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Ethical Review of Anthropological Research

Policy letter for research funding institutions and local ethics committees

German Anthropological Association (GAA)

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Context

There is currently a need to act with regard to understanding ethical research principles in the social sciences. Anthropological, up-close field research approaches of everyday life, in general, and ethnographic fieldwork in particular, generate specific requirements for ethical research behavior. Conventional ethical standards based on controlled research settings do justice to these requirements only to a limited extent. This paper addresses the specifics of anthropological research ethics and the consequences of these for an adequate assessment within an institutional ethical review process.[1]

- **Anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork:** Ethnographic research is based on a field-based methodology that investigates socio-cultural phenomena embedded in everyday life including the contexts, social practices, and processes of signification and meaning-making associated with them (research motto "understand rather than explain"). It is characterized by a holistic approach to the field (observing how concrete research issues are embedded in and interact with the overall sociocultural context), personal eye witnessing and partial integration by means of "participant observation" into a socially and spatially demarcated research site over an extended period of time.[2] This specific research approach has important ethical implications.

- **Dialogical and polyphonic data collection in informal settings:** In addition to systematic, controlled data collection and formal interviewing, ethnographic research also involves forms of data collection that are close-up to everyday life, *open*, *dialogical, interactive and collaborative* over an extended period of time. The transitions between public/unprotected and private/protected spaces, formal and informal research situations, observation and participation as well as strong and weak collaboration are fluid and vary during the research process depending on the topic of research, research situation and interaction partners. The result of this type of research process is that it is more difficult or even impossible for the researcher to come up with a detailed definition of ethical norms in advance.

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[1] On the ethical requirements for the evaluation of qualitative social science research: (a) international: http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/; (b) EU: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants_manual/hi/ethics/h2020_hi_ethics-self-assess_en.pdf; (c) Germany: https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/129793/1/852712170.pdf; Hella von Unger, Hansjörg Dilger and Michael Schönhuth (2017): http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/2719.

[2] Kohl, Karlheinz (2012): *Ethnologie. Die Wissenschaft vom kulturell Fremden*. München: Beck. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland (2015): *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.

- **Flexibility in research:** Alternating phases of participation and observation lead to different role assumptions, which can only rarely be clearly defined in advance so that the researcher is required to continuously reflect on his/her own role during fieldwork. In the course of fieldwork, relationships of trust, reciprocity, and power as well as the parties involved also change. This often requires a *dynamic adaptation of the research design* and *ongoing processes of social negotiation with actors in the field*. Predetermined formal approval processes ("*free, prior, written and informed consent*") are often inappropriate or even impossible. If so, these must be replaced by flexible verbally given "Informal Consent Without Forms".[3]

- **Trust**: Access to the research field and the quality of data collected through participant observation or produced collaboratively with research partners greatly depends on the mutual trust built up in the research relationship. This trust in often spatially limited research settings gives rise to a special responsibility regarding the protection of the research partners ("*Do No Harm" principle*[44]; *pseudonymization or anonymization*[5]) and the handling of confidential information regarding other actors *("competing ethical obligations"*[6]).

- **Knowledge:** Often in anthropological research, knowledge resources are not available through official "experts" or written sources, but are bound to specific persons and situations, which in turn are embedded in specific power constellations. In addition, the saving, translation, collecting or distributing of knowledge is often subject to local rules or restrictions. This implies complex negotiation processes regarding the individual or cultural co-ownership of data ("*Shared Cultural Ownership"*[7]) as well as restrictions on the handling or sharing of raw or primary data[8] (particularly personal field notes/field diaries) and, in general, the provision of data[9] to researchers, contracting authorities, or scientific third parties (*Open-Data-Policy*[10]).

- **Ethics codes**: Since the 1960s, anthropological associations worldwide have developed codes for ethically responsible research, which are continuously refined and adapted to the changing

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[3] On "Informed Consent" in anthropological research: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-3-obtain-informed-consent-and-necessary-permissions/; on the debate about "Informed Consent Without Forms": C. Fluehr-Lobban (*1994*): Informed Consent in Anthropological Research: We Are Not Exempt. *Human Organization* 53(1): 1-10.

[4] On "Do-No-Harm" conditions in anthropological research: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-1-do-no-harm/.

[5] On anonymising research partners: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-3-obtain-informed-consent-and-necessary-permissions/.

[6] On competing ethical obligations in field research situations: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-4-weigh-competing-ethical-obligations-due-collaborators-and-affected-parties/

[7] The ethical implications of "Shared Cultural Ownership": L. La Folette (ed.) 2014: *Negotiating Culture. Heritage, Ownership, and Intellectual Property*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

[8] On the necessary protection of raw data: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-6-protect-and-preserve-your-records/.

[9] On the ethically justifiable limitations for the dissemination of research results: http://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-5-make-your-results-accessible/.

[10] On the issue of long-term data archiving, see Peter Pels et al. (2018): Data Management in Anthropology: The Next Phase in Ethics Governance. *Social Anthropology* 26 (3): 391–413.

research conditions and sites. Social and cultural anthropologists in German-speaking countries are also committed to these ethical principles in the field of anthropology (see the *"Principles of Professional Responsibility"* of the American Anthropological Association). GAA members have their own declaration on research ethics since 2008 and ethical guidelines for research practice since 2019 (https://www.dgska.de/dgska/ethik/).

- **Processual ethics management:** Ethical guidelines, reflection or *self-assessment* questionnaires help to identify and strategically plan for foreseeable ethical dilemmas as part of the research proposal or research design preparation. Ethnographic field research based on knowledge generation rather than hypothesis testing is fluid in many phases and requires permanent reflection on situations, roles, and power constellations, also in the field. It therefore requires a high degree of *procedural* ethics management. As a consequence, ethical reviews of anthropological research proposals should primarily be geared to ensuring *ethical reflection* in the field as well as taking the special conditions for anthropological ethics described above into consideration (*"doing ethics anthropologically"*; Lederman 2017).