

Ethics of Museum Research

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Museum professionalism begins with ethics. A code of ethics usually addresses two aspects of the museum profession: firstly, it aims at the internal workings of the museum community and intends to bring a sense of self worth to those in the field. Secondly, museum ethics is directed externally and defines the acceptable conduct and practice (responsibility) of those working in museums towards the society they serve.

Research is considered an important responsibility of the museum professional and is included as a separate entry in all codes of ethics published so far (see, for instance, article 8.3 of the ICOM Code, or article 9 of the MA Code of Ethics). The main emphasis lies on three issues: first, museums should make sure that they do have an active research agenda, according to their possibilities, in particular in relation to their collections; second, museums have the responsibility to make the results of this research available to the public in various forms and formats; third, museums should ensure that all research they undertake conforms to the highest possible standards of scholarship, respect and sensitivity.

The aim of this presentation is to focus on these provisions made by the codes of museum ethics published by various sources and discuss their adequacy, suggesting that more elaborate provisions are currently necessary. What are the museum's responsibilities when research involves 'vulnerable groups' or 'sensitive topics', for instance? How do museums deal with the acquisition of 'informed consent' by those participating in a research project? What exactly are the researchers' responsibilities during their work? This paper argues that the definition of museum research needs to be expanded in order to include visitors' research (and not only collections' research); in addition, provisions for proper conduct regarding this specific kind of research need to be made, in order to satisfy the principles of accountability, transparency and social responsibility, which are at the core of museums today.