

An Ethical Question

Acknowledging Contentious Ethics in Medical Anthropology and Allied Fields

The MAT Editorial Collective

We are excited to present our April 2023 issue. Thanks to the efforts of our authors and our amazing peer reviewers, you will discover a new collection of intriguing contributions that challenge thinking at the intersection of medicine, anthropology, and theory. Nonetheless, the beginning of 2023 is less infused with what we had hoped would be post-pandemic relief. Rather, we are still globally reeling from how the pandemic continues to mark us. Even as we yearned for a time of respite, the ongoing war in Ukraine underscores the shifting sands of crisis and relief, and how these are felt differently according to the who and the what of our intersectional attachments. On a different scale, at the time of writing we are experiencing yet another period of industrial action in the higher education sector of the UK. Given the increasing likelihood of an impoverished retirement, an increase in zero-hours and fixed-term contracts, and persisting gender and race pay gaps, staff morale is low. This adds to the already severely limited capacity to uphold the acts of good will with which universities—and the academic journals they host—tend to be run in the UK.

As an editorial collective, *MAT* does not shy away from such difficulties. In fact, when it comes to our responsibility to address the ethical soundness of the research published in the journal, we positively invite them. While ethical and

political questions have been at the core of our work as an editorial collective from the start, as articulated in our [ethos statement](#), we have been prompted anew to consider our ethical guidelines. This is as part of a call from Edinburgh Diamond, the University of Edinburgh Library service that supports open access publishing. As the digital host of our publication, they have asked us to pin down guiding principles and requirements in an institutionalised and programmatic mode beyond the type of case-specific ethnographic thinking in which we had previously been engaged. This move on the part of the University reflects an increasing institutionalisation of research ethics across the sector, which effectively raises expectations for ethical review at multiple scales and increases the scrutiny of research across all disciplines. Journals and their editorial boards are, of course, no exception to this shift, and we welcome it. Open-access publishing has also introduced new ethical challenges for authors and editorial boards alike: are the publishing models it promotes equitable? How can authors and editorial boards continue to uphold the principles of transparency and accountability?

In response to these emerging questions and challenges, we ask that from 2023, all manuscripts include an ethics statement as part of the submission to the journal (see [author guidelines](#)). Similarly, all published texts will be accompanied by both an ethics statement and an authorship statement. In doing so, we recognise that what is meant by research ethics may vary extensively, depending not only on the different national guidelines our global authorship is bound by, but as much on the institutional milieus in which the research takes place (Gadd 2020). Robust research ethics vary according to scientific milieus too—whether interdisciplinary, across disciplines or within single fields. The discipline of Anthropology, with its colonial legacy, is a case in point. For many, this legacy raises questions of whether ethical conduct is even possible within this framework, or if full divestment from the discipline is, in fact, necessary to reclaim ethnography for future research.

Against a backdrop of such disparate understanding of research ethics, what weight does an author's ethics statement actually hold? Below, we offer some reflection to acknowledge that the ethical trajectories of our research may diverge and give rise to contentious discussion that cannot be absolved by the inclusion of an ethics statement alone. It goes without saying that research ethics raise useful and important questions at the heart of our disciplines. Yet what counts as 'good' research and who is equipped to determine the soundness of research are issues that we have seen significantly change over the last decades. Consent, transparency, and accountability are now widely accepted pillars of academic knowledge production. These pillars, however, have arisen from different historical contexts, meaning that in the past they have meant different things in different fields, countries and contexts. They are, indeed, ever evolving.

In this regard, medical anthropology is particularly interesting. Historically, this discipline has sat awkwardly between the medical and the social sciences, bringing together, as well as complicating, critical traditions of anthropological research ethics with the more formal history of medical ethics review boards. While the former has been a core element of anthropological research, the latter has been perceived as overdetermining our disciplinary responsibilities and methodologies, in turn imposing formalised medical ethics upon ethnographic research.

Troubling institutional research ethics

Medical ethics boards were originally celebrated as progressive. They instigated checks and balances, implementing lessons learnt from the past to create meaningful new guidelines for researchers. Following the Nuremberg trials—The Doctors' Trial in particular—and the lawsuit addressing similar abhorrent medical experimentation such as the Tuskegee study, medical ethics has rightfully become a codified set of regulatory standards that govern research. These codes of ethics, in turn, have established a frame of reference, from which the often ambiguous and contradictory aspects of what it means to do research for the benefit of patients and populations can be negotiated. As a result, many universities have rolled out similar models of ethical review to fields that are based on entirely different methodological grounds. This has often invited pushback from researchers, especially in the social sciences, to the extent that ethical standards adopted and expanded by university ethics boards have at times come into conflict with an ethos articulated by academic societies, such as the [Association of Social Anthropologists \(ASA\)](#). This organisation, for example, argues that the absolute need for individual informed and signed consent can be difficult to uphold in some situations of ethnographic research, and at times, counterproductive to the research process.

The context of an enhanced focus on institutional research ethics relies on other factors too and has shifted in its form, content and application in recent years. This is partly due to increased pressure on institutions to adhere to recent legislation on data protection, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), effective in the EU since 2016 and in the UK (UK-GDPR) since 2018. These legislations place the onus on institutions to demonstrate compliance rather than individuals. But it is also a direct effect of increasingly legal concerns at universities, where an association of a given institution with a potentially unethical or illegal research endeavour (think: Cambridge Analytica) could have disastrous implications. Yet even the most robust ethical procedures are not able to fully rein in researchers who may see the world as an endless resource of knowledge; a world which is their given right to extract from at any cost. Therefore, the idea that research ethics should unreflexively and solely rely on procedural requirements here might miss

the mark. Instead, the implementation of a solid, institutional, ethics infrastructure could create the opportunity for institutions to invite reflection on what is good research practice. Failing to recognise the importance of such an infrastructure would run the risk of devaluing the specific expertise of disciplines and fields, leaving little to no room for the researcher to gain ethical capacity, to train ethical reflection, and to arrive at shared moral judgements. The ASA [EthNav](#) tool, for instance, is designed not to regulate, but to inform on and teach ethics as an integral component of anthropological pedagogy and practice. Such disciplinary positions and reflections can be used by more formal institutional boards to support the research capacities of their staff as they consider their ethical responsibilities.

We are currently reviewing how *MAT* ought to relate to these competing ethical, institutional, and legal issues. To give you a taste of some of the questions that occupy the *MAT* Editorial Collective in their monthly meetings, consider the following: While we currently expect a research ethics review to have been undertaken at an author's institution, how do we manage a situation in which no such review has been undertaken? How do we consider the review of articles that revisit material collected before such reviews were an ethical requirement? Can we assume trust in a research ethics review carried out at the author's institution given all the concerns raised above? What if issues that are of ethical concern to us as the editorial collective of an open-access journal, with aspirations for global inclusivity, are not picked up by existing institutional ethics reviews? And what if the growing standardisation of research ethics threatens to diminish or to contradict concerns of decolonisation, diversity, and inclusivity in favour of actuarial worries about GDPR compliance? Conversely, how should we respond when academics bypass regulatory ethics bodies in the countries in which they undertake research? Should this be deemed a hangover of colonial entitlement? By indirectly endorsing the idea that academics have the right to conduct research how and wherever they like, would that constitute a failure on the part of the Collective?

These are just some of the emerging questions for the *MAT* Editorial Collective as we challenge the assumption that ethics are done and dusted solely through an ethics procedure or a statement. With this as our premise, we continue to find ourselves strongly committed to supporting and publishing work that emerges from good research practice. We are equally eager to advance discussions about ethical questions in the growing open-access publishing landscape.

The issue

Opening our compelling set of articles is McVey's ethnography of how mental health staff working with young and vulnerable people navigate complex ethico-

political dilemmas. Clinical sites as places in which moral claims are negotiated are investigated by Perkins, in the context of Bangladesh, as well as by Villar and Carrol, through their remote ethnography of crafting the good patient in TB treatment in Ukraine. This issue furthermore showcases important conceptual work, for instance with Laursen's approach to the notion of irritation as an analytical method in their study of Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Crossing theoretical and ethnographic paths, as well as journal sections, Chapman and Pearson each reflect on fieldwork as a site in which issues of positionality and the field itself are never given, but flow in ways the ethnographer must respond and adjust to. Fearnley's insightful Review essay traces how state governance historically emerged in and through responses to epidemic disease, and suggests we can also examine China's COVID-19 response as a crucible for implementing new forms of governing. Beautifully capturing the aesthetics of healing, Fournier's Photo Essay of cancer as image and medicine offers an intimate portrait of illness and recovery.

This issue also sees the inclusion of a fascinating Special Section titled *Experimental Engagements with Ethnography, Moral Agency and Care*, by the guest editorial collective formed by Julia Brown, Michael D'Arcy, Neely Myers and Tali Ziv. This Special Section could hardly be timelier, given the ethical conversations occupying us at *MAT*. The section opens with two research articles providing our readers with original research findings. In the first, Michael D'Arcy draws on fieldwork in the community mental health network of Dublin, Ireland, to examine the moral dimensions of polypharmaceutical treatment for substance disorder in the context of dual diagnosis. In the second, Yahalom, Frankfurt, and Hamilton outline the social and moral dimensions that can constitute psychological injury, and the way that addressing these dimensions through group therapy can promote moral agency and thus mental health recovery for veterans. By reflecting on their respective fieldwork experiences, further contributions to our journal sections Field Notes and Position Pieces explore the possibilities of the ethnographic encounter as a site of moral agency and relationship building. The space between moral agency and injury also finds relevance in Ziv's Position Piece, in which they examine the political and moral implications of conducting ethnography where interlocutors are survivors of a life of scarcity. Similarly reflecting on their positionality during fieldwork, Brown encourages other anthropologists studying psychiatric treatment spaces and moral experience to confront how racism can be filtered through the stories they tell. Wagner and Lesley both address moral agency in different contexts of political violence in their Field Notes. In particular, Lesley considers the critical importance of audience engagement in relation to personal narrative creation, and reflects on her own positionality, in this regard, as an active listener and ethnographer.

As this issue testifies, we believe that ethical questions are never settled but give rise to important discussions about how to practice and nurture good scholarship in a complex world. As our valued reader, we hope that you will receive the insights and questions raised across the contributions and revisit them during the course of your next seminar, workshop or conversation with a colleague.

References

Gadd, Elizabeth. 2020. 'CRediT Check—Should we welcome tools to differentiate the contributions made to academic papers?' *LSE blog*, 20 January 2020. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/01/20/credit-check-should-we-welcome-tools-to-differentiate-the-contributions-made-to-academic-papers/>.