

Basic Principles and Procedures for the Ethical Review of Anthropological Research [“Ethical Guidelines”]

German Anthropological Association (GAA)

This paper reflects current debates on research ethics in social and cultural anthropology and presents a procedure recommended by the German Anthropological Association for the ethical review of anthropological research. It is intended for use in conjunction with three addressees:

- *Anthropologists undertaking research, to be used in the context of a peer-to-peer discussion (Appendix 1)*
- *Anthropologists undertaking research, to be used in the self-reflexive process of research preparation (Appendix 2)*
- *Ethics committees at universities and research institutions as well as research funding bodies (Appendix 3)*

A. Foundations for the ethical review of anthropological research

Reason and necessity for an ethical review procedure in social and cultural anthropology

There is general agreement on the need for action to understand ethical research principles in the social sciences. This paper seeks to make the recommendations for ethical behaviour in anthropological research, which already exist in ethics codes or declarations (“*doing anthropology ethically*”), practicable for concrete research projects.¹ In addition, it should help to sensitise ethics committees and research funding bodies about the particular ethical conditions in anthropological field research, along the lines of “*doing ethics anthropologically*”.²

This awareness raising should ensure that the ethical criteria applied in assessing anthropological research plans acknowledge the specifics and framework conditions of the discipline as much as possible. In addition, this paper is intended to provide non-anthropological decision-making bodies with background knowledge about the ethical assessment of anthropological research projects. Thus, it follows on from the [GAA’s “Frankfurt Declaration of Ethics in Social and Cultural Anthropology”](#), which aims to stimulate the ethical judgement of its members and to contribute to a critical reflection of professional activity.

The “Research Ethics - Reflections Sheet” attached in [Appendix 1](#) aims (1) to sensitise anthropologists undertaking research about the [declaration on ethics](#) by the German Anthropological Association (GAA); (2) seeks to initiate proactive discussion about possible ethical issues during field research; (3) acts as a reference for peer-to-peer discussion; and (4) serves as written documentation, if necessary, to show that steps 1 to 3 have been accomplished. [Appendix 2](#) (“Reflections on Potential Risks during Research”) is intended to help anthropologists with their research preparation process to make a self-reflexive assessment of possible risks which could arise during research. [Appendix 3](#)

¹ The most recent report from the [German Data Forum](#) begins with the words: “There is a need to act with regard to research ethics in the social and economic sciences in Germany. More recently, this realisation has led to a rise in ethics commissions at German social science and economics faculties, although this has been the result of individual and non-consolidated efforts. The following report is a first step towards a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary understanding of the principles of research ethics and review procedures in German social and economic research.” (Council SWD 2017: 6). See also: Unger, Hella von, Hansjörg Dilger, and Michael Schönhuth 2016. Ethics Reviews in the Social and Cultural Sciences? A Sociological and Anthropological Contribution to the Debate. [Forum: Qualitative Social Research 17\(3\)](#).

² Lederman, Rena 2017. Lecture “Doing anthropology ethically takes practice: a US perspective on formalisation.” at the plenary session “Doing Anthropology Ethically: Is Formalisation ‘the Solution’?” at the Conference of the German Association of Anthropologists 2017, 4.-7.10.2017, Freie Universität Berlin.

is a synopsis of the special characteristics of ethnographic research approaches relevant for ethical assessment and is aimed at research funding bodies as well as ethics committees at universities and research institutions.

Specifics of research approaches in anthropology

The ethnographic methods used in social and cultural anthropology, particularly fieldwork and participant observation, are methodological instruments, which have been reflected upon and refined through methodological debates by the professional community since the early twentieth century. These instruments are characterised by direct contact and long-term interaction with people in their everyday life settings. The quality of the field research data depends on a field approach characterised by a sensitivity to the context and trust built up in the research relationship between researcher and research partners.³ Compared with the methodological paradigms of other social and cultural sciences, these ethnographic approaches are particularly suitable for investigating socio-cultural phenomena embedded in everyday life as well as acknowledging the associated contexts, social practices as well as processes of signification and meaning-making.

Alternating phases of participation and observation lead to different roles in the field. These can only rarely be clearly defined in advance by anthropologists; researchers must therefore practice continuous reflection on their role during field research. The relationships of trust, reciprocity, and power between researchers and research partners, which emerge in different forms in the course of the field research, raise questions about possible implications and effects of the research beyond the specific research activity. Therefore, the dialogical and polyphonic co-production of ethnographic knowledge also makes it necessary to confront complex issues regarding ownership and data being made available to third parties (“open data policy”). This particularly applies to research contexts in which the possibility of an ethnographic study fundamentally depends on gaining the explicit consent of local actors in advance. In these contexts, consent might be obtained only within institutionalised negotiation processes and is often only given after participation agreements have been made between researchers and research partners regarding the thematic focus of the research and methodological approach.

From a methodological point of view, the epistemological interest of ethnographic research requires a research design that is appropriate for the subject and adapted to the respective research context. This means that not only do anthropologists generally use inductive or abductive methods to gain knowledge, but also readjust the specific methods and the research questions depending on new empirical findings during the course of the research process. In this respect, it is almost impossible to formulate the exact research questions from the outset. Consequently, a central feature of ethnographic research is that anthropologists rather gradually identify the social fields relevant to their questions in the research process. This leads to anthropologists being confronted with local situations and social constellations in the course of research that could not have been foreseen in the planning of the research project.

Ethics in ethnography

Procedures for the ethical review of anthropological research must consider the specifics of ethnography. Since the 1990s there has been lively discussion about research ethics in the discipline characterised by the concern to always see ethical research premises connected with concrete ethnographic research practice. The outcomes of these discussions are incorporated in this document.

³ “Research partners” are those persons on-site with whom the ethnographer interacts during the field research in order to work on the research question. As the field situation is usually dialogical, the previously frequently used term in this context, namely “informants”, is not only problematic from a research ethics perspective, but is also simply misleading.

Against this backdrop, the idea that it is possible to enshrine a formal, standardised canon of specific ethical instructions for action to form the basis for all ethnographic investigations transversally and in an unalterable form, was rejected from the outset.⁴ Rather, there is a broad consensus in the international anthropological community that ethical decisions in the research process, general risk assessments and the obtaining of informed consent from research partners are situation-dependent and therefore usually take place dynamically and on a case-by-case basis in social negotiation situations in the field. In concrete terms, this means that ethnography at its action level requires researchers to engage in continuous ethical reflection, which should be actively prepared for as part of the research planning and cannot be completed *de facto*.

B. Procedures for the ethical review of anthropological research (Appendix 1)

Premises of the procedure

Based on these considerations, this document presents a procedure for the ethical review of anthropological research *within* the professional community, which understands ethical awareness in research as an important component of the *overall* process of conducting research - from the conception of an anthropological study to its enactment, evaluation and/or documentation through to the dissemination of the research results.

In order to achieve this, the procedure aims to invite anthropologists to enter into dialogue with colleagues from the discipline in an ongoing ethical reflection on their own research activities. The aim of this dialogue is to reflect on the ethical issues known to be associated with these research activities as well as to identify ethical problems which may only arise during the research process and to develop strategies for dealing with them.

The GAA strongly advocates for such a procedure being an *integral part* of the preparation for early-stage career researchers involving discussions between them and their supervisors or mentors. It can also be helpful for anthropologists with substantial empirical research experience (post-docs/self-employed researchers) to go through this procedure in a peer-to-peer discussion.

Application of the procedure

The procedure invites researchers to explore issues of research ethics using the GAA's "Research Ethics - Reflections Sheet" when they are developing their research design or preparing their research exposé. The document contains dialogical elements, in the form of an 'advisory consultation' between the researcher and research supervisor or colleague, and it also entails a result-focused protocol, which can be used as a reference at a later date.

The "Research Ethics - Reflection Sheet" is conceived as a 'living document' with questions and suggestions reflecting the current state of professional discussion on research ethics and will be regularly adapted to the changing ethical challenges of anthropological studies. The latter is made possible by a procedure within the GAA which invites specialists to draw new ethical problems to the attention of the GAA Board so that the "Research Ethics - Reflection Sheet" can be made available in an updated form on the GAA homepage. The Board reserves the right to establish its own working group for the purpose of revision and updating.

⁴ In its report entitled *Principles and Review Procedures of Research Ethics in the Social and Economic Sciences*, the German Data Forum draws the same conclusion: "The listing of normative statements and simple checklists are not considered adequate for the requirements of research ethics. Instead, it is necessary to identify areas of tension and dilemmas in an open and permanent discussion process, whilst taking into account the diversity of methods used in social and economic sciences." (Rat SWD 2017: 12).