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Composite Collaborations

Stories from a Digital Team Ethnography



Amethyst. Symbolic image, not a composite crystal. Image by Dieter Staab from Pixabay.

Introduction

In this brief blog post, we explore a recurring assumption in anthropology: collaborative research necessarily strives for symmetrical relationships. Although ethnography as an approach has long been defined as inherently

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collaborative (Zenker and Vonderau 2023, 134), more recent anthropologists have increasingly called for a more systematic collaborative approach from project conceptualization through to the writing process (Lassiter 2005). These approaches often emphasize collaborations within a team of ethnographers and with research participants grounded in principles of equity. Crucially, such collaborations are understood not merely as a means to co-produce (academic) knowledge for a shared project goal, but also as engagements that may serve diverse and sometimes divergent purposes beyond the production of knowledge itself.

This commitment to equity in research has also shaped our own work in the digital team ethnography "Hashtag Islam," established in 2020 as part of a collaborative research project by four researchers initially based at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and later at the University of Cologne (Ahmad et al. 2023). An important part of the hybrid ethnography was a shared Instagram-account for conducting research on Muslim everyday life and digital media practices in German-speaking contexts. The thematic Instagram profile (Pfeifer 2021) served for experiments with shared (digital) fieldwork, collective data interpretation, and co-authored multimodal outputs. At times, our research participants became temporary members of our ethnographic team, co-authoring Instagram posts or collaborating on other shared endeavors.

Through this multidimensional collaborative research process, it became clear that an idealized understanding of collaboration often obscures the persistent structural, epistemic, and institutional asymmetries that shape anthropological research in practice. In this piece, we turn our attention to the (digital) team ethnography between two researchers who maintained the Instagram account over the course of one year at the University of Cologne. Rather than framing collaboration as ideally symmetrical, we focus on the negotiation of asymmetries and uneven dynamics that shaped our ways of knowing and working together. Building on work that challenges the myth of the "lone anthropologist" (Gottlieb 1995) and that foregrounds the

complexities of team ethnography (Clerke and Hopwood 2014), we explore how these asymmetries became both a condition of our research and a source for reflections and insights.

Crystallography is a scientific discipline that studies crystalline structures and properties on a mathematical and molecular basis. As symmetry plays a fundamental role in the discipline, it offers a compelling metaphor for thinking about collaboration in ethnographic research. Every crystal structure consists of lattices, which are ordered frameworks arranged in specific ways. When two distinct lattices with different periodic structures are forced into alignment without attending to their fundamental differences, structural strain emerges at the points of contact. Some connections stretch beyond their natural limits; others are compressed into unstable forms (Kittel 2005).

A similar tension can arise in research collaborations when symmetry is assumed and identical roles, expectations, or knowledges are imposed on positions that differ in form, function, or context. Rather than forcing alignment, crystallographers have come to recognize the stability of incommensurate composite crystals: structures in which multiple subsystems with incompatible periodicities coexist in coordinated but distinct ways (van Smaalen 2007). These systems do not rely on perfect symmetry. Instead, they form selective, multidimensional points of connection that preserve the integrity of each component while enabling productive interaction (van Smaalen 2007). Like composite crystals, our collaboration was held together not by uniformity but by negotiated interdependence. Through three scenes, we reflect on the research process, our weekly Zoom meetings, and the collaborative WE ARE NOT CARPETS exhibition project, recognizing conditions of asymmetry that generate some form of stability and insight, allowing for shared understanding and knowing otherwise (Pandian 2019; Shotwell 2011).

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Scene 1: Collaborating on Zoom

As we did not live in the same city, we met in person only irregularly and held weekly Zoom meetings lasting from 30-minutes to an hour to discuss our work.

Simone, the postdoc, usually starts these meetings with small talk, a warm mug of tea in her hand. “How are you?” opens the space gently, a ritualistic phrase that holds room for both real updates and polite deflections. Sometimes the conversation between her and Cihan, the student assistant, stretches into the personal–fatigue from festivities or issues with family, friends, or kids – and sometimes they talk about a book or journalistic article the two find worth sharing. Despite the physical distance, there is an odd rhythm of intimacy. The shared screen becomes their work table. They toggle between the university-run cloud storage folders, text documents, and Instagram drafts, discussing caption tone, hashtags, and the politics of visibility. “Should we use #Zuckerfest [#sugarfestival] as part of the greetings for Eid [a religious festival at the end of Ramadan] or does that collapse too much into the non-religious aspects of the festival?” Simone asks, half thinking aloud. Cihan scrolls through comments and her research on older posts, making suggestions for images that could be used alongside the Eid greetings. They discuss what to include in the posts, rework captions, and mark potential reposts from other accounts.

Their labor is partly ethnographic, partly curatorial, partly affective. Proximity is built in fragments, through direct messages exchanged outside of meetings, shared laughter over awkward reels, and the collective labor of figuring out how to “be” as researchers on Instagram producing content about their work and Muslim everyday life without speaking for others.

And yet there is also distance. Some meetings are quiet or transactional. Simone’s attention drifts when deadlines press and other tasks suddenly become more important; Cihan sometimes postpones a meeting due to a technical issue at her

home or the migraine that continues to plague her. The platform enforces a kind of choreography, waiting for the other to finish speaking, unmuting with caution, and smiling into the screen even when tired. Between them, the silences can be filled with either concentration or exhaustion. It's not always clear which.

Then there are the others: the former team members. Their names still linger in the biographical information included on the "Hashtag Islam" Instagram account, the first publications, and posts related to the account (Ahmad et. al. 2023). Their contributions remain visible in older content strategies, graphic design, unspoken rules related to the account, and in references to earlier discussions. "Maike's master's thesis focused on remembering Hanau [the racist killing of nine people by a far-right terrorist in the city of Hanau in 2020], and she developed a series of posts as part of her work," Simone explains, her voice trailing into something almost melancholic. The ghosts of earlier labor persist, not haunting but inhabiting the margins, unfolding as a social figure "in temporalities where present and past collapse" (Langford 2016, 3).

The meetings usually end with another soft signal: "So, when do we meet next week?" or "I'll update the caption and then send it over." They log off and the shared space dissolves, but a trace remains. Simone sometimes immediately joins another Zoom meeting; Cihan often opens Spotify and returns to coursework but with the last caption draft still open in a browser tab.

While the research scene gestures toward a form of digital closeness, a fragile, rhythmic collaboration between a postdoc and a student assistant, it also points to the persistent asymmetries that shape academic labor, even in settings that give an impression of horizontality. Despite good intentions and affective care, truly symmetrical collaboration is rarely possible. Power asymmetries are embedded in institutional roles (hierarchy and status); differences in compensation, career stages, and access to decision-making; and even in the authority to speak on behalf of the research project or how much one is invested in a project and its goals. As Marilyn

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Strathern (1991) reminds us, the idea of symmetrical relations is often more ideal than real; differences of position, of power, and of responsibility are not problems to be resolved but conditions to be acknowledged and worked with. Dialogical praxis requires a continuous recognition of unequal conditions; collaborative research is not a given but a process shaped by social hierarchies.

In (digital) team ethnography, these dynamics can be further amplified through uneven workloads (who is writing, posting, and engaging regularly), digital visibility, and the fragmentation of shared presence. In the "Hashtag Islam" project, the weekly Zoom meetings served as both a site of coordination and a stage where collaboration was negotiated, stretched, reflected on and occasionally strained across institutional lines and affective investments (see Ahmad et. al. 2023 for earlier reflections at the start of our digital team ethnography). These interactions resemble the interior arrangements and processes within many crystalline formations, in which the structure of collaboration is revealed not as smooth or symmetrical but as composed of differently angled, refracted, and tension-bearing planes. In academic contexts, student assistants typically engage in projects as opportunities for learning, skill acquisition, and exposure to academic work, while researchers are often deeply embedded in long-term agendas involving funding, publication, and career advancement. These structurally distinct roles, refracted through the shared digital space, also reflect unequal levels of academic expertise, making teaching and mentorship an integral part of the collaboration discussed here, unlike many other employment contexts. Just as crystallography maps hidden tensions and complex geometries, digital team ethnography surfaces the layered and sometimes fragile nature of collaborative academic work.

Negotiated Asymmetries in Practice: "WE ARE NOT CARPETS"

The benefits of negotiating fundamental aspects of collaboration, such as

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responsibilities and involvement, can be illustrated through our efforts to organize a museum exhibition that Simone co-curated at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum Cologne. This example shows how asymmetric relationships, when thoughtfully negotiated rather than rigidly structured, can help navigate difficult moments in ways that benefit every person involved.

As the planning, organizing, and funding of the exhibition involved various institutions, including some beyond the university, preparing the exhibition represented an extremely high-stress environment with strict deadlines. Instead of imposing predetermined expectations regarding Cihan's participation, Simone gave her the choice to partake, explicitly making clear that non-participation would be completely acceptable. This initial negotiation of commitment levels established a foundation where participation emerged from genuine interest and will to help rather than obligation.

Cihan chose to participate, fully aware of the stressful environment, which she expected to result in her being assigned mostly "classic internship tasks," such as getting lunch, transporting things from one place to another, and performing other small support activities. However, having already established a work environment founded on mutual understanding, support and care, she trusted Simone's willful intent to create a room with many opportunities to learn. While some of these tasks were indeed assigned to her, Simone and the other people involved consistently showed appreciation for her help, both verbally and also by trying to give her tasks through which she could learn and gain insights into various parts of creating the exhibition. These included, for instance, gathering information, organizing and conducting short interviews, supporting the scenographic department, and recording a voiceover, as the following two scenes show.

Scene 2

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Cihan finds herself stranded in a sea of wool – tangled, knotted, and intertwined strings forming balls, streaming out of bags all around her. Voices speaking in Farsi echo through the room, the words she cannot understand just an abstract background sound while she focuses on the task at hand. Untangling the endless tight knots in thin, frail strings feels tedious yet almost meditative due to its repetitive nature. When she had offered to help on a Saturday with the last preparations before the opening night of the exhibition, she did not expect spending several hours sitting on the floor of the exhibition hall, seemingly aimlessly untangling and rolling up strings of wool. A voice tore her out of her thoughts: “Hey Cihan, everything going well? Could you quickly give us your opinion on this? Shall we hang this up here or there?”

This moment, seemingly mundane, illuminates the negotiated nature of collaborative work relationships. Cihan’s willingness to help on a weekend stemmed not from obligation but rather from a sense of inclusion. From the beginning, Simone, who was not present in the Museum that Saturday due to family obligations, had made an effort to involve her in a variety of tasks. Cihan had been updated on decisions, invited into discussions, and gradually began to also feel involved in the project instead of just assisting with it. Still, the wool task challenged this sense of purpose. The outcome in the situation was vague, yet she continued, driven by a broader commitment to the project and a sense of reciprocity built over time. The unexpected language barrier added another layer of complexity: the team around her spoke almost exclusively in Farsi. At first, she felt slightly out of place, unsure whether she had unknowingly overstepped a boundary. But she soon realized this exclusion was not intentional: it was simply a matter of convenience, as all others present that day shared the language. When they remembered, they translated, switched to English, and tried to involve her. It was not perfect, but it was enough to feel seen.

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Scene 3

Silence. The cinema – a small round space enclosed by heavy, thick curtains – lays like an island in the midst of half-assembled installations, tools, and exhibition pieces. Just days before the opening, the space usually brimmed with the chaos and noise of the last stages of work. Now it lies empty, all work halted to create the short period of silence their task demands: dubbing and recording the weavers' voices in German.

Footsteps echo loudly as Simone and Cihan make their way across the hall towards the small, secluded, curtain-lined space in the back. Neither speaks. An awkward tension moves with them – not discomfort, but the weight of what lies ahead, the gravity of voices waiting to be heard. A loud rip fills the room as Simone draws the curtains shut behind them. Quietly, both take a seat on the wooden platform that lines the sides of the room. Cihan, sitting cross-legged, draws her knees to her chest, fiddling with the arms of the pullover tied around her waist. The silence stretches.

"So…shall we read the texts together again and then decide which ones we want to voice or do you have a preference already?" Grateful for this gentle opening – an invitation rather than an instruction – Cihan nods. They read in silence. The room is dimly illuminated, warm overhead lighting swallowed by the heavy blue curtains. Heavy and blue like the words on the paper: anecdotes and life stories told by the weavers who wove the carpets for the exhibition, translated from Farsi into German. The stories are short, no longer than two paragraphs each, describing various moments from, general conditions in, and thoughts on the lives of the women. While the women, their ages, the regions in which they live, and their life stories are diverse and distinct, all share immense suffering, pain, and injustice. The room, now heavy with the emotional density of the stories, feels saturated: with silence, with empathy, with the presence of the ghosts of the stories. "Well…," Simone quietly says after the long period of silence needed to read and process the words. "…What do you think?" After taking a moment, Cihan replies: "That was tough to read. The

story with cutting off her finger. I don't think I can read that one." "I think I want to read the story of Anne Beik," Simone says. "In a sense, I can relate to her [...] constantly working, stressed, always having to function." Together in the quiet and empty room that is usually filled with people and the noise of busy work, they share an unexpected moment of intimacy. In this moment of shared silence and mutual recognition, the negotiation of roles – student and supervisor, assistant and lead – is momentarily suspended. What emerges instead is a layered, dynamic structure of relation, much like a composite crystal: distinct yet interdependent components coexist within the same form. The intimacy does not erase asymmetry; it makes room for its acknowledgment and calibration. Ghosts, too, are present not as supernatural figures but as the lingering traces of past work and lives woven in the carpets, the stories, and the silence between sentences.

These examples show that in specific situations, the hierarchical structure and other asymmetries at hand sometimes proved to be productive rather than limiting. Despite the intensely stressful environment and the resulting limited supervisory capacity, team members consistently made time to explain things like exhibition pieces and to answer Cihan's questions. Because her involvement in the project was negotiated rather than imposed, learning and working occurred through meaningful task engagement rather than through formal and imposed structures.

This example demonstrates that even in high-stress environments involving multiple institutions, negotiated asymmetry can improve collaborative results. When curating the exhibition, negotiation allowed for including divergent voices (also in a literal sense) and perspectives. This can also be scene in the blog post at hand, the structure of which demonstrates the metaphor of crystallography. When team members mutually consider others' interests and aims while maintaining appreciation for all the different contributions, the resulting structure uses individual strengths to achieve shared goals. Rather than striving for symmetry in structurally hierarchical settings, this approach enhanced the collaborative potential

of unequal relationships. Like the lattices of crystals teach us, independent but coordinated systems can achieve greater stability than rigidly uniform structures.

Concluding Remarks

Our collaboration was held together not by uniformity but by negotiated interdependence. As shown in the research scenes concerning our weekly Zoom meetings and the WE ARE NOT CARPETS exhibition project, it is precisely by recognizing and engaging with structural, personal, and emotional asymmetries that collaborative work can become both stable and generative, offering deeper insights into the possibilities of doing ethnographic research otherwise (Pandian 2019). The image of crystals helped us think through the kind of asymmetrical collaboration we describe in this blog post. Our work did not rely on a seamless merging of identical roles or equal contributions. Instead, it involved navigating differences of position, responsibility, and institutional context through coordinated and, at times, improvised modes of engagement. Through an ongoing process of (re)negotiating aspects such as expectations, project involvement, tasks, responsibilities. feelings, and atmospheres, we aimed to create a work environment that was not only functional but fostered the co-creation of shared understanding, perspectives, and experiences. Rather than relying on fixed principles or roles, our collaboration emphasized the sharing of experiential knowledge, in contrast to the more functional sounding “co-production of knowledge,” which implies measurable results and outputs that can clearly be ascribed to one person or perspective. Instead, the collaboration evolved thorough attentiveness to the dynamics of participation, mutual respect, care, and sensitivity to one another’s needs. As with our working conditions more broadly, the collaborative space was far from static. Team members joined and left at different points, bringing with them varying interests, commitments, and forms of engagement, some of which became visible on our Instagram account. These traces remain, both digitally and affectively, as quiet

reminders of the many contributions that have shaped the project over time. Writing this blog post together became one of the ways we continued this negotiation: a shared attempt to reflect on and make sense of the asymmetries, shifts, and connections that shaped the project. Reflecting on the research scenes both in conversation and in writing emerged as a crucial mode of knowing otherwise, allowing us to hold space for complexity, embodied experiences, and multiple perspectives.

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