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ETHICAL DILEMMAS

This group discussion activity can be used to introduce or conclude a unit on social change, culture conflict, technology, or anthropological theory and method. The format can also be used as a model for any ethics discussion in the classroom.

- I.
 1. Students will recognize the difference between a choice based on facts and a choice based on values.
 2. Students will gain some familiarity with the dilemmas anthropologists face in their fieldwork; and
 3. Students will gain some understanding of their attitudes or their culture's attitudes toward intervention and change.
- II. Procedure:
 1. Choose 4-5 students to join you in a discussion of case #1. Arrange this group in front of the class so that your leadership role and the group discussion can be observed.
 2. Read the case aloud and then ask the group to analyze the given situation.
 - a) Ask the group to define exactly what happened. What information is missing?
 - b) What issues and problems does the case raise and why?
 - c) What are courses of action the anthropologist could follow and what would be the negative and positive consequences of each?
 - d) How would "you" have acted in the same situation?
 3. As a group leader demonstrate your role by primarily a) asking questions, b) clarifying students' answers, c) linking together various responses, and d) summarizing the insights gained. Be sure to point out to the students that there are no right or wrong answers. They, like the anthropologist in the field, may not have all the information they would like to have before making their decisions.
 4. Divide the class up into 4-5 groups and have each person from the initial demonstration group act as a group leader. Assign each group a case to analyze for 15 minutes, using the same approach outlined above.
 5. One person from each group presents a summary of the case and the group's conclusions. As a whole class the teacher and the students might consider:
 - a) How and why do cultures differ in their values?

- b) How can ethical dilemmas shape or modify fieldwork research?
- c) What, if anything, can be done to prevent anthropologists from getting into ethical binds?
- d) What questions need to be asked before introducing change into a culture?

Case 1

Ray Davidson listened in amazement as his student, Frank Sawyer, recounted his reactions to his National Foundation interview. Sawyer had applied for funds to support research for his dissertation and had just recently been interviewed by a foundation representative with regard to his application. He sat across the desk from Davidson, laughing and obviously enjoying his success in "faking out the National Foundation people." Sawyer had flunked his oral exams during the spring term but did not reveal this to his interviewer. Instead, Sawyer told him that he was scheduled to take his orals in the late autumn. The interviewer hinted that Sawyer was very likely to receive funding if he passed his orals.

After Sawyer left the office, Davidson wondered what he should do. Although Sawyer had failed his oral exams the first time, he was a good student, and Davidson felt that he would pass the next time. However, he was concerned whether a student with this attitude toward the truth would become a reliable scientist, and whether he might be tempted to skew his data to support his hypotheses. Should Davidson inform the National Foundation representative of Sawyer's deception?

Case 2

Mary Thompson (pseudonym) had been conducting field work in a Southeast Asian community for 18 months. Her house was ideally located on the edge of the village plaza, allowing her to readily observe daily activities which took place in the plaza. In addition to gatherings of women who shared food preparation tasks and talk groups of men working individually on carvings, the plaza was regularly a gathering place for men at night.

One night while Thompson was working on some statistical problem in her house, she was distracted by loud, seemingly argumentative discussions in the plaza. When the noise of argument reached a high pitch, she decided to investigate the situation. Just as she stepped from her doorway, she saw one of the men in the group of five angrily raise his machete and deliver a deadly blow to another -- Tom (pseudonym) -- in the group. Stunned silence fell over the other three men, as they watched their companion quickly bleed to death before their eyes. Moments later people from other homes began moving into the plaza in response to the wailing which came from the man who had wielded the machete. Mournful crying and wailing was carried throughout the village. The family members of the dead man carried him to their home and began the funeral preparations. The next evening Tom was buried. The man who had dealt the deadly blow was allowed to participate in the funeral and to make a death payment to the family of the deceased.

Two days after the funeral, three regional policemen came to the village. As part of a new governmental program designed to reduce blood feuds, the regional authorities now regularly

sought to arrest and jail people who were involved in killings. They had heard about the recent death.

They began questioning the villagers in an attempt to determine if Tom had been "murdered." Thompson had written a detailed description of the events of the night of Tom's death in her notebook which contained a running record of village activities.

Since she knew the police would question her, should she quickly tear out and destroy the pages in her notebook where the events were recorded? When questioned by the police, should she, like the other villagers, plead ignorance concerning the killing?

Case 3

Roger Thompson had recently spent 18 months in Melanesia with the Grand Lake people. When he was invited to contribute a chapter to a colleague's book on myth, Roger decided to discuss one of the Grand Lake myths about the origin of certain magical powers. The story would illustrate a point that he wished to make about the authority of the shaman in the lives of the people.

After carefully translating the myth, Roger reviewed his field notes to check a few details. As he was turning the pages in his notebook, he discovered that two of them were stuck together. When he separated them, he found that the second page, which had been concealed by the first, contained a few short notes describing how he had come to record the myth, the details of which he had forgotten. According to his notes, he had persuaded the leading shaman in the village to recount the myth provided that Roger promised never to reveal it to anyone else. Suddenly Roger wondered whether he was violating a confidence by contributing a discussion of this myth to his colleague's book.

Case 4

Terry Kelly (pseudonym) received a NIMH grant for research in the Western Tropics. As part of her personal gear, she took along a considerable amount of medication which her physician had prescribed for use, should Kelly find herself in an active malaria region. Later, after settling into a village, Kelly became aware that many of the local people were quite ill with malaria. Since she had such a large supply of medication, much more than she needed for her personal use, should she distribute the surplus to her hosts?

Case 5

M was a disruptive student activist in the sixties, when it was the fad to be a disruptive student activist, but never to the point of "trashing" the administration building or placing stink bombs in the air-conditioning system. I am asked now to evaluate M for a senior government position. How much ought I to divulge?

Case 6

Laura Bohannon, in her book *Return to Laughter* (Bowen, Elenore, 1964, Doubleday), describes a dilemma when smallpox begins to rage through an African country. She has been vaccinated but cannot get the people to go to the hospital to get vaccinated by Western doctors. Their way of coping with it, is to banish a person from the tribe as soon as a person contracts smallpox. If Bohannon goes after the banished man to give him food and returns without having smallpox she will be considered a witch. This will mean she can no longer study these people effectively. Would you stay in the tribe or go help the man?

Bibliography for Ethical Dilemmas

American Anthropological Association. *AAA Code of Ethics*, newly revised code of ethics developed in 1971, designed to provide guidance to anthropologists and serve as the basis for an Ethics Education program of the American Anthropological Association. American Anthropological Association, 2200 Wilson Blvd, Suite 600, Arlington, VA 22201; 703/528-1902 <http://www.aaanet.org>

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1981 issues contain a series on ethical dilemmas prepared under the auspices of the Committee on Ethics. (cases 3, 4 & 5)

February 1994 issue contains the article, "Anthropological Ethics, the PPR and the COE: Thoughts from the Front Line."

October 1995 issue has an article by Bernard Gert, "Universal Values and Professional Codes of Ethics."

Appell, George. N. *Ethical Dilemmas in Anthropological Inquiry: A Case Book* Crossroads Press, 1978.

An excellent resource of over 80 cases designed to help sensitize students and anthropologists to the moral consequences of social inquiry. Cases cover such areas as dealing with threats of aggression; intervening in infanticide; perceiving of illegal activities; dealing with theft, medical emergencies, and missionaries; and handling problems in urban ethnic research. (cases 1 & 3)

Cassell, Joan and Sue-Ellen Jacobs (eds.). 1987. *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*. American Anthropological Association Special Publication #23.

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