore, evaluation process must be examined by a group of professionals or ethics committee members (e.g. institutional ethics committee or research review boards). Sieber and Tolich (2013) have identified some specific kind of benefit viz. (a) personally relevant benefit, (b) insight, training,

learning, role modeling, empowerment and future opportunities, (c) psychological benefits, (d) kinship benefits, and (e) benefits to the community. They also opined 'without benefit, no risk is permitted'. The benefit includes – regarding the precursors of benefit, regarding intermediate benefits to subjects and their communities and regarding ultimate benefits to science and society.

The issue of research deception may include misinterpretation or camouflaging the facts related to nature and consequences of the research to its participants. According to Drew et al (2008) “deception refers to either an *omission* or a *commission* on the part of the researcher in terms of interactions with participants. An omission deception could mean that the investigator does not fully inform participants about important aspects of the study. A commission involves a situation in which the researcher gives false information about the investigation, either partially or totally.” There may be many reasons why researchers adopt deception and also many problems involved in its use. Whatever is the situation, if a study uses deception, participants must have enough information to assess the possibility of risk and participate accordingly.

The next issue - participant observation is unique in respect of anthropological research as well as having unique ethical challenges. The challenges lie within methodology itself. The first question is who will consent on behalf of a group or society? Is it sufficient to obtain consent from a group leader or gatekeepers or from a few members of the group? On the other hand, if everyone is aware about the study they can behave in another way which is not natural. By obtaining consent from participants it is highly possible to alter their natural behaviour. Anthropologists during participant observation face different types of ethical dilemmas. Barnes (1996) classified four types as (i) conflict or consensus (ii) commitment or partiality (iii) science or citizenship and (iv) frankness or concealment. Shah (2006) opined that “in the case of participant observation the ethical problems are faced usually by only the individual researcher.

In the case of survey research, on the other hand, a team of researchers would face such problems. These problems multiply with the increasing size of the survey, culminating in nationwide surveys and censuses.” However, as already stated, American Sociological Association (1999) waived informed consent in respect to observation in public places or other settings where no rules of privacy are provided by law or custom.

The issue of compensation of participants because of his/her inconvenience and time spent in connection of research, is another serious concern specially in anthropological research due to its (anthropology) own ethical dilemma whether participants should be paid or not; and also because of limited or no fund for conducting research in a prolonged period. One concern is that if compensation is high, prospective participants can readily consented for participating the research without judging risk or harm because of the findings of the research. Arunkumar and Deverapalli (2014) opined that, “the decision of payment of respondent whether it may be of payment in cash or value or gift has to be decided by the researcher...But creation of a situation where the respondents make a rightful demand for a negotiated payment would raise the issue of commercialization of ethnographic research leading to many compromises on the quality, quantum and veracity of data.”

III

The ethics in anthropological research are more sensitive and delicate compared to other social and natural sciences. This is because of its close contact with research participants, as in some context anthropologists have to staying a long period with them. Even, after completion of the study they require another visit to check and cross-check his/her findings. The other uniqueness is lack of experimentation in human, which leads to observation and other methods

where they supposed to rely upon information provided by their research participants. This close contact and dependences require even more ethical practices other than present day norms of bioethics. Lakoff and Collier (2004) suggest that “strands of anthropological investigation can be fruitfully analyzed by engaging a set of discussions on ethics in philosophy and critical theory”. The use of secret and sacred information of individuals and society is also requires privacy in its own form. Unnecessary research and research by untrained researchers with lack of ethical dimensions sometimes create difficult situation for further study. One has to aware about misuse of anthropological data. In no cases it should promote racism, sexism, hierarchy, untouchability, regional/ethnic conflict, insurgency and so on. Cassell and Jacobs (1987) opined that “to improve the ethical adequacy of anthropological practice, we must consider not only exceptional cases but everyday decisions, and reflect not only upon the conduct of others but also upon our own actions.” In nutshell, it can conclude by saying that anthropological findings should be used to solve human problems and future development.

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