

The Ethics of Archiving – an Anthropological Perspective
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Do as you would be done by, do as you would be did
A boiling pot is mighty hot so don't sit on the lid (traditional nursery rhyme)

Do no harm (AAA Code of Ethics)

I have to confess that I thought very little about archives when I was a postgrad student, or indeed, for many years after that. The emphasis was on collecting data and writing it up, not disposing of it. In fact, my postgraduate supervisor cautioned me against researching in archives: ‘Don’t start there, you’ll never come out’, citing as a dire warning a fellow student who had decided to write a historical anthropological account, and whose thesis completion was continually delayed because ‘there is more I need to look at in the archives’. I did hear of other students who had used, or tried to use archives, in fact Lionel Caplan once regaled me with his account of trying to use a local archive in Nepal where all the papers were placed in bags hung from the ceiling to avoid destruction by white ants.

Many years later, I started to become more aware of archives, and this was largely thanks to David Mills, an excellent historian of anthropology in the UK¹. At the time, I was on the committee of the Association of Social Anthropologists, and David asked me if there were any archives he might consult. I made enquiries and discovered that a few boxes were held in the basement at the Royal Anthropological Institute (RAI), but these were old and had long been forgotten; furthermore once the RAI was reminded of their existence, they wanted us to take them away. However, the ASA had no archiving policy, so David and I decided to create an archive, retrieved the boxes from the RAI, and I wrote to all past office holders I could track down to ask them for copies of their ASA papers: minutes, agendas and such like. We had an excellent response, and David spent many months sorting them. The LSE library, whose archives are the official depository for anthropology material in the UK, was happy to take them.

The ASA committee had decided as part of its archiving policy that people leaving office should give their own papers to their successor, but should send the papers they would have received from their predecessor for archiving, having once sorted, ordered and listed them. So when I left office in 2001, I had to sort out the mass of papers I had received from my predecessor, as well as putting my own papers in order for my successor. In the course of so doing, I realised that there were some papers which should not see the light of day. These concerned delicate problems of one kind or another which had been raised by members seeking the help of their professional association and had been handled in the strictest confidence. So I destroyed them! Hence the first ethical issue I want to raise is one of editorial control, something which has already been discussed ad nauseam in the postmodern debates about authorial authority. So even then, I did realise that there were ethical issues involved in archiving, although curiously, in a book I edited shortly afterwards on anthropological ethics (Caplan 2003), there is no mention of the issue.

¹ Mills 2003

Meanwhile, my own field data collection was growing and occupying more and more space, while the ESRC had started to try and insist that the data from research it funded should be archived. We all had to start to 'think archive'. I heard many anthropologists discussing this with horror: 'What, give up my field-notes? But I'll be working on them all my life!' I couldn't help wondering about 'after' - it was a bit like one or two acquaintances of mine who had never made a will. I went to a talk given by the late Paul Stirling who had digitised his entire collection of Turkish field-notes collected over several decades and placed it on the University of Kent's website². He was very clear that this was the direction in which we should all be going, and it was our responsibility to do so not only for the discipline but also for those who had given us the information because it formed part of their history. As far as I know, he did not anonymise his data, which he regarded as primarily historical.

So that is the second issue I want to raise, and one which will come up again in my talk: does material collected by social scientists become something rather different – historical data – once it is archived? And if it does, what difference does that make, especially in terms of undertaking of confidentiality and anonymity?

In the early 1990s, the ESRC asked me to archive research it had funded on India, but at that time I had no intention of so doing, partly because I was still working there, and partly because I had no time. A few years later, I was directing a large research project on food and health in SE London and west Wales, also funded by the ESRC which this time pushed more strongly for archiving. When the two projects finished, it was already ESRC policy that all work they had funded should be archived, and provision was made for this in budgeting. Unfortunately, at the time we had started work on the food projects, no such funding was available, so it was not until a decade later that I allocated a summer to sorting out 300 taped and transcribed interviews, and numerous food frequency questionnaires, food diaries and more with a view to archiving them in the Qualidata archive at the University of Essex and on their ESDS website³.

There were a number of problems in working on this material:

- Lapse of time – trying to reconstruct the database after a 12-year gap and put it into a form intelligible to others
- This was particularly difficult given that it had never been 'in my head' in the same way as fieldwork I had conducted myself
- The Research Associates who had collected most of the data had gone their separate ways after completion of the projects and were no longer involved⁴
- Much of the material (especially in Wales) was not anonymised, although it was almost all digitised and so could be rendered anonymous, a job which took many weeks.

For me, the third issue I want to raise and the major ethical concern in this case was that undertakings of confidentiality should be honoured, and to this end I did not only change names, but in Wales, where the community was small and face to face, also some place-names and even, in some cases, took out some of the very intimate data that

² www.ukc.ac.uk/anthropology

³ [Http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5801](http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/findingData/snDescription.asp?sn=5801)

⁴ Their permission was of course sought for archiving

talking about food inevitably produces. Further, I decided not to archive any of the tapes or photographs, because this could lead to a loss of anonymity.

There were, however, a small number of interviews in Wales where older informants had discussed food as it used to be in the area – a rich oral history archive - and I decided to seek the permission of people who had been interviewed in order to allow them to be digitised and placed on the web. Sadly, all but one of the half dozen had died in the interim, and so I spent quite a lot of time in the summer of 2008 trying to track down relatives in order to get consent for this to happen. In each case, I gave the relative a transcript of the interview so that they could be reassured about the contents and asked them to sign a release form – the first time I have ever used consent forms.

Another archive on which I worked was data gathered in my single foray into Nepal in 1969 - notebooks, censuses, genealogies, taped interview transcripts, maps etc. I decided to archive this material because I did not think I was ever likely to do more work in Nepal or write any more about it. SOAS was happy to add it to the extensive Nepal archives already deposited by Christoph von Furer Haimendorf and Lionel Caplan. Here I did not consider that the anonymity of villagers living in a remote part of Nepal nearly 40 years ago was an issue and clearly it would have been impossible to ask them for consent. But this raises a fourth issue: the difference between the self and the other, or whether the informants whose data we archive are 'like me'/'not like me'. To illustrate further, I will contrast this archiving exercise on Nepal with the one which follows.

Recently, I turned my attention to the large quantity of material I had accumulated during fieldwork in Madras/Chennai from 1974 to the present and spent part of this summer sorting, re-filing, and listing. Much of the data from the 1970s and 1980s is in the form of notebooks and questionnaire forms, as well as diaries kept by informants. Putting all of this onto computer would be an enormous task. So this archive would not be able to go onto a website. And because it was not digitised, it could not be anonymised. Further, the work I did in Madras was with middle-class women, initially on their organisations, later on changes in food consumption practices. During the more than thirty years I had been doing fieldwork there, many of these women had become my friends – some had even stayed with us in London. Further, these middle-class, highly-educated informants not only read what I wrote about them but would be highly likely to be able to access archival material too. I am still debating whether or not to deposit the material now, but with a proviso that it cannot be accessed for a period of time, or to retain it for the moment.

Thus if I compare my readiness to archive material on Nepalese peasants with my reluctance to do so with elites in India, I have to ask myself wherein the difference lies: is it about whether or not the people concerned get to access the archive, or whether I feel differently about them because the first are further away in space and time and the second have become friends and in some cases, quasi-kin? In other words, is our archiving policy determined to some extent by who they are for us?

I've thought about this question in relation to another archiving project. Also recently, I have been working on a large body of taped material collected during my first postgraduate fieldwork among peasant villagers in Tanzania in the 1960s. The British Library is keen to hold it, and it would form part of their extensive oral collection. The initial idea was simple – I had attended a workshop in the BL designed to showcase their Swahili oral collection. At the end, I mentioned to the curator that I had a collection of old

reel to reel recordings sitting unused at the back of a cupboard. Would she like them? Her answer was enthusiastic and she said they could easily be digitised. I started to make a detailed listing of the contents of the tapes. However, as I did so, I also began to realise that the issues involved in archiving them were far more complex than I had first thought. Some of this material is 'secret' to all except initiates (circumcision *jando* songs, spirit possession material); some is 'women's secrets' (puberty ritual - *unyago*), some songs were 'given' to me as a personal gift, other stuff I was told not to reveal. But all of the people who originally recorded this material are now deceased and their descendants unlikely to come and access it in the BL. Does that release me from undertakings made so long ago? Or do I put restrictions on access to this sensitive material and if so for how long? Many anthropologists have published 'secret' information, indeed, some have been proud of being able to acquire it, but publishing allows for editorial control, whereas digitised and taped material does not. But many people from the area might themselves want to have access to this material which forms part of their history, particularly as many of the rituals are no longer performed. So here the issues are observance of requests for secrecy made a long time ago versus the desire to 'give back' their history to the descendants of the people concerned.

There is a further issue raised by this material, which is that of ownership of intellectual property rights. It is one which I already thought about when I wrote a personal narrative called *African Voices, African Lives* (Caplan 1997). The agreement with the subject of the narrative was that, although he did not want his name on the cover, he would like to share the royalties. So part of my current negotiations with the BL are about what should happen to any future royalties, should they decide for example to issue part of the Swahili recordings on a CD.

Conclusion

It is perhaps useful to ask ourselves in what ways archiving is different from publishing. The first difference is that we have no control over how the archived material is used, unless we specify on the deposit form, nor do we know how it will be perceived by others who do not have our head notes to help them. Secondly, with the possible exception of digitised text, as in the case of the food project discussed above, we cannot edit archives as easily as we can published work. Thirdly, we are uneasily aware that archiving is very revelatory not only of our informants but also of us and how we conducted our work – it is raw data, or what a friend and colleague of mine once called 'my underwear drawer'.

So why do we wish to archive at all? One reason may be a sense of finalising a project, wrapping it up. Another is that it perpetuates our work, enables it to be on-going, even when we are no longer working on it or even no longer alive. It enables others to use it, including the informants, and thereby turns ethnography into history.

But before we rush to do so, there are a number of basic questions we would want to ask about depositing material in an archive:

- 1) What is the content of our archive?
- 2) When was it collected and from whom?
- 3) Where is it deposited and when?
- 4) Does lapse of time between collection and archiving make any difference?
- 5) Does the nature of the material make a difference to whether it is deposited and how (text, photos, film etc.)?

- 6) Who is likely to access it?
- 7) Will the participants access it?
- 8) Does it make sense without the memory/head-notes of the collector and depositor?
- 9) What has been left out/kept back from the deposited material and why?

The ethical issues I have raised in this talk are several-fold. First of all, to what degree should depositors exercise editorial control by anonymising people and places, by leaving out sensitive material? Secondly, to what extent does material collected by social scientists become a form of history, and thus subject to different rules? How do we weigh up the benefits of giving the provenance of data and allowing informants or their descendants to recognise themselves, versus the need to preserve anonymity and confidentiality? Thirdly, how do we deal with sensitive or secret material? And finally, how do we handle issues of intellectual property rights?

All of these conundra would have been much easier to deal with had I been more aware of them at the time. So although archiving may seem far into the future for those who are still collecting their first data set, it may help to ponder what could happen eventually to their material when they place it in an archive. Having some notion of the future helps us to plan the present better.

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