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Informed consent in ethnographic research: A common practice facing new challenges

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Abstract

In this article, we give some insight into the growing debate on informed consent among social and cultural anthropologists in Germany and beyond that takes as its current starting point the wider debate on the impacts of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as well as the requirements of research data management and archiving. This critical debate centres two aspects: the standardized written form and the time of consenting. We use examples from the broader field of qualitative social scientific research when they address similar problems. Subsequently we outline proceedings that could lead to non-written forms of consenting, which have proven more appropriate to ethnographic fieldwork.

1 Informed consent as a legal and ethical concern

Ethnographic fieldwork is an activity of encounter. Social and cultural anthropologists usually seek out the living and working environments of research participants in person, where people permit them participation in everyday events, and provide insights into their life contexts. On these grounds, fieldwork is usually based on collaborative, mutual engagement and building confidence over time. Protagonists' consent to become part of the fieldwork is, with few exceptions, indispensable and one of the ethical premises in ethnographic research. Consent and cooperation are essential prerequisites for researchers to be able to experience, observe and participate in the activities of interest. Social and cultural anthropologists, therefore, treat consent usually as part of research ethics and much less in legal terms.

In the English-speaking world, especially the United States, long-standing, ongoing debates in social and cultural anthropology on « the doctrine of informed consent »¹ result from strongly institutionalised and bureaucratized review processes obligatory for all research endeavours with and on human subjects. In Germany, we are seeing similar developments - notably in international or interdisciplinary research - necessitating ethical approval. Even if there are currently no institutional bodies or committees at universities that systematically evaluate ethical conduct of ethnographic research, we notice that more such committees are being established in the last years.² Overall, however, this is one reason why obtaining consent is in no way standardized in German social and cultural anthropology. In Germany, the debate on informed consent is mainly driven from two other sources: first, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) set in place in 2018, to harmonize control and data protection requirements within the European Union and to equip the EU for the digital age; second, the increasing requirements from research funding agencies concerning archiving and sharing of research data. Archiving and subsequent reuse of research data have not been common practice among German ethnographers until now.

The notion of consent is first of all referring to a much broader social and political concept in Western societies with considerable moral and normative power.³ On the one hand, it is deeply

¹ Kirsten Bell, « Resisting Commensurability: Against Informed Consent as an Anthropological Virtue », *American Anthropologist*, 2014, 116 (3), p. 511-522. Ethical regulation and its implications for ethnographic research in the United States are criticized from different perspectives in the American Ethnologist Forum: « IRBs, Bureaucratic Regulation, and Academic Freedom », *American Anthropologist*, 2006, 33 (4). See also Joan Cassell, « Cases and Comments », in Joan Cassell, Sue-Ellen Jacobs (eds.), *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*, American Anthropological Association, 1987.

² <https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=12934&navItemNumber=731>.

² E.g., the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Hamburg offers counselling by an ethics committee, but « exclusively on application and voluntarily ». <https://www.gwiss.uni-hamburg.de/service/ekgw.html>. Cf. Hella von Unger, Hansjörg Dilger, Michael Schönhuth, « Ethics Reviews in the Social and Cultural Sciences? A Sociological and Anthropological Contribution to the Debate », in *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2016, 17 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-17.3.2719>.

³ cf. Franklin Miller, Alan Wertheimer (eds.), *The Ethics of Consent. Theory and Practice*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

rooted in Western thought on democratic legitimacy, and on the other it shapes interpersonal relations: "acts of consent establish entitlements, create obligations, and shift risks and responsibilities from some persons to others."⁴ Consent is thus closely tied to a notion of the independent and responsible individual person which does not fit all societies or groups studied in social and cultural anthropology.⁵

Freely given, informed, specific, and unambiguous consent means that all data collecting, storing, transferring, publishing, and archiving needs an approval from research participants.⁶ Data protection laws provide for an exemption only in particular cases, e.g. data processing for historical research or statistical purposes of public interest.⁷ Overall, however, it is controversial whether scientific research can be exempted from the obligation to obtain informed consent, and to what extent. As an absolutely necessary prerequisite and governing norm for research on/with human beings informed consent derives from common practice in medical research.⁸ But, although the principle of informed consent remains uncontested, the method of getting consent inevitably differs within the disciplines. Regarding ethnographic and qualitative social scientific research practices, simple transfer of the standard of consent from biomedical research to other research contexts has been discussed and criticized.⁹ We consider it vital to acknowledge disciplinary ways of knowing and proceeding methodically. Unlike in the United States, where anthropological associations have long since regulated informed consent in their ethical guidelines¹⁰, in Germany, apart from applicable law, there is currently no further mandatory guidance on consent procedures in social and cultural anthropology. German professional anthropological associations¹¹ recently initiated intensive critical debates on the consequences of GDPR and the novel requirements from research data

⁴ David Johnston, « A History of Consent in Western Thought », in Franklin Miller, Alan Wertheimer (eds.), *The Ethics of Consent. Theory and Practice*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p.25-51, see p.25.

⁵ The ethical debate about an essentialist Eurocentric idea of man is nevertheless contradictory. See Annette Hornbacher, « Ethik als transkulturelles Dilemma: Zum Spannungsverhältnis zwischen ethnologischem Relativismus und ethischer Normativität », *EthnoScripts. (Ethnologie und Ethik)*, 15 (2), 2013, p. 5-19.

⁶ See Anne Lauber-Rönsberg, Philipp Krahn, Paul Baumann, « Gutachten zu den rechtlichen Rahmenbedingungen des Forschungsdatenmanagements (Kurzfassung) », Dresden, TU Dresden, 2018. https://tu-dresden.de/gsw/jura/igewem/jfbimd13/ressourcen/dateien/publikationen/DataJus_Zusammenfassung_Gutachten_12-07-18.pdf?lang=de.

⁷ cf. Art. 5 and Art. 89 GDPR and Recitals 156 ff.

⁸ The reference to medical ethics and medical law points to the origin of this form of consenting: Clinical research without declared consent was prohibited only in 1947 as a result of the Doctors Trial in Nuremberg and established in the Nuremberg Codex as an effective standard, continuously developed in the course of changing clinical respectively bio- and life-science research. See Paul Julian Weindling, *Nazi Medicine and the Nuremberg Trials. From Medical War Crimes to Informed Consent*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

⁹ cf. Peter Pels et al, « Data management in anthropology: The next phase in ethics governance? », *Social Anthropology*, 2018, 0 (0), p. 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12526>. See also Mary Boulton, Michael Parker (eds.), « Informed Consent in a Changing Environment », *Social Science & Medicine*, 2007, vol. 65, special issue 11.

¹⁰ See Kirsten Bell 2014, *op. cit.*, p. 512.

¹¹ Disciplinary traditions of ethnology/Social and Cultural Anthropology and folklore/European Ethnology are divided in the German-speaking world. Institutions and courses of study can have yet another designation such as Empirical Cultural Studies, Popular Cultures, sometimes in combination.

management. They issued position papers that also pertain to informed consent.¹² All statements clearly show that informed consent is not only a « quintessential object »¹³ of research ethics, but equally the connecting link between ethics and data protection law. In the big picture, it is the digital transformation of research that calls for increasing attention to legal and ethical questions of data. Novel forms of analysis as well as expanded ways of distribution and archiving possibilities for data and research materials come along with novel methodological challenges, regarding anonymization, metadata creation, and the like. Some researchers hold informed consent as « a necessary evil, as exclusively instrumental in nature, and thus as separate from ‘research’ itself ».¹⁴ But we propose that reflections on informed consent also form part of methodological reflections and even methods development.

2 Inadequacies and insufficiencies of written consent

According to data protection laws, consent does not necessitate a signed form, but the data controller has to be capable to provide evidence of voluntary consent. Because the burden of proof lies with the researcher resp. his or her institution, legal experts usually recommend and expect written consent.¹⁵ This applies in particular to so called special categories of personal data such as political opinions, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or ethnic origin - that regularly emerge from ethnographic fieldwork. The aim here is also to standardize consent.¹⁶ Indeed, in a legal sense, the written form may be a reasonable and ‘safe’ way to obtain consent - moreover, gained with somewhat limited effort. But, as it can be seen in all position papers of the disciplinary associations, social and cultural anthropologists criticize and reject the written form as the only possible way of gaining consent. This refusal is necessarily linked to the epistemological and methodological basis of ethnographic fieldwork.

The recruitment and perception of research participants in anthropological research differs from sociological research and experimental settings in medical institutions, laboratories, and

¹² German Anthropological Association (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie, DGSKA), « Position Paper on the Handling of Anthropological Research Data », 2019. https://en.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/PositionspapierMV_EN_2019-11-29.pdf. And: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (dgv), « Positionspapier zur Archivierung, Bereitstellung und Nachnutzung von Forschungsdaten », 2018. http://www.d-g-v.org/sites/default/files/dgv-positionspapier_fdm.pdf.

The equivalent European associations have produced similar papers. See European Association of Social Anthropologists, « EASA’s Statement on Data Governance in Ethnographic Projects », 2018. <https://www.easaonline.org/downloads/support/EASA%20statement%20on%20data%20governance.pdf>. And: International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, « SIEF Statement on Data Management in Ethnology and Folklore », 2019. https://www.siefhome.org/downloads/publications/statements/SIEF_Statement%20Data%20Management.pdf.

¹³ Jennifer A. Hamilton, « On the Ethics of Unusable Data », in James D. Faubion, George E. Marcus (eds.), *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017, p. 73-88, see p. 86.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Anne Lauber-Rönsberg, Philipp Krahn, Paul Baumann, 2018, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ Katrin Schaar, « Die informierte Einwilligung als Voraussetzung für die (Nach-)nutzung von Forschungsdaten: Beitrag zur Standardisierung von Einwilligungserklärungen im Forschungsbereich unter Einbeziehung der Vorgaben der DS-GVO und Ethikvorgaben », RatSWD Working Paper, 264, 2017, Berlin, Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten. https://www.ratswd.de/dl/RatSWD_WP_264.pdf.

the like. In anthropology, interlocutors are not merely seen as « participants », who are conceived as a « survey unit » and selected as a « sample ».¹⁷ Roles depicted in ethnographic accounts comprise informants, interlocutors, research participants, collaborators, consultants, and host families. A prominent role can be assigned to so called gatekeepers, who often arrange access to the field and act as advisers, translators, guides, key informants, or even as research assistants in the course of research. Occasionally research participants also figure as co-authors like in the well-known collaboration between American anthropologist Franz Boas and George Hunt, English-Tlingit by birth, in the early 19th century.¹⁸

The wide range of terms illuminates different levels of participation in and control of the research process in the same field. Researchers and researched people establish more or less long-term relationships, a social process that cannot be fully envisioned. That means trust and consent must be continuously balanced. However, in the process of mutual interaction, the protagonists considerably contribute to data generation. Hence, data from ethnographic research is widely regarded as co-produced by researchers and those being researched.¹⁹ From that joint production results joint ownership, with consequences to all handling of data. With this in mind, consent in anthropology is understood as an ongoing intersubjective relational process.²⁰ It requires dynamic negotiations and generally cannot be fixed with a « contractual gesture signed in advance ».²¹ How and when consent is or can be established depends on the respective field and concrete settings and scenarios. In other words, there is not one way or procedure that can be applied in a standardized manner. Moreover, the current system of anticipatory, bureaucratic regulation is not a guarantor for ethical research. Anthropologists warn against restricting research ethics to procedural ethics. In order to avoid ethnocentric ethical principles, researchers need to pay attention to embedded ethics.²²

Field access is a crucial and often challenging phase in ethnographic fieldwork. « Gaining access is not simply a matter of hanging on a door and getting it to open », it is rather as much a dynamic and relational process as field research itself.²³ And it is necessarily linked to a

¹⁷ See Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (dgv), 2018, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ See Kathleen Mooney, « George Hunt », *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2015.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/george-hunt>. cf. Roger Sanjek, « Anthropology's hidden colonialism: Assistants and their ethnographers », *Anthropology Today* 1993, 9(2), p. 13–18.

¹⁹ See, as one of the first proposition to this epistemological condition, Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, New York, Columbia University Press, ([1983] 2014).

²⁰ See German Anthropological Association, « Basic Principles and Procedures for the Ethical Review of Anthropological Research [“Ethical Guidelines”] », 2019. https://en.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GAA_Principles-and-Procedures-for-Ethical-Reviews.pdf.

²¹ Igor Boog et.al., « Data management for anthropologists and ethnographers. A position paper », in Peter Pels et.al., « Data management in anthropology. The next phase in ethics governance? », *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 2018, 26 (3), p. 391-413, see p. 398.

²² See e.g. Sharon Macdonald, « Embedded ethics and research integrity: A response to 'the quest for generic ethics principles in social science research' by David Carpenter », in Ron Iphofen (ed.), *Finding common ground: Consensus in research ethics across the social sciences*, Bingley, Emerald, 2017, p. 29-35, see p. 31.

²³ Martha S. Feldman, Jeannine Bell, Michele Tracy Berger, *Gaining Access. A Practical and Theoretical Guide for Qualitative Researchers*, 2003, Walnut Creek, CA, p. ix.

process of learning on different norms, standards, hierarchies and dependencies on site. From multiple descriptions of each specific endeavour becomes clear that the entry into a research field depends not only on the ethnographer's skills but also on specific circumstances. Having that in mind, standardised written consent is considered as an often inadequate tool. Rather, the acceptance of the researcher, his or her behaviour and possible questions to the people on site can only be worked out gradually in many settings and situations. Paul Stoller²⁴, for example, used for a study on religious practices in rural Niger demographic surveys to enter the field - with support of local authorities. This strategy was not very useful when Stoller some years later started fieldwork among West African street vendors in Harlem who usually had no residential status. So he decided to join research participants in spending time in street markets at first. Here, with people in precarious social situations the « contractual gesture »²⁵ to fill out a form will hardly be helpful.

With regard to this contractual gesture, social and cultural anthropologists expect that the « quality of relationships in field research » might change.²⁶ German anthropologists have not extensively made use of written consent yet, but there are reasonable misgivings and doubts. A meta-study conducted among interviewees from social science studies in the United Kingdom reports that research participants overall disapproved of written consent.²⁷ Information letters and consent forms were perceived as formal, official and even intimidating. Research participants indicated that once they had signed the consent form, they felt committed to participating in the research. In their opinion, withdrawing or refusing to answer questions was hindered. Asking for written consent may be associated with a decrease of « naturalness », trust and emotional closeness, especially if the form is filled with abstract and barely tangible paragraphs. In a similar vein, researchers from the field of social work report that while doing interview research with elderly people in Germany on the highly sensitive issues of illness and dying, irritations were caused by the request to sign a sheet before or after finishing the interview. Gaining oral consent, recorded on tape before the interview, proved more acceptable than signing a written form.²⁸

Nevertheless, there are scenarios, where a written paper can be helpful. Marcia Inhorn reports from her research with female patients in private in-vitro fertilization clinics in the Middle East where the consent form acted as an icebreaker in a setting where female as well as male

²⁴ Paul Stoller, « Globalizing Method: The Problems of Doing Ethnography in Transnational Spaces », *Anthropology and Humanism*, 1997, 22 (1), p. 81-94.

²⁵ See Igor Boog et. al, 2018, *op. cit.*, see p. 398.

²⁶ Gisela Welz, « Wie sollen wir mit Forschungsdaten umgehen? Und was will die DFG? », *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, 2020, 1, p. 83-85.

²⁷ Jane Lewis, Jenny Graham, « Research Participants' Views on Ethics in Social Research: Issues for Research Ethics Committees », *Research Ethics*, 2007, 3 (3), p. 73-79.

²⁸ See Angela Benner, Julian Löhe, « Die informierte Einwilligung auf Tonband: Analyse im Rahmen einer qualitativen Interviewstudie mit älteren Menschen aus forschungsethischer und rechtlicher Perspektive », *Zeitschrift für Qualitative Forschung*, 2020, 20 (2), p. 341-356.

infertility problems are subject of shame and secrecy. The signed consent paper « was crucial in reassuring women that what they told me would be held in the strictest confidence, and their names would never be used in any published report. »²⁹ In other cases, a signed paper may be accepted as a token of esteem. In general, it can be assumed that fewer problems arise in research environments where using forms is established and accepted.

Standardised informed consent is also understood as « an a-cultural form of standardization that does not respect local understandings of ‘risk’, ‘benefits’, or ‘consent’ ».³⁰ In this sense, it might reproduce social inequalities and power relations, particularly in postcolonial contexts. This points out again that standardised consent as a Western concept of contractual agreement does not reflect on different norms and ethical standards in different research fields and countries. In general, a signed paper can be of less significance and lower cultural prestige.³¹ The bureaucratic exercise cannot substitute what anthropologists rather define as their own capacity for culturally adequate behaviour in local contexts, how two examples may illustrate. In Indonesia « it is considered impolite to openly reject a request or to bluntly say no », Mirjam Lücking reports from her research on Muslim lifestyles. To get truly voluntary consent she paid attention to « indirect messages and emotional subtexts », avoided asking people for consent immediately and offered to return to the matter later.³² When attending funeral services of HIV/AIDS victims in South Africa, Stephen Black mentioned, « decisions about when and how to record were also a display to others of my understanding of cultural conventions about HIV disclosure. » It was his ability to act respectfully that would have enabled him to integrate into broader social networks, families, and neighbourhoods.³³ However, making a well-grounded decision on the appropriateness of formal regulations assumes a deeper learning and understanding of the research field.

Another argument against standardized consent is that signing a form can put research participants at risk, and this may close certain fields of research. When studying HIV/AIDS as a stigmatizing illness in Tanzania according to Hansjörg Dilger, it was impossible in some situations « to talk directly to interlocutors about HIV/AIDS - or to present a declaration of consent that makes such a reference clear ».³⁴ Otherwise, Dilger worried that the bureaucratic

²⁹ Marcia C. Inhorn, « Privacy, privatization, and the politics of patronage: Ethnographic challenges to penetrating the secret world of Middle Eastern, hospital-based in vitro fertilization », *Social Science & Medicine*, 2004, 59 (10), p. 2095-2108, see p. 2099.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Thomas Widlok, « The Archive Strikes Back: Effects of Online Digital Language Archiving on Research Relations and Property Rights », In Marc Turin, Claire Wheeler, Eleanor Wilkinson (eds.), *Oral Literature in the Digital Age: Archiving Orality and Connecting with Communities*, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2013, p. 3-20, see p.15.

³² Mirjam Lücking, « Reciprocity in Research Relationships: Learning from Imbalances », in Thomas Stodulka, Samia Dinkelaker, Ferdiansyah Thajib (eds.), *Affective Dimensions of Fieldwork and Ethnography*, Cham: Springer Nature, 2019, p. 109-121, see p. 114.

³³ Steven P. Black, « Anthropological Ethics and the Communicative Affordances of Audio-Video Recorders in Ethnographic Fieldwork: Transduction as Theory », *American Anthropologist*, 2017, 119 (1), p. 46-57, see p. 51.

³⁴ Hansjörg Dilger, « Ethics, Epistemology, and Ethnography: The Need for an Anthropological Debate on Ethical Review Processes in Germany », *Sociologus*, 2017, 67 (2), p. 191-208, see p. 200.

act - and even only a form containing the title of the research project - would prevent his research. This is similar for research on socially discredited characteristics or illicit activities, e.g. for research with doormen or drug users.³⁵ Rapport is very important in such encounters. One takes notice, this can also apply in turn for scenarios of « studying up », investigating on powerful and privileged persons in companies or government agencies and the like - those who maybe don't want to be studied.³⁶ Less discussed is, that, e.g. in case of violent conflict, keeping consent sheets could also put researchers themselves at risk in case they become targets of police or other official inquiries.

Prior written informed consent may safeguard researchers in the legal sense, but it is not a guarantor of ethical research.³⁷ As the situation unfolds, rather tacit consent may decide on how to handle certain information. Some information may function as background knowledge that is widely shared among research partners, some information may be regarded as a secret and be passed on either off record or while recording but with reservation. Depending on the level of trust and knowledge research partners will make clear how to handle the information provided or expect the researcher to act accordingly. Moreover, anthropologists shall pay attention and « respect also non-verbal forms of non-consent and especially non-verbal withdrawal of consent ».³⁸ All these fine-grained tunings and negotiations are rather to be found in recordings or between the lines. It is impossible to put them down on a form. In case of doubt how to deal with particular pieces during data analysis, in publications or when archiving the material, the researcher may well contact the research participants to authorize the use of data.³⁹

Requirements for data archiving and sharing have broadened the debate on informed consent. Research partners should be asked to agree that data can also be used for future and after all unknown purposes. Among German social and cultural anthropologists, there is still limited experience with sharing and subsequent reuse of research data. Above all, researchers worry that archiving materials will become mandatory for successful funding commitments. The position papers of social and cultural anthropologists' associations reject such funding policies, not least because consent for archiving data will not always be given. But on the other hand,

³⁵ See David Calvey, « The Art and Politics of Covert Research: Doing 'Situated Ethics' in the Field », *Sociology*, 2008, 42 (5), p. 905-918. And Kirsten Bell, Amy Salmon, « Good intentions and dangerous assumptions: Research ethics committees and illicit drug use research », *Research Ethics*, 2012, 8 (4), p. 191-199.

³⁶ Laura Nader, « Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying up », in Dell Hymes (ed.), *Reinventing Anthropology*, New York, Vintage Books, 1974, p. 284-311.

³⁷ See German Anthropological Association (DGSKA), 2019, *op. cit.* In addition, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Volkskunde (dgv), 2018, *op. cit.*

³⁸ Institute for Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University, « Appendix I: Approved Informed Consent Procedures in Anthropological Research », n.d.

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/sociale-wetenschappen/ca-os/appendix-i---informed-consent.pdf>

³⁹ Maggie Mort et al., « The Health and Social Consequences of the 2001 Foot & Mouth Disease Epidemic in North Cumbria. Archiving the Study Data: Background guide for users », Lancaster, Lancaster University, 2006. <http://doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/5407/mrdoc/pdf/q5407userguide.pdf>.

they support the development of appropriate archiving processes. In view of sustainable research and the creation of value from data, research funders in Germany support the development of infrastructures and expect them to professionalize their services for data preservation. The Data Service Centre Qualiservice at University of Bremen, which is adapting its work flows to ethnographic materials, expects consent for data archiving and sharing to be available in written or audio-visual form. Alternative solutions should be offered for older ethnographic materials or for missing documentation of consent. Data repositories in Anglophone countries, which have a longer tradition of archiving ethnographic materials, work also with embargoes spanning several decades. Data archives in Germany can benefit from their experiences e.g. by involving research partners and groups in decisions on embargoes and access to research materials.⁴⁰

3 Gaining consent: obligatory, appropriate, unnecessary, or impossible?

Ethnographic fieldwork is a largely non-standardised, informal, and first of all relational practice, conducted in complex dynamic real-life settings. The « ability to see social life as it unfolds rather than as we imagined it »⁴¹ is the primary benefit of this in-situ observation. It is characterised by a particular openness, sometimes also described as « messy process »⁴². But, it forms a methodological program that allows adjustments to unpredictable developments in the course of research, and provides a flexible framework for a huge variety of fields, cultural contexts, settings and scenarios and a heterogeneity of themes and approaches.⁴³

In the light of legal regulations, including data protection laws, personality rights, and even intellectual property rights, it is becoming difficult for social and cultural anthropologists to decide when consent is required. Data protection refers to personal data, and legally speaking, it is well defined what « personal » means.⁴⁴ However, in which research scenarios is one dealing with such information? In qualitative sociological research, recommendations as to

⁴⁰ Lisa Cliggett « Preservation, Sharing, and Technological Challenges of Longitudinal Research in the Digital Age » in Roger Sanjek, Susan W. Tratner (eds.), *eFieldnotes: The Makings of Anthropology in the Digital World*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. 231-250. See also Robert Leopold, « The second life of ethnographic fieldnotes », *Ateliers d'Anthropologie*, 2008, 32. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ateliers.3132>.

⁴¹ Charles L. Bosk, « The New Bureaucracies of Virtue or When Form Fails to Follow Function », *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 2007, 30 (2), p. 192-209, see p. 194.

⁴² See most recently Alexandra Plows, « Introduction. Coming Clean About Messy Ethnography », in Alexandra Plows (ed.) *Messy Ethnographies in Action*. Wilmington, Delaware 2018, xiii-xxv. See also John Van Maanen, *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988, see p. 147.

⁴³ Michi Knecht, « Nach Writing Culture, mit Actor-Network. Ethnographie/Praxeographie im Feld der Wissenschafts-, Medizin- und Technikanthropologie », in Sabine Hess, Johannes Moser, Maria Schwertl (eds.), *Europäisch-ethnologisches Forschen. Neue Methoden und Konzepte*, Berlin 2013, p. 79-106.

⁴⁴ See Oliver Watteler, Thomas Ebel, « Datenschutz im Forschungsdatenmanagement », in Uwe Jensen, Sebastian Netscher, Katrin Weller (eds.), *Forschungsdatenmanagement sozialwissenschaftlicher Umfragedaten: Grundlagen und praktische Lösungen für den Umgang mit quantitativen Forschungsdaten*, Opladen, Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2019, p. 57-80.

how to gain informed consent usually refer to interviews.⁴⁵ Because of detailed, aim-oriented research designs, and the use of interview guides, interview-based studies often take on a more formal character and atmosphere: time is arranged, a room as quiet as possible is provided, and a technical recording is made.

Even if qualitative sociologists or oral historians have elaborated the difficulties implied when informing and gaining consent from interview partners⁴⁶, conducting interviews and the expectations on interviewers and interviewees are more standardised than in several ethnographic research scenarios. In such cases, providing information cannot be handled as a « one-way street », granting certain rights and taking particular precautions. This applies especially to the countless and heterogeneous informal unstructured real-life situations in ethnographic fieldwork, while observing events of citizens' action groups in Berlin⁴⁷ or talking with workers in German department stores during coffee breaks.⁴⁸ To get « comprehensive informed consent from everyone present can be difficult, if not impossible. »⁴⁹ But just those situations are open for serendipity, and can form the basis for unexpected relationships, sudden insights, and new knowledge, but also create the need for continuing reflection: To avoid conducting covert research⁵⁰ it is necessary to engage constantly in conversations with research partners.

Similar uncertainties may arise when conducting research in public space. Informed consent is recommended but not necessarily required, even if recording technologies are used. According to the German law regulating the copyright for works of art, also conclusive behaviour like posing, nodding or smiling is considered as a clear and unambiguous affirmative act to be filmed or photographed in more or less public space.⁵¹

Maren Heibges et.al. suggest scaling the expectations on privacy to judge whether and to what extent consent is needed: the more privacy one wants of a situation (e.g. a therapeutic session) the more important becomes informed consent.⁵² This can be helpful when ethnographers and

⁴⁵ See Tobias Gebel et al, « Verboten ist, was nicht ausdrücklich erlaubt ist: Datenschutz in qualitativen Interviews », *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2015, 16 (2). <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs1502279>.

⁴⁶ See e.g. Rose Wiles et al., « Informed Consent and the Research Process: Following Rules or Striking Balances? », *Sociological Research Online*, 2007, 12 (2), p. 99-110. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.1208>. And Almut Leh, « Forschungsethische Probleme in der Zeitzeugenforschung », *BIOS*, 2000, 13 (1), p. 64-76, see p. 70.

⁴⁷ Beate Binder, *Streitfall Stadtmitte. Der Berliner Schlossplatz*, Köln, Weimar, Böhlau Verlag, 2009.

⁴⁸ Götz Bachmann, *Kollegialität: eine Ethnografie der Belegschaftskultur im Kaufhaus*, Frankfurt/M., Campus Verlag, 2014.

⁴⁹ See Hella von Unger, Hansjörg Dilger, Michael Schönhuth, 2016, *op. cit.*, see paragraph 12.

⁵⁰ Dvora Yanow, Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, « Framing 'deception' and 'covertness' in research: Do Milgram, Humphreys, and Zimbardo justify regulating social science research ethics? », *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2018, 19 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/fqs-19.3.3102>.

⁵¹ See § 22 KunstUrhG. See also Diana Papademas, The International Visual Sociology Association, « IVSA Code of Research Ethics and Guidelines », *Visual Studies*, 2009, 24 (3), p. 250-257, see p. 256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860903309187>.

⁵² The framework is formulated with regard to ethnographic research on human-computer-interaction. See Maren Heibges, Frauke Mörike, Markus A. Feufel, « Wann braucht Ethnografie eine Einverständniserklärung? Praktische Antworten auf ethische Fragen zu ethnografischen Methoden in der HCI-Forschung », *Mensch und Computer 2019 - Workshopband*, Bonn, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.18420/muc2019-ws-258-02>.

participants share the same understanding of privacy. A similar multilevel approach was chosen for an internet-based ethnography with Wikipedia authors. As long as materials and interactions were unpublished, explicit consent was sought for collecting and analysing the information. For publicly accessible documents and interaction, informed consent was estimated either appropriate, non-essential or unnecessary, depending on the sensitivity of content and the feasibility of gaining consent.⁵³ Even though digital ethnography and research online has increased enormously during the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁴, internet-based research especially in social networks is a more or less new approach for many ethnographers, raising 'old' privacy and ethics issues in specific ways. Accordingly, recommendations for conducting digital ethnography in ethically appropriate ways are manifold: Similar to Heibges et.al. legal experts recommend distinguishing between open and closed social media, and being guided by users' expectations of confidentiality, especially when the size of groups involved does not permit informed consent. They also distinguish between static content - with a lower need for protection due to stronger control of the users themselves - and dynamic content.⁵⁵ In contexts where public and private are in a state of flux or difficult to interpret, researchers are encouraged to provide information via several channels - e.g. research blogs, own accounts and an email address - and proceed step by step in negotiating the terms of participation and then cross-checking with research peers.⁵⁶ Likewise, Janet Salmons recommends using « the visual interactive ways of communicating online to inform and engage potential participants » and provides a list of questions specified for the consent process in online research.⁵⁷ In all, research in online spaces imposes requirements akin to usual ethnographic research: Researchers will need good knowledge and tactfulness to decide on disclosing information and keeping information confidential.⁵⁸

Social and cultural anthropologists understand informed consent as an « exercise in communication ».⁵⁹ But, it is not always clear, what informed means. In the social sciences, discussions on what and how to communicate to interlocutors have therefore often revolved

⁵³ Christian Pentzold, « 'What are these researchers doing in my Wikipedia?': Ethical premises and practical judgment in internet-based ethnography », *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2017, 19 (2), p. 143-155. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-017-9423-7>.

⁵⁴ Many posts on the boasblog 'Fieldwork meets crisis', for example, talk about this. <https://boasblogs.org/fieldworkmeetscrisis/>.

⁵⁵ Social media set up specifically for research purposes are a type of their own. See Sebastian J. Golla, Henning Hofmann, Matthias Bäcker, « Connecting the Dots. Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschung in Sozialen Online-Medien im Lichte von DS-GVO und BDSG-neu », *Datenschutz und Datensicherheit*, 2018, 42, p. 89–100. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11623-018-0900-x>.

⁵⁶ Katrin Tiidenberg, « Ethics in Digital Research », in Uwe Flick (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, London: SAGE, 2018, p. 466-479.

⁵⁷ Janet Salmons, *Doing Qualitative Research Online*, London: SAGE, 2016, see p. 80-82.

⁵⁸ See e.g. Crystal Abidin « Somewhere Between Here and There: Negotiating Researcher Visibility in a Digital Ethnography of the Influencer Industry », *Journal of Digital Social Research*, 2020, 2 (1), p. 56-76, see p. 70.

⁵⁹ Miguel N. Alexiades, Daniela Peluso, « Annex 7.1: prior informed consent: the anthropology and politics of cross-cultural exchange », in Sarah A. Laird (ed.) *Biodiversity and traditional knowledge: equitable partnerships in practice*, New York, Earthscan, 2002, p. 221-227, see. p. 225.

around the accuracy, completeness and comprehensiveness of information. Besides basic information about the research project or participants' rights, researchers ought to inform about risks that might arise. In contrast e.g. to psychological experiments, the prevailing risk in ethnographic research, whether in face-to-face interactions or in online research rather relates to « informational risk », i.e. that private information could be made public.⁶⁰

As standardized consent forms and information sheets use standardized wording, written forms are not suitable for adequate communication in many cases. Seeking meaningful consent, oral explanations can ensure that content is communicated in clear and plain language. Especially in research projects with illiterate or semi-literate persons, orally transmitted information is inevitable. Moreover, negotiating on the conditions of participating in a research project and the handling of data is associated with improved understanding, better rapport and trust.⁶¹

If field access is established with the help of gatekeepers, distributing information to different participants sometimes turns out very challenging. Relying on gatekeepers - and using their credibility - often means that researchers need less informational work: « my gatekeeper [...] was considered alright, so I and my project must be alright ».⁶² Then again, it can also imply that researchers do not have full control over what information is passed on when and to whom. When studying hard-to-reach groups or hidden communities, there is in fact often no getting around gatekeepers. In a study on militia movements in West Africa, Danny Hoffman describes that he at no point could be sure that the dependency on his research assistant and translator Mohammed Tarawalley, a prominent high-ranking member of a fighting group, adversely affected the voluntary nature of other warriors' consent. Insofar such groups « functioned as large patronage networks », younger lower-ranking members possibly felt compelled to consent. But, without the permission of a militia commander they might not have participated in the research.⁶³

Passing information to research participants necessarily remains a subjective matter to be individually judged by the researcher.⁶⁴ As the example on the militia movement indicates, particular questions may arise from ethnographic research with groups, communities as well as in organisations like companies, schools and governmental agencies. Such organisations often have their own guidelines and policies. Likewise, some indigenous communities have set their own conditions and standard protocols of consenting research. Such a collective consent

⁶⁰ Tom Boellstorff et al., *Ethnography and virtual worlds: A handbook of method*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 131 ff.

⁶¹ Elisa J. Gordon, « When Oral Consent Will Do », *Field Methods*, 2000, 12 (3), p. 235-238.

⁶² David Tittensor, « Doing political ethnography in a difficult climate: A Turkish case study », *Ethnography*, 2016, 17 (2), p. 213-228, see p. 223.

⁶³ Danny Hoffman, Mohammed Tarawalley, « Frontline collaborations: The research relationship in unstable places », *Ethnography*, 2014, 15 (3), p. 291-310.

⁶⁴ See Rena Lederman, « Comparative 'Research': A Modest Proposal concerning the Object of Ethics Regulation », *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 2007, 30 (2), p. 305-327, see p. 310.

guarantees self-determination and control over the distribution of traditional knowledge.⁶⁵ Recently, the CARE principles also call for respecting indigenous rights when handling research data.⁶⁶ Research in organisations or institutions usually requires consent at multiple levels, with administrative authorities, executive or management boards, smaller units or entities, and individual persons. Navigating these fields can be complex and confusing, not least because issues of general admittance, research ethics and data protection are closely entangled. However, all collective consent needs to pay attention to hierarchies and status differences regarding gender or class « that disempower the individual ».⁶⁷ Complexity is also seen in online research, where one needs not only the consent from research participants or groups but also the permission from a moderator as well as the permission from websites or platforms. In some cases, people may want to be cited, then it's not a privacy issue but an intellectual property issue. Insofar, every single case needs its own strategy for negotiating consent.

In some cases, such a multi-level procedure can be a time-consuming exercise. José Luis Molina et al.⁶⁸ cite the example of a project on Rumanian migrants and their transnational networks in Spain. Before contacting the migrants directly, the researchers organised meetings with associations of Rumanian diaspora, the local churches and the municipal council to gain access to the events and festivities of the migrant community. Only after having become acquaintances with the Rumanian migrants did the researchers distribute information sheets and consent forms. Documentation took place throughout this process, producing data on the social organization of migrants. At the end, negotiating on the conditions of participating in the research project was thus not a waste of time. How formal or informal the process of gaining consent can be, depends not least on how large a researched group is.

If researchers want to archive their data for long-term access and preservation, explicit consent is required based on ethical requirements, legislation, and the guidelines of professional associations and data archives. Questions about time, scope and extent of the consent arise here once again as well as questions about the anthropologists' personal responsibility for careful handling of data. Social and cultural anthropologists remain slightly optimistic that

⁶⁵ Charles R. Menzies, Caroline F. Butler, « Collaborative Service Learning and Anthropology with Gitxaala Nation », *Collaborative Anthropologies*, 2011, 4, p. 169-242, see p. 173 f. Moreover, Robert Leopold, 2008, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Complementary to FAIR data (**f**indable, **a**ccessible, **i**nteroperable, **r**eusable) CARE calls for the consideration of **c**ollective benefit, **a**uthority to control, **r**esponsibility and **e**thics. See Stephanie Russo Carroll et al., « The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance », *Data Science Journal*, 2020, 19, p. 1-12. <http://doi.org/10.5334/dsj-2020-043>.

⁶⁷ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, « Anthropology and Ethics. », in Didier Fassin (ed.), *A Companion to Moral Anthropology*, Chichester, West Sussex, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 103-114, see p. 110.

⁶⁸ José Luis Molina et al., « El consentimiento informado en investigaciones sobre poblaciones vulnerables y/o culturalmente diversas », Pre-Print, Libro de Ponencias y Comunicaciones del V Congreso de ANCEI, Valencia 17-18 Mayo, 2018. https://www.uab.cat/doc/DOC_Ponencia_Conjunta_ANCEI_CI_20180517. See also <https://pagines.uab.cat/orbits/en>.

prolonged field stays will allow them to responsibly judge on which research materials to archive and on what conditions. However, particularly the infinite possibilities for reusing archived materials also leave them in doubt whether consent for archiving can be sufficiently discussed with research participants.⁶⁹ « Are we, as researchers, able to see all future implications? »⁷⁰ Regarding databases like DOBES (Documentation of Endangered Languages), the overall context, within which a single recording is embedded, can change insofar as the database is constantly growing over years.⁷¹ The National Anthropological Archives in the United States has worked with donor agreements on restricted access in order to meet such challenges. In response to requests from native communities, they plea for more ‘open’ methods that allow reviewing and modifying such agreements at the responsibility of the archives or by a joint decision.⁷² Moreover, scholars and data professionals have pointed to the fact that information provided is often inadequate insofar as questions concerning authorship and ownership of ethnographic materials remain.⁷³ Consent is never all-encompassing, but nevertheless, it should be possible to archive ethnographic data. Appropriate solutions to this dilemma are currently lacking.

4 Alternative approaches to consenting

From an ethical perspective, it is « the quality of the consent, not its format, which is relevant ».⁷⁴ Building mutual trust and confidence cannot be replaced by any other means. This means that flexible forms of consenting should meet the legal requirements as well as the heterogeneous research practices. To achieve this while preserving the quality and the potential social value of ethnographic fieldwork, French anthropologist Didier Fassin had already in 2006 called to invent appropriate principles and practices for consent in sociology and anthropology rather than adopting - criticized and complained - models coming from biomedical research.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ David Zeitlyn, « Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates », *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2012, 41 (1), p. 461-480, see p. 471. See also Libby Bishop, « Ethical Sharing and Reuse of Qualitative Data », *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 2009, 44 (3), p. 255-272, see p. 262.

⁷⁰ See Thomas Widlok, 2013, *op. cit.*, see p. 16. Similar considerations are made in oral history research. See Linde Apel, « Oral History reloaded. Zur Zweitauswertung von mündlichen Quellen », *Westfälische Forschungen*, 2015, 65, p. 243-254.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² See Robert Leopold, 2008, *op. cit.*

⁷³ Andrew Asher, Lori M. Jahnke, « Curating the Ethnographic Moment », 2013. <https://www.archivejournal.net/essays/curating-the-ethnographic-moment/>.

⁷⁴ Robert Albro, Dena Plemmons, « Obtain Informed Consent and Necessary Permission », in Dena Plemmons, Alex W. Barker (eds.), *Anthropological Ethics in Context: An Ongoing Dialogue*, Walnut Creek, Left Coast Press, 2016, p. 119-144, see p. 120. See also Sabine Imeri, « Archivierung und Verantwortung: Zum Stand der Debatte über den Umgang mit Forschungsdaten in den ethnologischen Fächern », in Bettina Hollstein, Jörg Strübing (eds.), *Archivierung und Zugang zu Qualitativen Daten. RatSWD Working Paper 267/2018*, Berlin, Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten, p. 69-79. <https://doi.org/10.17620/02671.35>.

⁷⁵ Didier Fassin, « The End of Ethnography as Collateral Damage of Ethical Regulation? », *American Ethnologist*, 2006, 33 (4), p. 522-524.

Although the GDPR is a generally applicable law within the European Union, national laws affect the possible ways of handling informed consent during fieldwork.⁷⁶ Some European universities have e.g. set up guidelines for specifying research scenarios, demonstrating a general awareness of the special needs of ethnographic (and other) research. The University of Oxford's Research Ethics Committee states e.g. cases in which oral consent may be acceptable. These refer to literacy, cultural or political concerns, security issues or time constraints. The committee recommends the recording of oral consent but it also provides for a template for self-documentation of oral consent.⁷⁷ Although this template focuses primarily on interviews, it suggests detailed steps in dialogue form to obtain consent. The Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona exempts research with vulnerable or culturally diverse groups from written consent. The position paper is based on the experiences and project evaluations by the local Research Ethics Committee.⁷⁸ It does not apply to research projects involving minors or illegal activities. In referring to participant observation, the authors recommend the gradual gaining of informed consent, from conclusive behaviour at the beginning of research to formal and written consent at a later stage of the research process. Instructive recommendations and strong arguments against obligatory written consent come from the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University.⁷⁹ Even though universities in Germany don't require ethical or data protection reviews for ethnographic research so far, these pioneers could serve as a model for research institutions, funding organisations and disciplinary associations. In a recently published guidance note, even the European Commission in its role as a major funder has noticed that in certain research contexts strategies for consenting must go beyond written forms. The Commission specifically recommends using oral consent, albeit only in conjunction with a vote by a Research Ethics Committee. The Commission also recommends seeking support from cultural insiders or NGOs when gaining consent from vulnerable groups such as refugees, asylum seekers or migrants.⁸⁰ From such considerations could emerge models for many fieldwork scenarios. Not least, data archives and repositories like the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences FORS or the Research Data Centre Qualiservice in Germany provide guidelines and informed consent templates to researchers.⁸¹ They are a fairly new player regarding informed

⁷⁶ Scott Summers et al., « Legal and Ethical Considerations in Sharing Data », in Louise Corti et al. (eds.), *Managing and Sharing Research Data: A Guide to Good Practice*, (2nd edition), London, SAGE, 2020, p. 159-195, see p. 178.

⁷⁷ <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources/consent#collapse281101>, for the script see <https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/files/templateoralconsentdocx>.

⁷⁸ See José Luis Molina et al., 2018, *op. cit.*

⁷⁹ See e.g. Institute for Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University, n. d., *op. cit.*

⁸⁰ European Commission - Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, « Guidance Note - Research on Refugees, Asylum Seekers & Migrants. General Principles. v1.1. », 2020.

https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/guide_research-refugees-migrants_en.pdf.

⁸¹ Sybil Krügel, « The informed consent as legal and ethical basis of research data production », *FORS Guide No. 05*, Version 1.0, Lausanne, Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences FORS, 2019.

<http://doi.org/10.24449/FG-2019-00005>. And Susanne Kretzer et al., « Erläuterungen zur Verwendung der von

consent in German speaking countries, with their own standards and regulations on how and to what extent consent needs to be documented. They are not only service providers, but important partners in the development of legally and ethically acceptable solutions to the long-term preservation of ethnographic research material. Recent guidelines developed by a German consortium of members of research data archives, research data managers and researchers in the social sciences clearly recommend multi-stage consent procedures for primary qualitative research and data sharing.⁸²

5 Conclusion and outlook

Ethnographic fieldwork is inseparably embedded in a certain time and place as well as in social and cultural relations. The examples above show the wide range and differences that have to be covered by shared regulations and procedures. Nevertheless, a certain standardization of procedures might be beneficial. We recommend developing models that are shared and accepted within the anthropological communities - as a basis for research as well as for the evaluation by ethics committees and data protection officers.

First of all, it should be irrelevant when consent is given. Gaining access in written form can be the preferred way when it is safe to do so. Researchers shall take reasonable care to check whether written consent is actual a meaningful consent in their field or in certain situations. Recorded oral consent on audio or even on video tape combined with oral explanations may replace a signed form. It can be expected that forms of oral informed consent will remain a standard practice as it is common in many research contexts. Therefore, the Institute of Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University proposes yet another format: oral consent with a written resp. printed sheet containing all relevant information, and without recording. In case of mutual understanding between respondents and anthropologists, it is conceivable to turn this sheet into a written consent form in the course of research.⁸³ But if not, there is no proof of consent that could be submitted to a third party. This can be a burden especially for doctoral students or less experienced field researchers. However, regarding highly precarious cases, it might be necessary to develop a similar procedure that does not demand a signature, a tape recording or printed information at all. This would require strict self-documentation by the researcher about what was said to whom and when and how the consent was expressed. From our perspective, such a procedure is not conceivable without

Qualiservice bereitgestellten Vorlagen für die informierte Einwilligung », *Qualiservice Working Papers*, 2020, 2. <https://doi.org/10.26092/elib/192>.

⁸² Isabel Steinhardt et al., « Opening up and Sharing Data from Qualitative Research: A Primer », *Weizenbaum Series*, 2021, 17. <https://doi.org/10.34669/WI.WS/17>.

⁸³ See e.g. Institute for Anthropology and Development Sociology at Leiden University, n. d., *op. cit.*

close contact and regular consultation with supervisors or qualified peers. Professional organisations should discuss such options and define the conditions of their application.

Moreover, different forms of consent may be required within a single research project. What is adequate depends first of all on the research context and the conditions on site. Furthermore, it can be helpful to link the form of consent to the methods used and accepted in the field. Can conversations or interviews be recorded or not? Do researchers only use oral methods or methods where participants are invited to draw or write? Decision-making could be easier, if the ways to gain informed consent are similar to the kind of methods applied. This also applies to digital ethnography. However, decisions on what the appropriate form of documenting consent is, cannot be made by the researcher alone, but is a necessary part of negotiations. As the examples above have shown, consenting is not an externalised obligation but integral part of the social practice of field research. In this sense, it is necessary to train and strengthen young researchers' ethical judgement already during their studies.

Not least, social and cultural anthropologists make substantial pledges to their interlocutors during the consent process. In view of the technologically open future and the possibilities for cross-linking data, these promises maybe cannot be kept. This raises important methodological and theoretical questions on how research relationships, ethically justifiable and legally secure procedures, and ultimately possible research findings will or must change in the coming years.

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About Qualiservice.

The Research Data Center Qualiservice archives and provides qualitative research data from the social sciences for scientific reuse. Our services include personalized and study-specific advice, and curation and processing of your data for reuse and long-term archiving. We also provide research data and relevant context information for scientific reuses in research and teaching. Internationally interoperable metadata ensure that all data sets are searchable and findable. Persistent identifiers (DOI) ensure that data and study contexts are permanently citable.

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