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Trading Safety for Knowledge?

Perspectives on Risks and Wellbeing in Fieldwork

Introduction

Enduring hardship and taking risks related to one's personal safety have long been considered a part of anthropological fieldwork. Often, emotionally challenging and dangerous situations have later been portrayed (and published) as heroic stories, which left out the far-reaching consequences for researchers' physical and mental wellbeing. In the past decade, an increasing number of researchers started writing, speaking and publishing about their own experiences of unsafety and violence during fieldwork and the lasting effects these experiences had on them.

At the 2023 GAA Conference "Umstrittenes Wissen/ Contested Knowledge: Ethnologische Perspektiven", we will discuss the topic of safety in research and its implications for ethnographic fieldwork in a roundtable. The roundtable is based on previous work by the Safer Fieldwork Project, an initiative founded by Kira Kreft, Laura Thurmann, and Tamara Gupper in 2021. The initiative has two main goals: The first one is to raise awareness for possible physical and emotional risks that might occur during all stages of fieldwork.

To achieve this goal, the members of the initiative have conceptualized and held multiple workshops for researchers on how their positionality, the research context, and the chosen methodology can impact safety in the field. What became visible in the exchange with workshop participants is that what is considered an acceptable amount of risk, a safe research context, or an act of violence is often unclear and contested.

The initiative's second main goal is to encourage a more extensive engagement with fieldwork safety within and beyond the limits of social anthropology. To this end, the

roundtable aims at bringing together different perspectives on safety in ethnographic fieldwork in order to critically engage with current practices of generating knowledge.

This blog post introduces different aspects of fieldwork safety and lays out some of the topics the invited speakers bring to the roundtable. First, Christina Bosbach, a PhD candidate at the University of Aberdeen, writes about her experiences of fieldwork on a small island in Scotland during the pandemic. Then, Saskia Jaschek, a PhD candidate at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies, reflects on her fieldwork during a military coup d'état in Sudan. Following this, Artemis Saleh, a PhD candidate at Johann Gutenberg University Mainz, shares her reflections about intersectional positionalities and safety based on multiple research experiences. Finally, Laura Thurmann, a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester, focuses on trust in ethnographic fieldwork drawing from her Master's and PhD research on gendered security practices and violence in ethnographic research.

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Trading Safety for Knowledge? – Photo by Laura Thurmann

Knowing well – Christina Bosbach

In her essay *The difficulty of reality and the difficulty of philosophy*, philosopher Cora Diamond (2003) reflects on experiences that we find impossible to wrap our minds around, sometimes because they are so painful and sometimes because they are astonishing. She argues rather than attempting to appreciate that difficulty of reality, philosophers deflect and "turn it into a philosophical or moral problem apparently in the vicinity" (p. 12). This deflection "makes our own bodies mere facts" (p. 13) – makes a wounded body a mere fact – rather than staying with the experience of inhabiting living bodies. Something is lost in the process and that something is important.

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Given the rich literature in anthropology that emphasizes the importance of embodied, affective and imaginative ways of knowing, one should think that anthropologists are experts in thinking with and from the experience of inhabiting living bodies. We should thus be uniquely qualified to appreciate the difficulty of reality, to add back in that important something. That, however, was not my experience.

I spent my PhD fieldwork on a small island in Scotland during the Covid-19 pandemic, much of it during stages of "lockdown". While this was interspersed with encouraging and comforting moments of sociability and care, I struggled with long periods of time spent isolated in a cold house, unable to leave the island for months. I worried about sick family in another country and grieved the death of a loved one. I was anxious about what Covid would mean for my PhD and limited funding, and I struggled with memories of being unsafe at home that suddenly came back to haunt me. Even though I strongly felt that affective and embodied ways of knowing were important to learn about and appreciate the uncertainty that upended our lives on the island at the time, there were times when I just could not access them. Some days or weeks, I felt numb, unable and scared to engage with my body as a way of thinking and knowing, or to allow myself to sense and feel what was moving me and others at the time. Some days, attention of any kind was elusive.

Many accounts of fieldwork written before the pandemic create the impression that learning and knowing comes at the price of suffering. Jackson (2010, p. 43) argues that understanding something entails suffering, because it changes what you know as well as what you are. That may well be the case for some – and I do not deny that fieldwork can change people in an enriching way – but suffering certainly was not "understanding" for me and many PhD students I spoke to. Rather than being an experience of learning, suffering made me feel stuck, numb and disconnected, unable to engage fully with the world around me, let alone learn anything.

So, what would change if we did fieldwork differently? Talking to other PhD students

about our fieldwork experiences convinced me that each of us has different experiences, skills, capacities and limits of safely inhabiting our living bodies, and I think discovering, acknowledging and working with them should be central to our academic practice. Concern for the safety and wellbeing of researchers – both physically and emotionally – is not "only" a discussion about ethics or a potential limit to our research, ruling out certain research practices and places. If anything, my fieldwork experience suggests to me that wellbeing is ethically as well as methodologically fundamental to our research practice. As Johnson (2016) argues, "[e]thnography means attending carefully to what's around you; it entails presence and attention, and interest above all". That cannot work unless we are able to be present in a safe way rather than shut down, stuck, numb or completely overwhelmed.

Can you imagine what an anthropology would look like that enables us to work in this way? An anthropology that might teach these embodied and affective ways of knowing that are necessary to appreciate "the difficulty of reality" that many of us work on and, when doing so, encourages reflections and discoveries on what that means for people in different bodies with different experiences? An anthropology that sees researchers' wellbeing as central to fieldwork, as enabling research rather than foreclosing possibilities?

"Safety? Nothing here is safe!" Researching street protests during a military coup d'état – Saskia Jaschek

Much has been written about the – often drastic – difference between fieldwork in theory and fieldwork in reality. For me, this difference meant suddenly being caught in a so-called "area of conflict" that I was not prepared for. I initially intended to study the resistant subjectivities within Sudan's December revolution of 2018-19. I had planned to study the emergence of the uprisings by listening to the reconstructive narrations of protestors, activists, and other members of the resistance movement.

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For this kind of research, I prepared as best as I could. When I started my first explorative field trip in October 2021, I was most concerned about being a “good” i.e., critical, queer-feminist, decolonial – and other labels – scholar, conducting fieldwork as collaborative and non-exploitative as possible. Only three weeks after I arrived in Khartoum, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, together with the militia of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), staged a coup d’état against the interim government. They set then-prime minister Abdalla Hamdok under house arrest and dissolved the civilian government.

The resistance movement I had just started working with was instantly revived. Only a few hours after the coup, the streets filled with protestors voicing their rejection of the power takeover. Instead of studying narrative analysis of revolutionary events in hindsight, I could now observe resistant subjects in the making. By accompanying the activists and protestors, I could now study the dynamics of street protests firsthand. Of course, this shift came with many obstacles and challenges. For me, these were mostly related to questions of security.

Yet, in constant exchange with my field participants, I gradually grew into this new context where security suddenly deteriorated rapidly. My field participants had been in the resistance for years and knew their ways. They taught me about their methods of protecting themselves and others. They taught me how to dress, act and move on the way to, at, and on the way home from the protests. They taught me how to recognize members of the security apparatus and how to communicate when possibly being listened to. They taught me when and how to navigate ways through the streets, staying in the shadow in the light of day. They had been doing this for years and were open to sharing their security process with me.

A question that has stuck with me since the beginning of my fieldwork and that I would like to explore collectively in the roundtable regards the Western security dispositif and its demand for “safety”. As a scholar from Germany, I have internalized this security dispositif. I constantly thought about the safety of my participants, the

protection of my data, and the safety of myself. When discussing the issue with my friends and interlocutors, they often reacted sarcastically, pointing out the impossibility of security in their country. As one of them said: “Safety? Nothing here is safe! If I want to be safe, I go out and sell vegetables on the street! Even then, I wouldn’t be safe; they would probably rob me or something”.

The Western notion of safety often seemed incompatible with the circumstances I found on-site. In the West, “safety” revolves around individual freedom and autonomy within the framework of a paternalistic nation-state. As Foucault (2003) shows, it is thus interlinked with governmentality and the biopolitics of crowd management. But in my field, governmentality does not work this way, as there is no paternalistic and providing state. It is state power that dominates through political violence; it is the state that creates omnipresent insecurity and uncertainty and thus makes life precarious for everyone. Individual freedom is a privilege that – if at all – is only granted to a small elite.

But one does not have to go as far as asking for safety. Even securing often became a difficult task. I took security measures; for example, I worked anonymously and took no names or places, even though many of my interlocutors asked me to. I secured my data in various ways and followed my interlocutors’ security instructions.

But what about risk reflection and risk-minimizing action? The Western security dispositif entails a temporality of future anticipation (Wichum 2013, p. 167ff). A possible risk is to be anticipated and prevented. However, the question arises as to the possibility of risk calculation. How to “secure” in a vast, opaque, and uncertain social reality? How to anticipate future risk in the complete uncertainty of the present?

Given these difficulties, how could research possibly be “safe”? How can safety be considered within research without bypassing the participants’ lived experiences and their everyday social realities? How to handle the contradictory demand of

conducting "safe research" in an "unsafe" environment?

On trading safety for trust. Research between risks, trust and a body read as female – Artemis Saleh

In contribution to the roundtable I will draw from my own research experiences and unsafe encounters in supposedly safe research environments since 2015. My research experiences range from different countries, continents, subjects as well as demographics and are all spiked with sexual, physical and mental violence – whether experienced or witnessed.

Likewise, I would like to discuss the trading of safety as a method in terms of building trust in the field as a queer researcher in between queer research partners who are constantly at risk. Conducting research on womxn in Nigerian media industries, gender-based violence was the only common denominator for otherwise very diverse and sometimes contradicting perspectives on womxnhood. Especially queer and trans womxn in Nigerian contexts are criminalized by law. Actively reflecting on and using my positionalities as tools in building research relationships at eye level and trading my safety through exposure communicates equally valuing all lives involved in the research. Being conscious of my positionalities a priori and re-embodying myself as a queer womxn of color researcher, I attempt to counter hegemonic narratives in academic communities and decolonize the epistemologies and methods at work (Hanson and Richards 2017; Crawford et al. 2021).

While being a queer womxn of color working in a queer research field has granted me with my research partners' assumption of a wider knowledge on queerness and thus, established trusting ties within a globally perceived queer community, part of that trust is based on the likewise assumed shared unsafety and experience thereof. This process might be invisible and not perceivable to researchers not sharing certain positionalities. Trust is not only a major factor to be taken into account when planning a research trip from the perspective of the researcher. In relation to the

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experience of unsafety, it can also assist in building ties with research participants.

It is not surprising that this roundtable only consists of participants with bodies read as female. While safety is not solely an issue to be taken into consideration for female researchers, gender-based violence is definitely a factor that affects female researchers, research partners and research participants alike. Those circumstances, especially when communicated openly with partners and participants, can aid in the process of building trust, when found to be a common experience. Common experiences in sometimes otherwise very differing realities can supply relatability between a researcher and the subjects she encounters in the field. The shared experience of broken trust and unsafety can create room for research participants to share knowledge that is assumed to be understood by the researcher due to the shared experience. Those factors and circumstances as well as our positionalities affect the methods and results of research significantly. Whether taken into account or bypassed, they alter the practicability and the value of the knowledge produced beyond measure.

Methods used in anthropology focus heavily on researching very specific groups of people and their contexts. Those specifications, however, often lack the positioning by the researcher in regard to their departure from a very specific group of people. The respective contexts can vary infinitely and should be pointed out by the researcher in relation to the group researched. This can, for example, become visible in the knowledge and use of certain languages, registers, and terminologies. One question researchers can reflect on before initiating relations with research partners is, whether and how they have access to the languages, registers, and terminologies of their approached research partners. Are the respective linguistic skills acquired before or during research? And how does that affect the research as well as the results? Reflecting about and answering those questions can provide substantial insight into the context the research is taking place in. Assessing a researcher's language proficiencies and learning circumstances can be one tool in making the

processes of positioning more practicable. As a queer researcher for example, learning queer terminologies and placing myself on the spectrum has been an integral part of my existence. The queer terminologies encountered in the field are therefore on a spectrum of positionalities that include my own. While researchers who learn queer terminologies primarily in the field could focus, in terms of positionalities, on research through a more contrastive lens of positionalities regarding their own and the ones encountered in the field.

What is our trust based on? Relationships and violence in ethnographic fieldwork – Laura Thurmann

Trust built on shared experiences, mutual compassion, and solidarity can facilitate successful and ethical data collection and at the same time increase safety for researchers and participants. There is broad consensus that trust is a crucial part of most, if not all, ethnographic fieldwork projects and essential to anthropological methodology. Despite this, as my current PhD research shows, building, assessing and re-evaluating trusting relationships during fieldwork and how to do so safely, is rarely part of methodology classes or fieldwork preparation seminars. I am wondering: Why do we learn, or teach our students so little about something that is not only central to our methodology but also poses a risk during fieldwork?

Hanson and Richards (2019) define intimacy as one “fixation” of ethnographic fieldwork. They quote a researcher who aptly states that “[n]o one gets excited about an ethnographer who has awkward, strange relationships with the communities they are trying to work in” (Hanson and Richards 2019, p. 35). Particularly at the beginning of fieldwork, researchers are often confronted with a pressure to engage in close and meaningful relationships with one’s participants. As I have previously shown, such situations can make us particularly vulnerable to “trust-based violence” (Thurmann 2023), which I defined as “all acts in which a trust-relationship is intentionally built or used in order to exercise violence” (2023, p. 84).

During my PhD research on gendered security practices in fieldwork, my participants shared diverse experiences of sexualized violence or harassment in the field. In many of these cases, the perpetrators were trusted contacts such as participants, members of host families, colleagues, or field assistants. Existing literature about sexualized violence in fieldwork echoes this phenomenon (e.g. Moreno 1995; Pandey 2008; Huang 2016; Kloß 2017). This also means that in many cases, the perpetrators are people who might be difficult to avoid and/or are central to the research project. This can make it particularly difficult to navigate the impacts a breach of trust can have on research projects as well as researchers' physical and emotional safety.

Trust relationships can both increase and pose a risk to fieldwork safety. They can make our research more ethical and more enjoyable, or can become a basis for violent acts. Given the ambivalence of trust in ethnographic fieldwork, it is particularly important to assess the relationships we build in the field and to find, learn and teach ways of doing so.

Conclusion

This blog post shows that researcher safety impacts fieldwork, and thus the knowledge we generate in social anthropology. In the first contribution, Christina Bosbach shows that emotional challenges can restrict our ability to conduct research. However, many research fields are shaped by people for whom unsafety is part of their lived experiences and everyday social realities, which directly influences research practices, as Saskia Jaschek shows. Safety considerations are thus not only relevant for researchers' physical and emotional wellbeing, but also shape research results.

Furthermore, diverse positionalities, prior life experiences, individual skills, and fieldwork methodology play a role regarding researchers' experiences of (un)safety during fieldwork. Christina Bosbach suggests that the active engagement with

researcher safety can bring ethnographic insights, thus proposing reflecting on aspects of safety throughout fieldwork as a method. Artemis Saleh's reflections show that consciously trading safety for trust among interlocutors can prove to be a valuable research tool. At the same time, Laura Thurmann's findings demonstrate that trust is not only an essential part of ethnographic methodology, but also a potential risk.

On the basis of our speakers' experiences and reflections on researcher safety, we will discuss the following questions in our roundtable:

What are the limits of ethnographic research if we prioritize the physical and emotional wellbeing of anthropologists over research results? How do risks differ in relation to anthropologists' diverse positionalities and identities, and what implications does this have for the inclusivity and accessibility of our discipline? And finally, how can we help future researchers conduct fieldwork safely?

We aim for the roundtable to provide a platform to discuss these contested and often ambivalent issues. At the same time, we hope to provide new inspiration for further and continuing debates surrounding safety in fieldwork.

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