

50. Trading Safety for Knowledge? Perspectives on Risks and Wellbeing in Fieldwork (Roundtable)

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Enduring hardship and taking risks related to one's personal safety have long been considered an integral part of anthropological fieldwork. Often, they have been portrayed as heroic stories which ignored the far-reaching consequences for researchers' physical and mental wellbeing. In the past decade, an increasing number of researchers started writing, speaking and publishing about their own experiences of unsafety and violence during fieldwork. Such accounts as well as recent scholarship on fieldwork safety show that challenging or even traumatic fieldwork experiences cannot be treated as isolated incidents.

In 2021, we, Kira Kreft, Laura Thurmann and Tamara Gupper, established the initiative "The Safer Fieldwork Project" to raise awareness for possible risks during fieldwork. In a year of collaborative work, we conceptualized and held multiple workshops for students on how the researchers' positionality, the research context, and the chosen methodology can impact safety in the field. What became visible in our exchange with students and academics, is that what is considered an acceptable amount of risk, a safe research context or an act of violence is often unclear and contested.

With this roundtable, we aim at bringing together different perspectives on safety in ethnographic fieldwork in order to critically engage with current practices of generating knowledge. What are the limits of ethnographic research if we prioritize the physical and mental health of anthropologists over research results? How do risks differ in relation to anthropologists' diverse positionalities and identities, and what implications does this have for the inclusivity and accessibility of our discipline? And finally, how can we help future researchers conduct fieldwork safely?

Knowing well

Christina Bosbach, University of Aberdeen

This contribution suggests that prioritizing the safety and wellbeing of anthropologists on fieldwork is crucial to our generating knowledge, rather than limiting research results and knowledge. It is based on reflections on my PhD fieldwork on a small Scottish island during the Covid-19 pandemic. I was interested in how people live and cope with the pervasive uncertainty the pandemic brought.

The experience of sharing this uncertainty made clear to me that rather than turning it into a 'fact' I could study, I needed to emphasise embodied, affective and emotional ways of knowing to understand people's experiences. While many anthropologists argue for the importance of these ways of knowing, however, there is a limited debate around the capacities, skills and support that is necessary to engage in them. Our capacities for appreciating the 'difficulty of reality' (Diamond 2003) are not equally distributed, skills and coping strategies not generally taught, and institutional support often lacks. I argue here that reflecting on this and teaching these skills is not 'just' an ethical issue but a methodological one – researchers' wellbeing is necessary for them to engage in these ways of knowing – and I imagine how teaching them could happen.

„Safety? Nothing here is safe!“ Researching street protests during a military coup d'état

Saskia Jaschek, Bayreuth University

Sharing my experiences of doing ethnographic research in the context of a military coup d'état in Sudan, I will reflect upon my 11-month-long fieldwork studying political subjectivations within Sudan's revolutionary movement, which has been resisting the violent power takeover by the military.

When I started my research only three weeks before the military coup, I was not prepared to conduct research in a so-called "area of conflict". Yet, in constant exchange with my field participants, I gradually grew into a context where security suddenly deteriorated rapidly. A question that has stuck with me since the beginning of my fieldwork and that I would like to explore collectively regards the Western security dispositif and its demands to conduct "safe research" in a "non-safe" environment.

I am asking in how far this demand fits the reality the researcher is facing in a field where life radically differentiates from the context of liberal democracies in the global North. Furthermore, how can it be considered within research without bypassing the participants' lived experiences and their everyday social realities? And how does the researchers' positioning within the circumstances translate into daily research practice?

On trading safety for trust – Research between risks, trust and a body read as female

Artemis Saleh, Johann Gutenberg University Mainz

In contribution to the roundtable I will draw from my own research experiences and unsafe encounters in supposedly safe research environments since 2015. My research experiences range from different countries, continents, subjects as well as demographics and are all spiked with sexual, physical and mental violence – whether experienced or witnessed.

Likewise, I would like to discuss the trading of safety as a method in terms of building trust in the field as a queer researcher in between endangered queer research partners. Conducting research on womxn in Nigerian and Congolese media industries, gender-based violence was the only common denominator for otherwise very diverse and sometimes contradicting perspectives on womxnhood. Especially queer and trans womxn in Nigerian contexts are criminalized by law. Actively reflecting on and using my positionalities as a tool in building research relationship on eye level and trading my safety through exposure communicates equally valuing all lives involved in the research. Being conscious of my positionalities a priori and re-embodying myself as a queer womxn of color researcher, I attempt to counter hegemonic narratives in academic communities and decolonize the epistemologies and methods at work (Hanson & Richards 2017; Crawford et al. 2021).

What is our trust based on? Relationships and violence in ethnographic fieldwork

Laura Thurmann, University of Manchester

Establishing trust with our participants during fieldwork is one of the most central prerequisites for a successful research process. At the same time, building interpersonal relationships quickly and in contexts we are often unfamiliar with can make us vulnerable for trust-based types of violence and related conflicts in the field. Based on 18 months of MA and PhD research on gendered safety during fieldwork, I am explaining how relationships researchers build with their participants can impact safety during fieldwork. I am analysing different networks and practices that ethnographers use to establish trust relationships, how these contribute to their safety and where their limitations lie. Thereby I am addressing the following questions: What can be done if the people researchers trust and rely on in the field surpass their personal boundaries? What if a researcher loses trust

in a person with whom they shared personal or sensitive information about themselves? How can trust relationships be built safely during fieldwork?