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Field of Exceptional Uncertainty.

The Challenges of Early-Career Anthropologists in the Wake of the Corona Pandemic

A position paper by Minh Nguyen (Bielefeld University) and Thomas Stodulka (Freie Universität Berlin) based on discussion at the German Anthropological Association's Autumn Academy Fieldwork Meets Crisis *on 21-23 October 2020, with additional inputs by Julia Nina Baumann (Freie Universität Berlin), Mercedes Figueroa Espejo (Freie Universität Berlin), Ulrike Luttenberger (Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris), and Lena Schick (Philipps-Universität Marburg).*

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Introduction

This position paper provides an update of the current status of life and work among early- career researchers in anthropology in Germany and beyond as the basis to propose institutional measures to support and facilitate the vital work that they are carrying out. The paper arises from the discussion of about 50 anthropology PhD researchers and a small number of post-doctoral researchers at a 2-and-a-half-day workshop in October 2020 convened by a group of anthropologists based at different Germany universities under the auspice of the German Anthropological Association (DGSKA), the Autumn Academy *Fieldwork Meets Crisis*. The modular workshop and its accompanying blog contributions cover a wide range of methodological, conceptual and practical challenges of doing fieldwork for the next generation of anthropologists in the wake of the current pandemic. What emerge

strongly from the discussions are extraordinary challenges that they are facing in their personal and professional lives and a great deal of anxiety that results from multiple layers of uncertainty. This paper draws mostly on the discussions of Module 3 – Research Infrastructures and Emotional Challenges convened by Thomas Stodulka and Minh Nguyen. In bringing these two seeming unrelated issues together, we wish to underscore the ways in which the pandemic is exerting enormous additional strains on early-career anthropologists who are already subjected to the pressures of a precarious labour market and uncertain professional trajectories. The shared experiences and engaged discussion of the participants suggest that all these are taking a heavy toll on mental health, private and emotional lives and their professional motivations.

As in most other disciplines, the work of PhD researchers is at the heart of the anthropology and their professional development is critical to its future prospects. The long and intensive fieldwork they conduct for their dissertations is not easily replicable when people move on to teaching positions that would only allow for much shorter stretches of fieldwork. More than any others, it is their work that carries the discipline forwards. Their challenges, anxieties and sufferings thus need attending to by all involved, and there is an urgent need for clear roadmaps and appropriate institutional responses at different levels. In what follows, we will first lay out the challenges as articulated by the early-career researchers participating in the autumn academy before putting forward recommendations for research institutions, universities, managers and supervisors in accompanying them out of the crisis. The participants are based in institutions of various European countries and beyond, although more of them are from German institutions – while some of the issues are particular to German higher education, most are relevant for the other contexts.

Lives and Work in Hyperuncertainty

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Anthropologists are no strangers to uncertainty. The reliance of anthropology on fieldwork, namely the work of immersing oneself in the social realities and lives of the people we study to observe and gain insights through our interactions with people, means that we have to take the time to let "the field" allow us to enter and reveal itself to us in its own ways. That means we are bound to accept uncertainty as part of our research – things may go wrong, access can be denied, permits not given, conflicts can escalate, wars may break out. The current pandemic, however, exacerbates uncertainty on many levels to the extent that few people could have anticipated, and it is doing so with heavy personal and emotional consequences for many.

Methodological Uncertainty

Compared to other disciplines that also rely on fieldwork such as geography or sociology, anthropological fieldwork tends to last much longer because of the disciplinary emphasis on building trust, cultivating relationships and carrying out sustained participant observation of

the social realities we study. Early-career anthropologists are often required to spend at least a year on the fieldwork component of their research, which is at the heart of the standard PhD or post-doctoral timeline in the discipline. Almost all of the participants at the workshop had to cancel their planned field trip or disrupt the fieldwork they were doing when the pandemic started to be in full swing earlier this year. Those doing fieldwork close to where they live also had to discontinue personal contacts and meetings out of social distancing concerns; meeting in public spaces are no longer possible. As funding or study periods get shorter or are running out, it is entirely unclear when or whether they could ever carry out the kind of fieldwork that they were planning to do as required, whether the online work they are doing counts towards the fieldwork time, or whether they will be able to fulfil the

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milestones of their PhD timeline. In the words of the participants:

> *Uncertainty, pressure and incomprehension => there are not yet any statements [from my institution] about a possible extension of the contract; [I am] under pressure to finish the PhD in four years and thus to change the fieldwork site to Germany/Europe instead of Ivory Coast; [there is] incomprehension of doing ethnographic fieldwork by leading members [of our research clusters who are] not used to this method in their disciplines.*

> *Even if I change my topic to something more feasible now, like something I can follow in Germany, another lockdown will affect this research too. There is so much uncertainty – this is somehow paralyzing me."*

> *[I have] anxiety to run out of time, [I] fear for other peoples' safety and [I have a feeling of] forlornness: when will this be over? When will we be able to do physical research?*

> *[I am supposed to] setting achievable goals for a day/week/month while writing and [doing] literature research without any empirical data to start from.*

> *These are all pressing issues also concerning the unaltered expectation of a*

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> *linear PhD process, [namely] 1. Conceptualizing 2. Conducting 3. Writing. In insecure times like ours, this simply doesn't live up to reality.*

> *I have put my head under lockdown since I have returned from ‚the field'. I was able to work with the data I gathered for a while, but that only took me so far, because I realized that there was so much left yet to learn in order to put a book together. Now there are 1,5 years left and it is very likely that I will not be able to return to field.*

Most of the researchers find themselves in a position to have to adapt their research question, especially with regard to including the implications of the pandemic, or to think about whether they should or could move their fieldwork activities to the online spaces of chatrooms, social media and conferencing apps. Although there is consensus that digital methods, collaboration with local researchers or research assistants and archival work are the most plausible alternatives, most are uncertain for various reasons. Archival work might not be as easy as it sounds – travel restrictions apply and it is difficult to access the archives at the moment. Meaningful collaboration with local researchers is equally difficult; no such protocol exists that makes it possible for establishing mutually beneficial and viable remote research relationships. Some participants manage to employ digital methods to varying extents, yet even those who have made positive experiences have great concerns over the ethics and suitability of digital methods and proxy-fieldwork. Besides concerns with putting extra burdens on people who are currently in the midst of hardships and crises, their first worry is over the compromise on participant observation in case digital ethnography becomes the primary approach, as indicated by the following conversation:

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– [The] primacy of ethnographic research is participant observation, while interviews come second (at least in my opinion) and this I find as a particular challenge and what alternative can we develop.

– Yes I very much agree to that. I think it is also a risk if we reframe the pandemic moment as opportunity for exploring new methods of remote anthropology. We might weaken the 'Alleinstellungsmerkmal" [unique selling point] of anthropology and the achievement of the past to establish participant observation.

– Thank you for mentioning it. I feel somehow old-fashioned mentioning it. Not doing participant observation or sensory ethnography feels like not getting in real touch with the people.

– I do agree that witnessing, learning and then participating in the modes of communication of the people we chose to work with is a crucial part of participant observation. While I was in the field at least lurking on the different platforms was an enriching experience, and it was also necessary to get information. [A part of it should be fine, but] to go full-on digital would be very weird for me.

– How can we establish trust without spending a long time "hanging out" with our participants? How can we establish meaningful relationships without being able to meet face to face? How can we convince people we've never met before that we are able to treat their stories with care and abide to what we wrote in our informed consent forms?

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Apart from the uncertainty over the relevance, the suitable extent and the ethics of digital methods, and the ethics of doing fieldwork in the wake of the pandemic more generally, the participants pointed out broader problems of digitalisation that do not necessarily affect anthropology alone. These include censorship, surveillance and the corporatisation of social media data:

> *I am still worrying a lot about the companies that provide the tools (Google/Facebook/WhatsApp a.s.o.) and the moral implications [of using them for our research]. Data security is not only in OUR power unfortunately.*

> *I totally agree. Those platforms try to force users to disclose their identities and, as we all know, are among the favourite place for secret services. We might not even realise that we put ourselves and others in danger since we're so used to those "social" media spaces and them feeding us the views/content we like.*

> *I am really not very fond of social media, even in my personal life. And the thought of having to transform my project into a digital ethnography via social media makes me anxious.*

Secondly, there is much uncertainty over the professional implications of switching to conducting research at a distance or changing their field sites to places closer to

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home. Participants are worried about whether they might be disadvantageously considered a “specialty cohort”, should physical fieldwork become possible again, and whether their anthropological work and expertise will be evaluated negatively as a result:

> *If we cannot have a more in-depth understanding with the informants and cannot understand the social environmental impact of them, how should the value and contribution of our research be measured?*

> *If most of our fieldwork is conducted via online interviews and we finally are able to write a thesis based on these, will this still be regarded as a valid anthropological research?*

> *I am concerned how my research is finally going to be considered. As a virtual ethnography? I am not sure of that yet. I am still hoping to access material archives and to relate with my interlocutors.*

Thirdly, there is a palpable feeling that overenthusiastic talk of creativity and flexibility or turning the pandemic into opportunities without proper support, training and infrastructure might contribute to existing inequalities between early-career and established anthropologists:

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> *Inequalities structure the possibilities for researchers at the moment, with some having more time than others, fewer worries than others, better internet connections, more quiet work spaces etc. […T]his is the moment to point out these inequalities and make them visible.*

Apart from the fact that "not everyone wants or can adjust their topic and methods", some participants are concerned that the demand for "being creative" or "going digital" overnight further burdens them with the responsibility of bracing themselves out of the situation while exempting the academic system from having to introduce meaningful institutional measures and support:

> *The emphasis on coming up with 'creative methods' puts all the responsibility on us as PhD researchers to figure out how to proceed – I am getting lots of faith (great!) and very little guidance (bad!) from my supervisors, who, in the end, are probably also going to benefit from our "stigma turned into charisma".*

> *When we are "creative" and "flexible" in our work, it is difficult to balance this with being responsible to society and do good work.*

> *In the end, nobody cares about your project and you are left fending for yourself.*

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Bureaucratic Uncertainty

Bureaucratic inflexibility, failure to respond to the changing conditions of fieldwork and lack of communication by universities, funders and other relevant institutions add to the already heightened sense of uncertainty. First, while a small number of institutions are willing to extend the contract for the researchers whose fieldwork is disrupted by 3 to 6 months, the paperwork for the extension application can be substantial and time costing. For most participants, any extension remains a far-fetched possibility:

> *"Becas Chile", from the National Research and Development Agency, will not make extensions "outside the official bases" so there will be no extraordinary extensions for Chilean PhD students. In fact, they cancelled the call of the next period for all international students.*

> *I have a position within a BMBF funded project, prolongation with more funding seems to be basically impossible.*

> *My position is funded by EU, Marie Curie Actions. The EU does not seem to have plans to give an extension.*

> *Doing a PhD in the highly neo-liberal environment of a British university*

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> *(without social security) makes me wonder every month if they will continue paying my stipend without me being able to do 'proper research'.*

> *Because of interruption of fieldwork I will need more time for finishing PhD, but I believe there are no extensions (my contract [in a DFG funded project]) runs out end of 2021); further I don't know when and if research can be continued.*

In addition, institutional procedures for granting field research permits or ethical approval of the fieldwork hardly take into account the changed conditions of fieldwork and the challenges faced by early-career anthropologists. One participant mentioned that her university does not recognise digital methods for anthropology while refusing to approve any fieldwork (at the same time with expecting the researchers to finish their degree on time). Writing the application for ethics approval can be a major burden – one participant mentioned having to submit about 150 pages of text for the purpose. Other participants are experiencing similar kinds of limbo:

> *Travel to my research site is in theory possible again but it depends on whether I can get a travel permit, which now has to be issued by the faculty instead of my supervisor.*

> *[The problems I am facing are] expectations to finish the PhD in the initial*

timeframe (3-4 years) and not getting extensions while simultaneously being confronted with new policies that make fieldwork impossible or lead to considerable delays.

In my university/department, while there is a willingness to acknowledge the difficulties ethnographers face, there is a tendency a) to stress fieldwork is always unexpected (hence, not acknowledging the pandemic fully) b) individualise the issues and their solutions (e.g. contract extensions) […]. Also: Most of us do not know yet how long/much we need to extend, this is something not thought of enough yet by funding bodies/university guidelines (3+3 months might be not enough).

Immigration Issues

Quite a few of the researchers are working for institutions based in countries in which they are foreigners, a position that becomes particularly precarious during the pandemic. Immigration issues such as visa and residence tend to conflate with familial and existential issues of living in separation from ones' family in a place without one's usual network of support, causing some dire financial needs. Many are unable to return home or enter the country of work because of border closure and flight suspension; others have no idea what happens when their visa expires and the PhD is not yet finished. These generate a further layer of uncertainty that can become overwhelming, especially for non-European researchers, as indicated by the statements of three participants below whose institutions are, respectively, in the UK, Germany and the US:

My most urgent structural issue now is how to deal with Home Office and care functions like home schooling and people at risk in my family including myself. I am in a liminal phase between PhD and postdoc [phases] and need more time to finish my [post-doc] application than I thought I would need.

It is important to raise the point of non-European researchers. The bureaucratic issues such as visa expiry, the problem of extension of visa, embassy issues, housing and Anmeldung [registration] issues simply adds to the stress. Moreover, because of lack of funding, the stress of having to manage and save the little money you have can be overwhelming on a daily basis.

My research funds have been frozen and officially I am not allowed to travel — though I had funding to come to Taiwan, I had to go on my own terms and own insurance — now my visa is running out and I might have to return to Germany, where I am not allowed to work, or I lose my PhD position in the US.

Emotional Challenges

Given the multilayer of uncertainty and the disorientation induced by their disrupted timeline, it is no wonder that many of the researchers come under great emotional strain and anxiety that heighten the existing emotional challenges of the academic working culture. It does not help that the university as a safe space of professional

exchange and sociality is closed off. Continued pressure to perform, to finish and to meet deadlines at the moment seems to be expecting the impossible, especially for those with caring duties. The discussion and the blog contributions of the participants highlight further issues that take a toll on their emotional and personal life, not infrequently with implications for their mental health. Many are exposed to intensified suffering of research participants and the feeling of not being able to help them with matters of death, illness and trauma is common. Others are juggling between the demands of doing a PhD project in a radically changed environment and those of switching to teaching online. Above all, the increased blurring of the boundaries between work and home life is proving to be detrimental for the emotional and personal life of many:

> *When and where does my field(work) begin and end? Through the usage of technology and the ways in which it has so intricately entwined itself in corners of my private online persona, it is difficult to distance myself (ever) really from the field and work.*

> *……. Additionally, I work part-time at a university, I manage Master's Program and teach, my students and all professors in the program are all going through their own stress and process which has creates (a lot) more work for me, and this eats away at the time I do have for my PhD.*

Meanwhile, early-career anthropologists belong to various age groups and their personal and their familial circumstances are diverse. Many are caring for family

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members, providing financial support for family in crisis, or raising small children. Others have their own special needs. Some have family members who are at risk, or they themselves are at risk and need care. During the pandemic, the conflict between work and family life seems at times insurmountable, as indicated by a researcher with an at-risk family member:

> *I would like to point towards (1) child care/doing fieldwork with children and (2) people considered at high risk and/or with disabilities. These problems are on my mind very much. The dilemma I face is that if I carry on doing fieldwork, I would be irresponsible to my at-risk family members, which makes fieldwork entirely unfeasible at the moment. I even think about stopping the PhD because of this.*

It is worth pointing out that while personal circumstances vary, these emotional and personal challenges often arise from a combination of structural conditions of anthropological work with the lack of care, support and understanding from the institutions that employ them. During the pandemic, they become more acute because of the fragile social infrastructure that is on the verge of being shut down any moment. Coupled with the economic impacts of the pandemic, these issues could exact even more lasting emotional costs for early-career anthropologists who finance their study/research through self-employment or non-academic sources of funding.

The Way Forward: Recommendations for Research Institutions, Universities and

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Policy Makers

On the basis of the discussion above, we are urging relevant bodies and institutions to take notice of the enormous challenges confronting anthropologists and other social scientists whose work is based on intensive fieldwork, especially for early-career researchers. While the pandemic poses acute problems, many of them indeed have to do with longer-running structural conditions of precarious academic work and the lack of flexibility, understanding and care on the side of the institutions that regulate the different facets of their work. Early- career anthropologists are urged to be creative and to take the pandemic as an opportunity for their research and professional development. They could only do so if appropriate structural conditions are in place. Following are our recommendations for institutional measures that will go some way towards making it possible:

1. Legitimise archival and digital methods while at the same time recognising that they have limits and are not always applicable.

2. Recognise the disruption of the PhD timeline as force majeure for the current cohort of PhD and post-doc researchers in future recruitment and evaluation.

3. Recognise, foster and provide institutional support for peer support groups and informal exchange networks among early-career researchers.

4. Make psychological counselling more readily available and accessible at the same time with sensitising supervisors/employers to potential psychological issues of their staff members/PhD students.

5. Reduce bureaucratic uncertainty through installing clear procedures for communication, feedback and responses on matters of contracting and extension.

6. Adjust funding structures to take into account the uncertainties of anthropological fieldwork in general and during the pandemic, especially through measures for

– meaningful inclusion of local co-researchers and research assistants with proper remuneration and facilitating co-authorship arrangements;
– flexible fieldwork fund that allows for non-bureaucratic inclusion of budget items such as paying local assistants, paying for additional technical equipment, or purchasing mobile data for interlocutors;
– fostering meaningful forms of reciprocity between the researchers and their interlocutors, for example through budget allocation for follow-up visits;
– extension of contracts and fellowships for those who are not able to carry out fieldwork as planned.

7. Digitalisation will not happen overnight and by itself – it needs to be introduced with care and feasible roadmaps through

– meaningful inclusion of digital methods in PhD training through budget allocation and capacity building;
– recognising existing and new inequalities that underline the digitalisation of research and having procedures to minimise these;
– investing in research infrastructures that accommodate the application oftechnologies in conducting fieldwork, starting with equipment and software for digital methods;
– providing clear and reasonable ethical guidance for digital data collection, processing and analysis, with proper attention to how issues of anonymity, surveillance and intimacy work out in digital research as well as protection measures for online researchers and research participants;
– providing training in the practical application of the data protection law for all researchers.

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8. Recognise the caring burdens of individual researchers whose family members or they themselves belong to at-risk groups, make allowance for caring time and accept CV gaps that arise from caring duties.

9. Provide meaningful support for international researchers in dealing with financial and immigration difficulties, while making it possible for them to continue their research abroad in case they cannot enter the country where their institution is located.

10. Install new funding schemes (for example emergency funds or writing fellowships) targeted at young researchers struggling with existential issues such as self-funded PhD researchers losing incomes during the pandemic, those whose funding runs out without recourse to new contracts, those needing more time for writing up their research because of pandemic-induced delays, or international researchers in need.