

MCDRC Statement of professional research ethics

As professional social scientists, we are bound to the ethical principles of our discipline and to the codes of responsibility published by the professional bodies to which we belong. Our guiding documents include the [Society for Applied Anthropology Statement of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities](#) and the [American Anthropological Association Principles of Professional Responsibility](#).

This document outlines the core ethical principles that we commit to following in our research.

Before the study: Research design

1. RISK

We will not conduct research that presents a risk of financial, political, or other potentially negative impact on participants.

- We sometimes find that continued project funding is contingent on positive results from an impact assessment, monitoring study, or similar research. This lends itself to research that is either biased, or that potentially undermines the interests of participants. We will not engage in research projects that are designed such that results may be used to withdraw resources from research participants, or that present a similar risk.
- We will not engage in research that involves captive groups, such as the participants in a specific project. To limit risk to participants, we may choose to conduct research in multiple sites, or study factors that are not directly related to funding allocations or policy decisions that predominantly affect one group of stakeholders.

2. COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROTOCOLS

We will respect our collaborators' rights to the research process, involving them fully in the research in compliance with established cultural and community protocols.

- In line with international practices for research involving local and Indigenous groups, we will follow local cultural protocols in seeking permission to undertake research, designing and conducting a study, and reporting our research findings.

This can mean consulting with local officials, community elders, or similar people who formally represent the voice of a community. The process of negotiating consent can also involve participating in appropriate ceremonies, giving gifts, and the like.

- Recognizing the rights of participants means that research should be collaborative. Participating individuals and groups / communities should be included in the research design, including at initial stages of setting research questions and priorities. We are guided by the principle that the information we gather does not belong exclusively to us.

3. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH METHODS

We will conduct our research using the ethnographic methods recognized by our discipline, including long-term participant observation wherever possible.

- Acknowledging that anthropologists and other social scientists employ a wide variety of research techniques, we assert the need to draw on our core disciplinary methods, notably participant observation and unstructured or semi-structured interviews. We note that ethnographic research is largely distinguished by holistic and inductive approaches.
- We will abstain from conducting research that is inconsistent with the professional methods and approaches of our discipline. We will decline working with a sponsor who expects us to conduct only quantitative research, for example, or to measure outcomes according to their own metrics.

During the study: Free and informed consent

4. INFORMED PARTICIPATION

We will ensure that participants in our research are meaningfully informed of the goals, methods, sponsorship, expected outcomes, potential risks, and benefits of our research.

- With every research project, we will outline the risks and benefits to participants, the uses of gathered information, the nature of the research process, sponsorship, and other essential details of the research.
- We will obtain ongoing, documented consent to participate in our study from all who contribute to our research. We note that participation in activities funded by a sponsor does not necessarily imply consent to participate in a research process.

- Where a study is likely to have an impact on a larger group of stakeholders, we will seek the consent of the entire group.

5. CONFIDENTIALITY

We will only document information from research participants that has been shared with us on the explicit understanding that it may be made public.

- Recognizing the strong possibility that participants may be identifiable in ethnographic data and reports, we will take care to distinguish at all times between what are “off-record” and “on-record” communications. We will not document or disclose confidential communications and private observations without the explicit consent of the people concerned. Conversely, we will ensure that participants in our research explicitly consent to the public use of any recordings we make of their actions and communications.
- Following the ethical principles of our discipline, we assert that our primary obligation is to our research participants and collaborators. We will discuss with our sponsors the ethical problems of attempting to provide “unbiased” opinions and recommendations on the basis of information that has been conveyed to us, by research participants, in the spirit of trust that we will understand and communicate their best interests.

After the study: Access to knowledge

6. PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

We will take measures to ensure that the information shared with us by research participants is preserved and made accessible to contributors and to other stakeholders.

- Whereas academic research projects typically privilege the professional judgement of an individual researcher, who might take private fieldnotes and then determine what is or is not appropriate to communicate in academic articles or a book, the spirit of public and applied research is often quite different. We frequently engage in collaborative processes in which the participants in our research wish, and deserve, greater ownership of the ethnographic records and the ways they are represented. We take the position that we are custodians, and not owners, of the information shared with us by participants in our research.
- We commit to sharing on-record data from our research in digital repositories that are accessible to our partners, collaborators, and communities in which we work.

We will avoid becoming the sole gatekeepers of information that is intended to be shared and used.

7. RE-USE

We will attach clear policies to our research materials and reports, defining appropriate contexts of access and use.

- We will agree clear and plain-language terms of use for ethnographic records with contributors in advance. These policies should state explicitly what we consider to be “appropriate” use of ethnographic records, including scholarly re-uses.
- While it may not always be possible to enforce respect for research participants by those who access published ethnographic records, we have an obligation to assert and protect the moral, cultural, and other rights of our collaborators.