Statement on Research Ethics

Historians participate in the making of history by interpreting the past for a range of audiences, and through a range of media, from museum displays and documentaries, to books and articles. Our understandings of the past alter over time, shaped by the emergence of, and our interpretation of both primary and secondary sources; our interrogations are neither entirely 'value free' or random in their understanding of how historical sources and writing should be utilized. Historians, however, do adhere to certain common or 'core values,' that overlap with those of other scholarly professions, and these too will alter over time, as they are shaped by changing political, economic, social, as well as intellectual contexts.

Historians also work in a variety of contexts, such as museums, government institutions, schools and universities, non-profit and non-governmental organizations; some also work as independent researchers. Despite the differences in our employment situations, it is useful for us to reiterate some common practices and ideals that are important to ethical research. The following four ideals lay at the heart of our understanding of ethical historical research. Taken as a whole, they reveal the need for a delicate balance between the openness of academic freedom and our understanding that not all interpretations of the past should be valorized.

Core Values

1. our commitment to free and open inquiry, adhering to the ideal of academic freedom;
2. our commitment to preserving and honouring the integrity of the historical record, never fabricating, destroying, distorting or hiding sources or evidence;
3. our proper acknowledgment of all primary sources and the works of other scholars;
4. our openness to hear, with respect, divergent interpretations and views, even as we subject those interpretations to critical scrutiny.

Integrity in Research

A policy statement on 'Integrity in Research and Scholarship.' issued by the Tri-Council (SSHRC, NSERC, CIHR) offers a number of important concerns for historians. An abbreviated version of their statement is given, verbatim, below, with our additional comments placed in italicized bold.

Researchers:
1. Recognize the substantive contributions of collaborators and students; using

unpublished work of other researchers and scholars only with permission and with due acknowledgment; and using archival material in accordance with the rules of the archival source. Archives are a major repository of our research tools, and as such, we affirm our commitment to adhere to their guidelines on confidentiality and privacy. When we disagree with the efficacy of those rules, we will strive to alter them through dialogue and consultation. Some historical records are still privately held. Researchers should establish written agreements with these groups about how (and whether) private or confidential information will be used. Lacking any such agreement, we would recommend following the policy established by a provincial or federal government archive.

2. Obtain the permission of the author before using information, concepts or data originally obtained through access to confidential manuscripts or applications for funds for research or training that may have been seen as a result of processes such as peer review. Our publications should acknowledge our debt, to the best of our knowledge, to the work of other scholars.

3. Use scholarly rigour and integrity in obtaining, recording and analyzing evidence, and in reporting and publishing results. Historians agree that we need to report our research findings truthfully and to leave a clear "trail of evidence for subsequent historians" to follow. (Wording of the American Historical Association's statement on standards of professional conduct.)

4. Ensure that authorship of published work includes all those who contributed to the writing of the publication.

5. Reveal to sponsors, universities, journals or funding agencies any conflict of interest that might influence your decisions with regards to reviewing manuscripts or applications.

Research Involving Human Subjects

Historians in Canadian universities are also bound by the Tri-Council Policy on Research Involving Human Subjects. Researchers collecting oral histories, for example, must submit their research plans to the REB (Research Ethics Board) at their own institution. We recommend that the same guidelines for human subject research should be utilized by historians outside universities. For the full policy, see: www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/policystatement/policystatement.cfm

Aboriginal Research

Doing history inevitably involves researching and writing about individuals and groups distanced from ourselves by time and social circumstances. Part of our ethical role is to continually question if, and how, our historical research and writing might have a contemporary impact on these individuals and communities. With regards to research about Aboriginal peoples, those employed in universities are governed by section 6 of the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Human Subjects:

The following are some of the suggested "good practices" for research on Aboriginal Peoples taken directly from the Tri-Council policy. Researchers and REBs should endeavour to:

- to respect the culture, traditions and knowledge of the aboriginal group;
- to conceptualize and conduct research with aboriginal groups as a partnership
- to consult members of the group who have relevant expertise;
- to involve the group in the design of the project;
- to examine how the research may be shaped to address the needs and concerns of the group;
- to make the best efforts to ensure that the emphasis of the research, and the ways chosen to conduct it, respect the many viewpoints of different segments of the group in question;
- to provide the group with information respecting the following:
  - Protection of the Aboriginal group's cultural estate and other property;
  - The availability of a preliminary report for comment;
  - The potential employment by researchers of members of the community appropriate and without prejudice; Researchers' willingness to cooperate with community institutions;
  - Researchers' willingness to deposit data, working papers and related materials in an agreed-upon repository.
- to acknowledge in the publication of the research results the various viewpoints of the community on the topics researched; and
- to afford the community an opportunity to react and respond to the research findings before the completion of the final report, in the final report or even in all relevant publications.

Other websites dealing with Aboriginal research may be of interest:
Indian and Northern Affairs

Role of the CHA Ethics Committee

Questions relating to research ethics in general, and Tri-Council policies in particular, will continue to raise important, and perhaps contentious issues for historians: discussions about how we define ethical research will be ongoing in the profession. These questions should be worked out with recognition of the 'core values' noted above, and in dialogue with the groups like the Tri-Council, archives and libraries, the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the broader community.

The Ethics Committee of the CHA cannot act as a tribunal, deliberating on all ethical questions in the profession or within our membership. It will, however,

disseminate information on research ethics to our members, stimulate discussion on issues as they arise, and also comment on any initiative that might affect our work as historical researchers. It is our intention to monitor university, government and granting body initiatives with respect to research ethics, and to intervene with advice on issues of importance to historians.

For a list of useful contacts and websites on research ethics in Canada, and abroad, see: www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/english/links/links.cfm