COMMENTS

Anne Lavanchy
University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland /
Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT),
Swiss Anthropological Association (SAA)
orcid.org/0000-0001-9903-948X
anne.lavanchy@hesge.ch

Wiebke Wiesigel
University of Leiden / University of Neuchâtel /
Ethical and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT),
Swiss Anthropological Association (SAA)
orcid.org/0009-0001-6020-8773
w.wiesigel@law.leidenuniv.nl

What Are, in Fact, Anthropological Data?

Intro

The article "Being Open About Open Data from the Perspective of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology" questions issues related to new research regulations and guidelines aimed at providing an easier – read free of charge – access to scientific publications as well as sharing research data to allow them to be reused by other researchers. While based on biomedical epistemologies and methodologies, these new trends have been extended to all disciplines to promote good and ethical scientific practice. This has prompted discussions amongst anthropologists and ethnologists who generate data through processual, interactive qualitative methods broadly designated as "participant observation".

Olga Orlić's article accounts for the uneasiness raised by these new norms and which has resonated in discussions in the Swiss Anthropological Association (SAA) these past few years. A working group named Ethic and Deontological Think Tank (EDTT) was created when the Federal Act on Research involving Human Beings came into force, in 2014. This working group has become an official SAA commission in 2022. Drawing on our experience in the EDTT, we wish to address two questions in our comment: (1) What are "anthropological data" (2) Under which conditions can these data be shared?

What are "anthropological data"?

The implementation of the Federal Act led the Swiss National Science Foundation, the main and public funding body, to introduce a Data Management Plan (DMP) for any project submission. The DMP requires researchers to anticipate the kind of data that will be gathered (or produced), how they will be stored, protected and shared, and a description of ethical measures to protect research participants.[1] When our Commission started working on Open Science and Data Management to issue a statement, most of our fellow anthropologists in Switzerland were skeptical, much like the researchers from Croatia the author of the article interviewed. However, we realized that before taking a stand, it was necessary to question what anthropological data are.

Though it might seem trivial at first, engaging with that question turned out to be a key step in our understanding of Open Science and a valuable reflection on anthropological research practice. The disscusion article draws on an online survey including an open-ended question on the attitudes of ethnologists and cultural anthropologists in Croatia toward open data. Excerpts of answers mention "raw data"[2] and "fieldnotes" and their reluctance, difficulty, or impossibility to share them. Yet, the article does not discuss nor clarify the different types of data produced over the course of anthropological research. As pointed out in the SAA Position Paper on Open Science,[3] anthropologists produce and rely on a large panel of data. Fieldnotes are, of course, at the core of anthropological data. They consist of an interweaving of observations, descriptions and personal reflections from the researcher, still often recorded in a paper notebook. Such notes remain often incomprehensible and even illegible to anyone apart from the researcher. Furthermore, these notes may contain sensitive or even intimate details about the interlocutors' and the researcher's lives. We thus agree that it would make little sense to share these notebooks with other researchers.

Yet, we have realized that our data are far more than fieldnotes recording participant observation: they include informal discussions, descriptions of settings, interactions, etc. Most of us also realize that formal, recorded interviews are transcribed, and then coded, and rearticulated to be used as quotations in publications. As the disscusion article argues, making interviews accessible to other researchers requires the explicit consent of the interviewee, but this does not mean that they should be excluded from any sharing. Yet the process requires a significant amount of work to anonymize the transcription and to provide enough meta data to situate the interview within the research and mention the general conditions and the context.

Beyond these classical data, we also rely on other kinds of data that we can produce because we have been "there" and shared social spaces (including online ones)

1 On the distinction between procedural and processual ethics, see Perrin, Julie, Nolwenn Bühler, Marc-Antoine Berthod, Jérémie Forney, Sabine Kradolfer and Laurence Ossipow. 2018. "Searching for Ethics. Legal Requirements and Empirical Issues for Anthropology". *Tsantsa* 23: 138–153.

2 In the article, it remains unclear whether the expression "raw data" was mentioned in those terms in the question or appeared in the responses to the survey.

3 Available at https://www.sagw.ch/en/seg/about-the-saa/swiss-anthropological-association/position-papers.

with research partners, participants, or informants. Our activities generate collections of screenshots, photos (of tags on walls, of election or plebiscite propaganda stickers, of painted marks recalling the COVID measures…), flyers, newspapers, artifacts and other "material data". We use some of them in our publication, while others serve as powerful reminders of emotions or specific events and thus incentives to further analytical elaboration. Many of these documents, images and physical/material objects have been gathered in public spaces and cannot be considered sensitive information. They might make a significant contribution to archives on a given region, a specific moment or a particular social group. Therefore, finding ways to make them accessible to further researchers is both meaningful and doable.

Sharing with whom and how?

This leads us to our second question. Reading Olga Orlić's article, we were somewhat disappointed with the absence of discussion about who might be the right people to share data with. We argue that it is necessary to address this issue, to shed more light on the audiences of these processes and how researchers can choose with whom they want to share their data and what data they want to share.

The first point is the fact that ethnography is increasingly being perceived as a team endeavor. This should help us to step away from the representation of the anthropologist as a lone (male) researcher, which still exists, even though we are aware that the almost mythical figures of Malinowsky, Boas or Levi-Strauss did not act alone in the field. The current transformation of the academic landscape and the reduction of research to "funded projects" lead to the constitution of research teams, made of one or more principal investigators (PI), postdoc researchers, and PhD students. DMP represents an opportunity to define the contours of who can access data and under which circumstances. In our experience, it is a useful tool to make explicit the right of all involved scholars to the data, even when they are no longer employed by the institution hosting the project. In fact, some institutional guidelines can have a deterrent effect to retrieving data stored on their servers, or even prevent it. In such situations, DMP might offer a way to protect junior, untenured scholars in their research. This process includes considering the power imbalance between PIs, who are also PhD supervisors, and hired scholars who are at the same time the PIs' PhD students.

Our second point is that unpacking who can access which set of data renders the discussion about open access more concrete, and somehow less scary to anthropologists. Opening access to some of our data does not (necessarily) mean sharing them with a large crowd of anonymous researchers. We can choose to disclose some of them to scholars working on similar issues or in the same area, and even constitute a set of collective archives that can be used in our publications. This implies setting up some rules or best practices regarding the authorship of pictures, and determining which kind of meta data is relevant to make them understandable, while also ensuring the protection of research participants. For instance, date and place seem to obviously belong to meta data that should be made available, but under some

circumstances – such as an ongoing conflict or illegal activities – they should remain vaguer. Carefully considering the possibility to share some of our material can then give us the opportunity to better define what is ethically sound, and what is necessary to ensure the protection of researchers, as well as participants.

A third and final point is the fact that Olga Orlić's article (and potentially the survey it is based on) uses different terms and expressions as if they would be immediately understood and/or synonymous: open data, fair principles, ethical principles. This mixes institutional and moral constraints. Each of them refers to specific situations that might also change in accordance with domestic regulations. For instance, "open data" means "available to everyone to access, use, and share, without licenses, copyright or patents. It is expected that open data at most should be subject to attribution/share-alike licenses", while FAIR principles mean making data accessible "by appropriate people, at an appropriate time, in an appropriate way".[4] The fact that they are usually considered within the framework of national legislation, as well as a part of larger bodies of science regulations such as the European Research Council, open another path of reflection. The different rules and their respective power imbalance should be a point of attention. Power imbalances are complex. They cannot be reduced to a powerful researcher and their vulnerable interlocutors. During fieldwork, and even after it is completed, we might be highly dependent on participants' willingness to engage with us and our research. Moreover, junior scholars such as PhD students encounter multilayered power structures – on the field, in academia, in relation with their supervisors – as vulnerability is relational and not absolute.

In a nutshell

As shown in the article "Being Open About Open Data from the Perspective of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology", institutional pressures to make data accessible to other researchers raise concerns in anthropology. Indeed, these new trends are based on biomedical epistemologies and methodologies and seem to carry little relevance for qualitative, inductive processual approaches, where data are produced in interpersonal relations and encounters of distinct natures. Yet the incentive to share data can be an opportunity to clarify the kind of material we gather during fieldwork. We do not rely only on personal fieldnotes and in-depth interviews. Anthropological data often include material of archival interest that could be useful to the people we work with and for some colleagues. Considering these new norms and their constraints should also let us think about what can be shared, with whom can it be shared, and under which circumstances, and clarify the conditions of working in research teams, also taking into consideration the different statuses of team members and their implications. Finally, we welcome the article's conclusion that sharing fieldnotes may also be uncomfortable for the researcher, and this should be considered as an important element of the discussion about sharing data.

4 See SAA Position Paper on Open Science and Data Management Plan, https://www.sagw.ch/en/seg/about-the-saa/swiss-anthropological-association/position-papers.