

TRAINING STUDENTS IN ARCHAEOLOGICAL ETHICS

Mark J. Lynott and Vincas P. Steponaitis

Ethics are the rules or standards that govern the conduct of the members of a profession. Until recently, archaeological ethics have been oriented to a profession dominated by academia. Formal ethical training has been generally limited, and the training which has been offered has been aimed largely at concerns of the academic community. Archaeology has changed a great deal during the last 25 years. This is most obvious in the wide range of positions and jobs in which archaeologists are employed. As long as most archaeological activities were conducted within the sphere of university departments, students were trained in skills that were important to their future careers as university professors. Ethical training at these times was generally informal. As such students learned about ethics from peers, observing their academic mentors, and experimentation.

Passage of the National Historic Preservation Act in 1966 changed the environment for archaeology in the United States immensely. While this change was somewhat gradual over two decades, the dramatic nature of this change cannot be ignored. Archaeologists are now working in an increasingly wide range of jobs, and constantly facing new challenges to their professionalism and ethics. Many of the challenges facing archaeologists today are new and were not anticipated 25 years ago (e.g., repatriation, archaeology as business), and many of the challenges have been around for decades but have metamorphosed into larger and more complex problems (e.g., commercialization of the archaeological record). Even the most well-intentioned individuals are frequently faced with ethical challenges for which there is often no clear or well-understood precedent.

The need for ethical guidance among contemporary archaeological practitioners has been advocated by the Society of Professional Archaeologists since 1976. The Society for American Archaeology, recognizing that an updated ethics policy and a more active approach to ethics was needed, adopted eight Principles of Archaeological Ethics (Lynott 1997; Lynott and Wylie 2000).

Ethics and Gray Areas

Ethical policies may be addressed in two very different ways. The Society of Professional Archaeologists has developed their Code of Ethics and Standards of Research Performance. This is a very specific code that

specifies desired conduct or behavior in terms of “an archaeologist shall,” and specifies undesirable conduct as “an archaeologist shall not.” This type of code specifies minimally acceptable standards of behavior or conduct, which Wylie (1996) describes as “floors.” The SAA Principles of Archaeological Ethics represent “ceilings,” or ethical ideals. It is understood that these goals or ideals may not be easily achieved in everyday archaeological practice, but they should be used to direct professional activities amid the complexities of our constantly changing world.

Because of the nature of ethical issues, it often is very difficult to codify and clearly define regulations to direct or curtail certain types of professional activities. Consequently, discussion and dialogue about ethical issues are important, and necessary to build a consensus among professional practitioners. Ethical policies that lack support from professional practitioners are likely to be ineffective. Consequently, the SAA Ethics Committee is responsible for encouraging discussion about ethical issues and bringing ethical concerns to the attention of the archaeological community.

Formal Training

The need for formal training on archaeological ethics cannot be overemphasized. Some university colleagues have argued that advancing the cause of archaeology will be accomplished by publishing more and better research. They are not persuaded by arguments that universities and archaeology will be advanced by the increased success of students who are able to take what they have learned and use it in a practical and professional way in the world outside academia. In the long term, universities will be judged not only by the publications of the faculty they employ, but also by the success of the students they graduate.

Any university that is concerned with the future success of their students is obliged to provide those students with training in archaeological ethics. Very few graduating archaeologists will find employment as researchers and teachers in universities and colleges. If they hope to use their skills in archaeology, most graduates will have to look for work in cultural resource management, either in the private sector or a government agency. They will be expected to regularly use skills they were never taught in school, and deal with issues and concerns which never affect an archaeologist in an academic position. If they are not properly prepared for the challenges of this large and diverse workplace, and are forced to rely upon skills and ethics which are narrowly adapted for university circumstances, there is a strong possibility that they will be unsuccessful. Unsuccessful employees reflect poorly on the institution from which they have graduated, and may limit or reduce the opportunities for employment of future graduates from that institution.

Yet the question remains: how and at what level should this ethical



training be provided? At the undergraduate level, most archaeology in the United States is taught in liberal arts programs. The primary goal of such programs is to teach students how to think and write effectively; imparting skills geared to a specific profession is of secondary concern. Thus, while archaeological ethics is certainly a suitable subject for undergraduate coursework (e.g., it forms an excellent case study of how one weighs ethical principles in solving real-world problems), one could argue that it need not be a major focus of undergraduate archaeology programs. As a practical matter, every undergraduate who takes an archaeology course should probably hear the message against looting, and enough background to understand why that message is important. But consideration of other ethical issues that affect professional practice in archaeology can hardly be considered essential, particularly given that a bachelor's degree is generally not considered a professional credential in our field.

It is at the graduate level that students in the United States are trained to become professionals, and so it is at this level that formal training in ethics should be offered. The ideal is to make a broad consideration of ethical issues part of every graduate student's classroom experience. Yet this ideal is more the exception than the rule. In some cases, the main obstacle to implementing this ideal is inertia: faculty tend to teach in the manner that they themselves were taught, and ethics has not traditionally been taught in the classroom. In other cases, the obstacle is time: there is so much to teach, and so little time in which to do it. Students don't want to remain in graduate school forever, and often faculty are already stretched to the limit teaching the courses that are currently required. We maintain, however, that neither of these obstacles is insurmountable. It may be that only the larger graduate programs will have the faculty resources to offer routinely an entire course on archaeological ethics. But any credible graduate program, no matter how small, can add at least some consideration of archaeological ethics to the courses that they now require their students to take. Needless to say, this addition will require devoting less time to other subjects currently being taught. But given the importance of the issues involved, we believe that this shift in priorities is essential.

Practicing What We Preach

The need for more emphasis upon ethics in formal education also is illustrated by the limited instances where ethics have been taught in archaeological education programs. Most archaeological training has taught that we are obliged to develop a research design, excavate in a systematic manner, take good notes, and preserve the records and collections from our research for future study. However, in actual practice, archaeologists have all too often failed to live up to those standards. Brian Fagan (1995) has written about what he calls "archaeology's dirty little



secret.” Although everyone in archaeology knows it is important to prepare a report on our research, why are there so many reports which remain incomplete or never even started? Field schools have been notorious for this transgression, but nearly everyone has at least one report on their research that needs to be finished.

The collections and records which result from our research represent the only opportunity by which a colleague can examine our research and agree or disagree with our interpretations. Consequently, we have always taught that it is important to make good notes and records and ensure that collections are kept in good order for future study. However, in reality, archaeological collections are in poor condition throughout much of the United States. Anyone who has actually tried to restudy collections from previous research has probably been frustrated with the condition of the collections and the lack of supporting archival information. Since the records and collections from our research represent the mechanism by which our interpretations may be verified, it is critical to our claims that archaeology is a science that we maintain these materials in good order.

Most archaeological students have been at least introduced to the concept that we have a professional obligation to prepare a report on our research and ensure that the collections and records from our research are preserved for future study. Why then are these highly important ethical concepts treated so lightly in everyday practice? Could it be because archaeologists have learned about these concepts from observing the behavior of their own mentors, professors, and supervisors? Elevating ethics training to be a part of formal archaeological education might help to resolve this problem. After all, isn't one of the best ways to ensure that we understand a particular concept, is to try to explain it or teach it to someone else?

Conclusions

Despite our best intentions and efforts, it is impossible to generate an ethics code that will specify proper and improper behavior for all potential situations that archaeologists may face in our world today. Circumstances that affect archaeology are constantly changing, and we cannot ever fully anticipate the issues which might arise. With a few notable exceptions, archaeologists ignored Native American concerns about the study of human remains and cemeteries, and those concerns were eventually manifested in legislation that profoundly affects the nature and amount of archaeological research we can do. Hopefully, the passage of the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act has taught us that we cannot assume that we control the archaeological record and its use, and that we must interact with the public and the special interest groups to ensure that the archaeological record is used

and preserved in the best interests of all humankind.

Archaeology has changed a great deal in the last three decades. The diverse range of positions in which archaeologists are now employed make it impossible to closely specify appropriate professional behavior for all possible circumstances. SAA's Principles of Archaeological Ethics were developed to serve as a beacon in the turbulent and constantly changing circumstances archaeologists face today. However, since these principles are quite general in nature, and are not intended to be the final word on archaeological ethics, it is essential that archaeologists stay informed about ethical issues through an ongoing dialogue about ethics. Every archaeologist needs to enter the workplace with a basic understanding of current ethical issues in archaeology. This understanding can be best developed in formal academic training, where proper ethical conduct should receive just as much attention as method and theory. A growing number of books and papers about ethics and ethical issues are available (e.g. Messenger 1989; Vitelli 1996; Woodall 1990), and university curricula needs to be refined to incorporate these timely and important issues.

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