

ETHICS STATEMENT

(2018)

I. Ethics are Dynamic

This statement is intended to assist, guide, and encourage ethical debate as it pertains to ethnomusicology. Ethics are not codified law but emerge dynamically through continuous critical engagement with contemporary concerns. We urge members of the Society to consider the challenges and problems raised by this statement and to communicate matters of ethical concern to each other and the Society.

Ethnomusicology is centrally concerned with music's role in mediating human relationships. Ethics in ethnomusicology are complex and dynamic because human relationships are complex and dynamic. Ethics often differ between individual ethnomusicologists and between fieldworkers and their research participants. This poses unique challenges for a field that takes as its purview any music, anywhere, anytime. As members of multiple professional societies, employees of institutions, and members of various communities, we have the obligation to respect ethical beliefs, guidelines, and moral precepts and codes that may sometimes give rise to conflicts.

Ethnomusicologists recognize that no single, prescriptive set of guidelines can be applied to all ethnomusicologists working in all contexts. It is not the aim of the Society for Ethnomusicology (henceforth SEM) or this statement to impose a particular regime on ethnomusicologists working around the world. The values affirmed by this statement do not necessarily represent those of all practitioners, especially those from outside of America. And yet, as members of a professional society, we hold shared ideals regarding some basic stances, subject to continuing debate and change.

II. Fieldwork

While ethnomusicology takes place in many kinds of research contexts (e.g. archival and museum, college and university, public and applied, performance and pedagogical), fieldwork involving participant-observation is the most common.

A) Approval and Oversight

Ethnomusicologists engage in ethnographic, artistic, archival, medical, cognitive, therapeutic, activist, applied, and historical research, among others. Some research is subject to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and oversight, others are not. As collaborative research in ethnomusicology increases, oversight becomes more complex. Ethnomusicologists are obligated to make themselves aware of applicable oversight guidelines and requirements and the Society's position on them.

[SEM's Statement on IRBs](#)

B) Do No Harm

This basic ethical principle guides our fieldwork and interactions with research participants.

C) Obligations to Research Participants

The fieldworker's primary ethical responsibility is to their research participants. Engaging in research in which conflicting ethical obligations arise should be carefully considered through

ethical debate and with the full knowledge and approval of relevant faculty oversight committees and IRBs. In such cases fieldworkers must carefully consider the overall impact (e.g. public safety, social justice).

Fieldworkers often work with communities and individuals from many different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Often the fieldworker enters communities from positions of economic privilege and power. This presents special ethical challenges and responsibilities. To the extent possible, fieldworkers should make themselves aware of, and be honest with themselves and their field partners about, potential power differentials and competing interests, expectations, rights, and responsibilities.

Fieldworkers should not exploit research participants or communities for personal gain, including but not limited to monetary gain. Fieldworkers and their research participants should discuss whether or not compensation is appropriate for participation in research.

1) Recognition and Anonymity

Fieldworkers respect research participants' wishes regarding recognition and anonymity. Whereas social-science and medical research is typically anonymized, most ethnomusicological research is collaborative and concerns context and identity. Many research participants in ethnographic contexts desire named recognition. Nevertheless, fieldworkers must ensure that research participants understand that they can request anonymity, can withdraw from an interview at any time, and reserve the right to refuse to answer any question. Research participants' right to anonymity should be respected in lieu of explicit consent to the contrary. This applies to the collection of all fieldwork materials (e.g. recordings, transcripts, artifacts).

Fieldworkers are obligated to ensure the confidentiality and security of fieldwork materials whenever requested. They have an obligation to protect and preserve fieldwork materials and ensure they are not used for unauthorized purposes. The increasing ease of digital duplication and circulation is no excuse for not securing confidential materials or materials that have not been explicitly approved for public circulation.

Fieldworkers should be clear about the potential for anonymity to be compromised and should not make promises that cannot be kept. They should keep confidential such information that, if made public, might pose a risk to research participants in terms of criminal or civil liability or that might be damaging to the participant's economic standing, reputation or employability. Fieldworkers should inform participants that confidentiality may be compromised if research records were to be subpoenaed.

2) Informed Consent

When possible and appropriate, fieldworkers obtain written, informed consent for research participants' engagement in a research project and for all recorded media and interviews. Informed consent may also be given orally; it may be video or audio-taped, or it may be established through various written forms co-developed with research participants. Whenever possible fieldworkers obtain written consent before fieldwork materials are placed in public archives.

SEM recognizes that written, witnessed, and signed informed consent—as is often required by IRBs—may be culturally inappropriate in fieldwork contexts. Because the ethnographic research process typically involves ongoing adjustment as fieldworkers learn from research participants, consent itself is a continual negotiation, based on trust built up slowly over time. Written consent forms, especially those couched in legalese, are sometimes inimical

to the development of trust between fieldworkers and research participants and may not be possible if the field interlocutors are illiterate or unfamiliar with standard Westernized research practices and ethical protocols. SEM also recognizes that written consent is sometimes required by academic presses.

3) Transparency and Ethical Conflicts

Before informed consent is established, fieldworkers are obliged to share with research participants their research goals, funding sources, sponsors, methods, and the anticipated outcomes and impacts of the research. They are obliged to be open and honest about the purposes of their work and to inform research participants as research goals and frameworks evolve.

III. Dissemination and Publication

Researchers have an ethical responsibility to disseminate fieldwork materials and research results in ways mutually acceptable to research participants, researchers, and institutions. Researchers must consider the potential impacts of the publication of results and recognize that their work may create or contribute to conditions enabling future exploitative uses of fieldwork materials and research results. They recognize their responsibility to ameliorate these possibilities and anticipate potential misuse.

A) Intellectual Property and Copyright

Ethnomusicologists recognize that ideas about intellectual property rights differ greatly between social groups, that copyright law differs between nations and that there is no binding international copyright law. Researchers are obligated to stay informed regarding evolving intellectual property and copyright law and to inform research participants of the potential protections and liabilities of contractual arrangements. In cultural contexts in which individuals have property rights to their creations, research participants should understand that they hold the copyright to their interviews and to the performance and lesson recordings produced by the researcher until and unless they explicitly transfer those rights to an individual or institution. Transfer of rights should be documented by an explicit, written release form or minimally by a recorded oral statement to that effect. The researcher has the obligation to ensure that research participants understand the extent of their rights over recorded media as well as their right to place restrictions on the use of that material if and when it is placed in a public archive. The researcher is obligated to follow all restrictions that research participants place on recorded media.

[SEM's Position Statement on Fair Use](#)

[SEM's Position Statement on Copyright and Sound Recordings](#)

B) Digital Dissemination

The technical ease with which fieldwork materials can be digitally distributed raises potential ethical concerns regarding archiving locations, access, rights, and ownership. Researchers should exercise extreme caution and forethought when sharing, posting, or uploading research materials or otherwise disseminating materials through forms of digital media. The open access publication and digital sharing of research results and fieldwork materials should be conducted with the full understanding and consent of research participants.

IV. Professional Ethical Responsibilities

A) Self-Education: Ethnomusicologists have an obligation to educate themselves on matters of ethical concern. They are encouraged to read, debate, improve, and teach the concepts

outlined in this document and to consider the ethical guidelines published by affiliated professional societies, including: [BFE](#), [AAA](#), [AFS](#), [OHS](#), [ASA](#).

Whether or not their research programs are required to receive IRB approval and oversight, ethnomusicologists are strongly encouraged to familiarize themselves with research review processes and their required ethics training materials.

[SEM's Statement on IRBs](#)

- B) As Colleagues:** Ethnomusicologists should not engage in exploitative behaviors, exclusionary practices, or any form of intimidation or slander. This applies when mentoring colleagues, working with clients in applied settings, supervising staff, and acting as a reviewer or evaluator. Ethnomusicologists support diversity and oppose discrimination and harassment.

[SEM's Position Statement on Anti-Discrimination, Anti-Harassment, and Sexual Diversity](#)

- C) As Teachers:** Ethnomusicologists have ethical responsibilities to their students. As teachers, they should faithfully represent the state of the job market—especially regarding issues of contingent labor—and prepare students to face it. Faculty should be non-exploitative, candid, and fair. Faculty have a responsibility to train students in the ethics of ethnomusicology and academe in general. Faculty should always give appropriate credit to student assistance in published research. Students should be fairly compensated for their labor. Ethnomusicologists should make themselves aware of their institution's policies and best practices regarding faculty-student relationships.

V. SEM Ethical Statements and Responsibilities

- A) Arbitration:** The SEM Ethics Committee does not adjudicate claims of unethical behavior or punish transgressions. It is not a grievance panel. Nevertheless, members may anonymously send in questions and complaints of ethical concern to the Ethics Committee to consider as it continuously develops this document and advises the SEM Council, Board, and membership.

[SEM's Ethics Committee Website](#)

- B) Labor:** SEM recognizes the need to respond to issues of labor precarity and the exploitation of contingent academic labor. We support the right to organize for fair compensation. SEM recognizes that participation in its annual conferences may represent a significant financial burden to students, independent researchers, and contingent faculty and is dedicated to enacting more equitable means of participation in the Society's activities.

[SEM's Resolution on Contingent Academic Labor](#)

- C) Environmental Responsibility:** SEM is dedicated to establishing and fostering environmentally sustainable practices. Whenever possible the Society, its chapters, and members should consider the environmental impacts of the practice and dissemination of research. Recognizing the environmental and economic costs entailed, SEM, its chapters, and membership is dedicated to facilitating digital participation in conferences and digital collaboration in research. SEM recognizes and supports efforts to balance environmental priorities with the production and dissemination of knowledge and the fostering of careers.

SEM recognizes that cultural relationships between humans, nature and other species vary globally and that the edict of 'do no harm' in some cases must explicitly be extended to natural flora, fauna and human relationships to these.

- D) Torture:** Researchers, when acting in their capacity as ethnomusicologists, base their action upon the ethical principle of doing no harm. Ethnomusicologists will not assist in the use of music as torture.

[SEM's Position Statement on Torture](#)

- E) Advocacy:** Ethnomusicologists are members of communities beyond the fieldwork setting. SEM recognizes its members' ethical obligation when appropriate to honor the long-term commitment to the rights and interests of research participants and their communities and to advocate on their behalf.
- F) Academic Freedom:** SEM is dedicated to fostering academic freedom and supporting the freedoms of scholars working under repressive government and colonialist regimes.

Further Reading

American Anthropological Association. 2018. *Ethics Resources*.

<http://www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1895>

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