

Protocol for Ethnographic Research in times of COVID-19

Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology (CADS), Universiteit Leiden

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Motivation

This document was motivated by the global outbreak of COVID-19. The pandemic considerably hinders anthropologists engaging in the core aspect of their research: the practice of ethnographic research, at home or abroad, but almost always in locations outside the Faculty building. Earlier guidelines for intra-Faculty research, such as those formulated by SOLO, therefore hardly apply, nor do the protocols for research with humans in times of COVID-19 drawn up by behavioral scientists address the relevant situations.

The protocol is meant to offer guidelines for doing good and healthy ethnographic research while the COVID-19 crisis is still ongoing, during a possible second peak in the outbreak, or during similar pandemics. It offers support in developing strategies to protect one's own health during research, but also that of research participants and the public in general. It applies to all ethnographic research done under the auspices of the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology of the University of Leiden.

The protocol

- Provides support in doing good and healthy research by staff, PhDs and postdocs of the Institute, as well as BSc and MSc students who are honing their research skills by means of the training courses in ethnography that our programmes offer;
- Explains to research participants how we take their health into account;
- Makes our conceptions of responsible research accountable to society.

Ethnography at a distance

The methodological and ethical standards of good ethnography during a pandemic are not substantially different from those that pertained before it arrived (there is therefore little need to elaborate an explicit run-down of this protocol once the pandemic is over). More importantly, these standards imply that restrictions observed during a pandemic do not result in lesser or second-rate ethnographic research – although a few aspects do differ.

Changes result from several facts:

(1) we realize now more than ever that anthropologists cannot “cover” a field as a whole, but have to create it in important measure in interaction with research participants and by means of the channels of communication we employ with them;

(2) both the topics and the people we research have to a considerable extent moved on-line, and not only because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has enlarged the significance of digital ethnography (for which the necessary protocols already exist, in methodological handbooks as well as in the guidelines of the [Association for Internet Research](#));

(3) shifts in balance between offline and online research are also informed by the changing nature of online socialization at home and abroad. This requires us to reinvent participant observation time and again, and never to limit ourselves to face-to-face contacts (just like we do in offline fields).

Whatever standards count as critical for producing qualitatively good ethnography is equally applicable to situations transformed by COVID-19. It is above all important to train the next generations of CA-DS MSc researchers in doing “COVID-ready” fieldwork, which prioritizes the reduction of health risks and creatively optimizes research possibilities. A first effort towards this is offered by this [online document](#).

Additional Principles

We expect staff and students to comply with local guidelines and/or legal frameworks pertinent to COVID-19. When doing **ethnographic research in the Netherlands** during COVID-19, researchers follow the advice of the University of Leiden and the VSNU, which are based on the then current government guidelines. When doing fieldwork abroad (see also below) we expect our researchers to consult the website of the [Dutch Ministry of Foreign affairs](#).

In this, CA-DS uses **three points of departure**:

- **Ethical guidelines:** The ethical standards of ethnographic research in times of COVID-19 always depart from the principle to do no harm: protect others as you would protect yourself. These guidelines do not differ fundamentally from those used earlier and can be found in the [Ethical Guidelines](#) section on the institute’s web site. All research of the Institute for Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology can be subjected to ethical assessment by the [Ethics Review Committee Social Sciences](#). When in doubt, this committee can be asked to advise on ethical dilemmas.
- **Criteria for staying healthy.** These equally apply to both researchers and research participants, and are always informed by the recent medical and virological knowledge that is employed for drawing up national guidelines. These can be translated in the following points of attention:
 - In ethnographic research, as elsewhere, we keep a distance of one-and-a-half meter to others; we cough and sneeze in our elbow; we do not shake hands but introduce ourselves to others in other ways;
 - We carefully consider what we can and cannot share with research participants: we do not share food, we do not drink from the same receptacle, and, cultural values notwithstanding, we always prioritize the health of researchers and research participants;
 - When distributing questionnaires or survey materials, we use large envelopes in which the questionnaires can be kept for 48 hours to reduce the chance of these papers being contagious;
 - Shared research instruments such as camera’s, recording devices and other equipment will be thoroughly disinfected regularly, and in any case after each use, by researchers as well as research participants. When re-used within 24 hours, cameras and tripods have to be cleaned with blue Wecoline microfiber cloth (available with SOLO), except when instruments can be put away in a closed crate for at least 24 hours. (It is advisable to squeeze the cloth until it is damp to prevent damage to the camera by excess moisture. Note that SOLO will not be held responsible for damage caused by the use of wet Wecoline cloth.)

- We avoid using public transport and prefer to use other means of travel;
 - We choose field sites that minimize potential health risks. This is particularly important for participant observation: researchers have a duty to minimize risks for host families, organizations and research participants as much as possible;
 - When experiencing one or more of the following complaints – fever (38.0 degrees or higher), respiratory problems, muscle ache, pain behind eyeballs, coughing or throat ache, general malaise and extreme fatigue, nose cold (sniffing/sneezing/nose running/blocked nose), loss of taste or smell, diarrhea – we stay home. When ‘home’ is a host family, researchers will quarantine themselves or return to their own;
 - Researchers stay at home when they or a fellow-member of their household has been proven or suspected to be infected with COVID-19 in the past month;
 - As long as we live under pandemic conditions, we draw up a ‘COVID-19-ready’ research proposal with a superior or supervisor that lists possible scenarios (second peak, sudden relapse, renewed lockdown of locations or sub-regions) and that discusses how those can be methodologically and ethically anticipated as much as possible;
 - We reflect on which methods, whether at a distance or digital, can be applied and which not, and how we can achieve triangulation of research data in the given circumstances (see this [online document](#)).
- **National guidelines and/or legal frameworks.** Ethnographic research often takes place abroad, where other guidelines than the Dutch may apply: some countries keep a one-meter distance, others two, while some make protective face-masks mandatory, and others don’t. CA-DS researchers follow the guidelines of the University of Leiden and the VSNU (and thus those of the Dutch national authorities) where these are more strict than those demanded in their research location; in locations where rules are more strict than in the Netherlands, the stricter, local guidelines have to be observed.

These three points of departure will not turn out to be fully compatible in all contexts. Where possible, the research design should anticipate such contradictions and enlist the support of superior or supervisor to elucidate a balanced proposal.

Doing ethnographic research abroad brings additional considerations with it. We need to point out to researchers that business trips abroad have, until further notice, been prohibited unless the University Board gives prior written permission. The CvB has so far been very reticent in granting such permission.

As and when field research abroad is once more allowed and becomes possible, we advise our students and researchers at all times to consult and heed the travel advice of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also when you have already arrived at your destination.

DISCLAIMER

- The protocol is valid until a revised version has been drawn up.
- The protocol will be revised when necessary.
- Researchers will always need to use the most recent revision of the protocol.
- Questions about how to execute these guidelines should be addressed to superior or supervisor.