

## DATAMANAGEMENT FOR ANTHROPOLOGISTS AND ETHNOGRAPHERS

### A position paper of the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

From the first comprehensive codification of ethics in anthropology onwards,<sup>1</sup> anthropologists and ethnographers felt primarily responsible in their management of data towards the people they study. Ethnographers recognize that social research is necessarily based in social relationships and therefore has to be built on a qualitative, intersubjective and value-laden foundation, usually based on mutual trust. Ethnographers therefore acknowledge that all social scientific data are *co-produced* by researchers and researched.<sup>2</sup> The co-production of data implies that data are rarely fully owned by either researcher or researched. The first duty towards science of anthropologists and ethnographers is therefore to recognize this joint production and joint ownership of data. All forms and norms of managing data depend on it.<sup>3</sup>

The collaborative nature of ethnographic research highlights several complexities of social research in general. The recording of data, whether in written, oral or visual form, is a form of collaboration to which participants have given their consent during fieldwork, including conditions pertaining to analysis and publication. *Researchers should continue to treat data as collaborative for as long as they work with this material.* Although the degree of involvement of research participants in the analysis and publication of data is variable, these two aspects of the scientific process are commonly understood as the prerogative of the ethnographer.<sup>4</sup> Yet this prerogative comes with both epistemological, methodological and ethical implications.

The first implication has already been mentioned: data are fully ‘owned’ neither by the researcher nor by the people researched. The second implication is that the individual researcher can and should be held responsible for the integrity, preservation and protection of the data gathered during a specific research project like any other caretaker of collective property or disciplinary standards. Thirdly, “[r]esearchers have an ethical responsibility to take precautions that raw data and collected materials will not be used for unauthorized ends”.<sup>5</sup> The individual researcher therefore has the duty to subordinate the sharing of data with third parties (including other scientists, also in cases of investigating fraud) to the recognition of the collaborative nature of data.

Questions of authorizing data from a collaborative relationship and sharing those data beyond that relationship confront anthropologists and ethnographers with a range of possibilities, depending on the kinds of social relationship in which they engage when co-producing or sharing the data. These

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<sup>1</sup> The “Principles of Professional Responsibility” of the American Anthropological Association, adopted in 1971 (see the reprint and discussion in Fluehr-Lobban [1991]).

<sup>2</sup> See, for some of the first statements of this epistemological condition, Fabian (1971, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Ethnographers therefore should not recognize, in the management of data, a contradiction between a duty towards science (as emphasized by, for example, the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice of the VSNU) and a duty towards research participants (as emphasized by, for example, the code of ethics of the American Anthropological Association). While both positions and codes of conduct contain useful ethical principles and advice, our current statement as a whole responds to the injunction to “apply or justify” such ethical principles by outlining the situations specific to our discipline (see VSNU, *Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice*, preamble, §5, <http://www.vsnul.nl/files/documenten/Domeinen/Onderzoek/The%20Netherlands%20Code%20of%20Conduct%20for%20Academic%20Practice%202004%20%28version%202014%29.pdf> [accessed March 19, 2015]).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mosse (2006).

<sup>5</sup> The AAA 2012 Statement on Ethics, <http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics/>.

possibilities vary from full ownership of their own “voice” by people studied (analogous to formal intellectual or cultural property), through a variety of forms of authority over co-produced data (for example, when recorded by interviewing, photographing or film), to data individually authorized by the researcher (such as records of observation in public spaces). In each case, consent in the co-production of data is (re-) negotiated constantly from the beginning of field research. It cannot be ascertained once and for all by the contractual gesture of a form signed in advance. Informed consent in ethnography is based on the incremental *change* of information obtained in the course of research, both by the people researched and the researcher(s) involved, and not least because third parties intervene in the research relationship or form a new audience for it.<sup>6</sup> Even when the (re-) negotiation of consent usually stops at the end of fieldwork, ethnographers are responsible for making sure that changing forms of consent are reckoned with when data are used in research reports. They should also make sure that data are only shared with third parties (other scientists, the general public) in ways that stay true to these forms of consent. Anthropologists can act “anti-socially” (that is, violate a consent relationship obtained during research) with justification when this is trumped by considerations of greater scientific or social relevance.<sup>7</sup> This, however, implies having clear reasons that state why the claim to ownership can be trumped in the specific relationship concerned.<sup>8</sup>

“Anthropologists should determine record ownership relating to each project and make appropriate arrangements accordingly as a standard part of ethical practice. This may include establishing by whom and how records will be stored, preserved, or disposed of in the long term.”<sup>9</sup> In the case of collaborative data, record ownership is necessarily plural and collective. In most cases, this implies that researchers keep records in their personal possession, and decide on a case-to-case basis whether data can be shared with third parties such as other scientists. Protection of data has become routine to the extent that in recent funding applications, researchers normally specify the norm to store digital data behind passwords. However, researchers have a primary duty to accede to requests for sharing data by people studied, unless they have reason to suspect this will harm or put at risk the (personal) safety or wellbeing of (individual members of) a group researched. PhD-students and their supervisors may confidentially share data gathered personally by the former (if only because supervisors are meant to coach PhD-students in the proper management of data), but supervisors should guard that trust as sacredly as when they engaged with their own research participants. In collective research projects, where sharing of primary data from PhD- or other research is part of the analysis, research data should initially be stored, preserved and disposed of in files not accessible to researchers other than those working on the project. In the case of audio-visual data, due to the fact that persons recorded by them remain recognizable and that the impact of making them public is often more consciously dealt with by local communities, a common practice is to follow up initial consent by people studied with a reaffirmation by their viewing of the finished product, and by

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<sup>6</sup> The portrayal of research ethics in terms of a dyad of researcher and researched is a late colonial fiction that anthropologists often persist in maintaining (Pels 2014; Pels & Salemink 1999).

<sup>7</sup> See Mosse (2006).

<sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily rule out the possibility of doing clandestine or secret research (that is, obtaining data without sufficient informed consent), but it emphasizes that in the history of anthropology and its involvement with intelligence gathering and corporate research, or with ‘repugnant others’, the overruling of informed consent obtained from people researched was based on political or economic values external to the theoretical or methodological considerations of science (see, among others, Harding [1991]; Kelly et al. [2010]).

<sup>9</sup> The AAA 2012 Statement on Ethics, <http://www.aaanet.org/profdev/ethics/>.

negotiations about ownership of and access to the recordings, conditions of publication, and copyrights of the eventually published film. For research that involves the collection of data in the form of items of material culture, ethnographers commonly follow the best ethical practices of ethnographic museums.<sup>10</sup> Ethnographic data are increasingly gathered, produced, stored, circulated, and shared digitally through online third party services. This can create additional concerns regarding ownership, privacy and safety of research data, especially where researchers should exercise caution in choosing to whom they entrust the research material. In the online collection of ethnographic data ethnographers should adhere to both the ethical standards that pertain within the discipline and the considerations outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers.<sup>11</sup>

Many recent discussions about datamanagement are more concerned with the possibility of sharing data with third parties as a means to prevent scientific fraud than with the sharing of data with the aim to enhance scientific insight. These two goals have to be sharply distinguished: the second goal, which governs our statement, treats scientific research as essentially based on and impossible without mutual trust, whereas the first assumes distrust from the start. Sharing data can be a means to track down scientific fraud, and ethnographers should do so where this is ethically possible. Recent cases where scientific fraud was suspected, however, do not support the hypothesis that the publication of raw data will help to detect fraud more easily or prevent it from being committed. In the case of social psychologist Diederik Stapel, it was the failure of peer review that allowed fraud to blossom, and courageous peer review of the unlikely consistency of published data that brought fraud to light. It was confirmed by public confession rather than the inspection of fraudulent data.<sup>12</sup> In the case of anthropologist Mart Bax, the process where fraud had to be investigated was started when a journalist published about the inadequate follow-up on instances of negative peer review of implausible published research findings. The resulting diagnosis was that existing mechanisms of peer review at the time had been insufficiently implemented, and are much more firmly in place today.<sup>13</sup> In both cases, the normal procedures of proper scientific conduct – such as methodological accounting in published research reports; and peer review by both thematic and regional experts – seems sufficient to safeguard the reliability of results and prevent fraud from happening if they are faithfully implemented.

In the light of the collaborative nature of data, the increasing demand to include a Datamanagementplan (DMP) in applications for funding should therefore result in ethnographers adding the following clauses to their research proposal:

- the data gathered are the property of individual researchers or are held in trust by them to protect the interests of people studied or be returned to them, unless otherwise stipulated;
- they are stored and preserved by individual researchers until their retirement from actual research reporting, when they will be returned to people studied or destroyed, unless otherwise stipulated;

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<sup>10</sup> For material culture, see, for example, <http://arts.gov.au/collections/best-practice>. In the case of the collection of both audio-visual and material culture data, their public viewing can be protected in some countries by privacy laws and collective property jurisprudence, which may shift the ethical discussion to the legal field.

<sup>11</sup> See Ess et al. (2002), and Markham and Buchanan (2012).

<sup>12</sup> See Levelt Committee et al. (2012). Available at <http://www.tilburguniversity.edu/nl/actueel/commissie-levelt.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> See Baud, Legène and Pels (2013). Available at [http://www.vu.nl/en/Images/20131112%20Rapport%20Commissie%20Baud%20Engelse%20versie%20definitief\\_tcm12-365093.pdf](http://www.vu.nl/en/Images/20131112%20Rapport%20Commissie%20Baud%20Engelse%20versie%20definitief_tcm12-365093.pdf).

- no third parties have a right to demand access to ethnographic research data except in the strictest confidentiality, unless otherwise stipulated.

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