

Fieldwork research challenged: constraints, needs and opportunities

Scholars are increasingly aware that fieldwork research in conflict-prone, politically unstable or authoritarian areas can pose specific risks. To respond, at least in part, to such risks, new regulations and restrictions have emerged. While it is imperative that safety and security be taken seriously, it is a fact that emerging regulations are often contradictory, imported from other research fields without an assessment of their impact and likely to unevenly affect research agendas. Policy relevant research is increasingly on demand to respond to the needs of policy-makers in a rapidly changing world, but the new regulations impact precisely where ethnographic approaches are most useful and needed: in explaining social and political change in times and spaces of uncertainty.

At the same time technological developments, by lowering the costs of communication and team coordination, disclose new opportunities for digital ethnography, data analysis and storage, but also open up/generate new forms of control and surveillance, thereby raising questions about the ethical and professional implications of relying on open-source data-mining.

As the conditions for the (re)production of knowledge are exposed to unprecedented stressors, challenges and opportunities, it is important to raise awareness about the changing conditions in which we gain and maintain access to the field.

Over the past few years social science researchers and academics have often voiced the need for a public debate on which measures are most appropriate for their fieldwork to be safe. In particular, they lament the fact that they are hardly consulted in the process of adopting new regulations and procedures that have an impact on knowledge production. To this end, scholars at the EUI-RSCAS, Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna and Scuola Normale Superiore have promoted since January 2017 opportunities of exchange with a view to identifying needs, setting common expectations and building a collaborative platform on these themes.

As part of this continuing exchange, the above parties convened in Fiesole on 7 May 2019. The objective was to discuss best practices to address the emerging challenges of site-intensive social science research with a view to engaging policy-makers, research funding institutions, universities (ethics committees included), and researchers themselves in order to further mitigate any problems encountered by researchers in the field.

The following action points have been identified:

Action points

1. Encouraging Dialogue and Establishing a Common Approach

Inter/intra-university dialogue between researchers, ethic review boards, heads of research, as well as research funding agencies, sharing concern for improving existing standards and procedures. This includes ensuring that the membership of the ethical review boards assessing academic projects includes academics provided with sound understanding of ethnographic methods, and not only lawyers and/or consultants.

In particular, the following axes could be developed:

- Universities should provide participatory mechanisms to carry out risk assessment, encouraging peer-review, self-awareness and value-maximisation of academic resources, as well as extend the risk assessment procedures to the publication strategy, so as to better balance the ambition to policy relevance with the risks of political connotation.
- Raise awareness of the issues addressed here by reaching out to existing social science associations, makes sure methodological challenges are debated and our concerns are shared and represented in existing fora and debate.
- Mapping ongoing projects and initiatives geared to give instruments for field researchers in a changing research environment, new constraints and opportunities.

2. Sharing Best Practices and Streamlining Procedures

Share best practices and discuss with a view to harmonising procedures of risk assessment and mitigation. This should entail considering the requirements of university administration (such as duty of care), the specific needs of fieldwork research in the social sciences, while bearing in mind the differences between what is ethically and legally permitted. This includes:

- Ensuring flexibility to avoid a superficial checklist approach;
- Ensuring that the ownership of risk assessment procedures for fieldwork research is not entirely delegated to non-academic bodies of general purpose – such as the travel advice offices of foreign affairs ministries, consultancies and travel agencies;
- Ensuring that risk assessment procedures are systematically accompanied by mitigation and contingency measures
- Supporting the creation of risk mitigation focal points in universities to address risk contingencies and encouraging collaboration between universities to develop contingency plans;

3. Promoting Training and Preparing for Fieldwork

Promote and organize more opportunities for training and capacity building, both in the form of ordinary courses and specific events and summer schools:

- Research ethics in the social sciences
- Safety and security in ethnographic methods (for supervisors and researchers)
- Digital methods: constraints and opportunities
- Data protection and data transparency
- Legal framework, compliance and constraints (the duty of care: the who and how of research staff, supervisees, research partners, research targets).
- This entails a serious understanding of additional costs. Consider the possibility to lower, for example insurance cost, by acting collectively.

4. Raising Awareness of the Various Actors Involved

Raising awareness about the need for appropriate criteria to ensure the informed consent of research targets. This includes:

- More flexibility on written informed consent, accept to replace with oral consent where necessary;
- Balance the requirement for replicability and transparency with those for data protection, duty of care and context sensitivity;
- Greater awareness of how the security of your informants is intimately related to your own personal security
- Provide for greater support and flexibility in assisting the issuance of visa to third countries for research purposes. A rigid approach to full disclosure and transparency can be counterproductive and detrimental to the conduct of ethical research.

It is intended that this document acts as a starting point for further rumination over this topic, with a view to finding new and better ways to raise awareness and proceed in order to ensure the safety of researchers.