



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Ethnographic Responsibility. replies to Herzfeld (Anthropology Today 39[3])

Grasseni, C

Citation

Grasseni, C. (2023). Ethnographic Responsibility.: replies to Herzfeld (Anthropology Today 39[3]). *Anthropology Today*, 39(6), 24. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3677264>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3677264>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

comment

ETHNOGRAPHIC RESPONSIBILITY

Replies to Herzfeld (AT 39[3])

Michael Herzfeld's exposé on how bureaucratic interpretations of ethics risk stifling ethnographic engagement and methodological creativity is timely and poignant. Regulatory approaches to research ethics vary significantly according to national and disciplinary contexts. In the Netherlands, the current focus is on research data management and scientific integrity. I see this from the privileged point of view of an appointed national committee member for Scientific Integrity in Research Data Management in the Social Sciences. Since June 2022, I have participated in meetings, discussing what data archiving for scientific integrity might mean, particularly for social and cultural anthropologists and qualitative fieldworkers in the social sciences.

The existing *Guideline for the archiving of academic research for faculties of behavioural and social sciences in the Netherlands* (DSW 2022), issued in 2018 and revised in March 2022 by the Council of the Deans of Social Sciences in the Netherlands (DSW), has received diverse and even contradictory critique as some social scientists find it too broad and vague, while others find it restrictive and overburdening, particularly for those working with qualitative and mixed field methods, or in collaboration with other disciplines and professions.

While a distinction between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' is not always clear-cut, there are fundamental disagreements amongst social scientists on whether data should be stored at all, with some maintaining that all research data must be kept forever and in its entirety on a repository that is separate from the fieldworker. This would be to preserve data integrity and to be able to evidence from it, if needed, the researcher's integrity. Notorious fraud and data manipulation cases for scientific publications have historically directed Dutch discussions of 'scientific integrity' in this direction but need not lead to a 'one size fits all' (Labib et al. 2023).

In the Faculty of Social Sciences at Leiden University, I have had the honour of directing the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology (2017-2020) and experimenting with introducing research data management policies that would be, on the one hand, compliant with institutional regulations, and on the other, meaningful and congruous with ethnographic practice (CADS n.d.). Under the leadership of Bart Barendregt (2020-2023) and now, Marja Spierenburg, we continue to develop cross-disciplinary conversations on the premises and principles of scientific integrity concerning data management. With the help of keen and insightful data stewards and data managers (notably Andrew Hoffman and Céline Richard) we are eager to engage in generative correspondence and deliberations,

starting from the acknowledgement that there is a diversity of scientific paradigms within the social sciences, which affects their research data management practices. When discussing this in interdisciplinary committees, it is essential to recognize that this diversity is not a problem but a wealth.

Social scientists need to know how their diverse disciplinary communities are appropriating national guidelines on scientific integrity. A bottom-up understanding of the routines, concerns and underlying convictions of the various disciplines and communities of practice would facilitate conversations and understandings. To achieve this, consultation with all relevant research data management stakeholders and experts must *precede* protocol implementation and monitoring. Shared rules must be embraced rather than policed (as also argued by Labib et al. 2023). Finally, meaningful research data management should not be an added burden to researchers but constitute an appreciable advantage, for example, in making their intellectual work visible and rewarded. It needs to consider workload and available tools, infrastructures and resources, as well as contribute to scientific recognition. ●

Cristina Grasseni

University of Leiden
c.grasseni@fsw.leidenuniv.nl

CADS n.d. Guidelines, protocols & policies. Leiden University. <https://tinyurl.com/LeidenGuidelines>.

DSW 2022. *Guideline for the archiving of academic research for faculties of behavioural and social sciences in the Netherlands*. <https://zenodo.org/records/7583831>.

Herzfeld, M. 2023. Ethnographic responsibility: Can bureaucratization of research ethics be ethical? *Anthropology Today* 39(3): 1-4.

Labib, K. et al. 2023. How to combine rules and commitment in fostering research integrity? *Accountability in Research*: 1-27.

In the current era of interdisciplinary enquiry and hybrid 'mixed methods' research plans, it is what Herzfeld concisely refers to as 'the epistemological and methodological issues that distinguish anthropology from other disciplines' (p. 3), which in fact characterize some of the most compelling work taking place across the humanities and social sciences. This kind of research depends on nurturing both sensitive and robust relationships of *respect* between researchers and 'the subjects' with whom we collaborate.

This is unquestionably the case in enclaves of sociology and in the field of gender and sexuality studies. It is also true for cross-disciplinary research focusing on social justice more broadly, whether studying people living on society's margins, such as informal workers, or fully illegalized others, be they undocumented migrants or women seeking an abortion in certain states. Trust – knowing when and how to establish it, understanding its nuance and limits, and building on it to deepen interpretation and discussion of results – is a central part of the talent behind what we deem 'excellent research' in and across various disciplines.

Despite the claimed objectivity of research ethics committees and the seemingly neat formalities of bureaucratic instruments like 'consent forms', introducing these elements into 'the field' can be massively disruptive. Their impact ranges from subtly undermining the crucial informal relationships vital for promising research to abruptly ending those relationships altogether. Also, the requirement for a detailed explanation of research topics in advance all but eliminates the possibility of making exciting and unexpected discoveries through fieldwork, focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

In my view, the most troubling part of the ongoing bureaucratization of ethics is its own slippery focus. Initially purporting to be a protective practice of care for research subjects, it soon morphs into a discourse claiming to safeguard researchers. Ultimately, it emerges as a discursive formation that works to regulate and discipline not just the researchers but also the types of knowledge that can be produced, all in the name of protecting another entity, *the university*.

Even this protection of the university is not about lofty ideals to ethically produce high-quality nuanced knowledge of social inequalities in an increasingly technocratic neoliberal 'Western' world. Rather, it pertains to protecting the university as a business entity, susceptible to legal action. Alongside everything else Herzfeld identifies as problems in the ongoing bureaucratization of ethics – a trend certainly evident in Europe as well – I think we also need to consider and discuss the broader implications for the politics of knowledge production per se, extending far beyond anthropology or any single discipline. ●

Alexandra Halkias

Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences
alhalkias@panteion.gr

Michael Herzfeld describes some of the effects of the deplorably inadequate arrangements of institutional ethics reviews for anthropology. 'Ethical obstacles' are often associated with the enforcement of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in the European Union (EU) in 2018. But the GDPR does not need to be a hindrance, as it has more regulatory provisions for anthropology than did former regulations. Instead, it is in the capacity of research ethics committees (RECs) to apply the exemptions offered by the GDPR for research done in the public interest. In combination with their awareness of the diversity in research traditions, this may help to counteract needless restrictions.

Universities that define their research as 'public task' use the grounds of 'public interest' as the basis for processing data. The website of the University of Sussex, for instance, says: 'We must always have a lawful basis for processing personal data and, in the context