

Fielding the field

A workshop organized at the 21. May 2021 by Erdmute Alber, Iris Clemens and Pamila Gupta

10-14.30

Zoom Link: <https://uni-bayreuth.zoom.us/j/64107595714?pwd=bolvR2phYXBxYnYvOW5FZlY4Z1BqQTog>
Meeting ID: 641 0759 5714 , Passcode: 345306

We start by understanding any kind of field as an open assembly of questions, assumptions, curiosities, previous knowledges, time regimes, geographic features, interests, prejudices, observations, and emotions. It can also involve human and non-human interactions, other existences, materialities, images, literature, previous research studies, collaborative research, etc. Accordingly, the question of how fields emerge in the process of doing research points towards diverse ontological and epistemological foundations. What is an entity or a sequence or process that can and should be observed, and for what reason? Where should the first distinction be introduced, and why? And how can something ever be observed and described, both in the field and outside of it, increasingly online, and from a distance during these pandemic times? How can one describe the relationality between the observed entity, the observer (as always vulnerable and distanced), and everything else? Diverse disciplines and scientific perspectives will give quite different answers to these questions. We have asked a number of contributors who represent these diverse perspectives to share with us their answers to the questions raised. In sharing perspectives, we believe we can test our own positions and enrich our perceptions.

Programme

10.00 **Welcome**

10.10-11.20 **Fielding assemblages and connectivity (Chair: Iris Clemens)**

Vandana Vyas: From Physical to Digital: Reflections from the Field in the times of Corona

Michael Bollig: Studying Multi-Species Assemblages: Anthropological Hybris or the Solution of the Challenges of Cross-Scale and Multi-Site Ethnography

Eileen Jahn: The Struggle Around Electricity: Re-producing framings of subject positions, illicit practices, and locations

Paolo Galbazzi: On debordering and rebordering fields and workers in ethnographic fieldwork

11.20-11.35 Break

11.35-12.45 Fielding as algorithming and writing (Chair: Pamila Gupta)

Penelope Papailias: The field in/of our algorithmic and datalogical everyday: Rethinking subjectivity and temporality in the networked contemporary

Julia Pauli: Writing the Field, Reading the Field

Susan Levine: Telling a story from fragments: The field as puzzle work

12.45-13.01 Break

13.00-14.10 Fielding the self (Chair: Erdmute Alber)

Joh Sarre: Constructing the gendered subject of the fieldworker: clothing, belonging and surprises

Valerie Gruber: Fluid Fields: The Un/Making of the Research Field in Transdisciplinary Knowledge Co-Production

Paddy Kinyera: Fieldwork as reflective process: researchers as embodiments of relationality

Gokce Gunel and Chika Watanabe: Patchwork Ethnography

14.10-14.30 General discussion

14.30 informal coming together and hanging out on **wonder.de**

Abstracts

Studying Multi-Species Assemblages: Anthropological Hybris or the Solution of the Challenges of Cross-Scale and Multi-Site Ethnography

Michael Bollig (University of Cologne)

Since three decades anthropological fieldwork is experimenting with cross-scale approaches. Anthropological fieldwork follows people, technologies, and ideas across spatial (and more rarely so) across temporal scales. Anthropologists study value chains and travelling concepts across spaces, social groups and temporal units. Multi-sited ethnography was an early methodological approach that attempted to solve the dilemma of different scales by following the objects of study. However, multi-sited fieldwork and cross-scale methodological approaches come with some costs. Field-workers have fewer chances to get well accustomed with the people they want to work with. There are fewer chances for participant observations. The assemblage approach made prominent by e.g. Anna Tsing and others in the past years radicalizes this approach and brings more challenges – but in many ways also opens new doors.

Anthropological case studies that serve as a point of orientation for this approach are Tsing's monograph on the Matsutake mushroom (Tsing 2015), LeCain's work on the mid-west Longhorn (LeCain 2017) and Münster's work on elephants in southern Indian conservation areas (Münster 2016). A look into such assemblages allows to go beyond the confinements of a nature-culture dichotomy, where humans use, degrade, or protect other species. The study of assemblages traces

the agency, historicity, and sociality of non-human species and humans. Assemblages are anchored in one species and trace interlinkages with other species, infrastructures, technologies, organizations, and legislations. But will this not make further demands on the anthropologist's skill set and knowledge base. Tsing commands vast knowledge on a rare mushroom, LeCain displays amazing knowledge on the biology of the American Longhorn and the Japanese silk worm. Münster gained expertise in elephant behavior and disease patterns.

This presentation attempts to pinpoint the methodological needs of assemblage approaches in environmental anthropology, delineates the pertinent challenges and highlights (some of) its theoretical promises. I do so in order to ground a project to come on multispecies entanglements in a conservation zone methodologically. So the final part of my presentation will be a sketch of ideas how to make use of the assemblage approach for my own project.

On debordering and rebordering fields and workers in ethnographic fieldwork

Paolo Gaibazzi (Bayreuth University)

In this contribution, I present very tentative reflections on re-fielding my ethnographic research on and around Ganbana, an anti-slavery movement in West Africa and the West African diaspora. The question I am reflecting on is less on the kind of content – the questions, objects/subjects, etc. – that constitute the field, but where the boundaries of the field and fieldwork are set, transcended and reinscribed. In the context of pandemic-induced immobility preventing me from undergoing field trips, I have redefined my field as a digital platform, and my trip as browsing and participating to an extent in chat groups. It was not simply a way of continuing my planned offline research through digital means. Whereas post-slavery relations in West Africa had long been a silenced topic, anti-slavery mobilization and counter-mobilization had made it a hot public issue. This debordering of the "object" of research enabled, in my understanding, a debordering of my research methods and questions, thereby shifting from the intimate, inter-personal context to the online public arena. However, in a conflict-ridden, polarized context, many interlocutors seemed to have gone offline or into self-silencing again: they avoided to voice their position for fear of repercussions. This led to a new mode of re-bordering. I began a cooperation with Alagie BK Sillah, a civil society and media person as well as my long-time research partner. Sillah helped to contact people more privately over the phone. At some point, he travelled to the Gambia from Europe, and he has thus been able to carry out classic fieldwork there. Moving offline has re-bounded not only the field but also the work on it around specific localities – me in home-office and Sillah in the "fieldsite". While this has raised practical and ethical questions, it has also provided additional ways of debordering our respective positions through cooperation across a distance in research and dissemination.

Fluid Fields: The Un/Making of the Research Field in Transdisciplinary Knowledge Co-Production

Valerie V. V. Gruber (Bayreuth University)

The quest for transdisciplinary research requires academics to collaborate with actors from heterogeneous fields, both inside and outside academia. In order to transcend disciplinary, social, symbolic or physical boundaries, co-producers of knowledge need to deal with multiple relations, theories and practices taken for granted in each field involved. This presentation explores how field alignments can be made between researchers, artists and activists in order to create synergies and

produce knowledge collaboratively. It draws on a participatory research project developed with diverse actors from Brazil, Colombia, Mozambique, Cameroon and Germany, who share a common interest in understanding whether and how the arts can contribute to processes of transformation in communities afflicted by violence, racism and social exclusion. The reflection shows how the research field emerges as a fluid third space co-created by actors with specific knowledges and positionalities. Ultimately, this presentation raises fundamental questions on whose queries, assumptions, interests, theories and methodologies count as legitimate, giving them the power to (re)define a research field.

Patchwork Ethnography: Bringing to Light Our Intersecting Responsibilities

Gokce Gunel (Rice University) and Chika Watanabe (University of Manchester)

Patchwork ethnography is a proposal to bring to light how ethnographic practices are being reshaped by researchers' own lives and our multiple professional and personal commitments—from childcare and health concerns, to financial, environmental, political, and temporal constraints, to relationship commitments at "home," to the transience of particular research subjects. We argue for consolidating the innovations that are already happening in anthropology out of necessity but remain black boxed. Patchwork ethnography helps us refigure what counts as knowledge and what does not, what counts as research and what does not, and how we can transform realities that have been described to us as "limitations" and "constraints" into openings for new insights. We hope this intervention provides a methodological framework and theoretical armor for those about to embark on research projects or others who may feel as if their research has reached an endpoint due to personal, financial, or practical reasons.

The struggle around electricity: Re-producing framings of subject positions, illicit practices, and locations

Eileen Jahn (Bayreuth University)

In my doctoral project, I focus on the politics of access to electricity networks as they are mobilized in knowledge by undersupplied and precariously connected residents in South Africa, who pursue strategies of non-payment, self-connection, manipulation, and destruction of electricity infrastructures. Throughout the presentation, I address (1) the re-production of subject positions along colonial and class divisions in public discourses around electricity, (2) the illicit practices around electricity, and (3) the locations where these practices are generally said to occur. With this, I reflect on some challenges I encounter in constructing a research field while working with and against some of the assumptions underpinning hegemonic framings of the struggle around electricity in post-apartheid South Africa.

Fieldwork as reflective process: researchers as embodiments of relationality

Paddy Kinyera (Bayreuth University)

Researchers might generally agree that conducting fieldwork can be the most exciting part of knowledge production in the social sciences. The excitement with fieldwork is driven by the desire

to gain new forms of knowledge, experiences and to be able to constitute these experiences and “knowledges” into scientific discourses and debates. Preconceived research problems, well-formulated research questions, assumptions, objectives, designs and tools together, make research systematic and scientific. With fieldwork, real encounters by the researcher in the field, and the way they navigate through these realities do not only (re)shape the research process, but also make fieldwork more dependent on the researchers’ conducts. From the onset, researchers constitute the spaces, the objects and the subjects of inquiry, and are urged to be “objective” about the inquiry. In this presentation, without necessarily contesting the call for objectivity in its entirety, I argue for a perspective in which the place of researcher-reflexivity in both the process of knowledge production and the final body of knowledge that they produce is clarified. I argue fieldwork is a heavily engaging relational practice in which researchers cannot be passive actors. Rather, they are integral parts of the field’s “multiple” — an equally constituted subjects of research whose actions, interactions and relations with other elements of/in the field bring about new perspectives and worldviews.

Telling a story from fragments: The field as puzzle work

Susan Levine

The affective dimensions of conducting fieldwork on the frontlines of the covid pandemic in South Africa is marked by immobility and doing the opposite of what was possible at the height of AIDS denialism and the catastrophic – if not genocidal – response to treatment. The field for medical anthropologists was wide open and immersive. We marched in the streets to protest AIDS denialism; we made documentaries and screened them across the continent; we occupied hospitals and clinics in rural and urban parts of the country. Anthropologists were visible, unmasked, and the field was a zone of collapsing the borders of ethnography, activism, and forging close interpersonal relationships with people caught up in the tide of stemming the pandemic. My contribution reflects on the unfolding global covid pandemic from the claustrophobic zone of my living space. Crossing borders happens on zoom and gathering data on the pandemic includes watching SABC news and CNN. Social media sites, newspapers, WhatsApp messages and podcasts fill my brain like pieces of a puzzle with the work of telling a story, deep puzzle work or “patchwork” (Gunel and Watanabe 2021). I consider the zone of the fragmented field and the work of piecing together fragments and flashes of ethnographic insight. The world outside my home is a puzzle, a maze that I can no longer walk through, no space for conviviality and the kind of ‘being there’ that underpins the space formerly called, the field.

The field in/of our algorithmic and datalogical everyday: Rethinking subjectivity and temporality in the networked contemporary

Penelope Papailias (University of Thessaly)

During these pandemic times, “digital ethnography” - normally a “backwater” for the high theorists of our discipline - suddenly became a hot topic. Bibliographies and resources were shared widely as anthropologists scrambled to figure out how or if they could continue their research. As someone who has written extensively on issues of mediation and technoculture, I find this moment instructive to think about what was missing in anthropological conceptions of the field *before* the

pandemic supposedly upset our working patterns (that would also include much of “digital ethnography”).

I will focus on two issues I feel are critical to refunctioning the field in relation to our networked contemporary: first, the implications of the “datalogical turn” and the distribution of **subjectivity** and bodily practices in terms of how we conceive both researcher and researched; secondly, how new forms of **temporality** associated with algorithmic memory, a continuously networked present and “lifelogging,” impact the historical parameters of the field and the individual and collective histories of our interlocutors.

Writing the Field, Reading the Field

Julia Pauli (Universität Hamburg)

If an ethnographic monograph is the result of fieldwork in black and white, what then is the field? To answer this question, I suggest that it might be fruitful to go beyond a focus on the author/fieldworker and include the reader of ethnography. Many anthropologists extensively contemplate on how they do their fieldwork. To a much lesser extent, anthropologists ponder on how they later write about their fieldwork. Hardly ever, anthropologists consider who might read what they write. Reader-response criticism (Rezeptionsästhetik) from literary theory emphasizes the reader’s role in creating any literary work. What is the reader’s role in creating an ethnographic field?

Constructing the gendered subject of the fieldworker: clothing, belonging and surprises

Joh Sarre (Bayreuth University)

Ethnographic fieldwork is a particular – one might even say peculiar – scientific method, involving human encounters and “impression management” (Berreman 1962) on many levels. The proposed paper approaches these encounters against the backdrop of the author’s prolonged engagement with theories of belonging and the negotiation of difference, categories and in- or exclusion. Centering on ‘gender’ (in conjuncture with other intersectional categories), I ask how the gendered subject of the fieldworker is (de)constructed and negotiated in interaction. Drawing on clothing (choices) and related encounters during my own fieldwork in Kibera, Nairobi’s most populous informal settlement, I explore the spatial, visual and embodied aspects of fieldwork-relationalities, and, in turn, the insights I was able to generate into negotiations of (dis)belonging, difference and sameness.

From physical to digital: Reflections from ‘the field’ in the times of Corona.

Vandana Vyas

Many researchers were ‘in the field’ when the pandemic began and observed a close transformation of the field from social intimacy to digital connectivity. After funding, ‘being in the field’ is the most sought after activity in a researchers career. This paper presents the experiences of the researcher ‘caught in the action’ during the pandemic. It draws a parallel from pre-COVID, beginning of the pandemic and continuing challenges while doing an ethnographic study on ‘actively ageing population of Baden-Württemberg’ during 2019 and 2020. The paper discusses the researcher’s reflections in challenging position during the pandemic, with protocols of doing ethnographic research was continuously changing. The paper argues that the initial pandemic measures did

much pressure on older adults for self-isolation, categorising being old as equal to being at risk, especially the media representation became problematic with re-emphasising ageism. It accounts for the ethical questions in general and particularly in qualitative research in social sciences as encountered by researchers. Further, the paper shares the researcher's experience of the field diving into familial to unifamilial shift. The shift towards 'digital question' in education and lifelong learning of older adults seems abrupt and forced to many elderly, social scientists, and educationists. To look into the transformation of the field from physical lecture halls learning / discussion groups to online chats, zoom break rooms, it brings in the narrative accounts from the older adults participating in learning activities before COVID and continue to participate along with the organisers of the institution of mentors or educators adapting to new technologies in order to serve and survive. Finally, the article outlines the new challenges that emerged during the pandemic, and 'the field is ever-evolving, making it imperative to study objectively, especially the new digital practices. Therefore, it presents both challenge and opportunity; however, the equation weighs more towards the former.