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Statement on Professional Ethics

Endorsed by the Council of the Association of American Geographers

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I. Preamble

Members of the Association of American Geographers recognize that the conduct of geographic research and analysis, as well as the transmission of geographic theories, concepts, and information, involves a wide variety of ethical considerations. Careful, active examination of those considerations is likely to promote professionalism and courtesy in interactions among geographers and to enhance the positive impacts of the research, teaching, and service undertaken by geographers. The strength of this statement rests on the discussion and reflection it generates, and the careful approach to professional activities it encourages.

No one statement can possibly cover the range of ethical matters confronted by geographers. The activities and styles of geographers are diverse, as are the contexts within which they practice their craft. Thus, any statement that seeks to be comprehensive will inevitably fail. At the same time, there are a variety of arenas in which professional geographers work that raise basic ethical considerations; to say nothing about these is to ignore their ethical dimensions. This statement sets forth principles that speak to some of the (often overlapping) arenas in which professional geographers find themselves. The principles should be seen as starting points for consideration of the ethical issues attendant to these and other arenas of professional activity.

Most professional geographers are members of multiple professional communities, each with its own ethical standards. As such, this statement should be viewed in conjunction with statements and understandings related to those professional communities. Indeed, no attempt is made here to confront the range of issues that might append to specific professional communities. Instead, this statement is drafted with the specific intent that it encourage active, thoughtful engagement with ethical issues both within the scope of the statement, and in relation to the various professional circumstances confronted by geographers.

II. Professional Relations with One Another

Collegiality should be an expression of our ethical commitment to our discipline and to each other. Collegiality requires respect for the opinions and rights of others, a refusal to spread unfounded accusations and rumors about colleagues, and a commitment to discussing differences openly and honestly. There are three particular areas in which unethical conduct threatens collegiality and weakens our professional and personal bonds: when discrimination and harassment occurs in our workplaces, when individuals exhibit indifference to the wellbeing of our professional community, and when job searches are conducted with a lack of professionalism.

A. Avoiding Discrimination and Harassment

Discrimination is extraordinarily destructive. Geographers should adhere to fair employment practices and ensure equal opportunity when evaluating peers and

other employees. They should not discriminate against individuals or groups using criteria irrelevant to professional performance. Such irrelevant criteria generally include (but are not limited to) age, class, ethnicity, gender, marital status, nationality, politics, physical disability, race, religion, or sexual orientation. In addition, geographers should not only comply with all federal laws, state laws, and institutional procedures, but endeavor to avoid unfair employment practices whenever they are encountered.

Beyond specific legal dictates, geographers should strive to create a collegial environment that never tolerates harassment of any kind. Harassment occurs when a climate is created that prevents or impairs the full enjoyment of a person's rights and opportunities. It may include (but is not limited to) a pattern of unwanted sexual advances or demeaning remarks, physical assaults or intentional verbal intimidation, and requests for favors (sexual or otherwise) as conditions for recruitment, employment, publication, or advancement. Intentionality is of central importance when considering instances of harassment and discrimination, but the lack of intentionality should not be used or accepted as a blanket excuse for harassment or discrimination.

Asymmetries of power are a fact of academic and professional life. Yet in some circumstances they might raise actual or perceived conflicts of interest, and they will often be interpreted as aggravating factors in grievance and legal proceedings. Such conflicts may arise when personal and professional relationships are mixed, and care should be exercised under those circumstances to protect the interests of less powerful parties.

B. Sustaining Community

Geographers should strive to create and maintain a diverse, pluralistic, and inclusive professional community. A professional community comprises a set of social relations and communications in which individuals define and locate themselves. It is a physical, social, and moral 'place' where people belong, where lives have meaning and purpose, and from which individuals derive part of their identity. As members of the geographical community, it is the moral responsibility of geographers to respect the dignity of persons, to value a diversity of intellectual commitments and projects, and to treat colleagues with civil collegiality in written, spoken, and electronic communication.

While civility does not imply homogeneity or the absence of conflict, it does require that differences of philosophy, politics, or social position (race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) not be allowed to transcend or obscure what geographers share as professionals and as persons. This means that geographers should engage in reasoned exchanges that are civil and respectful of individuals and their differences. The growing use of electronic forms of communication raise special challenges in this regard, as these can undermine community by facilitating the wide dissemination of statements that are hurtful, embarrassing, or of questionable veracity. Hence, users of these technologies should make special efforts to avoid postings that could be construed as cyberbullying (the use of electronic communication systems with the intent to harass, embarrass or intimidate), and electronic bulletin-board moderators should strive to ensure that such postings are not among the electronic communications under their purview. By the same token, the vigorous exchange of ideas and perspectives over the World Wide Web should be welcomed, and efforts should be made to respond to alternative perspectives and constructive critique in a reasoned, measured, and civil manner.

C. Promoting Fairness in Hiring

Hiring procedures should be conducted in a manner that is courteous and fair to prospective candidates. For academic hires, this means that candidates invited for campus interviews should be given sufficient notice of the interview to provide adequate preparation time and a clear indication of what will be asked of them during the interview. Participants in the search process should also respect the confidential nature of the process. Moreover, candidates who are no longer under consideration for a job should be notified of that fact as soon as possible in keeping with university or college hiring guidelines. In addition, no one in a unit that has extended an offer of employment should seek to undermine the offer or discourage the person from accepting it in the interests of a personal agenda.

III. Relations with the Larger Scholarly Community

Ethical behavior in relations with the larger scholarly community means that geographers should exhibit care in according credit for ideas and information where it is due, adopt high standards of fairness when evaluating the work of others, and avoid self-plagiarism.

A. Attributing Scholarship

Geographers should give full credit to those making significant contributions to their research and teaching, as well as acknowledging all persons, groups, and organizations that have supported their work. Intentionally misrepresenting as one's own the information or ideas provided by others constitutes plagiarism. In cases of collaborative research and publication, attribution and authorship should accurately reflect the contributions of participants. This is especially important in the cases of students and junior faculty, whose work should not be appropriated by more senior colleagues without prior approval and due recognition.

B. Evaluating Scholarship

Geographers should represent or evaluate the work of others fairly. Such evaluations should be devoid of prejudice or malice, whether rooted in differences of personality, ideology, theory, or methodology. Editors and reviewers are responsible for the fair application of editorial standards. Unless explicitly agreed to in advance, manuscript reviews should be undertaken confidentially, and subsequent recommendations should be justified with explicit and reasonable arguments. Moreover, editors and reviewers should be sensitive to conflicts of interest when evaluating the manuscripts or publications of persons with whom they have an overriding sense of personal obligation, competition, or enmity. When a conflict of interest is apparent, such persons should excuse themselves from the process of editing or reviewing.

C. Self-Plagiarism

Geographers should ensure that each article or book they publish is a distinct piece of scholarship that is largely independent from any prior scholarship, unless the extent of the overlap with the prior scholarship is explicitly acknowledged. Independent scholarship constitutes published work that, for the most part, does not use the same language, present the same data, or elaborate the same concept or idea set forth in a prior publication. In cases where there is doubt about overlap, the potential overlap should be acknowledged through citations and/or quotations.

IV. Relations with Students

In relations with students, the academic's overriding responsibility is to contribute to the intellectual development of the student, at least in the context of the geographer's own area of expertise, and to avoid exploitative or discriminatory actions that might detract from student development. While adhering to ethical and legal codes governing relationships between teachers/mentors and students/trainees at their institutions of employment (NACADA 2005), geographers should be particularly sensitive to the ways such codes apply in their discipline. The following ethical principles, ideals, or expectations should be taken into account in the design and analysis of learning experiences.

A. Instructional Content

Instructors should be responsible for maintaining a high level of geographic knowledge and for ensuring that instructional content is current, accurate, representative, and appropriate to the position of the learning experience within the student's/trainee's program of study. Instructors should also endeavor to create a classroom environment that is conducive to learning on the part of all students. They should consider carefully whether the material they use in class could be considered prejudicial, bigoted, insulting, offensive, or derogatory, and if using such material they should endeavor to present it without fostering prejudice or alienating students of a particular background. Topics that students/trainees are likely to find sensitive or discomfiting should be dealt with in an open, honest, and constructive way.

B. Pedagogical Competence

Instructors should communicate the objectives of the learning experience to students/trainees, be aware of alternative instructional methods or strategies, and select methods of instruction that, according to research evidence (including personal or self-reflective research), are effective in helping students/trainees to achieve the objectives of the learning experience.

C. Training Students with Funded Research

Many agencies now support undergraduate and graduate training. While it is tempting to think of these programs as a supplement to faculty research, the central goals are generally to support the development in students of critical thinking and research skills that can be transferred beyond a specific project. A student-centered approach to research training is important. There are no guidelines for how this might be accomplished other than to involve students fully

in the research process and to give them the freedom to explore questions that may not be directly relevant to faculty research projects. An important element of research training should be training in the ethics of research.

D. Confidentiality

Grades, attendance records, and private communications are treated as confidential material, and should be released only for reasons outlined in such documents as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (U.S. Department of Education 2008).

V. Relations with People, Places, and Things

Geographical research necessarily involves interactions with peoples, places, and things. In conducting research, geographers should make every effort to ensure their work is conducted honestly. Under no circumstances should they fabricate or falsify research results, or plagiarize the work of others. In addition, geographers should comply with government requirements for the protection of researchers, human subjects, the public, and the environments in which they work. Geographers whose research involves human subjects should seek review and approval from their Institutional Review Board (IRB) and comply with their IRB's expectations for informed consent, modification of research practices, and reporting of adverse events. The IRB process varies somewhat by institution, but should include review and disclosure of funding sources, review of downstream dissemination, and disclosure of uses of collected data. The IRB process cannot treat all ethical challenges that may arise in a given research project. Thus, geographers should take responsibility for examining and addressing ethical issues that lie outside the IRB process, and for making their IRBs aware of particular ethical issues associated with geographic research and the use of geospatial data. Finally, geographers should familiarize themselves with relevant documents on which the IRB process is based. Of particular importance is the Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1979).

Consistent with these guidelines, research should be conducted only after careful consideration of three fundamental principles:

- (1) Respect for persons and communities: The right of individuals and groups to be informed that they are research subjects, to be given adequate information so that they are in a position to give informed consent as research subjects, and to have confidentiality arrangements protected to the extent possible.
- (2) Equity: The sharing of research results, to the extent practical and legal, with individuals and communities affected by the research.
- (3) Beneficence: The maximization of benefits and the minimization of harm from research.

Another principle of overarching relevance is that geographers' quest for understanding through field research should be accompanied by consideration of the long- and short-term effects of research projects on the people, places, flora, fauna, and environments under investigation. In research, geographers are guided by a fourth principle:

- (4) Respect for ecosystems, biodiversity, natural resources, climate, landforms, and the principles of sustainable environmental stewardship.

Given the tremendous diversity of topics and research methodologies embraced by geographers, it is impossible to catalogue all of the ethical issues that might arise during research. The following general principles, however, have wide applicability.

A. Project Design and Development

Regardless of whether the information collected in the field is intended for academic or practical application, researchers should seek to anticipate the impacts of their field work prior to its inception. It follows that they should design and complete projects in a manner that, in so far as possible, protects and preserves the animate and inanimate subjects of field research, and the persons who assist in the realization of research goals. In cases where field methods are invasive or may cause long-term alterations or transformations to people and environments, strong justification as well as appropriate safeguards are reasonable obligations. In such situations, the costs and benefits of the research should be weighed carefully while planning the field work—not once the work is underway. There is a limit to what can reasonably be anticipated, but at the outset geographers should be mindful of the potential uses of the data generated by their field work over time. Issues to consider include the rights to information of national or international agencies that fund research to information; full disclosure requirements; potential misuses of information by third parties; and the economic and environmental impacts of projects.

B. Ethical Behavior during Field Research

Many ethical considerations that develop during field projects are predictable and generic. They arise across geography's many sub-disciplines and cognate fields, and across the cultures and societies geographers encounter in their work. The most basic principle governing field research should be that places, people, and things should be treated just as researchers would like others to treat their own places, possessions, and selves. The dignity, safety, and well-being of informants and local colleagues should always have precedence over the goals of the project. Informants and local researchers should be asked whether they prefer anonymity or recognition, and the project should be implemented and its results should be presented in keeping with these individuals' preference. Prior to participation, informants and local collaborators have a basic right to know the purpose of the project and the end uses of the information. Those providing assistance should be well treated, and when appropriate, paid fair and reasonable wages. Promises made to local interested parties must be honored. If there is no genuine intent to return information or provide some type of assistance to local persons and agencies, such promises and assurances should not be made.

In the case of environmental studies or those focused on non-human topics, field research should be conducted in ways that minimize long-term impacts. If required, samples should be taken to meet the goals of a project, but sampling procedures should be efficient. Whether information is derived from a library or the natural world, the "sources" should be respected and preserved as much as possible.

The synthetic nature of geography requires unusual sensitivity to the peripheral effects of field work. Cultural and environmental studies may generate data that are co-opted by others—with damaging results. These peripheral consequences of research projects are often unclear and may develop with disarming speed. Interviews by local media or local government agencies during field research can reasonably be anticipated. Researchers should ascertain the purpose of such interviews before they are conducted, and if language barriers exist, they should endeavor to ensure that any translation of the interview is fair and accurate. Moreover, researchers should report only on matters about which they have acquired considerable understanding, and should always keep the best interests of their research subjects in mind. This means that local traditions and mores should be respected unless they directly undermine the basic human rights of affected individuals. Moreover, assistance provided by local informants and co-researchers may be controversial, and protecting these persons should be paramount.

C. Research Involving Indigenous Peoples, Ethnic Minorities and Other Potentially Vulnerable Groups

Research with indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and politically vulnerable or marginalized groups raises special challenges and requires special care, regardless of whether the research is conducted by members of those groups. Potential issues include physical and social threat and danger to participants from both outside and within their groups, violation of intellectual property, and threats to the viability of a group and its territory posed not only from published data, but also, in some cases, from the data collection process itself. Research in such situations should be conducted with foreknowledge of appropriate protocols and the social, cultural, and even legal pitfalls that may arise. For indigenous communities, researchers need to engage in a process of respect, reciprocity, and mutual benefit wherein the research: (a) is informed by the viewpoints of indigenous peoples involved in open negotiation; (b) benefits the community; and (c) results in a product that is shared with the community, and in which the community's participation is clearly acknowledged. These principles are explicitly outlined in "Nine Guidelines for Research with Indigenous Peoples" (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian 2009).

D. Research Involving Geospatial Technologies

Geospatial technologies currently used in geographical research and publication introduce special challenges with respect to potential violations of privacy and confidentiality of individuals and groups. In using these technologies, researchers should make reasonable efforts to protect the health, well-being, and privacy of research subjects. Decisions about the collection, ownership, and analysis of geospatial data should be made with a view toward affording individuals and communities that bear the burdens of geospatial research the opportunity also to share in its benefits. Particular efforts should be made to protect the privacy of geospatial data when such data could be used to undermine the interests of communities or community members and when specific agreements have been made to keep such data out of the public domain.

The following are examples of research approaches involving geospatial technologies that are particularly likely to raise privacy and confidentiality issues,

and that therefore should be undertaken with special care:

- (1) Automated tracking of the locations and movements of individuals or vehicles;
- (2) The use of images from satellites, aircraft, or ground-based sensors that are of sufficient resolution to identify individuals or vehicles; and
- (3) The use of geographic location, in the form of coordinates or street addresses, to link diverse sources of data of a personal nature.

E. Reporting and Distributing Results

Whenever appropriate, results of field projects should be returned to local colleagues and host agencies in an accessible form. In matters of authorship, the inclusion of associates from the research location or host site as co-authors of publications should, whenever possible, be determined in advance and in accordance with their wishes.

VI. Relations with Institutions and Foundations that Support Research

The guiding principles in relations with sponsoring and funding organizations should be openness and disclosure. In many cases, ethical issues related to funding can best be avoided by discussing possible conflicts or concerns with officials at the agencies and institutions that fund research at the time funding is sought, rather than after problems appear. Geographers should be prepared to reject funding from an agency if agreement cannot be reached that enables the geographer to behave ethically. In this section of the statement, attention is directed to the particular issues that arise in sponsored research as they relate to the funding agencies.

A. Funding Research

The ethical issues involved in funding research primarily fall into two categories: seeking funding from multiple sources and using contract research to fund basic research goals. In the first case, funding agencies should be notified when multiple proposals for similar or overlapping research projects are submitted and when awards for overlapping projects are made. In using contract research to fund or supplement other research projects, researchers should ensure that the needs of the contractor are met and that use of data for purposes other than the contract is acceptable. It is best to clarify in advance the conditions under which data can be used, the review processes that are to be followed, and the implications of restrictions on the use of data for the broader research. Generally, problems are most likely to be avoided if program officers are notified in advance and basic guidelines established for use of funds from multiple sources and for the use of data. Establishing these guidelines can also assist researchers if they believe that funding agencies are attempting to guide the outcomes or conclusions of research.

B. The Use of Results from Funded Research

Most funding agencies have guidelines for the use and distribution of data and research findings as a condition for grant or contract awards. In general, geographers should make data and findings available to the greatest extent allowable by funding agencies and in a fashion that is consistent with the goal of protecting the people, places, and things they study. More specifically, information that can be shared without violating funding guidelines and confidentiality should be archived in a manner that maximizes accessibility. Maintaining confidentiality may mean that information is reported at coarser levels of aggregation or geographic resolution than the level at which it was collected. Some forms of data (e.g., life histories, participant observation) may need to be dramatically transformed in order to protect confidentiality.

VII. Relations with Governments

Geographers frequently deal with their own or host governments in the process of gaining access to and using official data, in obtaining information from governmental officials, in applying for government-sponsored grants, and in undertaking government-sponsored work. Geographers should be open and candid in their dealings with their own government or with governments in places where they are conducting research. They should avoid undertaking any task that requires them to compromise their professional responsibilities as geographers or as employees of the institutions for which they work. Geographers should make explicit the extent to which governments have limited or restricted their research efforts. Ethical issues are particularly likely to be encountered when seeking government support for research or undertaking a government-sponsored project.

A. Government Research Support

Geographers should clearly state the reasons for applying for support from a government and not resort to ambiguities to make the research more acceptable to the government funding source. It is particularly important that geographers not mislead foreign governments as to the purpose for which research is being conducted. In all dealings with governments, geographers should be honest about their qualifications, capacities, and aims. They should be especially careful not to promise or imply acceptance of conditions contrary to professional ethics or competing commitments. Geographers should comply with the appropriate government requirements pertaining to the conduct of the research. When financial support for a project from a governmental authority has been accepted, geographers should make every reasonable effort to comply with the terms of the project agreement.

B. Government Employment

Geographers undertaking work for their own government should be open and direct about the conditions of the employment, and should never undertake employment that violates the principles of the institutions for which they work. If the employment involves producing classified materials, a clear line should be drawn between classified work and other work they are doing that is aimed at the general scholarly community. For either kind of work, however, the geographer should be bound by ethical principles set forth elsewhere in this statement. Geographers should be under no professional obligation to provide reports or debriefings of any kind to government officials or employees unless they have explicitly agreed to do so under the terms of a grant or contract. If geographers take on classified work they should do so only within the limits of the law. In no case should they misuse their positions as professionals as a pretext for gathering intelligence for government agencies. After a grant has been made or a contract signed, the researcher should not submit to any new restrictions on methods, procedures, or publications that would violate ethical procedures with respect to human subjects of research.

VIII. Conclusion—Ethical Debate in Geography

This statement should be seen as the beginning of an ongoing, collective project aimed at promoting reflection on ethical matters and ethical accountability in geography. It is designed not simply for specialized professional and legal reasons, but to encourage consideration of the relationship between professional practice and the well-being of the peoples, places, and environments that make up our world. The ultimate goal of this statement is to foster approaches and practices that serve that end. The concept of well-being that underlies the statement is not to be understood as the product of any particular personal or political agenda. Instead, it is inspired by a concern with individual, social, and environmental health. What constitutes health will always be a matter of debate that can and should be informed by a diversity of perspectives. Some will emphasize the well-being of animals, humans and/or the natural environment, focusing, for example, on the rights of sentient animals, oppressed minorities, or endangered species and ecosystems. Others will emphasize the role of human rights, social justice, or ethics of care in the pursuit of well-being. For still others, well-being may exist as an unarticulated commitment, or as the central focus of research. This diversity of views is to be welcomed because an ongoing conversation, conducted with respect, can deepen personal and shared insights into moral relations between humans and the world in which they live and work.

The purpose of this statement, then, is to encourage professional engagement with the concept of well-being. No attempt is made to specify what well-being should mean, or to provide a comprehensive list of requisite social or environmental practices; no single definition or list could possibly capture the plurality and complexity of the moral concerns relevant to geography. Instead, the statement seeks to highlight such concerns with the goal of encouraging ongoing reflection, debate, and action. In this spirit, the statement affirms the responsibility of all geographers to consider and take responsibility for how their professional activities—as researchers, teachers, advisors, consultants and advocates—foster or hinder well-being.

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