At the recent annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, a colleague stated that anthropology was leaps and bounds ahead of other social sciences in thinking about the ethical dimensions of our research with those we study—our participants: understanding the nuances and perhaps the impossibilities of truly informed consent, recognizing the collaborative nature of knowledge production, and thinking proactively about negotiating issues of ownership and dissemination of that knowledge. It is true, I think, that anthropologists have become very adept at these particular conversations, convinced as they are of anthropology’s exceptionality (our specific methodology of ethnography, and the completely unique kind of relationship with human subjects that methodology engenders). Our fraught history with those we study makes these conversations—and our attention to this kind of ethical practice—especially salient, as do current debates about our engagement with the military in specific ways, and longer standing conversations about anthropologists in the marketplace.

We are, as a discipline, consumed with these concerns of the ethical practice of anthropology; while we are able to agree about broad and general ethical principles, it is much more difficult for us to find consensus about what those principles could (should) look like in actual practice. Is it enough, for instance, to say “do no harm” without also explicitly saying “do good”? This question is inevitably followed by the conversations about what harm actually is, and to whom, and who decides, and what “do good” can really mean in a non-paternalistic way. What do we really mean when we talk about transparency, or secrecy, or deception? While social psychology and sociology have long practiced deception research, anthropology struggles with both that term and the validity of that kind of research, a struggle not helped by the fact that
IRBs routinely approve deception research, a difference perhaps between ideas of “ethical.”

What strikes me as especially interesting, frustrating and frankly quite alarming is the absence of any realization of the much wider realm of research ethics, as those of us who work in that area understand that to mean—there seems no recognition that there are ethical dimensions to all aspects of our work, not just the relationship between the social scientist and his or her “subjects” or the relationship between the practitioner and the IRB. Our “work” is not just our anthropological practice, but also our collegial relationships, our teaching and mentoring, and our dialogue with the public. My concerns are especially for the students of anthropology, and for a public which has very little accurate idea—if any—about what anthropology, as a social science, actually is.

Though it seems completely unnecessary to even need to say it (one would think especially for anthropologists), our science happens in a social context, and in increasingly complicated webs of relationships, each of which comes with a range of rights and responsibilities—not just responsibilities to our participants, but also responsibilities to our colleagues, our students, our mentors, and the public (and, just parenthetically, anthropology is particularly inept at having conversations with the public, though we’re trying to get better).

As a member of the Committee on Ethics for the AAA for four years, I know the kind of complaints that have come to the committee for advice and redress, and eight times out of ten, those complaints involve how one anthropologist was treated by another, either in matters of data management/sharing, authorship, or peer review. There are also issues of tenure denied, or promotions not awarded. And, finally, we also frequently receive complaints about how an IRB is or isn’t making sense of an anthropological proposal, and that while the anthropologist is certain he or she has written an ethical proposal, the IRB wants more, or different, constraints—constraints which the anthropologist feels is unreasonable or perhaps even damaging. We need to pay more attention to the differences between ethical practices and compliant practices, and these are conversations that very few seem to know how to have.

A recent appeal to anthropology graduate students to talk more about what seems pressing for them vis-à-vis ethics conversations in the discipline resulted in a dialogue with some very thoughtful and engaged graduate students at Texas A&M University. The students—among them Cory Arcak, Richa Dhanju, Celia Emmelhainz and Catherina LaPorte—shared some of their concerns:
• “How do graduate students address the multiple power dynamics involved in relationships between students, faculty, and administration (ex…sexual/social issues, ownership of research and publication credit)?”
• “A majority of students are unfamiliar with the process of research and publication and who the research ‘belongs’ to and who should/shouldn’t receive credit during presentations and publication especially when the research overlaps with the interests of the advisor and/or committee chair.”
• “There is a lack of an effective, anonymous and safe mechanism to report and/or question when a student’s research has been ‘taken’ by a faculty member and/or another student.”
• “Some students fear social and academic repercussions for reporting inappropriate behavior and feel that as a student they are viewed as a ‘temporary asset,’ therefore the administration will not take their concerns and/or experiences seriously especially when it involves a tenured faculty member.”
• “Some academic advisors do not have the training necessary to guide graduate students through their programs.”
• “Academic advisor does not collaborate with the student in combining/synthesizing the theoretical and practical experience of the student in preparing them for the work force.”

There is a basic failure to understand that we can’t really figure out our relationships with the “other” of so much anthropological work until we understand that ALL our relationships matter. It is too easy for social science disciplines to think of themselves as positioned only in a relationship with their subjects/participants/collaborators; we’ve saved none of our energy or focus on the relationships we’re making with our students and our colleagues.

The internal and inward focusing discussions of anthropologists continue to concern almost exclusively our work with our participants, and of course, this makes sense for a social science discipline. But this is not the entirety of our work, nor a complete picture of the contexts in which we work, and we are enculturating our students poorly—when at all—into the professional contexts in which we practice. This, I think, is the biggest challenge in the social sciences when we talk about research ethics education.