

New Challenges for the Ethics of Anthropological Practice

Workshop of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology (*Česká asociace pro sociální antropologii*)

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Entering the location of a researched field always carries with it a whole range of issues pertaining to the responsible approach to the question at hand and to its conveyors – the informants, or the participants of the research. The anthropologist, i.e. the individual carrying out the research, attempts to understand a phenomenon, as well as to find answers to both questions posed in advance and to those discovered during the research itself. They enter a space where concrete people live, and the anthropologist's movements in this terrain may have a significant impact on the lives of these individuals or of these communities. In any case, they inform, or in the very least should inform, not just their colleagues, but also the general public of their findings. They are thus the medium that presents certain discoveries and interpretations, that creates theories, or that supports or, on the contrary, dismisses already existing theories. The anthropological research report can influence how its readers, but also authorities and various opinion-makers will think about certain phenomena, communities, events, etc. At the same time, in their research, the anthropologist does not work with inanimate materials, but with living entities, and thus they must approach them in a manner that would not encroach

their rights. Anthropologists thus have a responsibility towards three given areas throughout the entire research process (i.e. during the research itself, while working with data, in interviews, during fieldwork, and while writing the final report): towards science as such (adhering to the principles of responsible research), towards the public and the research commissioner (attempting to achieve objectivity and quality of transferred data), and towards the informants and participants of the research (attempting to understand their behaviour, making an *objective* interpretation of what is said, and ensuring the *protection* of the informants). The entire research thus must be led in accordance with an ethical codex; however, what is understood to be responsible research and what is/is not possible to do while researching remains to be the subject of debate. The workshop “New Challenges for the Ethics of Anthropological Practice” aimed to contribute to this discussion. With their discussion themes, the authors of contributions touched upon all of the aforementioned levels of research. Aside from this, the discussion also dealt with the rigours of auto-ethnography, especially taking into consideration the limits of objectivity during such research.

Researchers of various ages and fields took part in the workshop, which was held on the pleasant premises of the Scouts' Institute in Prague. The workshop was practically international, since participants from Slovakia also attended. This variegated composition of participants was reflected by the variety of contributions, not only in terms of the subject researched, but primarily by the methods used and ethical issues dealt with by the

participants – the researchers – in practice. The debate itself was also rather lively, held in separate blocks at the end of each contribution, and which also showed, just as the contributions themselves, that the research of man, of society, and of various social phenomena is difficult due to the rather ambiguous determination of what is still ethical and defensible in terms of its merits. In other words – where is the line between the right of society to knowledge and the right of an individual to remain anonymous, closeted, and thus rightfully and responsibly say that they do not wish to disclose anything to the general public? The long-lasting debate was then led primarily about whether it is ethically acceptable to carry out *secret* research, i.e. situations where the informant does not know that the researcher is not one of the *members* being considered, and thus has a different ambition than to be a true member, an “*insider*”, or situations in which they even assume the role of someone else just so that they can infiltrate the group. This is disputable primarily because the researcher should have some form of agreement – an informed consent of the informant – research participant, communicating that they consent with their inclusion. In the case of secret research, however, this is not possible, although the option of the so-called double role was mentioned – some informants know of the research, while others do not, or eventually that the informants are told the true role of the researcher after the research is concluded. This debate did not come to a unilateral conclusion. Or, respectively, we could say that a certain conclusion was made as to the “rule of defensibility”. It is thus desirable that research remain open,

and in this sense, fair to all participants. On the other hand, some situations may exist whereby it is desirable to carry out secret research. It is necessary, however, to truly thoroughly consider which cases require this approach and why it is so.

The relationship between the informant and the researcher was also discussed on other levels. For instance, some contributions considered to what extent is the objectivity of research affected by a relationship with the informants – research participants that is too close or friendly. The question also arises of how *power* is divided between the actors of the research. The question of how the representatives of the target group perceive the researcher is absolutely fundamental especially in situations where the research subject is a group of people living on the fringe of society, people in difficult life situations, or people otherwise marginalised. Also, their expectations may differ in accordance with this fact – what do they expect from their participation in the research, and to what extent can such expectations be fulfilled (and should the researcher take them into consideration)? Can the researcher in actuality help, and where is the line between activism and research, is such a delineation necessary, or should we also aim to make a certain (social) change, provoked in part by the data from our research? Here, we approach another issue, namely the protection of informants – participants, but also of the researchers themselves in the case that during their research, they come upon information that should not be disclosed to the public.

As mentioned above, the workshop was attended by researchers with different levels of research experience. Thus,

participants included not only students or researchers who are dedicated only to studying *their* subjects, but also those who do commissioned research. Thus, the issue of carrying out research for a specific commissioner (e.g. the government administration) was also discussed, especially in terms of finding a balance between the expectations of the institutions (expected responses, unclear methodology and scientific terminology, financially underfunded research) and the actual capabilities of the researcher, also considering ethical standards. Within this discussion, the participants also touched upon *language* as the tool for communicating the gleaned data, or, what is the difference between an academic text aimed primarily at the scientific community and a final research

report that must be readable for individuals *not in the field*, respectively.

The workshop touched upon a whole range of themes, and opened many other themes for discussion. It also showed that mutual meetings and discussions of the various aspects of research is beneficial, if not necessary. As for myself, I must say that I had the opportunity of seeing the issue of research ethics from a new perspective, to consider the influence of anthropologists entering the field, as well as to consider what are the (ethical) limits of anthropological research. Regular meetings of this type are thus definitely positive, and it would be worth it to make them a habitual activity.

Blanka Kissová