

EDITORIAL

Ethics and Fieldwork

In December 1930, Franz Boas watched a potlach feast at Fort Rupert, British Columbia. He had seen his first Northwest Coast feast forty-five years earlier and he now noted some of the changes that had occurred. The host chief, Boas wrote, made a speech while the meat was distributed, saying "'This bowl in the shape of a bear is for you,' and you, and so on; for each group a bowl." The speech was the same one that he had heard often before, "But the bowls are no longer there. They are in the museums in New York and Berlin!"

Fieldwork is something of a rite of passage for most folklorists, an experience in which we must endure, learn and, we hope, succeed. It is a craft at which we, as professionals, are expected to become highly proficient. All too often though, the consequences - positive or negative - of our actions in the course of field research are buried beneath the final results on which, ultimately, our work as scholars will be judged. Unfortunately, erudition on the campus does not necessarily beget a strict adherence to local proprieties in the field, and under the pressure to succeed in fieldwork, decisions can be made which benefit the scholar but not the individuals being studied. The consequences may be seen immediately, but just as likely will be seen much later on, perhaps years later, as in the case of Boas.

The question of ethics and the moral implications of research during and after "the field" has engendered considerable discussion in the social sciences and humanities recently, fueled, in part, by such things as Margaret Mead's work in Samoa and Steven W. Mosher's actions as a graduate student regarding contemporary Chinese abortion practices and policy. Within the last few years, a small movement has developed in the ranks of the American Folklore Society to draft a Statement on Ethics which would be considered

for adoption by the AFS Board. In brief, the statement (Santino 1986) is modeled directly after the Statement on Ethics adopted by the American Anthropological Association in 1971 (as amended through 1976), and addresses the folklorist's professional responsibilities to: those people being studied; the public; the discipline; students; sponsors; and one's own government and host governments. While most folklorists would probably not object to certain specific principles (e.g., 2a. "Folklorists should not knowingly falsify or color their findings."), others have already questioned the need and utility of the statement as a whole, as Elliot Oring (1987) has done.

We respect both the sincere efforts to draft such a statement and the reservations made about its text. We feel, however, that it is high time that folklorists and students of folklore confront issues of professional responsibility, particularly those which focus on our behavior during and after fieldwork.² It may well be true that the adoption of a Statement on Ethics will not improve ethical behavior, but the careful consideration of the issues in question may help us to form our own guidelines, and possibly help us to distinguish between ethical choices and ethical imperatives.

Without being prescriptive or judgmental, we might bear in mind some of the following questions as we grapple with the problems of fieldwork ethics.

Is the tape-recording of an individual or group without their knowledge permissible? What is the difference between secretly taping someone and writing down their words in a fieldbook shortly afterwards without their knowledge? At what point does gentle prodding or requests (to achieve an induced natural context) leave the realm of encouragement and become a subtle form of coercion? While our discipline demands precision and accuracy of contextual details, is it

right to record and publish a story which may be a narrator's account of the most personal and emotional experience of their life (e.g. a supernatural encounter; the death of a loved one) even if the narrator, at the time, had given permission to do so? Should a fieldworker approach controversial topics ("ethnographic dynamite" such as sex, criminal acts, etc.) even if they know an individual or group will be offended or object?

Should people interviewed be called "informants," "assistants," "associates," "consultants," "interviewees," or "participants"? What are the limits of sole-authorship, and when should members of the folk group be listed as co-authors? Is it fair not to reveal your true feelings on a controversial subject only to satisfy informants' wishes and avoid a confrontation? Who "owns" the information or performance which a folklorist has recorded? What are the rights of the individuals who create or perform products or activities which are based on tradition? Who has control on what or who is filmed or photographed? Should we be responsible for the protection, privacy, or consent of individuals who are filmed or photographed, especially at a public event?

Reciprocity is about as universal to social behavior as one can get, so it should be natural to the human interaction involved in fieldwork. But what is the nature of reciprocity between fieldworker and folk, and what forms should it take (e.g. money, gifts, prestige, "psychological gratification")? Even where monetary gain is not involved - for either the fieldworker or the folk - what is "fair return" (Id., Statement on Ethics) when the fieldworker's success brings prestige, employment, tenure?

At what point should fieldworkers emerge from the shadows of anonymous observation and announce their presence to a person or group, possibly hindering the observance of a folkloric

event in its "natural context"? Is a folklorist **always** on the job? How honest or dishonest is a certain amount of role-playing in order to gain information? How should one introduce oneself to an individual or group who may not fully understand what a folklorist does: as a "folklorist," "anthropologist," "historian," "scholar," "teacher," "student," "interested person"? What does one tell people about one's work when asked "What are you going to write about?" How does the fieldworker know if subjects fully understand the aims of the investigation and its possible consequences? Should one send individuals or groups copies of published work resulting from the fieldwork?

How much time must be spent on fieldwork if it is to be "fair" to the group concerned? Can transient collecting, "windshield surveys," "summer ethnographies," or other short-term field surveys fairly represent a group's traditions, or are they only forms of carpetbagging? How is long-term fieldwork different? Is it fair to a community for a teacher to send numerous students out to conduct their own brands of fieldwork without guidelines for ethical concerns?

To what extent should gossip (or what one thinks may be gossip) be recorded in field records? Does one record in the fieldbook **everything** that is observed? Should a written record be kept of those things which a group prefers not to be recorded, even if it's done in an anonymous, disguised fashion? How does the fieldworker deal with political or social factions? At what point is suppressing the publication of certain information, sensitive or not, censorship or accommodation for the protection of privacy? Something in every published ethnography is bound to be disapproved of by somebody in the group. How does one gauge what is truly "sensitive" information? Is it really possible to foresee potential misuse of field-collected

data, and should the fieldworker be held accountable if it is misused? Should one disclose material deemed sensitive when the information was gained while working with public funds?

To whom do the "folk" belong? Can they be "kept" from other fieldworkers or others interested in their knowledge or abilities? To what extent are faculty and peers responsible for training students on the practical side of fieldwork, and informing them of the potentially dangerous realities of fieldwork in unfamiliar territory (see, e.g., Howell 1986)? To what extent can the descriptions of people and places be modified to protect confidentiality or privacy and yet still present a responsible and informative piece of scholarship that can be used confidently by peers? Should a fieldworker become involved in public controversies (the whole question of advocacy)? What if one's view doesn't contribute to an "adequate definition of reality" (2c., Statement on Ethics) that would be supported by the majority of one's peers? What if the fieldworker's view was based on sound scholarship, but was potentially contrary to the welfare of the group or some of its members?

Wrestling with at least some of these questions is nothing new for experienced fieldworkers. Many have probably come up with their own personal answers, or have relied on the advice of co-workers. Still others may see the issues as unresolvable. Whatever the case, as professionals we have the obligation to seriously consider and reconsider the problems of fieldwork ethics. We have to make the effort to write more about our personal experiences in the field, and openly and honestly discuss the negative and positive consequences of our actions. Perhaps the AFS could follow the example set by the American Anthropological Association: in most issues of their *Anthropology Newsletter* there is a section entitled "Ethical Dilemmas,"

edited by Joan Cassell, in which ethical problems (anonymous with disguised details) are outlined and commented upon by at least two anthropologists. Could a column of this nature regularly appear in the pages of the AFS Newsletter? We think it would be an excellent idea.

Obviously the exigencies of daily fieldwork don't often permit sufficient time to consider the possible consequences of decisions which we might make. However, some advance consideration of the choices and imperatives involved in the issues of deception, privacy, consent, and reciprocity cannot help but make us better and more conscientious fieldworkers in the long run as we, like Boas, continue to "capture" the traditional heritage of people and observe the consequences of our actions.

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Notes

1. From a letter Boas wrote to his children, December 14, 1930, in the Boas Family Papers, American Philosophical Society. Quoted in *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts*. By Douglas Cole (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), p.xiii.
2. Indeed, this issue was first raised, with little response, in the pages of *Folklore Forum* by Tom Ireland in 1974.

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