

## **Ethics I did not consider**

### ***Research ethics and fieldwork amongst vulnerable groups***

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When choosing a research field a long list of methodological and analytical approaches must be considered to get access, find relevant participants, collect data, review scholarship and come up with theoretical frameworks that can provide insights into the research question. Moreover, each stage of the research inquiry, from formulating a research question to publishing or handing in the written project requires ethical considerations on the fundamental principle of do no harm. How do we as researchers protect the people, we engage with and turn into becoming the subject of our study? To what extent can we even ensure that our writings about a certain group of people do not end up as material that can be used against them? Ethical considerations are crucial particularly when inquiring into the lives of people belonging to vulnerable groups in societies. Migrants, refugees, minority groups, political opponents to governments, criminals, the list is long of people at risk due to lack of protection from authorities; due to widespread persecution against the undesirables.

This essay takes departure in the ethics that I did not consider in relation to my first long-term ethnographic fieldwork amongst female rebel suspects in a prison in the Philippines in 2014-15. In retrospective, I believe much can be learned from reflecting on my own beginner's mistakes, what I was not aware of when I entered into a field of particular sensitive character. In particular, the potential risks and precariousness that follow analysing and writing about this group of women as part of my master thesis, and how I had to make up for my lack of awareness. In the following, I will start out describing the discomfiting moment, where my ethical unawareness struck me in terms of my inadequate handling of confidentiality in relation to my research inquiry. Then the essay moves on to afterthoughts on how my research field materialized through relatively coincidental meetings with various gatekeepers, through whom I came into contact with participants as well as my insistence on making women's participation in armed conflict the topic of my master thesis. The unplanned and unpredictable nature of gaining access to the field combined with my own excitement about pursuing the study resulted in absence of thorough ethical reflection along

the way; reflections that in hindsight probably would have prevented me from conducting fieldwork with exactly the participants I ended up engaging with. I do not aim at any argument about how to handle the ethical dimensions of conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Rather I simply point out the importance of thorough ethical consideration and as an integral part of the different processes of making a research project. Taking ethics immensely serious, I believe is what can justify research about the lives of people at risk.

### **Belated senior consultation and sense of panic when discovering ethical flaws**

Upon return from my stay in the Philippines while writing my master thesis about women's participation in the Muslim separatist movement in the South of the country, I was given the chance to participate in a workshop on ethnographic lessons, and present my work to scholars on southeast Asia from around the world. Being merely a master student, and not even an anthropology student, I was honoured about getting this opportunity and considered it a recognition of the fieldwork I had been conducting to be invited into this group of experienced and respectable ethnographers. My presentation took departure in the methodological considerations I after all had done. In brief, I focused on dilemmas of positionality and power relations, as below excerpts of the presentation demonstrate.

*In the jail setting various conditions influenced my engagement with the women and it was clear that they could not speak openly about their participation in the struggle for independence, as it was the reason why they were imprisoned. The fact that they were not convicted yet and that several NGOs, including the one I was affiliated with, were working for their release both for humanitarian reasons and due to lack of evidence, speaking about their involvement with the Muslim organizations inside the jail constituted a risk of harming their cases. Thus, in my engagement with the imprisoned women I aimed at carefully considering, which questions to ask in order to avoid topics that could possibly interfere with their imprisonment. This naturally posed a dilemma as the scope of my research is their very involvement in or relationship to the separatist movement for which they were charged. It also became clear that the women repeatedly, yet in varying degrees, emphasized angles and incidences in their stories that could support a story about their own innocence, and that they positioned themselves accordingly as well as they often changed their narratives.*

*Furthermore, I was wearing two hats initially in my interaction with the women in jail and*

*some of the women I got to know in Mindanao during my two first visits; one as an intern with Balay [NGO] and another as an ethnographer. This generated some ethical dilemmas as my affiliation with Balay, which provides the women with different services, resulted in that I inscribed myself in an already established relationship between the organization and its beneficiaries that carries a degree of reliance. Thus, this double role may have put the women in a situation where it was difficult to decline my inquiry about interviewing them for my study, or (...) they might have had an expectation that their engagement with me could result in favouring by Balay and perhaps further assistance. To appear as a privileged foreigner, I sensed added to the expectations that I might had a certain power and the means to help. (Lehman, 2015 Paper for Nordic Southeast Asian Network workshop, unpublished)*

A short comment followed about that I had ensured their anonymity in the sense of changing their names and leaving out their places of origin.

As such the presentation was well-received. During the subsequent round of feedback, the participants accredited that I had been able to gain access to an unexplored research area and gather reasonably comprehensive data. However, the conversation quickly moved into the theme of research ethics, when one of the workshop participants asked, “what did the ethical board say to this”, how it had been approved and what ethical precautions it had required. The questions puzzled me, mostly because I was not familiar with an ethical board at my university and in terms of having the research approved, my only concern had been that it fulfilled the requirements listed out in the handbook of student regulations. Rather off guard, I answered that I had just started collecting data during my internship and had not consulted my supervisor nor the university. Particular American scholars were surprised that my research inquiry had not been through any ethical board at the university beforehand to be approved. A Danish researcher clarified that institutionalized ethical guidelines for master students were still to be made at most Danish Universities. Indeed, many universities did not have an ethical research board. The pros and cons of having clear procedures for ethical guidance were discussed and, whether it had gone too far with protocols for researchers limiting what can be studied. Returning to my fieldwork, I made a small objection saying that most of my informants had insisted on participating with their full name and identity disclosed to make the point that there might also be a danger of patronizing ones’ participants when going against their wishes and deciding on their behalf to separate their entrusted stories from them as persons. A

male anthropologist replied with great authority that, “but end the end of the day it is your responsibility to make sure that your work cannot cause them harm!” specifically referring to the fact that the female prisoners were still to face trial for their alleged involvement in armed insurrection against the Filipino state. I could obviously not agree more; having female participation in the armed Muslim rebellion at the core of my research question, anything that could reveal their identity and even more pressing, prove their guilt had to be carefully left out of the thesis. The discussion went on, and different suggestions about how I should deal with these ethical concerns were brought up: to not reveal in which country the ethnographic accounts had been gathered (any specific historical and political context and events would also have to be left out), to change their sex (the analytical lens looking at armed conflict, gender and female agency would not be possible), or to simply leave out the accounts from the female prisoners (which would reduce my empirical material significantly).

At the end of the session, I sensed a growing unease realizing that I had not taken the necessary precautions to ensure the safety of my participants and was suddenly doubting if it would be morally responsible to complete the thesis. The thought that the information conveyed in my thesis could travel back to the Philippines, be obtained by authorities and used to harm the participants overshadowed my ability to assess to what extent the empirical material should be revised, altered or left out. Simultaneously, I found it conspiratorial that the Philippine Intelligence services, police, jurisdiction or other state agents would go as far as to look into student’s written work in Denmark in their search for evidence. Dealing with a rather abstract and potential question of “if” something could happen, the decision about when risk assessment and precaution measures are adequate to protect the participants seemed indeterminable. Suffice to say, in any case these new insights required that I rewound back to the beginning and reviewed my ethnography with an ethical lens. I will return to which concrete measures I decided to apply in order to hand in a thesis that was loyal to my actual ethnography as well as ethically responsible in the final section.

### **Stumbling upon a field, and continuous uncertainty about whether it really serves as field**

Now reflecting on my insufficient attention to ethics along the way during my fieldwork, one of the explanations might be found in how the ethnographic field came into being. The reason why I was in the Philippines in the first place at this time was that I was doing an internship with a human rights organization in Manila. I was assigned with the programme for internally displaced people in

the conflict-affected areas in Mindanao and since the following semester would be dedicated to writing my thesis, I had planned to combine the work with data gathering. However, not having any previous experience working on the Philippine context, I had not decided on a specific topic nor made any plan for the data gathering.

Early on during my internship, I discussed my particular interest in women's roles in armed conflict with one of the staffs, who was part of the team that provides assistance to political prisoners. The staff member mentioned a small group of women that were detained and accused for rebellion, and invited me to tag along during their prison visits twice a week. I did not think twice about accepting that offer, as it would be a chance to pursue research on a topic that for long had been my field of interest. The staff and I agreed that I should tag along to the prison a few times, become familiar to the women, and that a certain degree of trust was crucial before I should think of requesting them to be research participants. As above extract from the workshop presentation indicates, my key concern was my own conduct inside the prison and awareness that my conversations with the women could not in any way touch upon their involvement in armed activities nor the separatist organizations. In this way, occupied myself with the here-and-now concerns of not causing harm, which kept the larger picture of what it would mean to include them in a project that would designate them as involved in the conflict out of sight. Meanwhile, along the way as I continued to engage with the women, I continuously doubted that these interactions could really qualify as fieldwork and as data for my thesis, exactly because we did not talk about their participation in rebellion.

Not until the end of my internship, did I feel assured that what I had been doing and the data I had collected was eligible to serve as empirical basis for my thesis. Complementing the prison visits, I had been connected to a number of women with whom I met travelling around Mindanao. Including the conversations and interviews with these women who in varying ways belonged to the Muslim insurgency, it all together served as a proper foundation to actually say something about the topic. In this sense, the ethnographic field emerged along the way and was stitched together by more or less random encounters with people, who served as different entry points. One of the dangers with this kind of snowballing became that I for most part went along with the opportunities to access a relatively closed field without much thought on the potential consequences of disclosing their stories in writing for the participants. Moreover, other and more tangible concerns such as security measures when travelling in conflict areas, trying to go under the radar of government officials, and

ensuring to meet with the women in locations where they could safely share their stories were my focus in the heat of the battle for pushing through with the research. In this way, my eagerness and dedication to do this study paradoxically pushed aside essential ethical considerations.

### **Concluding remarks on making ethical neglect right**

Following the workshop outlined in the above, and a thorough revisiting what I had written so far, I decided that a number of details should be left out and that parts of the ethnographic material should be deleted. Taking into account that the women in this particular prison, where I had conducted fieldwork most probably belong to a relatively small group of women charged with rebellion in the Philippines, any description of the events that had led to their arrest was removed, as well as names of specific locations including the prison itself. Most importantly, I found it necessary not to make the thesis publicly available. To be on the safe side, I refrained from circulating the thesis via internet and uploading it to the university library. In addition, I made sure to keep all field notes safe both those on my computer and those written in notebooks. Whether these safety precautions were sufficient or I should simply have refrained from writing about the imprisoned women all together, I believe can be discussed and now four years after handing in my thesis I still contemplate about the rights and wrongs related to this particular fieldwork. I know for a fact that my research has not been used against the women and that they eventually got released due to lack of evidence.

This essay does not suggest any clear guide to have the right ethical standards in place when conducting research about people at risk. Rather it serves as a case of the contrary: to not be sufficiently aware about the potential far-reaching consequences it may entail to document the stories of people. By drawing on my own ethical unawareness and realization of how I had overlooked crucial questions of security for the participants, my aim is to emphasise the importance of thorough ethical consideration throughout the research project. To have appropriate ethical standards in place in the different processes of a research project, obviously concerns a wide range of questions of how to keep participants safe from harm. It is paying attention to how we engage with participants in a respectful way. It is being loyal to the stories, they have shared when writing, while at the same taking the necessary precautions to not disclose sensitive details. What it entails to take ethics into account in concrete terms might vary depending the research subject, context,

methodology and so forth. To be well-informed and reflective about the ethical dimension of research in social sciences, is what I believe justifies inquiring into the precarious lives of people at risk.

## References

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