Position Paper on the Handling of Anthropological Research Data, German Anthropological Association (GAA)[1]

Starting Point

In current debates on research data management, national and international funding bodies are calling on all disciplines to permanently store research data and make it available for further use. The *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (German Research Foundation, DFG) already established general guidelines for this purpose in 2015 and called on disciplines and professional societies to reflect on the handling of research data and to establish suitable standards.[2]

It has become clear that generic regulations alone are not sufficient. Instead, the development of possible standards and criteria, binding agreements and procedures must be aligned to research styles anchored in discipline-specific culture and methodologies, the specific characteristics of the data generated in the research as well as ethical research standards. As a general rule, anthropological data cannot be published or made freely available. It is also important to consider the fundamental dilemma that, due to its high level of situatedness, even the controlled provision of data to third parties can only happen on a voluntary basis and after careful consideration of these criteria and standards. At the same time, the discipline has a general responsibility to make research material available to interested users, provided that the institutional, technical and ethical requirements are met. To this end, the DFG Review Board 106 that is responsible for the subject area of Social and Cultural Anthropology made recommendations for the submission of proposals.[3] The European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) has also issued a *Statement on Data Governance in Ethnographic Projects*.[4]

This is the context in which this position paper has been written and the points formulated are intended to support researchers and teachers of social and cultural anthropology in dealing with the requirements for archiving, storing and distributing research data and materials. The GAA also expects funding bodies to consider these positions when awarding grants and reviewing project reports.

Basic Principles

In social and cultural anthropology, primary research has absolute priority over scenarios and requirements for subsequent use. Decisions about archiving and possible access

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[2] http://www.dfg.de/download/pdf/foerderung/antragstellung/forschungsdaten/richtlinien_forschungsdaten.pdf

[3] https://www.dfg.de/download/pdf/foerderung/antragstellung/forschungsdaten/handreichung_fachkollegium_106_forschungsdaten.pdf

[4] https://www.easaonline.org/downloads/support/EASA%20statement%20on%20data%20governance.pdf

to data and materials are not only made in advance, but in particular, also during the course of the research and in the process of evaluation and writing, and must not be relevant to funding decisions. Alternative options must be available for the planning and calculation of resources for data archiving. Research ethics provide guiding principles for handling research data before, during and after research.[5] These may call for the data not to be archived or, in some circumstances, not to be accessible even if it is archived. Therefore, data archiving — or the accessibility of archived data — cannot be made mandatory, even if the project is funded by third parties. Decisions must be taken on a case-by-case basis.

The distinctions that are often made between raw data, primary data and secondary data make little sense for social and cultural anthropology, because the research data and materials are socially embedded as soon as they are generated. They can only be understood in context.[6] It will be necessary to clarify what the term 'data' pertains to or whether — also with regard to objects and their (digital) archiving in ethnographic collections and museums — alternative concepts such as 'representations' and 'research materials' must be found.

The heterogeneity of research data resulting from the application of a variety of methods in ethnographic research must also be taken into account and retained in data archiving processes and scenarios for subsequent use. Most importantly, the hierarchisation of research data to the detriment of observational data must be avoided. The close connection of this data to the researcher — also with regard to implicit, embodied knowledge — must be recognised and adequately 'translated' in the data archiving procedures.

In ethnographic research, data and materials are co-produced in specific social situations and contexts by researchers and research participants and cannot be separated from the dialogical and multi-perspective practice of field research. Therefore, the (intellectual) ownership and control of data and materials cannot lie exclusively with the researchers or research institutions. This co-production and co-ownership make ethically responsible archiving obligatory. Access to data and materials may be allowed, but subsequent use may be restricted. Researchers carry a personal responsibility here.

Research participant consent is vital not only for the research itself, but also for the archiving of data. In open-ended ethnographic research, consent is an ongoing process and is dependent on the research situation, the institutions or individuals involved and is based on ethical research standards. This also means that obtaining a written agreement/consent is not always possible.[7] Disadvantages for research participants must be reflected upon and avoided wherever possible.

It is usually necessary to negotiate the issues for archiving and subsequent use of data and materials obtained from ethnographic research with the research participants. Because of this, the possible forms of data preservation are not always predictable or fully standardisable. Data must be handled as flexibly as possible during the whole research

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[5] For the GAA reflection paper addressing ethical research aspects in the field and The "Frankfurt Declaration" of Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology see: https://www.dgska.de/dgska/ethik/

[6] Pels, Peter et al. 2018: Forum discussion: Data Management in Anthropology: The Next Phase in Ethics Governance? *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 26/3: 1-23.

[7] American Anthropological Association (2012): Principles of Professional Responsibility. http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/

process as well as afterwards. This may mean that research data and materials have to be placed under embargo or deleted at a later date.

Costs and Resources

The GAA supports the development of models that enable the archiving of data and materials from anthropological research, which take the above principles into consideration. It advocates developing these models in collaboration with data repositories suitable for this purpose.

It is foreseeable that the processing of data and materials from anthropological research for archiving and subsequent use will require significant resources. Therefore the expenses must be carefully weighed up against the potentials for subsequent use. Suitable technical solutions are currently not sufficiently available, such as solutions that allow controlled access to data. In addition to allocated research funding, there must be adequate resources provided to cover the extra expenses that arise.

Adequate research data management also requires curricular knowledge transfer to students and doctoral candidates as well as raising awareness about the issues involved with digital data collection and data storage. Discipline-specific advice and training for researchers are necessary before new content and teaching concepts can be developed and implemented.

Furthermore, the international nature of anthropological research must be considered and, if possible and useful, access to data and materials must be given to interested colleagues in international contexts as well as research participants. The linguistic diversity of research materials poses an issue here — for example, multilingual access to the research or the conditions of use.

The GAA calls on universities, education policy and science organisations to provide the necessary funding for this as well as for the processing and storage of research materials and the development of suitable infrastructures.

In Conclusion

The archiving of research data not only presents the possibility to permanently preserve important materials, but can also contribute to making anthropological research and its usefulness more visible to research participants, the professional community, other disciplines and the public as a whole. This also corresponds to the social mission of scientific research in general. The GAA therefore supports the establishment of structures for the long-term archiving of research data and its accessibility for further use, provided that the special characteristics of ethnographic research processes, especially the principles of research ethics, are given proper consideration.

The exchange that has already begun with neighbouring disciplines working ethnographically or qualitatively (especially European Ethnology and Qualitative Sociology) will be continued and deepened. The GAA also advocates a close dialogue with international professional societies and communities on the subject of research data management. Such interdisciplinary and international alliances are not only of great importance for

the positioning of science policy, but also for the establishment of a community of practice that generates knowledge and expertise and articulates common demands for infrastructure development.