

A Report on the International Conference Ethical Dilemmas in Ethnographic Field Research



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On 25 January 2024, Tina Ivnik and Petra Hamer organised an international conference entitled Ethical Dilemmas in Ethnographic Research as one of the events of the ERC project DEAGENCY (№ 101095729). The hybrid conference took place at the Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology University of Ljubljana and was simultaneously transmitted on Zoom. Twelve presenters talked about the different aspects of ethical dilemmas they have personally faced while conducting fieldwork. The idea for the conference arose from the need to discuss ethical dilemmas more profoundly, exchange ideas and thoughts, provide support and share advice with colleagues and co-workers, who have all experienced different situations in the field.

The conference was divided into five sections, addressing the following topics:

1. The question of reciprocity between the researcher, the interlocutor, and the community

2. How to avoid the politicisation of ethnographic data

3. What does reflexivity mean in practice?

4. Between legitimate and legal

5. What is private and what is public?

Ethical considerations in the visual documentation of fieldwork

In the first section, Csaba Meszaros argued that reciprocity has a strong epistemic value and was an integral part of his fieldwork experiences in three village communities in Yakutia, Russia. Tina Ivnik reflected on her past fieldwork experiences and thoughts about the possibility of establishing a more reciprocal relationship with interlocutors based on her fieldwork in Natisone Valleys. There she used several strategies to 'give back to the community', such as bringing gifts to interlocutors, offering spontaneous assistance whenever needed, publicly presenting the findings of the research, and researching the topic

that the community found relevant. Simona Kuntarič Zupanc emphasised that the anthropologist should not only write about the numerous individuals and institutions that in their various capacities helped the researcher in their fieldwork but also need to share their findings in an accessible way with the community they are studying.

The second section addressed the question of the politicisation of ethnographic data, where Jaka Repič highlighted the concept of the politicisation in/of ethnographic knowledge, saying that the politicisation of ethnographically produced knowledge can be an obstacle to research, but if anticipated and recognised, it can also provide an understanding of negotiating differences and contribute to the debate and action. Petra Hamer argued that in the case of popular music, politicisation is impossible, as music – and art itself – are very political. Based on her fieldwork experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina, she suggested we embrace politicisation and address it critically.

The third section addressed the practical aspects of reflexivity. Uršula Lipovec Čebren discussed how reflexive practices are crucial to all aspects of the research process, from ethical considerations and understanding the researcher's biases and stereotypes to methodological and conceptual decisions. She also addressed the importance of self-reflexivity during one's own research process. In his contribution, Michal Uhrin talked in favour of reflexivity in scientific research on religion, using his own ethnographic research as an example. Juan Esteban de Jager presented two obstacles that might threaten the ways we exercise reflexivity: the dismissal of reflex-

ive dialog and the narcissistic exacerbation of our ethnographic participation.

In the fourth section, Agnes Hesz talked about transparency in anthropological fieldwork, as anthropologists have often been likened to either spies or secret police informers. She emphasised the importance of transparency, but also addressed its limitations. Veronika Zavratnik presented how accepted social practices shape what is considered right and/or legal by focusing on a Carnival practice and reflecting on the role of the researcher and the moral obligation to 'act' based on her experience in Ptuj, Slovenia.

In the last section, Marta Botiková discussed ethical considerations in the visual documentation of fieldwork, focusing on photography at funerals. Visualisation through photography gives a feeling of realness, as photos create a faithful image of reality. She discussed the dilemma involved in taking pictures at funerals, during moments of mourning, as well as taking photos of tombstones. She acknowledged the complex tension between the private and public spheres, as the classification of funeral rituals as either private or public remains ambiguous. Ana Sarah Lunaček Brumen also addressed the role of photography as a valuable methodological tool in ethnographic research as well as a means of presentation. She highlighted the importance of ethical considerations inherent in capturing and publishing photographs, cautioning against potential harm in certain contexts. Furthermore, because the meaning of photography is contextual, she emphasised the ongoing need to consider the relationship between the subject, the researcher, and the viewer.

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