



Open Science and Data Management in Anthropological Research. Position Paper of the Swiss Anthropological Association (SAA)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY FOR FUNDING AND REGULATORY INSTITUTIONS

Adopted at the SAA Annual Meeting on November 4, 2021

Context

The Position Paper on “Open Science and Data Management in Anthropological Research” of the Swiss Anthropological Association (hereinafter “SAA”) results from a four-year, multi-party process launched in 2017¹. This process was catalyzed by new data management protocols instituted by the Swiss National Science Foundation (hereinafter “SNSF”). The present “Executive Summary” provides a synthesis of the SAA Position Paper specifically oriented towards the principal institutions funding and regulating anthropological research in Switzerland: the SNSF, swissuniversities, the Swiss Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and cantonal and federal university authorities. The longer “Position Paper” can be consulted as a complement to this Summary; its intended audience is first and foremost the Swiss anthropological research community.

General conclusions

The SAA sees the push towards open science and data management as a welcome occasion to rethink and clarify disciplinary practices on a wide variety of issues, ranging from collaborative research to informed consent, from data protection to procedures for sharing our research results with the people with whom we work. However, despite this general embrace of the principles of data management, our association is also aware that these new regulatory requirements are modeled on scientific paradigms that originate in other disciplines. In contrast to the hypothetical-deductive research model, ethnographic research is primarily inductive and context-driven. Our data is both informed by and informs our thematic and theoretical analyses through an on-going, reflexive process in which the researcher is not a neutral “outsider” but a constitutive part of the situation under investigation.

These characteristics (common to much qualitative research) create misunderstandings and a certain degree of mistrust towards new regulatory requirements amongst the anthropological community, whose vision of their discipline does not align with much of the open science vocabulary. In particular, anthropologists are frequently put off by the terms and rationales for the “FAIR” framework and, in particular, the notions of “interoperability” and “reusability” that do not have ready equivalents in the

¹ Preliminary work was conducted by a working group convened by the SAA’s Scientific Commission in 2017. In 2018, the SAA governing board took up the issue, mandating two independent researchers to produce an initial analysis of the state of the field, which was discussed by the SAA Board in June of 2019. In the fall of 2019, the SAA’s Data Management Working Group (hereinafter “DMWG”) identified a series of open questions, which it submitted to the principal governing institutions for Swiss open science policy. The results of this consultation were transmitted to members at the SAA General Assembly in November 2019 (see [“Data Management Framework for Anthropological Research. Discussion Paper of the Swiss Anthropological Association”](#)). On the basis of these exchanges, the DMWG carried out further discussions, notably with the experts at FORS. The resulting “Position Paper” was submitted to SAA members on November 4, 2021, where it was adopted in its final form.

ethnographic research paradigm. While discussions with experts and authorities in this field have been reassuring thus far, as social scientists, we know all too well how regulatory drift can transform norms into obligations, create hierarchies amongst knowledge practices, and promote bureaucratic procedures and standardization. It is with these concerns in mind that the SAA Board decided to provide this “Executive Summary”, addressed to relevant governing bodies.

Examining disciplinary practices – targeted conclusions

As mentioned, the SNSF’s requirement that researchers spell out their data management plans has sparked new awareness within the anthropological research community and provided an occasion to (re-)examine common disciplinary practices. The DMWG has identified three areas for improvement, along with a certain number of caveats. These are, in order of priority:

1. *Data protection*: The keystone of anthropological ethics worldwide is the “do no harm” principle². The Swiss anthropological community has long been aware of the deontological requirements flowing from this principle³. However, it is insufficiently informed about the evolving legal and regulatory norms in this area.

Specifically, SAA members are frequently unaware of their legal requirements and liabilities in the area of data protection, and have not been systematically equipped with the knowledge and/or technologies necessary to meet this challenge. While this has become a pressing issue with the widespread use of digital technologies, non-digitalized data, notably researchers’ hand-written field notes, must also be taken into account. Given the highly contextual and personal nature of ethnographic data, where full anonymization is virtually impossible, special attention is necessary in this area. In our Position Paper, we discuss many of the issues arising from this situation, and encourage our members to inform themselves about their responsibilities and available solutions, in particular by consulting the excellent guidelines drafted by the experts at FORS⁴.

One aspect of this problem requires further action on the part of our regulatory and funding agencies: encryption. Because anthropologists frequently work in areas where they cannot reliably access the Internet, storage on secured university servers alone does not provide adequate protection for the individuals and groups with whom anthropologists work, as regular and secure transfer of data to university servers is not always practicable. Thus, anthropologists should practice systematic encryption of digital data whenever they are and whatever the digital technologies they are using. *In order to assist the anthropological community with these questions, we encourage the FNS (through FORS) to create a user’s guide and/or more training module on the principles and techniques of data encryption in the social sciences.*

An ancillary problem concerns access to secured servers by researchers (post-docs, doctoral students) who finish their contracts with the host institution but still need access to the data produced by their research group⁵. *We have not seen any institutional response to this problem, and we encourage our funding and host institutions to address it directly.* Without a structural solution, these non-affiliated researchers will be forced to store their data on personal computers or, worse yet, commercial servers, creating further risks for data protection.

Finally, over the course of our reflections, a new issue came to light: the degree of legal protection available to social scientists in cases where their data might be sought out by intelligence, police, border control or judicial authorities. To the best of our knowledge, anthropologists do not benefit from “researcher-subject” privileges analogous to those of doctors or journalists. *We encourage the FNS (through FORS) to produce a paper specifically addressing these important issues.*

² See <https://ethics.americananthro.org/ethics-statement-1-do-no-harm/>.

³ See “[Searching for Ethics](#)” (2018), a “white paper” written by the SAA’s Ethical and Deontological Think Tank.

⁴ See generally the [FORS Guides to Data Management](#).

⁵ We limit ourselves here to aspects of this problem related to data protection, but it clearly has implications for promoting the careers of young scholars as well.

2. *Data minimization and destruction:* Following key European regulations in the area of data protection and ethics⁶, data management guidelines often suggest that researchers should follow the principles of data “minimization” and that raw data should be “destroyed” after analysis. The DMWG understands and shares the ethical positions underlying these requirements: clearly, researchers should minimize their intrusions within other people’s lives, and make sure that the data they generate do not circulate in ways that could invade the privacy or threaten the personal security of their research subjects. However, neither of these terms taken at face value is compatible with ethnographic research methods.

Data minimization: Working within a holistic, inductive research paradigm, anthropologists cast a “wide net” when producing data, often conducting interviews, collecting objects and recording audio-visual documents that are not immediately related to their research questions. This practice is explained and justified in the foundational texts of the discipline: the different dimensions and dynamics of social life are interrelated, and these relationships must be explored transversally. Requiring that anthropologists collect only those data that have been anticipated and explicitly mentioned in their research design is in direct contradiction with this paradigm. Were anthropologists to follow this injunction *à la lettre*, it would drastically reduce the discipline’s relevance and innovative, hypothesis-generating potential.

Data destruction: Because of the context-specific, reflexive nature of anthropological epistemology, our data are subject to continual reinterpretation. Thus, they are potentially relevant long after the research project for which they were collected has been completed, and it is counterproductive to request that anthropologists destroy them.

The DMWG is aware that, practiced carelessly, the long-term use of holistic, “wide-net” research data can pose problems of informed consent and data security. However, we are convinced that through the conscientious management of data, the essential characteristics of the discipline can be respected while conforming with the ethical and legal requirements of EU and Swiss regulatory frameworks. *To accompany these measures, we request that the SNSF develop explanatory documents and/or re-work some of its language to reflect these specificities, perhaps even creating a tailored DMP protocol for qualitative research.*

3. *Data sharing and archiving:* Over the course of its work, the DMWG has become persuaded of the relevance and value of data-sharing and archiving for the anthropological community. While anthropologists have long encouraged collaborative research, co-authorship and systematic restitution of research results to the populations with whom we work, we have not developed the technological tools or platforms necessary to pool these efforts, to learn from best practices, or to make our data available to researchers or populations outside specific research networks. We will continue to work with FORS specialists in qualitative research methods to develop disciplinary capacity in this area, and we will recommend to our members that they consult the rich material and follow the training modules that FORS has developed.

However, a caveat is in order here as well. Thinking systematically about long-term data storage, sharing and archiving is relatively new to the discipline and will take significant amounts of time and resources. The main questions concern: (a) the heterogeneity of ethnographic data and their intimate link with the intersubjective process of data production which informs their interpretation; and (b) the tensions between the necessary contextualization of ethnographic data and the need to protect the people with whom we work. To address these complex issues, the SAA will need institutional support. *For this reason, we strongly recommend the creation of an ad hoc working group that could work with FORS specialists in qualitative data management to produce data storage, sharing and archiving protocols that are appropriate to anthropology and neighboring disciplines.*

⁶ See, notably, the European Commission’s 2018 paper on [“Ethics and Data Protection”](#).