

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Codes of Ethics and Museum Research

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This paper aims to focus on museum codes of ethics and discuss their provisions on museum research. Museum research is an important part of museum work; it is an ethical responsibility of museum professionals to perform this work for society and to encourage this undertaking in their institutions by other stakeholders. But how do codes of ethics in their current form encourage that? Instead of promoting a contemporary idea of research – multi-faceted, complex, open to the participation of many different interested parties, such as different professionals and communities of knowledge – they seem to understand research as a rather single-faceted phenomenon, object-oriented and collections-based. If codes of ethics are the epitome of museum professionalism and museum values, then these ethics should be embodied in new provisions for museum research. Notions like social inclusion, public accountability, and transparency, are central in museum research, and should be included in all codes of ethics as well, reflecting the efforts museums make to embody democratic ideals and share both research and writing of history with their audience, thus creating communities of knowledge. This paper aims to contribute to the debate on museum codes of ethics and to provide some ideas for future revisions.

**Keywords:** museum ethics; museum research; inclusivity; accountability; transparency

### Introduction

Codes of ethics, guidelines and codes of practice have been used by the museum profession since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to organize and regulate best practice. The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) was the first to publish a professional code in 1925; since then a large number of similar codifications have been made available for the museum professional by national and international professional bodies, regional authorities or individual museums.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike ethics in general and ethical principles in particular, with their claims to universality and stability (Marstine 2011b: 6), museum codes of ethics refer to the practice of employing ethical principles to everyday museum work and they are regularly renewed and revised. Naturally, the pursuit of excellence and responsible citizenship are at the heart of every attempt of this sort. Whereas law serves as a minimum standard of social behavior, applied ethics in the form of codes describe and define correct actions for people working in specific fields and under specific circumstances.

But applied ethics, and museum ethics in particular, are more than a technical set of guidelines. Museums have a moral agency (Marstine 2011b: 7). They exist in a continuous dialogue with society and are complex institutions.

Current research and publications in museum ethics (Marstine 2011a; Marstine et al 2011) recognize this multiplicity and complexity and encourage a more elaborate understanding of the institution and its social role. Museum codes of ethics reflect the values of the institution, but also the social contexts as well as the standards, values, norms and philosophies that determine how museums operate in accordance with their own values and those of the society to which they belong.

A museum code usually addresses two aspects of the museum profession: firstly, it aims at the internal affairs of the museum community and intends to bring a sense of self worth to those in the field by emphasizing the conceptual unity of the profession. Secondly, museum ethics are directed externally and defines the acceptable conduct and the responsibility of those working in museums towards the society they serve (Edson 1997: 10). Museum codes are enforceable,<sup>2</sup> although they are not legal documents: they function through peer pressure; loss of accreditation and banning from the museum association are two typical penalties, whereas professional isolation may bring embarrassment and shame at a more personal level.

As with all codifications, museum codes are themselves debated within the professional community. Their use, interpretation, and function, their relation to different understandings of ethics (such as the recently introduced 'discourse ethics'<sup>3</sup>), the differences between codes of ethics and codes of conduct (Nicholson and Williams 2002) are among the issues under discussion. This paper will not elaborate on any of these issues; nevertheless, it takes the

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stance that museum codes of ethics are very important documents. The universal principles that define museum ethics (selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, leadership) acquire a concrete shape and form as codes of ethics, i.e. codified lists of notions that help museum professionals position themselves towards ethical dilemmas. They are useful because they help make abstract ideas (like those presented above) more tangible; they reflect current practice; they are helpful for introducing new professionals to the profession; they can form benchmarks of ethical practice and policy. In the words of Marstine (2011b: 16)

Ethics codes do not resolve ethics issues but can promote an ethics of social change when seen as part of a matrix of other mechanisms, from mission statements to vision statements to strategic plans, invested in the moral agency of museums and which are routinely interrogated and re-imagined.

Codes of conduct, on the other hand, are more practical guidelines referring to specific aspects of museum work (Nicholson and Williams 2002). They are usually detailed, they attempt to be as comprehensive as possible and they rely on current developments of the profession. But the existence of a code of conduct does not erase the need for updating or introducing new ideas in a code of ethics. The ideas of a code of ethics reflect the deep beliefs of a profession, the norm; it is not enough to provide a code of conduct – the core beliefs have to be present in a code of ethics.

Within this wider framework, this paper aims to focus on museum codes of ethics and discuss their provisions on museum research. I will argue that the most widely acceptable of those codes (like those of AAM or ICOM, the International Council of Museums) do express a rather antiquated idea of museum research; they often provide merely general suggestions and encourage museums to write their own codes of good practice / codes of conduct on specific issues. Even in the cases that the code of ethics has been renewed recently and is more up to date in terms of what museum research entails (such as in the case of the Museums Association in the UK), the provisions regarding research are still too general and abstract and only partially reflect current understandings and values. Museums that are particularly active in research (such as the V&A and the British Museum) have created their own codes of good research practice, mainly in order to satisfy the requirements of financial bodies, such as the UK Research Councils. But what does this mean for the museum professionals and their responsibilities? Museum research is an important part of museum work; it is an ethical responsibility of museum professionals to perform this work for society and to encourage this undertaking in their institutions by other stakeholders. But how do codes of ethics in their current form encourage that? Instead of promoting a contemporary idea of research – multi-faceted, complex, open to the participation of many different interested parties, such as

different professionals and communities of knowledge – they promote research as a rather single-faceted phenomenon, object-oriented and collections-based. If codes of ethics are the epitome of museum professionalism and museum values, then these ethics should be embodied in new provisions for museum research. Notions like social inclusion, public accountability, and transparency, are central in museum research, and should be included in all codes of ethics as well, reflecting the efforts museums make to embody democratic ideals and share both research and the writing of history with their audience, advocating a wide-ranging understanding of knowledge, and creating communities of knowledge.

This paper thus aims to contribute to the debate on museum codes of ethics and to provide some ideas for future revisions. In order for museum codes of ethics to be effective, they have to, as already suggested, be constantly debated, revised, and distributed. Museum codes do need to encourage a new perspective on museum research and to focus more on the institutional responsibilities towards society in its entirety (Marstine 2011b; Besterman 2009).

### Museum Research

Research has always been considered an important responsibility of the museum professional. Traditionally, it is thought of as an 'inalienable aspect of curation' (Anderson 2007: 12), even though curators are not the only museum professionals privileged with this right. Appadurai suggests that research 'may be defined as the systematic pursuit of the not yet known' (2001: 10); or, in other words 'research is understood to involve original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding' (V & A, n.d.). Desvallées and Mairesse (2010: 73) define museum research as 'intellectual activities and works aimed at discovery, invention and the advancement of new knowledge connected with the museum collections, or the activities it [the museum] carries out'.

It is true that the importance of research for museums, its exact content and scope, have been disputed and debated during the last few years.<sup>4</sup> Under the pressures of the financial constraints that museums are going through, but also due to the prioritization of people rather than objects,<sup>5</sup> traditional curatorial research started being considered elitist and of secondary importance. Emphasis has been rapidly shifting towards visitor and marketing research, whereas questions such as 'for whom are we doing research?' and 'why is it important?' have been gaining attention. The re-evaluation of the museum's role and the subsequent change of definition of the museum, that took place internationally from 2000 onwards, resulted in a different understanding of research as well. This change is illustrated by ICOM's French definition of the museum, where the term '*étudier*' in the previous definition, reserved mainly for academic research, was replaced by the term '*fait des recherches*', which suggests a broader and more descriptive understanding of museum research (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010).

There have been many attempts to distinguish among different categories of research. Davallon, in 1995, distinguished four categories: the first is the one based on the museum's collections and relies heavily on the disciplines connected to the content of the museum. The second involves sciences and disciplines (such as physics, chemistry, communication, and media studies) pursued in order to develop tools for museum practice. The third type of research aims to stimulate thought about the museum as an institution and takes place at a more theoretical and philosophical, or museological level. The fourth type is also museological, in the sense that it addresses the analysis of the institution through communication and heritage studies; in this sense, visitor studies and evaluation are included in this category.

In a similar light, different museums around the world have adopted this multi-faceted, interdisciplinary understanding of research. The Deutsches Museum in Munich, for instance, has developed a research programme divided in four foci, two of them oriented towards academia (collections-based and object-oriented research; historical innovation research) and two towards the Museum (science, technology and the public; museological research) (Trischler 2007: 60–1).

The Victoria and Albert Museum in the UK, on the other hand, favours a different approach. It describes research as falling within the following categories (which are also used by academic institutions and other museums, like the British Museum):<sup>6</sup> scholarship, pure research, strategic research, applied research and action research. It defines these categories further when it comes to the museum, as follows:

Within the museum setting some of the ... work takes place in the context of research informing the identification, selection and acquisition of objects into the museum's collections and exhibitions. Research may also focus on collections, or audiences, or both. Audience research may address (for example), the diversity of audience needs and behaviour, the effectiveness of exhibits, programmes and other public provisions and issues of cultural policy. Research also plays an active part in the conservation, presentation and interpretation of objects in the galleries and is essential in providing appropriate levels of documentation (V&A 2013).

Is this multi-disciplinary, complex understanding of research taken into account by the codes of ethics of the museum profession? Does understanding of museum work (as reflected through the codes of ethics) include research as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, where curatorial expertise goes hand in hand with expertise coming from other stakeholders, including the public? It is to these questions that we will now turn our attention. We will briefly discuss the provisions made in four codes of ethics introduced by three major national and one trans-national professional bodies: the AAM, the Australian Association of Museums (Museums Australia)

and the Museums Association (MA) in the UK at a national level, and ICOM at an international level. These bodies were selected because among themselves they cover a very large number of museum professionals around the globe, while they influence museum practice beyond the borders of their respective national territories.

### Codes of Ethics and Research

The UNESCO-affiliated ICOM adopted its *Code of Professional Ethics* at the 15<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Buenos Aires in 1986.<sup>7</sup> After minor revision, the code was re-adopted in 2001 as the *Code of Ethics for Museums*. It was revised in 2004 and again in 2006 and since then it has been translated in to more than 36 languages.<sup>8</sup> Every individual and organization joining ICOM internationally agrees to respect this code. This trans-national application makes the code very important, but also difficult to change, since it has to be able to address different cultural traditions (Besterman 2009: 435).

Research is discussed as part of Section 3 (in the 2006 version), which relies on the premise that '[m]useums hold primary evidence for establishing and furthering knowledge'. The principle behind this claim is that museums are responsible for the care, accessibility and interpretation of collections. Further on, the code suggests that the research undertaken by museum personnel should relate to the museum's mission and objectives and should conform to established legal, ethical, and academic practices (article 3.5). This rather broad provision is further clarified in a series of articles that require museum personnel to: (a) record any destructive analysis done for research purposes (3.6); (b) respect ethnic, religious or other sensitivities involved in the research in human remains and sacred material (3.7); and (c) share expertise with other institutions and with the public (3.9 and 3.10). Finally, the code suggests that research undertaken by museum personnel belongs to the museum (3.8).

The Code of Ethics of the AAM, in the version of 2000 (currently still in practice), takes a more descriptive approach when it comes to research.<sup>9</sup> In the introductory paragraph the collections and / or the objects museums own, borrow, or even fabricate, are considered the basis of research, exhibits and programmes. Research is one of the programmes that museums should undertake in order to serve society along with exhibitions, publications and educational activities. Within this framework, the code argues that museums' programmes 'should be founded on *scholarship* and marked by intellectual integrity'; should be 'accessible and encourage participation of the widest possible audience, consistent with its mission and resources'; should 'respect pluralistic values, traditions and concerns'; and, finally, should 'promote public good' (AAM 2000, my emphasis).

The *Code of Ethics for Art, Science and History Museums* was adopted by Museums Australia in 1999 and is currently under revision.<sup>10</sup> In the present version, research is highlighted as one of the most important museum functions, on which curators (*sic*) should spend as much time as possible, whereas a clear policy made by each museum

should provide guidelines about publication and dissemination (5.1). The research undertaken by museum personnel is, similarly to the provisions made by the other codes, recognized as the property of the museum (5.2).

All three codes we have discussed so far express a rather traditional approach, perhaps reflecting the difficulties of amending a code which requires wider consensus (across national borders in the case of ICOM, across a variety of institutions in the cases of AAM and Museums Australia). Political and governmental contexts might also be relevant to the construction of codes of ethics, and often provide additional restrictions. In any case, all three codes seem to share the idea that collections are at the core of research. Dissemination and publication are mentioned, but the curator seems to be the sole agent of research, in pursuit of scholarship alone, whereas efforts are made towards delineating the borders of ownership between curators and the museum. Perhaps in line with the more liberal / non-interventionist character of heritage legislation in the US and Australia, individual institutions are encouraged to develop their own codes of practice / conduct regarding the particulars of research in their own domain. 'Sharing expertise' seems to be equivalent to or synonymous with 'dissemination', while property issues are highly prominent in all examples. Interest in sensitive issues, such as respect of source communities and recognition of the research work of conservation, are present in the ICOM code, which is the most recent one, but a certain lack of confidence prevents reference to other, more public-oriented provisions, such as the development of knowledge communities around the museum or issues of social inclusion, equal representation, and transparency.

Nicholson and Williams (2002) argue that it is not codes of ethics that should include detailed guidelines about the particulars of professional behaviour, but standards of practice - a different written document that shares some of the characteristics of the codes of ethics, but emphasizes recognized excellence and state-of-the-art developments in all museum fields. This view, which is partly reflected in the commitment of individual institutions to develop their own codes on specific issues, and is encouraged by two of the codes of ethics we have examined so far, does not prevent codes of ethics from including suggestions and parameters displaying a different understanding of museum research.

In this sense, the Museums Association's *Code of Ethics for Museums* (Museums Association 2008; firstly published in 2007, current edition 2008) reflects a different understanding of the museum as an institution, and its provisions are more elaborate. The definition of the museum adopted in 1998 ('Museums enable people to explore collections for inspiration, learning and enjoyment. They are institutions that collect, safeguard and make accessible artifacts and specimens which they hold in trust for society', Museums Association 2013) provided the basis for a template which begins each of the ten sections with the words 'Society can expect museums to ...' (Besterman 2009: 434).

Research has its own central position in both the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> sections. Article 8.3 encourages different categories of research: research to establish provenance, or for interpretation, publication and other appropriate purposes. It is on the latter that section 9 focuses: research should be 'about collections and the subject areas within the museum's expertise' (9.1). Research should be in accordance with appropriate legislation, ethical and academic standards (8.3) and acknowledge intellectual debts not only as a legal obligation (copyright), but also as an ethical one.

Dissemination of research is described in detail: museum professionals should make it public and should publish it promptly (9.3). Furthermore, the code encourages museum personnel to share interpretations and exchange views with the public; in other words, the public is acknowledged as a partner in research, something that has not been acknowledged in any of the previous codes. In this light, the code asks museum professionals to 'develop mechanisms that encourage people to research collections' and 'shape interpretations' (9.4); to 'strive to dispel prejudice and indicate clearly the role played by personal opinion' (9.7). The issue of diversity is explored in more articles as well, since a variety of perspectives on collections are encouraged in order to 'reflect the diversity of the communities served by the museum' (9.5), to 'recognize assumptions' (9.9), to 'reflect differing views' (9.8). Objectivity and integrity are also explicitly encouraged: 'distinguish clearly between evidence and deduction' (9.2), 'strive for editorial integrity' (9.10), and 'keep records accurate' (9.11) are some of the encouragements made by the code. Finally, ownership of research is retained by the institution, as it was in the previous cases (8.3).

The change of research culture upon which this code is based and the change in research culture this code has encouraged is illustrated by the way museums in the UK pursue research: apart from the museums already mentioned (the V&A and the British Museum) that have developed their own codes of research, other institutions aim for participation, inclusion and transparency in their research. For instance, the Imperial War Museum offers five blogs where members of the public can engage in dialogue with curators and researchers and / or follow research projects as they develop in the museum. Another example is the Horniman Museum and Gardens, which launched in 2012 a large-scale, three-year project entitled 'Collections People Stories: Anthropology Reconsidered', which aims to engage researchers and communities in 'investigating new and innovative methods of collections research, engagement and interpretation' (Horniman Museum & Gardens 2013). Participatory research projects and efforts to be inclusive in both the subject matters and the methods employed for research are made by several museums in the UK; and despite the limitations of many of them, the effort is in the right direction.

The MA code, being the last to be revised, is more in tune with the values advocated by museum ethics: accountability, transparency and social responsibility are at the heart of this code, whereas sharing authority with other stakeholders is also a recognized responsibility of



the museum personnel, thus enabling the empowerment of visitors, different social groups and diverse communities. But is this enough?

### New Directions in Museum Research and Museum Ethics

Edson claims that ethics has two important functions: the guidance and protection of museum professionals (1997: 108). Codes of ethics aim to provide guidance when it comes to ethical decision-making, to define expected conduct and training for new members and to describe acceptable practices for the general membership. Furthermore, codes accentuate professional responsibility and reinforce the primary function of the profession, i.e. to serve the public interest. Most importantly though, codes of ethics must be dynamic, living documents: they should develop along with society, its expectations and entailed responsibilities; they should follow both the changes in society that the museum serves and the subsequent changes in the museum.

A primary mission of any code is to communicate established professional practices (Edson 1997: 118); in other words, new understandings or developments need to become part of the code of ethics, if they are to become real, to become benchmarks for the profession. In this sense, and taking into account the fact that museum research has undergone great transformations during the last decade or so, changes that entail a different understanding not only of the work of some professionals but also of the institution as a whole, need to become part of the museum profession. Museum ethics need to take into account a new understanding of museum research. Far from being an enquiry into objects and their provenance, museum research may involve human subjects (as in visitor research), practices, performances, intangible heritage, and much more. Therefore, issues and concerns that arise from such research endeavours should inform the professional codes of ethics in the future.

More specifically, revisions of national or international codes in the future should also include provisions regarding: (a) the responsibilities of museum research towards society (e.g. respect for all communities, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or culture; respect for under-represented social groups and avoidance of marginalization or exclusion; respect for gender differences; addressing concerns of relevant stakeholders and user groups); (b) the adoption of appropriate tools and standards to cover the different categories of museum research and their needs (e.g. selection of appropriate research methods, appointment of informed professional experts, avoidance of unwarranted material gain or loss, factual accuracy, reflection on the consequences of research engagement for all participants and so on); (c) the responsibilities towards human participants in research (such as respect of voluntary participation, participation from an informed position, confidentiality and anonymity respect, protection from undue intrusion, harm or distress).

Codes of ethics are not just guidelines; they are the codification of professional wisdom and a source of

inspiration for new generations of museum professionals; they should 'inspire ethical thought ... that encourages honesty, fairness, respect, excellence and accountability' (Andrei and Genoways 1997: 8). In this sense, they should be more inclusive, recognize the changing role of museums and museum work, provide new ways for people to think about their work and for society to think about its institutions and appreciate them. Codes of conduct may provide practical guidelines. The museum profession needs more than that: it needs increasing awareness, a source of inspiration, and perpetual encouragement towards formulating a new role for themselves and their museums. Continuous effort on behalf of both individuals and museums is therefore essential in order to revise museum codes of ethics and endorse a renewed perspective on the profession and on the institution.

Marstine (2011b) suggests that there are three theoretical stances that (should) inform current work in museum ethics: social inclusion, radical transparency and shared guardianship. Research is part of all three of them and all three of them need research in order to take place; inclusion is not limited to visiting or representation, but also refers to the opening up to new agendas, new research methodologies, new research questions and agents. Transparency refers equally to decisions made on administration, communication, and interpretation, no less than to decisions regarding knowledge creation. Finally, shared guardianship means equal opportunities for all stakeholders to gain and create new knowledge from and about the museum. These values should become part of the museum codes of ethics. We are part of an intriguing and challenging period for the museum world and ethics is at the centre of it, as it has always been.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For the history of codes of ethics see Besterman 2009; Hein 2000: 93–98; Boyd 1991; and Macdonald 1991. For a list of codes of ethics by various organizations see Nicholson and Williams 2002.
- <sup>2</sup> The parameter of enforceability of museum codes of ethics is discussed in Andrei and Genoways 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> The term has been introduced by Chelius Stark; the basic notion behind it can be summarized as follows: '... the interests of those actually affected by the decision are morally relevant and that moral rightness depends on the real consensus of participants in the discussions' (2011: 34).
- <sup>4</sup> For many different perspectives on museum research and its role in museums today see Cavalli-Björkman and Lindqvist 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> This transition has been extensively discussed in museum literature since the 1990s: see, for instance, Hooper-Greenhill 1994; we will not discuss this transition in this paper, but rather what it means for museum codes of ethics.
- <sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the *British Museum Code of Good Research Practice* (2007); it is explicitly mentioned that this code has been written so that the British Museum is eligible for funding from the UK Research Councils.

<sup>7</sup> About the historical development of the ICOM code, see Marin 2012. In 2013, ICOM introduced one more Code of Ethics, this one referring to museums of natural history. Although research is mentioned in several sections of the code, there is no section or article specifically addressing research. Nevertheless, the Position Statement of this code explicitly states that: 'The multifaceted purpose of natural history museums is to... [c]onduct research and interpret the results' (ICOM 2013: V).

<sup>8</sup> For instance the Hellenic Committee of ICOM translated the code in to Greek in 2009. Other translations are available (ICOM 2006).

<sup>9</sup> About the difficulties of forming a museum code of ethics, see Macdonald 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that the website informs the visitor that the new code will be available at the beginning of 2011, the revised code is still in preparation in December 2013.

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