

DGEKW Position Paper on Research Ethics *

Preamble

This position paper outlines fundamental questions of research ethics that arise for researchers in the fields of (Empirical) Cultural Analysis/European Ethnology (ECA/EE) in their research activities and provides an overview of options for appropriately responding to challenges relating to research ethics.

The document is the result of years of ongoing expert discussions on issues of research ethics and proven field-work practices in ECA/EE. The position paper is to be understood as a living document that will be further developed in response to current requirements and developments.

The structure of the position paper is based on the Belmont Report,¹ a pertinent guideline for research ethics that was developed in the United States in 1974 in response to ethical abuses in medical and behavioural science research. We also draw on existing ethics statements from related fields.²

We understand research ethics as a continuous reflection on the respective research conditions and the responsibility of researchers throughout the entire research process. The aim of this position paper is to explain the specifics and research ethics implications of the characteristic approaches and methods of the discipline, which are also relevant in the context of research ethics reviews.

ECA/EE explores how people organize their everyday interactions in modern societies, what relationships they form with their social and natural environment, and what meaning people attribute to these relationships. In addition to this focus on contemporary phenomena, the discipline also addresses historical contexts and developments. Both orientations, contemporary and historical research, are united by an interest in describing complex sociocultural contexts and critical analysis.³

In contemporary research contexts, this usually happens through direct contact – whether in physical co-presence or online – and through both short- and long-term interactions with people in the field. This primarily involves the use of ethnographic methods that are open-ended, dialogical, interactive and often collaborative (such as informal conversations and participant observation), as well as forms of systematic, controlled data collection (such as surveys and structured interviews). The implementation of such ethnographic research depends to a significant extent on establishing relationships of trust with the research subjects.

¹ Cf. <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/index.html>.

² Specifically, these are the codes of ethics and declarations of the American Anthropological Association (<https://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-1-do-no-harm/>) and the German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology (GASCA) (Hahn, Hornbacher & Schönhuth 2008) and the GASCA procedures (<https://www.dgska.de/en/ethics/>). Further statements and position papers are provided, for example, by the German Data Forum (RatSWD, <https://www.kon-sortswd.de/publikationen/stellungnahmen/>).

³ Since position papers on research ethics are still being developed by the German-speaking academic community of historians – for example, by the Working Group Applied History/Public History in the Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (VHD) – the “Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct” of the National Council on Public History, the “Statement on Ethics of the Oral History Association”, and the “Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct” of the American Historical Association can serve as helpful first points of reference: <https://ncph.org/about/governance-committees/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct>, <https://oralhistory.org/oha-statement-on-ethics/>, <https://www.historians.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Statement-on-Standards-of-Prof-Conduct-Jan-2023.pdf>.

The interpretation and presentation of factual information, as well as the handling of research material and data, are always accompanied by a self-critical process of reflection in both contemporary and historical research. This process carefully weighs the acquisition of knowledge against the protection of individuals and/or groups involved (e.g. field partners, contemporary witnesses or direct relatives).⁴ This also applies to non-reactive research, such as the analysis of publicly accessible documents, information available in the media, and public actions.

ECA/EE studies everyday culture in all its breadth and diversity. This results in a research ethic that takes the expressions and views of field partners seriously, that seeks to avoid exoticizing or othering and is guided by the paradigm of understanding. The focus is on the responsibility of researchers for the individuals affected by their research, for the resulting – often sensitive – data and materials, and for society as a whole.

The positions taken by researchers towards their field partners are potentially caught between the fundamental commitment to human rights and the liberal democratic basic order on the one hand, and on the other hand the necessity to deal responsibly and analytically with potentially conflict-laden values and even extreme world views in accordance with research ethics. Further tension exists between the researcher's self-image as an observer and a person who actively intervenes in the field.⁵

Respect and consideration for research partners

Researchers in ECA/EE generally follow the principles of explicit consent from field partners to participate in research, the recognition of agency of those being researched, and data security. Researchers strive for a differentiated, multi-perspective representation in order to do justice to the everyday cultural and social phenomena being studied, and to the people being researched in all their diversity. Social power relations, which can also be inscribed in the research relationship, must be adequately addressed. Researchers make their methods and approaches, as well as their own situation and assumptions, as transparent as possible in relation to all stages of the research process – from initial access to data collection, interpretation and writing – in order to enable an intersubjective exchange about research results.

Due to the dynamic nature of the ethnographic research process, which cannot be fully anticipated in advance, and the fact that the boundaries between research and non-research interaction are not always clearly recognizable, the principle of consent is not a one-time event. Rather, the negotiation of consent permeates the entire research process and is part of an ethical reflection.

Informed consent in the sense of data protection must be obtained if the data and materials generated contain personal information. In addition, local privacy expectations, for example, can serve as a guideline: research situations with high privacy expectations require informed consent that is ideally obtained in advance and in writing, while research in public spaces usually does not require formal consent.⁶ In certain cases, such as research on the topic of violence, consent can neither be obtained in advance nor in writing. In such cases, forms of verbal consent are also possible. The form and timing of informed consent always depend on the specific research situation.⁷ Regardless of this, appropriate forms of anonymization and pseudonymization in publications or in the case of long-term research data archiving must ensure that individuals cannot be subsequently

⁴ For information on handling material from these research contexts, cf. the DGEKW position paper on research data management: <https://doi.org/10.18452/27741>.

⁵ On the positions taken by researchers in the field cf. Näser-Lather 2023.

⁶ Cf. Heibges, Mörike & Feufel 2019.

⁷ Cf. Huber & Imeri 2021.

identified against their will.⁸ Researchers should also adopt an ethics of care when analysing published documents, media-bound data, or performative actions in public, weighing the interests of those affected, science and society against each other.

Knowledge production in empirical cultural studies takes place in collaboration with field partners and thus recognises the perspective of the research subjects to a high degree. The spectrum of how this collaboration is realized is extremely broad in ECA/EE- and again depends on the specific field of research: In addition to polyphonic approaches, in which field partners are actively involved in the representation and communication of research results, there is collaborative research in which field partners are actively involved in the research process as co-researchers. In some contexts, such as in engaged anthropology, this can lead to a dual role as researcher and activist. In some cases, however, researchers may also come to the conclusion that it is necessary not to take into account the concerns or political positions of field partners and/or not to give them a say in the research process or in relation to their representation.

The implementation of research ethics principles has another practical research aspect that requires special attention: the secure and appropriate handling of research data and guaranteed data security for research subjects regularly include measures of reflexive communication about what level of visibility or invisibility is desired in the context of research.

Requirements for respectful interaction apply not only to relationships with research partners during and after research, but also to professional and academic relationships, especially in the context of situations in which academic qualifications are at stake. These relationships should be characterized by respectful and discrimination-sensitive interaction as well as the greatest possible transparency in order to prevent exploitation and abuse of power. Particularly in their role as teachers, mentors and leaders, scientists are obligated to make their ethical responsibilities transparent and to initiate reflections on research ethics as part of their supervision.

Goodwill and protection

Researchers in ECA/EE follow the principles of minimizing potential risks and harm and maximizing benefits for participants and society. They strive to adhere to an ethics of care that prioritizes the protection of individuals or groups affected by their research. As a matter of principle, measures must be taken to protect field partners, primarily through pseudonymization or anonymization practices. In individual cases, it may be necessary to refrain from making research results available to the research community and/or the public, for example if particularly vulnerable groups can only be protected from harm, reprisals or violence in this way. In addition, the self-protection of researchers must be taken into account, for example in cases of danger from (sexualized) violence on the part of the research subjects or in the event of political attacks. Protection concepts for researchers should already be considered during the conception of research projects.

Justice and fairness

Another principle of research ethics involves avoiding unfair burdens on certain social groups and preventing preferential treatment of specific social groups. In ECA/EE, research ethics considerations regarding justice and fairness are closely intertwined with socio-political issues. This includes critical examination of topics such as hegemony and agency within and outside of research relationships. These relationships may also involve

⁸ Cf. the DGEKW position paper on research data management.

competing or even contradictory ethical obligations arising from different constellations of vulnerability, interdependence, and implicit power asymmetries, which must be reflected upon.

There may be constellations in which researchers come to the conclusion that the actors they are studying pose a danger to other individuals or groups (for example, in the case of extremist field partners). In such cases, it may be necessary, in the interests of responsible research ethics, to give priority to the protection of society over the interests of the field partners.⁹ Furthermore, in justified cases, it may be necessary to deviate from the principle of making the research intention and identify of the researchers transparent in order to protect the researchers.¹⁰

Context-sensitive research

The methods and approaches of ECA/EE are adapted and further developed in a context-sensitive manner in response to the circumstances of the respective field. Both the procedures and the research questions are usually readjusted in the course of the research by adapting them to new empirical findings and changes in the field resulting from the complexity of social situations and interpersonal dynamics, as well as from the actors' reactions to social, economic, and political influencing factors. The fundamental openness of ethnographic settings makes it possible to react flexibly and appropriately to the unexpected – and thus represents a central methodological strength.

The strong context sensitivity of the research design and the situated nature of the specific approach in the research process necessitate case-related ethical considerations. These are not based on purely individual assessment but are made within the framework of the research ethics principles outlined here and established, collectively shared reflections that meet the specific requirements of ethnological research.

References and Links

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⁹ On government confiscation of empirical data, cf. Heibges 2021.

¹⁰ Cf. Scheper-Hughes 2019.

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