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Guidelines for anthropological research: Data management, ethics and integrity

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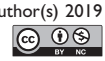
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Abstract

As anthropologists we are increasingly confronted with attempts – be it by employers, the media, or policy makers – to regulate our work in ways that are both epistemologically and ethically counterproductive and threaten our scientific integrity. This document is written out of concern about the problems that occur when protocols for data management, integrity, and ethics, developed for sciences that employ a positivistic, hypothesis-testing and replicable style of research, are applied to different scientific practices, such as social and cultural anthropology, that are more explorative, intersubjective and interpretative. In social and cultural anthropology, issues of scientific governance and its ethics are strongly case-specific. Still, concerns about the imposition of scientific protocols from other disciplines require anthropologists to develop some general guidelines for data management, integrity and ethics of anthropological research. Rather than fixed rules, these are broad principles to guide work and adapt it to specific cases.

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ethics, data management, integrity, consent, harm, protection, privacy, anonymity

Guidelines for anthropological research

Data ownership, data protection, and Open Science

Anthropological research materials cannot be considered as disembodied and transferable 'data'. As much anthropological knowledge is co-produced with our interlocutors, we cannot transfer possession, access, or ownership rights of 'our data' to others (such as employers, fellow-scientists, or the general public) without their consent. Based on relations of trust, our interlocutors often share personal and sensitive material with us. We are responsible for keeping such personal and potentially sensitive materials protected and confidential. Providing open access to fieldwork materials is therefore limited; in the case of an integrity inquiry we can at most provide confidential access.[1] Anonymizing ethnographic research materials is often not a workable solution, as it is not only overly time-consuming but, above all, removes so much detail that the material becomes virtually meaningless.

Anthropological knowledge production

Anonymity as default option and non-disclosure of fieldwork data are a precondition for anthropological knowledge production before they are turned into ethical concerns. If we do not allow for anonymity and the protection of our fieldwork material, many of our interlocutors would be hesitant, if not positively unwilling, to share their insights with us. Moreover, much of the knowledge we co-produce with our interlocutors is embodied and personal. Our fieldnotes function as a memory bank, rather than as a complete record of knowledge acquired. Using this material without such personal knowledge runs the serious risk of misinterpretation of the material. This character of anthropology as a science dealing with research materials that can often not be reduced to 'data' has serious ethical consequences, especially regarding the following.

Anonymity and informed consent

Our default position is that we do not engage in covert research and that we safeguard our interlocutors' anonymity in our texts. Anthropological research is built on trust, and researchers have a responsibility to protect the privacy and the safety of their interlocutors. Anthropologists regard written informed consent as potentially deceptive. Because relations with interlocutors change in the course of research, for instance under the influence of changing political circumstances, this transfer of knowledge is never fully concluded. We consider it legitimate

and often advisable to work with oral forms of consent, since written consent forms may impact negatively on interlocutors' privacy, safety, and possession of knowledge.

Doing no harm

The epistemological need for trust in research relationships generally implies that anthropological ethics starts, in the vast majority of cases, from the position of doing no harm to our interlocutors. We may be confronted with dilemmas in which not doing harm to some (especially if these are in a position of power) will do (serious) harm to others. In those cases we hold a particular responsibility towards those in a position of precarity and vulnerability.

Bias and 'conflicts of interest'

We recognize that we all speak from a particular position and value reflexivity highly as a means to deal with bias. We fully support the need to report on material conflicts of interest, including conditions imposed by funders or employers as well as conditions imposed by people studied. In contrast, the extent to which it is desirable to disclose information about personal backgrounds, perspectives and positions can only be judged by the researcher and not be imposed by others.

Legal protection

We do not enjoy a legal right to keep sources confidential, such as medical or legal practitioners or journalists. The European GRDP, however, allows an interpretation of the law that grants similar protective privileges to 'academic expression' as is granted to journalistic expression (Pels et al., 2018: 13). We urge our institutions to work towards the legal protection of researchers, their interlocutors, sources, and the processing of their data. Especially when we work on sensitive subjects, our research may be severely hindered, and our interlocutors be put at risk, when we are not able to claim protection from forced disclosure in court.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Note

These guidelines are endorsed by the Dutch Anthropological Association (ABv, 2018).

1. This position is clarified at more length in a statement by a Leiden University 'data management for anthropologists' committee (see Pels et al., 2018). The discussion of this statement in the journal of the European Association for Social Anthropology indicates that many anthropologists support these principles.

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Author Biographies

Martijn de Koning is post-doc researcher at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Amsterdam and lecturer at the Department of Islamstudies at Radboud University Nijmegen. In 2008 he defended his PhD on the construction of religious identity among Moroccan-Dutch youth and has since worked on Salafi Islamic religiosity, Muslim activism, racialization and Islamophobia, Islamic marriages and Dutch men and women under IS rule in Syria.

Birgit Meyer (PhD anthropology, 1995) is Professor of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. She has conducted anthropological and historical research on missions and local appropriations of Christianity, Pentecostalism, popular culture, and video films in Ghana. She studies religion from a material and postcolonial angle, seeking to synthesize grounded fieldwork and theoretical reflection in a multidisciplinary setting. She chairs the research program Religious Matters in an Entangled World (www.religiousmatters.nl).

Annelies Moors is an anthropologist and professor of contemporary Muslim societies at the University of Amsterdam. She has done extensive fieldwork in the Middle East (Palestine and Yemen) and Europe (the Netherlands). Currently she is the PI of the ERC advanced grant on 'Problematizing "Muslim marriages": Ambiguities and Contestations'. (https://sites.google.com/site/anneliesmoors/)

Peter Pels (1958) is Professor in the Anthropology of Africa at the University of Leiden since 2003. He graduated from the University of Amsterdam in 1993 on a

study of interactions between missionaries and Africans in late colonial Tanganyika, and has since continued to work on the construction of differences of culture and power in human relationships. He was the editor of Social Anthropology between 2002 and 2007. He is currently finishing a book on material culture, religion and the power of objects, and coordinates research into modern conceptions of the future, museums, and heritage.