



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Ethical Considerations with Archaeology and Community Conflict

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Description

When a development company offers to buy a piece of land that potentially holds pre-contact Native American archaeology, an archaeologist faces a number of questions from the local community.

Body

Part 1

Avery Simpson is the director of an archaeological project near the southern Indiana town of Arrowhead. The project is part of on-going excavations at a major pre-contact Native American site on public city land where archaeologists have worked on and off for nearly 20 years. Avery has a field crew with him comprised of archaeologists and local community members. In previous years, archaeological crews at the site have interacted little with the local community, principally because the site was outside even the residential areas of town. The archaeologists have, however, participated in educational events such as hosting an open house for the public at the site. The archaeological research has also contributed greatly to the discipline, specifically elucidating formerly unclear strategies of early farming in the area.

Over the last five years, Arrowhead has greatly expanded and its business and residential sectors now border the public land where the site is located. Development, principally in the form of new housing and businesses, now dominates the local economy, replacing farming. Because of the growth in development and the effects of suburban-sprawl, the value of the archaeological site where Avery and his crew work has been called into question by Arrowhead citizens. Specifically, an outside developer, Global Malls Inc., has offered to build a new shopping center in Arrowhead if the town will sell some public land. The proposed mall project would not only necessitate the destruction of a major portion of the archaeological site where Avery works, but would also destroy, for the purposes of archaeology, outlying areas of the site that have never been investigated.

In the local newspaper, several letters to the editors have been written concerning the development project and its relationship to the archaeological site. The first letter was negative and discussed the wasted use of resources in preserving and excavating archaeological sites. This person preferred the building of the mall, since its immediate economic and social benefits were substantial and easily recognizable. Many citizens of Arrowhead agree with this letter. Other letters have praised the archaeological research, specifically noting the project's efforts to work with community members and the benefits to the town in terms of education. A third letter was written by a Native American representative from a local tribe who wanted all use of the land to stop since it was sacred to his tribe. The Native American tribe is not federally recognized and evidence suggests the tribe members are not direct descendents of the people who occupied the site. Because

of this, and the fact that the project has not discovered any burials, NAGPRA (the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) does not apply. For federally recognized tribes, NAGPRA protects graves and graves goods from unauthorized disturbance or destruction. Finally, a local Anglo community member questioned why the archaeologists had for so long focused on Native American history while historical buildings and cemeteries associated with Anglo history had been ignored.

Avery is concerned about the potential consequences of the mall building and the negative press. He fears the field research will be forced to shut down and important information relating to the prehistory of the region will be forever lost with the construction of the mall. Moreover, Avery feels he has failed adequately to communicate the benefits of archaeology to the citizens of Arrowhead and other stakeholders.

Questions

1. What are Avery's options in responding to the criticism and praise in the newspaper letters?
2. What steps might Avery and his crew have taken to assuage such commentary before the project began? Would a dialogue with the multiple stakeholders resulting in informed consent have changed the current situation? How would an archaeologist obtain consent and advocate participation from multiple communities who have different interests in the past?
3. Assume, instead, that Avery (and earlier archaeologists) had engaged the community in a Participatory Action Research (PAR) project involving community participation and collaboration. When the new shopping mall is proposed, what ethical considerations must Avery now consider? Are these issues more critical concerning the extent of community collaboration?

Part 2

Avery overhears that the Arrowhead town council is organizing a meeting to discuss the mall proposal and the opinions voiced recently in the newspaper. At the meeting, local citizens of varying opinions are expected to attend, in addition to the mayor, chamber of commerce members, and a representative from Global Malls Inc.

Questions

4. Should Avery go to the meeting? If so, how should he proceed?
5. What are the ethical considerations in balancing community interests with scientific research paradigms and concerns? How can these be effectively and ethically discussed with local affected populations (remembering that there are multiple stakeholders)? What are Avery's responsibilities to his profession?

Part 3

Avery is also concerned and confused about his obligations to the profession of archaeology and the ethical codes of professional societies in which he participates. Avery is a member of the Society for American Archaeology (SAA), which strongly encourages archaeologists to act as stewards to the archaeological record. Avery also participates in the World Archaeological Congress (WAC) and the American Anthropological Association (AAA), both of whose ethical codes state that a professional's principle duty is to local communities and, specifically, research populations. Regarding the SAA's ethical code, Avery believes his situation demonstrates a conflict between the SAA ethical principles of "Stewardship" and "Commercialization." As just noted, the SAA believes it is of prime importance for archaeologists to act as stewards to the archaeological record and one way of doing this is by not commercializing archaeological sites or artifacts. Specifically, archaeologists should "discourage, and should themselves avoid, activities that enhance the commercial value of archaeological objects, especially objects that are not curated in public institutions, or readily available for scientific study, public interpretation, and display." Though archaeological sites are not mentioned specifically, they do contain unexcavated objects and could be subsumed under the later qualification. Thus, the commercialization of archaeological sites is unethical because it results in the loss of "contextual information that is essential to understanding the archaeological record." Concerning the WAC and AAA codes, Avery feels his responsibility as a steward of the archaeological record may be conflicting with the interests of the local communities in and around Arrowhead.

Questions

6. Is it inappropriate for Avery to discuss the potential economic benefits of archaeological research (e.g. heritage tourism) in addition to its educational benefits? More generally, when professional (and likely personal) values conflict with community values, what are a researcher's ethical options?
7. How can Avery reconcile the differences between the professional ethical codes? Are the ethical codes of the SAA, AAA, and WAC useful to archaeologists if they seemingly conflict in this difficult case?

Part 4

With all the discussion concerning the mall project and the editorials, Avery discovers there are even myriad opinions on the matter amongst his crew. Some crew members are upset at the “uninformed” locals and their lack of understanding of archaeology. Other crew members, primarily the community members, agree with their fellow citizens and think the land could be used for more profitable purposes.

Questions

8. Is it necessary that all researchers on a project share values and opinions concerning the benefits and purposes of archaeological research?

Contributor(s)

Brian Schrag

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