

# Code of ethical principles and policy for research undertaken by researchers in AC-NMW

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## Introduction: ethics and museums research

Traditionally, research in museums has been directed at object-focused enquiry and scholarship. Insofar as this remains the case, objects and specimens require an ethos of care, accessibility and interpretation. Research involving human remains is another key area of museum practice, and this requires particular ethical treatment. We also undertake research that involves living persons as participants ('human subjects research'), in which the ethical issues differ again. This Policy covers all three sources of data: objects and specimens, human remains, and human subjects.

The use of objects and specimens from the collections is governed by the various Collection Management Policies of Amgueddfa-Cymru-National Museum Wales (AC-NMW), which guide our practice (as a Museum accredited by Arts Council England), and by the Museums Association (MA) 'Code of Ethics'<sup>2</sup>. The latter has three categories of ethical principles, each with a number of specific guidelines:

1. Public engagement and public benefit
2. Stewardship of collections
3. Individual and institutional integrity

In addition, research involving human remains is governed by AC-NMW's *Policy on Human Remains* (2016). This states that 'human remains were once part of living people and accordingly we will care for them in a culturally respectful manner'. This policy is governed by the Human Tissue Act (2004<sup>3</sup>); it also reflects the guidelines contained in the document *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*, published by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS: 2005). The ethical principles outlined in that document are:

- 1 Non-maleficence – *doing no harm*
- 2 Respect for diversity of belief – *respect for diverse religious, spiritual and cultural beliefs and attitudes to remains; tolerance*
- 3 Respect for the value of science – *respect for the scientific value of human remains and for the benefits that scientific inquiry may produce for humanity*
- 4 Solidarity – *furthering humanity through co-operation and consensus in relation to human remains*
- 5 Beneficence – *doing good, providing benefits to individuals, communities or the public in general*

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<sup>1</sup> This document is based on guidelines already published by RCUK, UK Universities, including Cardiff University, by the Museums Association, and Research Policies published by other museums, such as the British Museum and the V&A.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.museumsassociation.org/download?id=1155827> (accessed 18/07/2017)

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.hta.gov.uk/policies/human-tissue-act-2004> (accessed 02/08/2017)

## The need for a comprehensive ethics policy across teams, departments, subject specialisms and disciplines

Our research will increasingly involve human subjects research, in addition to objects and human remains. This is because, as we seek to become more democratic and socially inclusive, our research must enable the participation of a broader and more diverse range of individuals and groups. This implies a need to pursue social research that investigates the relationship between collections, exhibitions, museum publics and the wider society – including social groups who do not visit and/or whose heritage is often marginalised in collections. This places responsibility on all engaged in museum research to ensure that we treat all research participants with the highest ethical standards.

The RCUK Policy and Guidelines on Governance of Good Research Conduct (updated 1 April 2017<sup>4</sup>) sets out standards of ethical research conduct for all researchers in institutions in receipt of, or eligible to apply for Research Council funding. These state that:

‘All are expected to observe the highest standards of integrity, honesty and professionalism and to embed good practice in every aspect of their work. This includes the interpretation and presentation of research results and contributions to the peer review process and the training of new researchers, staff and students as well as the conduct of the research itself. That is, individual actions must comply with the principles of honesty, openness, transparency and research rigour.’

It is a requirement that the AC-NMW has a Code of Ethical Principles and Practice in place to be eligible to apply for funding from UK Research Councils and other bodies.

At AC-NMW, the Director of Collections and Research, the Head of Research and the Research Board are responsible for ensuring good research practice within the Museum, and for putting appropriate mechanisms in place for dealing with allegations of research misconduct. In addition the Research Advisory Committee provides overview of our ethical policy and principles. All individual researchers are required to ensure that they work in accordance with the principles and procedures set out in this document, and to be familiar with the established values and principles shared by the international museum community, including the MA and the International Council of Museums (ICOM<sup>5</sup>).

### 1. Definitions

What is research?

The research we do can be divided into four major types:

- a. Object- or collections-focused research, producing new knowledge about the collections (e.g. taxonomy; artefact analysis) and their care, and to inform the identification, selection and acquisition of objects into the museum’s collections and exhibitions
- b. Discipline-based research, producing new tools for museum practice (e.g. chemistry for conservation research; molecular biology for DNA research; archaeology for excavations and finds)
- c. Museological research, producing new knowledge about the museum as an institution (e.g. history of our collections; history and theory of museums and

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<sup>4</sup>See <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/reviews/grc/rcukpolicyguidelinesgovernancegoodresearchconduct-pdf/> (accessed 02/08/17)

<sup>5</sup> See <http://icom.museum/the-vision/code-of-ethics/> (accessed 02/08/2017)

museum practice; sociology of organisations; collections management practices)

- d. Audience, visitor and community-focused research, producing new knowledge about museum publics and how to engage them effectively (e.g. visitor surveys; ethnographies of visitor behaviour; action research; community studies)

What is a researcher in AC-NMW?

A researcher is any person who conducts research within and/or on behalf of AC-NMW, including: as an employee; as an independent contractor or consultant; as a research student; as a visiting scholar or honorary fellow; or as a member of staff on a joint or honorary contract or seconded from another organisation.

What are ethics in research terms?

Ethical research means a commitment to research conduct that respects the integrity of living persons, human remains and objects, and which embeds principles of fairness and integrity (below) in the research culture of the organisation. High ethical research standards are required in order to ensure the quality and reliability of the research outcomes produced, and of decisions made in the light of those outcomes, and in order to ensure that as far as practically possible any risk of harm or disrespect to living or dead persons and objects is avoided.

## **2. What constitutes ethical research practice?**

The 'Nolan Principles' form the basis of the ethical standards expected of anyone who works as a public office holder. They are:

Selflessness; Integrity; Objectivity; Accountability; Openness; Honesty; Leadership

AC-NMW researchers should adhere to these principles in all aspects of their research. In particular they should:

1. Demonstrate moral integrity, transparency and professionalism in the course of their research;
2. Strive for intellectual integrity, including factual accuracy; distinguishing clearly between evidence and deduction; dispelling prejudice and indicating the role played by personal opinion; maintaining editorial integrity; keeping accurate records.
3. Observe fairness and equity, by recognising the diversity of the communities we serve, and respecting ethnic, religious, social or other identities, sensitivities, traditions and power-imbalances
4. Avoid, and/or declare, conflicts of interest
5. Ensure that research participants' active and informed consent is obtained and recorded; and that personal data are treated with high standards of confidentiality, in order to protect participants' anonymity, where appropriate.

Records should be kept that document the process of obtaining active informed consent

6. Ensure the safety and well-being of those associated with the research (researchers and participants) and avoid the possibility of harm
7. Treat people as partners in research, not as objects of research, and to develop means of encouraging a wider diversity of people to research our collections<sup>6</sup>
8. Be accountable to society and 'the public', the relevant professional bodies, the Museum, the staff and students involved and, in particular, to the sponsor that is funding the research
9. Be open to scrutiny, peer-review and debate
10. Clarify at the outset of the research project who are the parties that can own, access and use, where relevant:
  - The results/findings/interpretation of the research
  - Primary data generated in the course of the project, including survey data, interviews, fieldnotes, transcripts, video or audio recordings and images, and other primary sources such as specimens, objects, documents, photographs, artworks, etc.
  - Equipment paid for by funders/sponsors

Good research practice should also include:

- Securing and storing primary data appropriately, and in keeping with current legislation (e.g. Data Protection Act, 1998<sup>7</sup>): all data stored electronically should be securely and regularly backed-up to the Museum's centrally-maintained secure server, and preserved for a minimum of ten years
- Maintaining accurate records of all research activities
- Documenting and disseminating results clearly, promptly and accurately, and in accordance with the UK's commitment to an open access policy for publicly-funded research<sup>8</sup>
- Attributing and acknowledging the contributions of others

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<sup>6</sup> See Museums Association (2008). *Code of Ethics for Museums: Ethical Principles for all who Work for or Govern Museums in the UK*. London: Museums Association.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/29/contents> (accessed 02/08/17)

<sup>8</sup> Different funders require different levels of open access. For RCUK see <http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/research/openaccess/policy/>  
For Leverhulme see <https://www.leverhulme.ac.uk/funding/open-access-publishing>

- Co-operating with other researchers and inviting other experts into the research process where appropriate
- Taking special account of the needs of less experienced researchers

### 3. Misconduct in research

Researchers are expected to understand that the following constitute misconduct and that penalties will be incurred in accordance with Museum disciplinary procedures and ethical guidelines:

- Plagiarism, deception, piracy of others' ideas without due acknowledgement, or the fabrication or falsification of results, including omission from analysis and publication of inconvenient data. These are regarded as serious disciplinary offences
- Conflicts of interest that remain undisclosed (these must be disclosed along with any new research proposal to the Research Board, who will decide which action to recommend to the Museum's Senior Management Team. Such conflicts may include legal, ethical, moral, financial, personal, academic or of another nature)<sup>9</sup>

Researchers are encouraged to report cases of suspected misconduct to the Head of Research, and to do so in a responsible and appropriate manner. All reports will be treated in strict confidence, in accordance with the Museum's policy on 'whistle-blowing'. General guidance (for researchers at all levels) on avoidance of plagiarism and academic dishonesty is available from the Museum's Head of Research.

## Procedures for ethical review

The Museum's Research Board will act as the Museum's Research Ethics Committee.

All new research projects must be submitted to the Research Board for approval using the established procedures (i.e. the Research Proposal Form). The latter will include a question about the types of data that the research project will use and/or generate, and a traffic light system will apply, as follows:

1. Green light: no human remains or living persons (other than the researcher(s)) will be included in the research. No further action is required, but the researcher should ensure that s/he follows the Museum's *Collection Management Policies* (approved by Board of Trustees December 2016), and *Procedures for Access and Use of Collections and Collections Information* (23/03/2017). The aim is to avoid possible harm to collections. The form *Application for Samples for Analysis* should be completed where relevant.
2. Amber light: human remains, but no living persons, will be included in the research. In this case, the Museum *Policy on Human Remains* will apply, together with the

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<sup>9</sup> Areas of potential conflict might include:

- researchers possessing an existing or potential financial interest in the research outcomes
- researchers deriving private benefit, or benefits to private practice, which are significantly dependent upon the research outcomes
- researchers deriving professional or personal gain from the research over and above what would be deemed usual for research

document *Access and Use of Collections*. In addition, the Human Tissue Act 2004 will apply. The applicant must fill out the Research Ethics Approval Form [Section F](#) and give details on the Form as to how these principles will be applied during the course of the research. The (Head of Collections Management?) will approve all Amber submissions.

3. Red light: living persons are to be included in the research as participants. This raises the potential for ethical concerns relating to consent and to the collection of personal data, and so will require approval from the Research Board. The applicant must complete the Research Ethics Approval Form, to be submitted to the Research Board alongside the Project Proposal Form. Approval from the Research Board must be obtained for Red level research before embarking on the collecting/generating of any primary data.

#### References

Bounia, A. (2014). "Codes of Ethics and Museum Research." Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies **12**(1): p.Art. 5.