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Making deportable people

Bureaucratic knowledge practices in European deportation sites

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Chapter 4

MATERIAL GUIDES IN ETHICALLY CHALLENGING FIELDS. Following deportation files.

4.1 Introduction

How do daily bureaucratic practices manage to make a deportable person? This was my empirical question during my ethnographic fieldwork in the Deportation Unit of an Immigration Office. Here, contemporary deportations are carried out in a highly bureaucratized process wherein the work is extensively divided. For a deportation file to present a legalized deportation many different little steps are mobilized whereby various actors with different skills and authorities are involved. This makes it impossible to become familiar with the development of deportation cases by staying put in one setting. Bureaucrats, my initial research participants, stuck mostly to their desks while adding their small bit to the file's trajectory. So instead of focusing on bureaucrats as my research population, to get a sense of the deportation process as a whole I followed the deportation file and observed the practices that unfolded around it. I did so for six months in the year 2016 during which time my fieldwork proved to be a fruitful soil for ethical dilemmas. Dilemmas that were not covered by the ethical guidelines in my research design but weighed heavily on me given the high political, financial and in particular human costs involved with deportations.

In this chapter I will highlight how research ethics as perceived in the phase of research design fell short whilst I was on my fieldwork. The reason for this shortcoming is twofold. Firstly, the ethical dilemmas I faced were unanticipated due to the securitized environment wherein deportations take place. Access difficulties and the obfuscation created by the file's dispersed trajectory made it hard to anticipate beforehand what I would encounter. The second reason is related to my methodological choice to focus on file-work as a practice rather than (the motivation of) people. In attending to a practice, a network of multiple actors involved became visible rather than a singular research population. But the ethical guidelines in social science methodology handbooks which I adopted in my research design were formulated in an actor-centered manner. This caused a misfit between ethical guidelines and fieldwork practice since the uniform and bounded actor to whom these guidelines were directed did not exist in my field. Hence the at times conflicting ethical needs among several research actors, enforced by the unequal distribution of power between bureaucrats and deportees, were similarly missing in ethical guidelines.

To learn from this experience, I aim to stir a discussion about the gap between ethics in the phase of research design that is mostly inspired by 'textbook ethics', and ethical dilemmas that an ethnographer encounters in the field. I firstly share the dilemmas faced during my fieldwork in the Deportation Unit. The thought-experiment that follows serves to further illustrate the gap between textbook ethics and ethics in the field. Then I will discuss the challenge to prepare for ethical dilemmas in a field wherein practices remain hidden until you get to them. Thereafter I show how the actor-centered character of ethical guidelines makes them not necessarily useful when using practice-oriented methods. The question thus becomes how to rethink ethics so that they support a practice-oriented ethnographer to make ethical decisions when embedded in ethically challenging fields.

4.2 Clean hands? Losing innocence on fieldwork in the Deportation Unit

Ethical dilemma #1: Participant observation and involvement in the field.

I followed deportation files from the moment that the police presented a potential deportee to the Immigration Office's Deportation Unit, to the identification of a deportees' nationality in order to obtain travel documents from the embassies, to the preparations of an eventual flight. Although my main ethnographic method was 'participant observation' by being present on the work floor fulltime, I was adamant not to actively participate in the deportation process. This meant that I avoided any contribution from my side to the development of deportation files. Keeping the ethics of my research in mind I felt obliged to uphold such moral integrity even though this sometimes came at the expense of social acceptance in the field. For example, if someone took the time to guide me through every tiny step in their work and they would ask me to copy something for the file, I would refuse by explaining I had to stay out of the actual practices in order to maintain a strict dividing line as a researcher. Although this seemed to be accepted, I could not deny that, despite my efforts, my embeddedness in the field actually did change the practice I attended to.

I remember sitting next to a bureaucrat, Abigail, whose work I had followed that morning. Meticulously following every step, I hoped to better understand the file's trajectory. At a certain point though I got confused and asked her why she did not tick a specific box in the file she was working on. She hesitated and took some seconds to think. Then Abigail replied: 'Indeed, you are right, it has to be marked! That would've been an administrative mistake otherwise!' I thus had unexpected influence on the completeness hence future development of this file. Whereas such influence from my side on the file happened accidentally, I had restless nights about the extent to which I carried an ethical responsibility for actively intervening in a deportation file's trajectory. The knowledge that became accessible to me by being present inside the Deportation Unit could influence individual deportations if I would take

this knowledge outside of the Immigration Office to make it accessible too for a lawyer or NGO for example.

Ethical dilemma #2: What to do when being witness to the bureaucratic art of cheating in legal practice.

During a training for new functionaries in the Deportation Unit that I attended in my first days, a senior functionary called Evelyn had repeatedly emphasized the importance of checking the completeness of a deportation decision in the files. If it is decided that a person arrested by the police will be detained in order to eventually be deported, the potential deportee has to be informed about this that is then confirmed with a signature on a legal document stating that the person is detained with the prospect of deportation. This legal decision has to be 'signed' within 24 hours of the arrest. Evelyn emphasized: 'This is very important. Make sure you do it right. Otherwise we will have to release them on the basis of an administrative mistake.' From the examples that she showed us in running files it occurred that the potential deportee is not always the one who signed. Evelyn explained that the decision may also be signed by the functionaries themselves by stating 'refusing to sign', so that 'for us, it is signed nonetheless'.

However, it still happens that a functionary further down the process discovers that there is no signature nor a 'refusal to sign' indicated on the decision in the file. Kevin, a colleague of Evelyn, shared his view on juridical rules like this signature: 'We cheat on little things that do not really matter to us. For example, if a decision for detention is not signed, well, for me that's a futility. But for a jurist it is not. For me however, that person is not unfairly detained'. Kevin further shared his opinion that the current legal framework stands in the way of a fair system:

We will do a bit of cheating but well, I justify that for myself by... they cheat even more; with their endless asylum requests... We get the feeling that there are too many rights, so many that we cannot do our job! According to the law, someone can file an asylum request up to ten minutes before departure so that

means nobody can ever leave. So, we need to cross the line a bit because if we don't we will never succeed...

Thought-Experiment: 'Is it ethical to continue fieldwork if...'

A few months after I came back from fieldwork in the Deportation Unit, I lectured in the same bachelor course on research methods that I myself had attended as a student. The students were asked to stand up and then I told them to sit down and remain seated when they would answer 'no' to one of the questions I was about to ask them. The questions started with the following: 'Is it ethically justified to continue research if...?', hence sitting down meant that the student considered the fieldwork to transgress ethical boundaries. The questions were:

Box 1 Is it ethically justified to continue research if:

1. Your participants act unlawfully?
2. These participants act from a position of power towards those who might be disadvantaged by these unlawful acts?
3. The unlawful acts by your participants potentially harm this disadvantaged group?

Question 1: Is it ethically justified to continue research if your participants act unlawfully?

Some murmuring and a little thinking time resulted in a handful of students sitting down. It is not uncommon for ethnographies to observe illicit or illegal acts by their research participants (see also Small et. al. 2014). The protection of participants as an ethical rule mostly justifies not reporting these cases. To report illegal acts in these cases could seriously

cause harm to participants. Think about a jail sentence, loss of income, or social exclusion.

Question 2: Is it ethically justified to continue research if these participants act from a position of power towards those who are disadvantaged by these unlawful acts?

Now the murmuring intensified in the lecture hall. After all, early ethnographies that are as such part of a student's literature list mostly deal with respondents who might not quite stick to legal frameworks but who formed part of a marginalized group. Now that this question turns this relationship of ethnography with the marginalized versus the powerful upside down some turmoil went through the lecture hall but after consulting one's neighbors eventually about 80% of students sat down.

Question 3: Is it ethically justified to continue research if the unlawful acts by your participants potentially harm the disadvantaged group over whom they have power?

Adding 'harm' to the situation does seem to make things easier. This comes as no surprise given the curriculum on research ethics wherein there seems to exist a consensus on the ethical 'rule' that, at all times, harm to participants must be prevented. Without much deliberation, all students sat down indicating their opinion that it would be unethical to continue the research if unlawful acts of one's 'powerful' participants might harm marginalized others.

Considering the thought experiment, none of my students answered yes to all three questions whether it is 'ethical to continue research if...'. Yet, in my research, all given situations occurred: 1) bureaucrats knowingly cheated in legal practices, 2) they were doing so from a position of power in relation to those who might be disadvantaged by these acts, and 3) this influenced the

possibility of an actual deportation which could be considered as serious harm. Was my research unethical? Not according to my ethical justification in my research design. Yet this was not reassuring since my research design failed to address the ethical challenges I faced. Hence, I explained my dilemma to my supervisors in an email with the subject ‘serious ethical challenges’. The reply was that neither knew how to advise me but ‘to follow your own moral compass’. Having run out of my sources for ethical guidance I was still highly confused and worried about what to do. Why was I not prepared for these ethical challenges I faced? My answer to this question is twofold: first of all, the ethical challenges themselves and their seriousness were unforeseen especially so due to the secretive character of the field. Secondly, ethical guidelines are shaped around a singular actor whereby the broader network involved gets overlooked and therewith the relations between actors in this network although conflicting ethical needs might be produced between them as well as differences in positions of power.

4.3 Navigating access to a Deportation Unit

One reason for being unprepared for the ethical concerns that arose in the field is that the Deportation Unit appeared to be such a closed off environment that it was impossible to get a taste of what to expect behind those closed doors. The Deportation Unit as part of the Immigration Office cannot be entered unless one is an employee or registered guest who is accompanied throughout the visit. Even bathroom visits require a personalized keycard. That access had to be worked for was certain but there was no clear-cut trajectory on how to gain access for research purposes (see also Belcher and Martin 2013; 2019). For about a year I worked on gaining access in a trial and error fashion. During this year the extent of access I would eventually obtain remained unknown.

I approached local organizations, academics, collectives formed by undocumented migrants and policymakers through emails, phone calls, events, and visits. I also studied annual reports and deportation statistics from the Immigration Office, followed news related to the subject through

different media outlets and worked on my local language skills. Through the wide network I had built after some months I could join a lawyer during his consultation hours at an NGO supporting those with immigration issues. Here I learned crucial terminology like the relevant legal articles and orders and their abbreviations on the work floor. To make oneself knowledgeable of the appropriate terms is also key. For example, 'deportation' is not considered neutral but understood as a term used by opponents of deportation. Instead, 'removal' is used within the Immigration Office.

On some rare occasions I managed through my contacts to schedule a coffee appointment with an immigration officer but some days later these meetings would be cancelled due to a supervisor who did not give the required permission. Hierarchy, I learned, was crucial in this state institution. Then, over drinks after a lecture organized by an association for international relations that I had attended for network purposes, I was lucky to meet a rather high-ranking official. He was kind enough to use his old boys' network to forward my contact information directly to the director of the Immigration Office with the request for a meeting. Soon after, the personal secretary of the director contacted me to schedule a meeting at the directors' private office. The gigantic room with a stunning skyline view was cheered-up by scale model airplanes and a desk loaded with stacks of paper. We endlessly talked about the national deportation rates, why annual figures differ drastically at times, which legal articles or measures smoothen or obstruct the process, and the differences between neighboring countries – subjects and figures I became familiar with whilst preparing my fieldwork.

Last but not least, the conversation went rather smoothly as I was not primarily interested in bureaucrats due to my methodological choice of following file trajectories. The former approach is more common in bureaucracy studies. Think for example about Arendt's analysis of the 'banality of evil' (2006) or Herzfeld's 'production of indifference' (1993, see also chapter three). Both these studies aim to solve the puzzle of how ordinary individuals can become involved in extreme practices. The answer is sought in the machinery that a bureaucracy becomes through the acts of multiple individual bureaucrats.

Although my findings do not necessarily contradict this answer, the puzzle that I aimed to solve was not focused on bureaucrats but the technicalities of the work. This enabled our conversation to move away from initial normative judgements around questions like ‘how can one possibly execute this policy?’ Such questions easily create dichotomies in politically loaded topics like deportation. Not long after our conversation the director granted my request for an employee badge which also served as a key. I was also provided with my own desk within the Deportation Unit. For the six months that followed I stuck to a nine to five office rhythm being present fulltime on the work floor.

4.4 Lost in a beehive: obfuscation behind closed doors

Soon after I received my key card I realized that I did not have full access yet. As a newcomer it was impossible to make sense of what was going on around me. Behind the closed doors of the Deportation Unit I had to get beyond the obfuscation inside created by the complicated, scattered and constantly changing trajectory of deportation files. Gaining access to the Deportation Unit did not get me beyond this obfuscation, access still had to be worked on in matters of transparency and visibility. Hence what a fieldworker might observe or – even more ethically challenging – participate in given the non-transparent character of the field remain open questions during the fieldwork let alone in the phase of research design.

The deportation file was my methodological guide offering unique insights into the webs of this bureaucratic process of file making. Following the file, I obtained a different visibility from others ‘inside’ whose whereabouts were mostly determined by the careful division of work in the procedure. The productivity of such partial visibility inside is also related to the secretive character of the field. Security thus exists not only through closed doors, but also in matters of legibility or transparency. The whole of the bureaucratic process towards deportation remained rather invisible to bureaucrats who were only involved with fragments of it. Therefore, it seemed not so much the case that ‘transparency was often feared because it could be the source of

public embarrassment that would reveal internal incoherence' (Belcher and Martin 2013). Rather, this internal incoherence was invisible to bureaucrats themselves as well, hence it being revealed could not be feared. Staying put in their own sub-units, for bureaucrats their work made sense within that limited space. It is exactly the division of work, and the obfuscation of cohesion between the work as a result of it, that eases a continuation of the work. The single units themselves functioned in a coherent fashion. For a procedure to be considered as incoherent, the relation between these single units has to be envisioned. Exactly this whole is obfuscated in a carefully divided bureaucratic practice.

Bureaucrats were self-aware about their partial vision caused by the division of labor. In a conversation I had with Aaron, a senior bureaucrat, he said:

My disadvantage is that I am in the middle of this forest which makes that I cannot see the trees anymore. You come from outside and can say, 'oh what is happening here'? Once you are in the middle of it... all the different units... like a beehive. Bzzz. Last week someone called and asked about whom to contact about this residence permit... and I honestly admitted 'I don't know!' It is all changing so fast in here, so rapidly, and there are always these exceptions.

Aaron highlights an invisibility due to which it is not possible to recognize incoherency. For to recognize incoherency, a certain degree of a visibility is needed to get a sense of the existence of a whole, a forest to borrow Aaron's comparison, rather than there to be merely singular trees. The partial visibility Aaron points to is inherent to bureaucracies because the division of labor produces obfuscation and thus also disguises possible incoherencies for insiders.

4.5 Actor-centered ethics and practice-oriented methods

'Textbook' stances on ethics

What I learned about ethics during my studies is that despite there being several stances on ethics they share certain basic ethical principles. In his classic social science research methods book Bryman shows how these principles are formulated around four main topics: - a lack of informed consent, - invasion of privacy, - deception, - causing harm (2004: 509). The shared aspect of these ethical concerns is that they are all organized around the interest of the main research participant as a uniform, bounded actor and who is the focus of these ethical boundaries of protection. So, the second factor of the gap between ethics in the books and ethics in the field that I aim to highlight, is that 'textbook' ethical stances are actor-centered, presuming the research participants to be the center of ethical concerns. Staging the research participant here as the central actor these principles pose challenges for practice-oriented research wherein a relational network hence multiple actors form the research focus rather than a bound off population as a clear singular actor.

The myth of 'the' research participant

Rather than the motivation of bureaucrats to execute deportations I was interested in how the file mobilizes practices for it to develop into a deportation case. I indeed joined individual bureaucrats behind their desks but the file also brought me to court, to detention centers, to canteens, police trainings, fingerprint machines, embassies, databases, cocktail parties, (inter) national meetings, and bureaucratic trainings. Just like research populations not necessarily being marginalized communities any longer, it is also not obvious anymore (if it ever was) that participants are considered to belong to one specific group in the way it appeared in more classical ethnographies (Malinowski 1922; Mead 1928). Especially when focusing more on practices and the networks formed around them, the focus of the research is not so much actor centered as it is relational. As Annemarie Mol stated in her ethnography *The Body Multiple: 'To be is to be related'* (2002: 53-54). Existence

does not exist outside of relations. In this light a practice exists through the interaction between different actors, including material ones. These actors form a social network through their interactions and it is through these relations that a practice is made.

Take for example the daily practice of preparing deportations. The development of a deportation case comes about through the transformations of the deportation file. As such, the files are mutable mobiles (De Laet and Mol 2000; Law and Mol 2001). The file can transform exactly because of the acts and actors that become related through the file and produce a certain reality. '[R]ealities are created and enacted in many different locations, practices and relations, and the connections between them, and the coherence of what has been created, is not a given' (Asdal et. al. 2007: 36). It is the file that assembles the many different acts and actors, that (partially) connects them with one another so that they form a network wherein deportations take place. Bureaucrats, police, signatures, transferring files from one place to the next, consuls, the fingerprint database, the plane, stamps, and so forth. My empirical question of how daily bureaucratic practices manage to make a person deportable is actually the question of how relations are built in the process of deportation.

Box 2 Ethical boundaries that presume a singular actor:

Lack of informed consent

Invasion of privacy

Deception

Causing harm

4.6 Informed consent, deception, privacy and harm

The bureaucrats were explicitly informed that my research was the reason for my presence. But since I was not only interested in their work but in the social life of the file, they took me with them on visits to other actors involved as well. In the beginning especially, I had no idea where I was following them to. After all, getting a sense of the deportation network was a matter of learning by doing due to the obfuscation of the process. These visits of me accompanying bureaucrats were exemplary of the many unknowns about, in this case, the trajectory of a file.

So, it happened that I attended meetings between bureaucrats and detainees awaiting their deportation in a detention center. Without informing me beforehand, the bureaucrat who invited me to come along introduced me to the security guards and the detainee as a colleague. The same goes for the police training I attended, or the visits to ambassadors that I joined with bureaucrats who hoped to arrange travel documents for detainees. This was to the benefit of my research in the sense that I would probably not have gained access to these external settings if I had had to ask the authorities at those settings for permission. But whereas bureaucrats were informed, there is no *informed consent* in the wider network. Giving the impression that I am a colleague might even qualify as *deception*. Moreover, the *privacy* of potential deportees was not always respected in the sense that I received confidential information on individual's cases.

When harm is caused: considering relations of power when studying up

Working as a bureaucrat in the Deportation Unit and as such being responsible for the implementation of administrative law, Kevin's earlier mentioned take on cheating can be seen as a form of discretionary power, or, as Aretxaga says, 'the state in this sense is and is not the law' (2003: 405). This form of power is exclusively forwarded to authorities. Hence, I was troubled by my own pre-designed ethical guideline of protecting my research participants, whom I understood to be the bureaucrats when I designed my proposal. Between them and potential deportees an unequal distribution of power is at

stake given their crucially different relation to authority. In fact, this power dynamic is made exactly in the relation between bureaucrats and deportees. The ethical consensus that research should not cause any harm to participants does not teach a researcher about degrees in the seriousness of potential harm done to different participants in one and the same network. Especially so if dichotomized parties participate in the research given their relatedness in the practice one researches. Interests of different participants can be opposite but nevertheless be intertwined since they are mobilized in the very same network. Which actors involved in the network should then be prioritized when it comes to ethics?

Historically, ethnography was mostly a methodological tool for anthropologists commissioned by colonizing authorities. It has been argued that anthropologists in the 1980s turned their attention from these 'others' to the 'suffering' subjects closer to home (Robbins 2013; Grassiani 2019). Ethnographies tended to focus on marginalized populations or the underprivileged who typically needed protection from authorities. Take for example Bourgois' ethnography 'In search of respect' (2003) wherein crack dealers form the research population. Here, Bourgois' concern of protecting research participants who cross legal boundaries lies in protecting them from authorities, mostly the police. But a phenomenon that was first referred to as 'studying up' by Nader in her article titled 'Up the anthropologist' (1974) increasingly inspired social researchers. Nowadays, both anthropologists and ethnographers from increasingly varied backgrounds do fieldwork among the 'powerful' rather than the 'marginalized'. Think about the police, the army, elites, state-functionaries, banks, and more (e.g. Garriott 2013; Aguiar and Schneider 2016). When ethnographers extend their focus from societal underdogs to authorities, the question of how to reckon with the ethical treatment of research participants is cast in a new light. For example, does the ethical breakpoint of 'harm to participants' always get priority over harm to others, even if those others are in a more vulnerable position than your main research participants?

Within secrecy research in general it is often the case that a researcher is ‘studying up’, which comes with fields that are generally hard to access due to their exclusiveness to the elite group in power. What can ethics teach us if the population over whom research participants exercise power, a population that forms part of the research too exactly through this relation with the research participants, is in an arguably ‘needier’ position for protection than the main research participants? One could raise the valid ethical question to what extent ethical codes apply equally to a drug dealer or a police agent. But this narrows the question down again to two singular research populations whereas the answer should not be sought in two separate guidelines of how to treat a drug dealer and how to treat the police. The point is that these are not two separate questions. On the contrary, they are intrinsically related. The ethical question hence becomes even more complex: how to apply ethical codes in a research wherein both the police and the drug dealer, exactly through their relation with one another, are involved in the practice one researches?

Acknowledging the myth of the singular actor in practice-oriented research and recognizing the layered and varied networks of actors involved does bring up further questions about how to direct ethics. My earlier shared observations of bureaucrats’ balancing between il/legality were shared by bureaucrats themselves. However, according to Kevin this is justified: ‘It is that feeling of, “they play it that way too”, it’s exactly like that: they cheat too. It’s similar to a football match. If you are on the losing side, you can say “well, at least I do not make mistakes and I respect all the rules”, but you will end up losing!’. The ‘they’ Kevin refers to, are individuals who Kevin and his colleagues in the Deportation Unit attempt to deport whereas the potential deportee tries to escape from deportation. I let his explanation sink in for a while before starting a follow up question:

‘But... isn’t your position somewhat different?’ Kevin releases a mocking laugh ‘Ha! Well, nobody thinks that way of course. I won’t be thinking like, I am in a power position. I am just thinking, I am simply doing my job’ ‘Why then do you immediately conclude that I referred to you being in a power

position?', I ask Kevin. 'Because of... this prevailing idea that one should be professional when working for the government.'

4.7 Distribution of ethical concerns within relational networks

In a football match both parties equally suffer or benefit from the same rules. That cannot be said about a bureaucrat and a deportee. A 'loss' for one party comes with a completely different (human) cost for the other. Also, the privilege to play with the rules is not equally divided either. After all, endlessly requesting asylum abides by the legal rules of the 'game' whereas cheating on a signature on a legal document does not. Opposite interests or ethical needs among research participants are often accompanied by unequal (power) relations (Lavanchy 2013). Thinking back to the protection of underprivileged participants like crack dealers, this ethical choice is based on a difference in power positions too. Namely, the human costs for a drug dealer who crosses legal boundaries to get arrested are not equal to a police agent who is unable to arrest a drug dealer. For that reason, it seems ethically justifiable not to report such activity. But what's more in a practice-oriented research is that if ethical codes do not apply equally to the various actors involved in the network, it is often exactly because of the unequal relations that exist between actors within the practice that is focus of the research. This further complicates a question of balancing ethical needs. It is not a simple weighing of what human costs weigh heavier than others because the action following this answer will unavoidably affect the ethical stance of the researcher towards other participants.

The needs of several actors within a network and the ways of protecting them are hardly ever homogenous. The network wherein the deportation process is shaped consists of bureaucrats, files, stamps, consuls, identification papers, representations of deportees, legal terms, political preferences, databases, judges, detention centers, transport services, diplomacy, and events that at first sight do not seem to have much to do with deportations like for example flight delays due to stormy weather. The network of a research reaches further than only the actors in the direct environment in the field. A crucial question

for ethical concerns then becomes where to ‘cut the network’ (Strathern 1996). Which actors or practices count as part of the network enough to fall under the scope of ethical guidelines? Indeed, the people I surrounded myself with in a physical way were mostly bureaucrats working on deportation files. Deportees themselves were often only present in the process in a translated form, namely through the files. However, these files are very much part of the network that is formed in the deportation process. To what extent can deportees as the files’ referent be considered participants too? And what to do if the ethical treatment of one implies the crossing of ethical boundaries for another? An obstructed trajectory of the file carries a totally different ethical concern for a bureaucrat than for a potential deportee. The same goes for protection needed in cases of legal cheating. In a practice-oriented research, one could even take potential harm to a legal procedure or an infrastructure into ethical consideration.

New questions have to be addressed for research wherein the focus does not lie so much with a specific population (actor-centered) but more with a practice within a (relational) network. After all, it is the relationality between actors and the specific network that exists through these relations wherein file-work hence contemporary deportation can be done. ‘Textbook ethics’ contains the assumption that it is clear who the subject of ethical concerns is. This suggests too that one peculiar (group of) actor(s) can be isolated from another. But networks are fluid, dynamic, and never static but constantly changing. Ethical guidelines therefore are by default a ‘situated knowledge’ (Haraway 1988). What we understand as an objective ethical boundary, shared by various ethical stances, is rather relative and mutable. It is context bound and depends on our own position within the network, on the relations of power involved, and on the transformations of these relations. For this reason, a practice-oriented researcher encounters an ontological miscommunication between one’s methods – wherein the field is formed by practices that exist through relations, and one’s ethics – wherein the field is formed by separable actors.

4.8 Conclusion: relational ethics?

Highlighting the friction between 'textbook' ethics versus ethics in the field here is not an attempt to make fieldwork more ethical. It is an attempt to prevent ethics from becoming an empty promise that works to make a neat research proposal pass ethical boards but subsequently fails to provide guidance in the field. Therefore, stirring this discussion is an attempt to take ethics seriously. Ethics are dynamic rather than bounded or objective. Just like the networks in the field are constantly in-the-making, ethics has to be made in the field too in order to connect to the situations that occur in the field. This demands effort whereby the situated and relational character of ethics has to be acknowledged. Imaginaries of clear ethical boundaries stand in the way of such discussion and further increase the gap between textbook ethics and fieldwork ethical challenges.

These gaps between textbook ethics and ethics in the field potentially are intensified in fields with a secretive character wherein knowledge is so scarcely circulated, especially so when the fieldwork is practice-oriented. Besides the inability to prepare for ethical challenges due to the limited knowledge I could gather beforehand, I also encountered an ontological misfit between the ethical guidelines in my research design and challenges that arose once in the field. If the practices a researcher attends to are obfuscated, the relations formed in these practices cannot be foreseen let alone the ethical challenges they might produce. Moreover, the field is formed by a network of multiple actors whose relations and positions are constantly subject to change. Formulating ethics as if research participants are singular actors with equal needs is not sustainable. Burdened with the task to do the 'ethically right', this imaginary weighs heavy on a researcher's shoulders. Dealing with different needs and positions of research participants, how does one direct ethical guidelines like informed consent, harm to participants, or invasion of privacy, if these mean various or even conflicting things for different actors?

Ethics in the field differs from ethics in the books. Rather than relying on clear ethical answers that fail to provide guidance in practice, ongoing reflection

about unsolvable ethical dilemmas during fieldwork is crucial. How do we as researchers deal with the burden of (distributing) ethical concerns? What if one's research does transgresses 'textbook' ethical boundaries? Is it possible to simply leave such a situation and if yes, is it clear-cut that it is *more* ethical to leave or stop the research rather than to continue such 'unethical' fieldwork? Rather than producing pre-fieldwork ethical answers we need to raise ethical questions during fieldwork itself. This is to prevent that ethical guidelines that sound solid on paper but become meaningless in practice. After all, the unpredictability of ethical challenges and the changing character of their boundaries in the field are a known unknown.