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Whose Research Ethics?

Some notes between code and conduct



Still image from Circulating Objects – four stories about bocios, © Anna Lisa Ramella, video installation as part of the exhibition Object Biographies, curated by Margareta von Oswald and Verena Rodatus, Humboldt Lab Dahlem 2015.

Questions inherent to debates on contested knowledges often circle around authorship, directionality of discourses, and how to make heard a polyphony of voices. Such questions have perplexed the discipline of anthropology for some time: since at least the late 1970s' *writing culture debate*, but if we look even further, we find experiments in subdisciplines such as visual anthropology. Jean Rouch's ethno-fiction, for example, can be read as such an example in which authorship was markedly diluted by participatory approaches and improvisation.

However polyphonous and inclusive research methods may be, a second critical question with which anthropology is concerned is whether these experiments can

indeed ever be evaluated as “ethically sound”.

With anthropology being a discipline that has increasingly been moving to the centre of public debates – not least due to the restitution debates that have shaken ethnological collections in Europe and beyond – its ethical implications have been debated in the same breath. The question then, namely, becomes: Is anthropological research and its main method of fieldwork even ethically possible? A follow-up question that is probably less debated than it should be, and which our colleagues Eveline Dürr and Erdmute Alber have recently accentuated in a discussion on ethics within our association, is: Whose ethics are we even talking about?

Ethics, Dürr and Alber questioned, have long been understood as a sort of responsibility felt (at best) and discussed by the researcher with her peers with the main aim of figuring out the most ethically sound way of doing fieldwork. Ethical pitfalls encountered while in the field are, once “back from the field”, then discussed again among the same peers to get feedback for future fieldwork. A learning process, at least.

This is not just problematic because of the underlying assumption of a spatially and temporally limited anthropological field, upholding the long collapsed dichotomy between “here” and “there”.

It also situates such debates and reflections within an intellectual context surrounding the researcher’s “here”, while keeping these discussions detached from “the field”, or an apparent “there”. Most anthropologists would probably agree that ethics is neither to be understood as a code of conduct that will save us all from empirical failure, nor a codeless conduct, a mere “Herzensangelegenheit”, which each researcher may interpret at their own liking. In what follows, I present some ideas and reflections to navigate the tension between these two extremes – formalisation and responsibility – and seek to sketch out what this might mean for our discipline going forward.

Ethics as situative practice

One major concern in the setting of "ethical standards" is that there is no real global benchmark for what is or what is not ethical. Furthermore, what is deemed ethical or unethical can change over time. There is, to some extent, fluctuation in the definition of the ethical; an ethics is always subject to discussion.

But this malleability does not only hold true on a global scale. Should we look into our own research practices, we might well find that the position we once took, and the questions we once asked, have changed during the trajectory of our research as ethnographers. My own trajectory and its distinct research fields is a clear example of this.

The first anthropological research project I carried out was part of my M.A. degree in Transcultural Studies in Bremen. I pursued a multimodal project whose main output was an interactive website on the (im)mobile lives of railroaders in Mali along the tracks of the dilapidated Dakar-Niger railway line.[1] One of the ethical issues I was much concerned with was my own positionality in the field in relation to that of my research participants. Though hardly a novel issue for anthropologists (even budding ones), my concerns over positionality had to do mostly with my use of the camera in the field. I found myself using it to figure out methodologically how I could include my participants and their perspective in the image production while also making my own perspective transparent. After my fieldwork, I developed an interactive website with the intention of adding the perspective of the viewer/user by giving them the opportunity to create one's own path via the research materials. This was an attempt at radically de-hierarchising ethnographic research dynamics while at the same time re-enacting the course of a fieldwork experience, in which serendipity and interest-led enquiry wittingly (or otherwise) influence processes of knowledge production.[2]

Maintaining a research focus on mobility and mobile actors, I then did my doctoral training in media ethnography at the University of Siegen's DFG-funded research

training group Locating Media with a project on the mobile lives of touring musicians. Here, I developed a rhythm concept that takes mobilization and immobilization (rather than mobility and immobility) as practices with varying intensities, positioning them as situatively produced by both, movement and stasis. Using audiovisual methods and digital ethnography, the project resulted in both a book[3] and a two-channel video installation.[4] However, in this research project the questions of ethics took a markedly different track. Being in a context of intense exposure to cameras and public media, my ethical position was rather more actively challenged than it was during my fieldwork in Mali. In the context of international music performances and public presentation, I was demanded to position myself much more prominently (though perhaps less as an ethnographer and more as an extension of the bands). The international rock musicians I worked with were eager to be filmed by my camera, as it promised to create more exposure and visibility for them on social media and beyond. As an ethnographer on tour, I was at the very low end of the labour hierarchy. I was compelled to negotiate my role in this mobile endeavour, fearing at times being asked to step off the touring van for not contributing enough valuable work. From an ethical standpoint, I was mostly concerned with finding a way to pay tribute to this mobile environment that so strongly influenced my own well-being. This meant distancing myself from my own experiences in order to make sense of the intense atmosphere and stark boundary-setting of my research partners.

In my current project at the University of Cologne, entitled “Testing future – cross-scalar linkages as coping strategies for socioeconomic exclusion”, once again, quite different ethical questions are at stake. This project is concerned with how migrants imagine infrastructure and practice their future. The ethnography was carried out in the Rift Valley along the shores of Lake Victoria in western Kenya. It follows migrants’ diverse work arrangements, such as wage labour in international flower farms, tourism, farming and fishing. Simultaneously, with their wage labour or seemingly prioritised work, migrants most often engage in what I’ve come to call

'lateral work practices', which are not to be seen as secondary 'hustles' but are rather part and parcel of the future-making practice altogether. In 2020, my PI Martin Zillinger and I were in the village of Naivasha filming with some fishermen when the pandemic broke out. We were on our way to meet some very old fishermen at Lake Victoria when we took the difficult but sound decision to cancel our fieldwork, not least because of ethical concerns related to having just arrived from Europe and potentially bringing a virus to some very remote villages (at that point, publicly available Covid tests were still a long time off). When the airports were threatened with closure, we left Nairobi on one of the last flights, which brought about reflections about our privilege of being able to leave as soon as things got tricky. We reflected on our decision and our experiments with the remote fieldwork that followed in a post on "pandemic audio diaries".[5]

One conversation I frequently had with colleagues in those days was about whether it was "more ethical" to stay or to leave. While this question might lack a clear answer, I now see that an ethics, while at times about differentiating right or wrong, must also be a continuous reflection, one that is processual in nature, that cannot and should not ultimately be looking for concrete answers. Rather, it might be described as a positioning with regards to the changing circumstances of fieldwork, to the shifting dynamics of how (or where) we are being in the world. The described positionality of the researcher – a positionality that can change over time and from context to context – is certainly one aspect of ethics anthropologists are concerned with. However, in engaging with the intricacies of research funding schemes, it may be that careful reflection of one's own positioning in the field or the epiphany that ethics considerations are intrinsically linked to the course of research, might indeed not suffice to convince an ethics board of the "soundness" of one's prospective project. Given that we are finding ourselves increasingly confronted with the need to abide by rigid ethical review boards at the international (e.g. EU), national and institutional level, the need for a disciplinary positioning with regards to ethics grew. In this regard, the Ethics Review working group (the "AK Ethikbegutachtungen") of

the German Anthropological Association (DGSKA, then DGV) took it upon itself to prepare a set of documents to support anthropologists in achieving ethical clearance for their projects. Let me try now to shed some light on their work and the discussions around it.

Ethics as code vs Ethics as conduct

In 2008, Hans Peter Hahn, Annette Hornbacher and Michael Schönhuth as co-speakers of the Ethics Review working group published a statement, the Frankfurt Declaration[6], which had been commissioned by (then) DGV members in a meeting the previous year. This statement lists five points on ethical particularities in anthropology and provides six questions on ethical aspects in ethnographic work, which remain quite open in their scope and avoid ethical prescriptions. This document was complemented in 2019 by five additional papers prepared by the then three members of the working group, Michael Schönhuth, Thomas Kirsch and Anita von Poser. One reason for spearheading the push for guidelines and documents on a specifically *anthropological* ethics was that while demands for ethical clearances of research projects multiplied, anthropologists often found themselves confronted with or evaluated by ethics committees from other disciplines (primarily the medical sciences and psychology), ignorant of the specificities of ethnographic research. Nevertheless, a methodological approach to the anthropological, characterised by extensive long-term fieldwork and the establishment of deep and trusting social relationships, necessitates considerations distinct from psychological or medical "experiments" involving human participants. For us, the protection of individuals from potential harm needs to be approached in a unique manner. However, in anthropological research, what is or might be harmful can happen in a much more veiled way. We might be ultimately unable to foresee the impact our presence may have on a community, or we might be unaware of the shifting positions within a community that our presence results in. Similarly, in digital ethnography, the traces our fieldwork leaves behind might not ever surface to our consciousness. One aspect

of ethical concern is certainly to reflect on such processes in the context of our research, as we may also detect its impact on our findings. Another pressing concern revolves around the fundamental understanding of ethics that underlies such considerations. It is often assumed that ethics is something researchers must be aware of and carry with them into the field. This assumption disregards the disciplinary dynamics that have challenged and redefined the boundaries of the contemporary field, including multi-sited approaches and the emergence of the post-digital realm. Does an ethical understanding that primarily focuses on the researcher's responsibility inadvertently lead to the illusion of a field untouched by the presence of an anthropologist — a field that can be described as separate and distinct? Does it imply a notion that the field can be entered and exited, detached from the researcher's lifeworld? Such understandings place the researcher at the centre of reflection, disregarding alternative approaches grounded in negotiations in the field, including performative, collaborative, and speculative methodologies.

The documents prepared by the Ethics Review working group were meant to address these concerns, particularly those specific to our discipline. These five documents were drafted, thoroughly discussed, revised based on feedback from association members, and ultimately approved through a democratic voting process. The documents encompass ethical guidelines, a risk assessment sheet, a reflection questionnaire, a synopsis aimed at bridging the understanding of ethnographic fieldwork with ethics committees from other disciplines, and finally a confirmation of compliance. Other organisations, such as the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), have also been concerned with the topic and have reacted accordingly by publishing statements valuing the discipline's unique methodology and the consequences for ethical standards (such as in this statement on data governance). Numerous scholars have[7] engaged in publishing writing foregrounding the ethical intricacies of the discipline, stating for example researchers' responsibility for the integrity, preservation and protection of ethnographic materials, while pointing out the always already collaborative nature of fieldwork (e.g

Dilger/Pels/Sleeboom-Faulkner, 2019); or the dilemma of revealing or hiding our identity when, for example, conducting fieldwork in fields that jeopardize the researcher's safety (see Sökefeld, 2022).

Updating ethical considerations after the pandemic

While digital anthropologists have been critical of seeing online and offline socialities as separate for quite some time now, arguing that digital communication has become an unquestionable and transcendent part of our lives, the pandemic compelled even previously reluctant anthropologists to consider the undeniable presence of digital and online methods of fieldwork. Questions of research ethics that had been tackled in the field of digital anthropology then surfaced again, taking a new spin.

As the number of anthropologists turning to digital and online research methods grew on account of the blanket restrictions on international travel, there grew demand for an update of the existing DGSKA papers. In recognition of this need, I was elected to the Ethics Review working group in 2021, tasked with supporting my colleagues in developing new versions that incorporate digital, online, and remote approaches to fieldwork, with a particular emphasis on expanding their implementation. Upon completing these updated versions in January 2023, we gathered feedback from our members and convened a meeting in April 2023 to discuss necessary modifications and additions to the documents. The discussions in said meeting serve as a notable example that provides an overview of some of the ongoing challenges that perplex our academic community.

As alluded to earlier, one of the pressing questions we face is determining the boundary between ethical responsibility and code-like rules. This raises the question: who even are we to make judgments on what is ethical or not?

A valid point raised by our members Dürr and Alber pertains to the existence of local or indigenous ethics guidelines. Both highlighted that when doing research or

accompanying students' research projects on the African continent or the Americas, they do it together with colleagues who do not only have their own thoughts about the procedures and ethical questions, but often also have their own ethical procedures. We have, thus, to deal with multiple ethical orders and should not insist of following our procedure alone.

It prompted a consideration of how such guidelines should fit alongside the ethics guidelines within our discipline. The very development of an ethics guideline within our researcher community suggests that ethics might be the sole responsibility of the individual researcher – rather than something that researchers should become aware of within the local context, engage in discussions on, and consequently adapt their practices accordingly. Given the diverse research contexts in anthropology, which exist across various locations having their own ethical standards, the endeavour to establish overarching guidelines is undoubtedly ambitious; critics of the documents published by the Ethics Review working group have expressed concerns regarding the potential limitations associated with the textualization and formalization of ethical considerations, as well as the perceived rigidity of the written word. This critique primarily revolves around the fear that the act of documenting guidelines or "rules" may in fact serve to hinder the very openness that lies at the core of the ethnographic method.

Members of the Ethics Review working group and others have been keen to find ways to formulate such guidelines that can support the language required of funding applications while also preserving the necessary flexibility for the inventive and evolving methods employed during fieldwork.

Although these two positions—proposing and opposing documenting ethics guidelines— may at first blush seem to be in contrast, I would argue that these are not as contradictory as they might appear. By unravelling the various elements that contribute to these positions, it becomes evident that seemingly opposing stances may in fact share a core common intention.

(Anthropology against) formalization of ethics

While ethics has long been central to anthropology, its bureaucratization, particularly in Germany, is a relatively recent development. Nowadays, when applying for grants from international or national funding institutions, we encounter a litany of documents that demand foresight and reflection regarding particular ethical concerns and also require proof of preventive measures against harm. However, any anthropologist who has done some time in the field knows that we can never fully anticipate what will transpire "there". In our pursuit of openness to the unknown and the invisible, we strive to free ourselves from predictions. Yet, paradoxically, we are often formally compelled to do just the opposite. The seeming futility and redundancy of effort can be immensely frustrating, even while most of us acknowledge the paramount importance of ethics in our work and its significance in our field.

The dichotomy between formalization and fixation, on the one hand, and openness to process and negotiation, on the other, is something familiar to those of us who frequently write grant applications. These applications often require anticipating findings before actually conducting the research. We might call it "future project planning", but we must also admit that this step contains no small amount of imagination – indeed, fictionalization.

During one recent lecture I delivered at the University of Cologne as part of a research ethics lecture series, my colleague Franz Krause posed a tongue-in-cheek question regarding the possibility of simply collectively disregarding formalized ethics altogether through a unified statement from anthropologists or the DGSKA, as the representative body.

This radical solution acquires sympathizers, if only as a dream scenario. The reality is that most national or institutional ethics committees often see their work (and the necessary work of ethics) as being able to speak across sciences and fields, and often

do not seem to want to make exceptions for the specificities of our discipline.

However, there are important positions that question the very nature of formalizing ethics, such as a piece by Martin Sökefeld (*Keep Research Ethics Dirty*! *Current Debates*, 2022): Pointing out the diversity of fields and thereby of necessary ethical considerations, such as differences in terms of positionality and transparency when researching in surveilled fields, for example, Sökefeld argues against the risk in writing down and thereby fixating what we do in our fieldwork.

Also, as he brought forth in our discussion of the new documents, the use of such reflection of ethics is critical when ethics becomes something for just checking boxes. In particular the questionnaires – the reflection and risk assessment sheets – were subject to criticism and opened up the debate for considering alternatives. While they are intended to serve as a frame for guiding peer discussion, ideas arose as to whether the questions should remain unanswered, or reflected upon more thoroughly, such as in a written essay. The primary question that remained was whether answering the form fields in the sheets carries the risk of being seen as a mindless task to be accomplished without further reflection. Or whether a simple list of recommended questions to consider will just be ignored (and put into a folder to collect dust).

Upon close examination, these documents do encourage reflection, dialogue, and imaginative exploration in the face of potential challenging scenarios. They do not explicitly prescribe actions or establish rigid rules to follow. Still, the risk of misinterpretation as prescriptive measures may arise due to their written and formalized nature. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge their specific purpose: to enable us to position ourselves within the unique context of our discipline when confronted with the urgent demand for ethical justifications and clearance from funding institutions. We should recognize that these documents primarily aim to safeguard our work from external judgments shaped by the formalizations of other disciplines, some of which have more standardized and fixed methods.

Ethical considerations prompt us to reflect on the stakes involved in each research project and pose questions rather than provide definitive answers. How do we navigate transparency regarding our role, especially when faced with potential risks related to our own sexual orientation, religion, or political views, for example? How do we present ourselves in contexts where certain practices are illegal, as highlighted by Thomas Hüsken (*Research in dangerous fields*, 2021)? How do we incorporate the preferences of our research partners regarding protection or exposure? How do we handle larger datasets? How do we ensure transparency regarding our role in contexts where our presence tends to go unnoticed?

A way forward? Ethics as collaborative, situative practice of positioning

To embrace ethics as positioning rather than as a rigid set of rules requires us to genuinely acknowledge and consider the perspectives of all that is (and all who are) involved in a research project. As if this weren't already a challenge, effectively incorporating these potentially diverse notions presents its own task and may not be adequately addressed within formalized ethical clearance processes. Anthropology, unlike disciplines with clearly defined boundaries of right and wrong (if those even exist!), allows its practitioners to perceive their research fields as transformative, dynamic, and processual. They have the capacity to engage in negotiations with their research partners regarding the terms of knowledge production. Applying a similar understanding to ethics, as proposed by the Frankfurt Declaration, expressing the open nature of our discipline without rigid constraints, we present a counterposition to advocate for our field.

It is widely agreed upon by anthropologists that ethics should form the foundation of every research project, guiding the planning process from the outset. However, the question of whose ethics we prioritize and base our considerations on should always take precedence. Given the diversity of our fields, there can be no one-size-fits-all solution. I therefore propose viewing research ethics as a situative collaborative practice that is responsive to a specific given context. This approach involves

embracing the potential of collaboration to reach a shared understanding that goes beyond the mere combination of individual perspectives. It also requires us to continually reflect on and negotiate the ethical terms of our collaborations within the framework of the given time, space, and social dynamics.

Footnotes

[1]www.laviedurail.net
[2]https://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/1401
[3]https://www.transcript-verlag.de/978-3-8376-4813-3/mit-bands-auf-tour/
[4]www.vimeo.com/annaramella/rhythms
[5]https://boasblogs.org/witnessingcorona/future-making-on-hold/
[6]https://www.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/DGV_Ethics-Declaration_FINAL_1.11.2016-1.pdf
[7]https://www.easaonline.org/downloads/support/EASA%20statement%20on%20data%20governance.pdf

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