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RESEARCH IN DANGEROUS FIELDS

Ethics, morals, and practices in the study of smuggling

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Introduction

Writing about cultural habits and practices that are labelled as illicit is difficult, particularly when those who practice them are your hosts, conversational partners, and friends. The *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* tells us that smuggling is “the crime of taking or bringing goods secretly and illegally into or out of a country.”¹ Etymologically, the roots of the word come from the Low German *schmuggeln*, which means “to lurk.”² Thus a smuggler is not only a person involved in the clandestine transportation of goods and people, but is also someone who lurks (behind bushes) and is potentially dangerous as well as morally ambivalent. On the other hand, smuggling has often been a topic of romantic discourses that portray smugglers as social rebels, or situate smuggling in the context of political resistance (Girtler 2006) against state authorities and their territorial regimes. States label forms of trade and exchange as smuggling when these activities collide with border regimes, taxation laws or other legal regulations. History reveals how these regulations change in time and thus turn practices that were once legal into something illegal.³ Smugglers themselves also have varying perceptions of their conduct. They may see (or present) themselves as part of a moral economy of the underprivileged (Wagner 2010, 80ff), or just follow a rational logic of profit maximization. Even ordinary people judge and deal with smuggling in quite different ways. At times, they are the customers of smugglers and purchase goods on black markets without a sense of guilt; at others, they consider smugglers criminals who endanger law and order. Seminal studies like Nugent's *Smugglers, Secessionists & Loyal Citizens on the Ghana–Togo Frontier: The Lie of the Borderlands since 1914* (2003) have shown that clear distinctions between the good and the bad are often misleading or part of self-legitimizing narratives. This applies, for example, to the distinction between the smuggler as a criminal and the morally superior ordinary citizen or to state authorities as representatives of law, order and justice. In practice, smugglers, soldiers, customs officers, policemen and the ordinary citizen are very much intertwined actors for whom smuggling is a field of economic cooperation, social arrangements and political strategies. Thus, the distinctions between legal and illegal or formal and informal economies have little relevance in the empirical study of smuggling and the real practice of borderland economies and beyond (Hüsken 2019, Gallien

2020). What smuggling is and what it is not seems to depend on the position or situation of the person, group, institution or regime defining it.

There is certainly no room for such ambivalence in the perspective of governments, international intervention regimes or the politics of migration control (van Schendel and Itty 2005, Raeymaekers 2014, Gaibazzi, Bellagamba, and Dünwald 2017). Here, smuggling is discussed as a threat to state-centred definitions of sovereignty, territoriality and citizenship, and as the adversary of the formal economy. It is seen in the context of human trafficking across borders, as part of the transnational drug trade or the illicit trading of arms, or in relation to global jihadist terrorism. Smuggling has thus become a major object of the securitization policies (Scheele 2012, Amar 2013, Hüsken 2019) conducted by states, intelligence services, and military interventions. In the context of civil wars and the disintegration of nation states, non-state actors such as militias and organized crime networks also seek to control or appropriate transregional and cross-border trade routes and resource flows. In this context, borderland populations and their transgressive practices are exposed to state and non-state policies led by the imperative to control or suppress what is labelled as illegal or as unwanted connectivity. Likewise, researchers and their counterparts can become the objects of state and non-state repression, threat and violence simply by the fact of their interactions in the field.

When risk, safety, security and securitization become important issues in fieldwork, fundamental questions are raised about methodology, ethics and the integrity of academic knowledge production. This article tries to find answers to this complex issue. However, my contribution is neither intended as a research ethics guide, nor as a methodological toolbox. Instead, I try to review discourses and practices related to the notion of morality and research ethics in the study of smuggling and the social sciences. The article begins with a discussion of institutionalized ethics review boards as a means to ensure ethical compliance in research and academic knowledge production. It then proceeds with an exploration of the concept of an implicitly reciprocal and negotiated morality that develops through the interactions between researchers and their counterparts⁴ in the field. This is followed by an examination of covert research practices that have emerged in the context of the securitization of fieldwork. The last section of the article then considers how risk can be anticipated by embedding research in local safety practices and the joint anticipation of risk as well as by methodical pluralism and every day diplomacy.⁵

Ethics review boards

Ethics review boards are a mandatory, albeit not undisputed practice in the social and cultural sciences of the anglophone world (Dingwall 2012).⁶ Ethics review boards can be found in university departments, national academic associations, and national funding institutions or can exist as national committees. In the case of the United States, they are, for the time being at least, part of national legislation (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017). In addition, an increasing number of journals request evidence of ethics review as part of the submission process leading to publication. Here, ethical approval has come to act as a kitemark or official endorsement not only of the safety of the research method used in a particular piece of work, but also regarding the integrity and probity of the researcher. Boards and commissions made up of fellow scientists or academics from fields other than that of the researcher, and representatives responsible for gender, diversity, and ethics who likewise may be unfamiliar with the researcher's field or region of study, now play an important role in the process of approving or rejecting research projects.⁷ The recent debate in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland reveals some of the controversial points related to this development. In an article published in 2017, the German

medical anthropologist Hansjörg Dilger (2017, 192) argues that research ethics in German Social and Cultural Anthropology should no longer be characterized by an “voluntaristic and self-imposed muddling through.” Instead, he argues for a professional and institutionalized ethics review process based on the internationally established norms documented in most of the ethics declarations of professional science associations such as the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK (ASA),⁸ the American Anthropological Association (AAA),⁹ or the American Political Science Association (APSA).¹⁰ The envisaged professionalization and standardization is understood as a proactive initiative to catch up with the natural sciences and clinical studies where institutionalized ethics review boards have been established since the beginning of the new millennium (Marshall 2003). At the same time however, the necessity to sensitize research-promoting institutions and ethics review committees to the special conditions of qualitative field research has been underlined. Furthermore, it has been noted that “qualitative researchers find it far more relevant to promote ethical reflexivity in teaching and research practice than to introduce ethics review boards” (von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016, 1). It appears that the motivation of the authors is to find a balance between “doing anthropology ethically” and “doing ethics anthropologically.” For now, the German Anthropological Association provides questionnaires such as a “reflection sheet”¹¹ (to be completed and peer reviewed in dialogue before fieldwork) and a so-called “risk analysis”¹² (to be completed before travel) for voluntary use and for self-assessment only. In addition, anthropologists have presented tutorials on research ethics for self-study or for use in workshops (Schönhuth 2021). Again, these tutorials are voluntary and do not deny researchers the right to make independent decisions.

It seems that the anglophone world has already passed through this process, albeit with different trajectories. While the administration of research ethics in the United States appears to be in the process of returning the responsibility for ethics review to the research professions and departments, Europe is increasingly institutionalizing and centralizing the issue of research ethics, thereby risking or accepting estrangement from the research professions. Not only leading funding programmes for research such as Horizon 2020 of the European Research Council (ERC), but also important national funding institutions like the German Research Association (DFG), require extensive and detailed information on research methodology, sex, gender and/or diversity, and ethics in project applications.¹³ In addition, some countries of the global south have established national ethics review boards in order to safeguard the ethical conduct of (foreign) research.¹⁴ In the case of Horizon 2020, the research ethics screening process includes an ethics self-assessment (in the proposal), an ethics review (two stages), and ethics checks and audits (during the project and up to two years afterwards if necessary).¹⁵ Committees and science officers can reject research in regions that are not considered safe for empirical field research or withdraw approval if the security situation changes. They can also sanction unethical conduct (any conduct supposedly violating the ethical principles of the ERC) of the researcher in the course of the project.¹⁶ While ethics review boards seem to be accepted in the natural sciences, they have received criticism in the social sciences and especially in social and cultural anthropology (Dingwall 2012, Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017). The critique points out that ethics review processes are legalistic procedures that fail to address the processual, unforeseeable and often ambiguous character of fieldwork based on qualitative methodology. It is argued that the concept of ethics review boards assumes that “social science researchers control the research process and are in charge of the research situation, which is not the case in most qualitative, ethnographic research” (von Unger, Dilger, and Schönhuth 2016, 8).

A nonreflexive application of ethics screening along selective cultural, moral and legal standards can cause far-reaching ethical dilemmas for researchers. For instance, the guideline for “Ethics in Social Science and Humanities” by the ERC prescribes that criminal activity witnessed or uncovered in the course of research must be reported to the responsible and appropriate authorities, even if this means overriding commitments to participants to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.¹⁷ Confidentiality and anonymity, however, are an indispensable part of the research ethics declarations of all professional associations in the social sciences. Thus, the policy of the ERC not only creates a moral dilemma for researchers but virtually generates unethical behaviour. In the case of my research in the borderland of Egypt and Libya this would have meant exposing my counterparts to the prosecution of the Egyptian and Libyan authorities, who consider most transgressive practices in the borderland as criminal. A similar critique has been directed at the principle of informed consent¹⁸ in the social sciences. While informed consent is indispensable in medical science, it simply cannot be so easily applied in the social sciences and in research on smuggling. Not only is the researcher unable to anticipate with whom, for how long, to what end, and where they will work, but also people like smugglers (who are acting under the suspicious eye of states, services and organizations) will certainly not sign papers that reveal who they are and what they are doing.¹⁹

However, there is an even more fundamental problem. Ethics review boards are obliged to follow the security regulations (including travel restrictions) of state departments. The professional assessment of the researcher is not considered sufficient. If there is a travel warning from the respective foreign ministry, research trips will not be approved or only permitted under safety precautions that are difficult or impossible to meet for researchers. With a few exceptions, such as in the case of the DFG, which leaves the decision with the university and the respective scientists, this is true throughout Europe. As a result, an increasing number of researchers have stopped conducting research trips. Instead of ethical compliance, the uniform and formalized structure of such ethics reviewing provokes counter strategies by researchers. This can include the customization of rigid ethical principles and standard research models by stretching the meaning of planned activities to tick the right boxes (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017, 73). It can also mean, though, that the real practice of research is concealed in order to avoid a negative evaluation by the committee. Here, the strictness of the guidelines leads to actual unethical behaviour, namely the pretense of conforming, or concealment, as strategy and tactic. In practice, conflicts between researchers and ethics committees are frequent, and have led to a new form of mediation conducted by experts (often fellow researchers) who are commissioned to moderate between the two parties. In particular, the ethics screening and reporting in the course of a research project forces researchers to hide the ambiguities of the research practice and to translate them into a code that conforms with legalistic terms. The rendering of the ambiguities of research into bureaucratic and legal codes calls to mind what has been described as the “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994) of development, where politics are rendered technical in order to process them within the framework of development co-operation. Instead of ethical compliance, a culture of “hidden transcripts and practices” (Scott 1990) is established that is not only an indication of the over-bureaucratization of science but also represents a culture of distrust.

Morality and ethics in the practice of fieldwork

The different ways of perceiving and defining smuggling – as a transgressive practice and culture of borderland populations or as an illegal or illicit action (see above) – highlight the fact that smuggling is a controversial and conflicted field of practices and worldviews (Hüsken 2019).

Thus, research on smuggling too contains epistemological, social, political and moral ambivalences and ambiguities for researchers and interlocutors alike. Because of this, a non-normative empirical approach based on the merits of cultural relativism as advocated by Franz Boas and many generations of anthropologists (King 2019) is the essential premise in the study of smuggling. In the sense of Meyer Fortes and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's introduction to their seminal volume *African Political Systems* (1940, 4), we should not ask ourselves how things ought to be done but direct our attention to the ways they are done by people. In other words, our interest must be the emic perspective and the lived practice of people. Thus, the adoption of normative epistemologies centred around statehood, formal economy, legalism and securitization do not make sense in our approach to smuggling and smugglers. As independent researchers, we need openness without prejudice paired with curiosity and empathy. However, even a non-normative approach does not free us from the ambivalences and ambiguities of smuggling as a practice and a field of study. Counterparts may be dangerous or endangered, malevolent or vulnerable. Practices and contexts can be shaped by risk, danger and securitization, or be surprisingly uncomplicated, ordinary and even officially tolerated. Within this fuzziness, called practice, researchers and counterparts alike are constantly making decisions that constitute the morality, the sociality and the politics of fieldwork. Because morality and ethical judgments can vary widely within and among cultures, societies, milieus, groups and individuals, this process is certainly complex. I agree with the German ethnologist Annette Hornbacher, who sees moral decisions in fieldwork as "responsible judgments in view of complex challenges and sometimes aporetic dilemmas, especially in transcultural practice" (Hornbacher 2017, 214). In my view, research ethics must be based on an implicitly reciprocal and negotiated morality that develops through the social interactions between researchers and counterparts, and cannot be delegated to a set of positive laws or normative rules imposed, monitored and safeguarded by specialists, for example, ethics review boards. This process can be complex, contradictory and conflictive, but is also an essential and indispensable part of research practice. In this context, ethics declarations and tutorials can certainly play an important role as a benchmark for compliant scientific work. Even here, however, we always must reflect carefully on their boundedness in certain cultural traditions and revisit their adequacy in the context of every piece of research.

Since the days of Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942),²⁰ the critical reflection of fieldwork as a complex social process with eminent moral issues has been part of the identity of cultural and social anthropology. The alleged scandal in connection with the posthumous publication of his diaries in 1967 does not contradict this but rather confirms this thesis (Malinowski 1967). The debate about the crisis of ethnographic representation (also known as the writing culture debate) initiated by Clifford and Marcus (1986) was certainly another important step in the critical self-reflection of the discipline and its methodology. More recently, colonial and postcolonial studies and queer and critical race theory have produced a growing body of literature that engages with the critical revision of existing hegemonies in academic knowledge production (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2013). In this context, fieldwork and participant observation are examined and critically reviewed, and authors and activists call for a fundamental moral, ethical, methodological and political revision of all aspects of fieldwork which goes beyond the established ethics declarations of professional science associations.²¹ All this has certainly broadened our perspective; however, as Lewis (2014) has argued, the debate has left little room for contributions that do not deal with criticism and deconstruction. The focus on alleged hegemonic power structures (mostly defined as white, male, heteronormative, or Western) and their impact on academic knowledge production obscures the actual polycentricity of power relations in research practice. In this practice, the relationships between the strong and the weak,

the powerful and the powerless, the vulnerable and the malevolent, the good or the bad, or the right or the wrong, are complex, multilayered and dynamic. Within this complexity, the vulnerability of researchers and counterparts is certainly an important aspect, but is one which is always accompanied (if not counteracted) by agency and resilience.

If we instead leave the negotiation of morality and research ethics where it belongs, namely in the hands of the principal actors involved (researchers and their counterparts), we therefore need to discuss the elements involved in this negotiation process. Almost every introduction to anthropological fieldwork emphasizes the necessity of trust and empathy as significant resources, and in fact these are the basis of all social interaction in ethnographic research, particularly participant observation and in-depth interviewing. In classical ethnographic fieldwork carried out over a one-year period, or through repeated research over longer periods (Spittler 2014), researchers and their counterparts can begin an interpersonal dialogue or negotiation about the good in (their) human practice, which is what ethics as a theoretical consideration about morality is actually about. Ideally, this dialogical negotiation opens the way for the social and moral contextualization of the research among reliable local partners and the gradual development of stable relationships with key informants based on shared and mutually practised (moral) principles such as confidentiality, accountability and trust (Hüskén 2019, 22ff). Together, they form what has been called the “ethics of reciprocity” (Schönhuth 2021, 50). As anthropologists, we know that this process is fundamental to how and what kind of knowledge is gained.

However, this is only an ideal model, and I do not wish to advocate a false romanticization of ethnographic fieldwork here. Fieldwork and participant observation are only in retrospect a coherent endeavour. In fact, fieldwork can be an experience of unpredictability and insecurity. The negotiation of a shared morality can therefore be controversial, and there is no guarantee of its success. However, ethical judgements and decisions are an expression and a consequence of human freedom, reason and responsibility. This includes decisions that involve risk and safety. Commissions, screenings and ever new rules can neither anticipate nor replace this process. Again, we must leave these decisions in the hands of the researchers and their interaction partners in the field, accepting the possibility of success or also failure. If questions of morality and ethics have to be lived through anew in every research project, then we must expect an honest and transparent disclosure of this process. Although most colleagues involved in the study of smuggling underline that ethnographic fieldwork has been the foundation of their empirical work, we hear relatively little about what this actually meant in detail and almost nothing about moral and ethical challenges. With the promotion of ethical reflexivity in teaching and research practice we can respond to critique without falling into forms of post-modern hyper-reflexivity. Instead of a critical philosophy of science (much needed in other contexts), we should stick to the pragmatism of empirical studies. If there is a paradigm to follow, then I would suggest Robert Chambers’ words about the merits and pitfalls of empirical research: “Start, stumble, fall, stand up and use your own best judgement at all times” (quoted by Schönhuth (2021, 106).

Hidden practices and the securitization of fieldwork

The issues of risk, safety and security in fieldwork are now the subject of broad discussion across the social and cultural sciences. With regard to the Middle East and North Africa, some authors argue that recent political developments have turned the region into “no countries for anthropologists”²² where (ethnographic) fieldwork on the ground is hindered, prohibited and threatened. The detention of researchers by security apparatuses – albeit not a new

phenomenon – is becoming more common and can be lethal, as the tragic case of Giulio Regeni, a doctoral student at the University of Cambridge shows.²³ The empirical study of smuggling has so far been spared such tragedy. In some border regions of Tunisia, even border officials talk unreservedly about their involvement in formalized smuggling systems with fixed tariffs and conflict resolution mechanisms. In the Libyan region of Fezzan however, any open conversation on illegal transborder trade (such as human trafficking and slave markets close to the border) can cause severe safety issues (including persecution by organized crime networks and militias) for researchers and their counterparts alike (reported by an Algerian historian and ethnologist working in Fezzan who wishes to remain anonymous). Other examples of such issues include the experience of German ethnologist Georg Klute, who during his field studies in Guinea-Bissau in 2010, recognized Italian mafia gangsters (engaged in drug trafficking) in the streets and restaurants of Bissau. His local counterparts strongly advised him to avoid any contact (including eye contact) with these actors due to safety issues. An American colleague, who wishes to remain anonymous here, has also been under United States police surveillance since his research on the United States–Mexico border, while colleagues working in the border area of China and Central Asian states report systematic surveillance by Chinese authorities.

In a conference contribution in Zürich in 2018,²⁴ David Shankland, Director of the Royal Anthropological Institute, reported about his own experience of vulnerability when he was abducted by drug smugglers in Morocco. According to Shankland, the current situation and developments require researchers to develop strategies and tactics of protection. As a consequence of increased security risks in recent years, social science departments may either prevent researchers from going to unstable areas or introduce security protocols similar to the ones deployed by humanitarian organizations to protect their staff. This would restrain the researcher's movements and require regular contact with local security services, and might impede the ability of researchers to participate in everyday life (Akcinar et al. 2018, 38). These developments are, albeit to different degrees, not exclusive to the African continent or the Middle East. The securitization of fieldwork on smuggling also takes place regarding the borderlands of Russia, central Asia and China (Ibañez-Tirado and Marsden 2020). Meanwhile, the issues of the possible risk involved for and the potential vulnerability of counterparts have been addressed by David Spener (2009) in his book *Clandestine Crossings: Migrants and Coyotes on the Texas-Mexico Border*.

Despite the debate and the obvious relevance of the topic, only some authors reveal the related methodological and ethical problems of their research. This has to do in no small part with the difficult role of the ethical review processes discussed above. Another reason for this may also be the fact that disclosing problems or even failure in the research process is not very conducive to a successful academic career at a time when the publish or perish paradigm applies more than ever. Instead, a hidden securitization of research practices has emerged, that is again seldomly openly discussed. In a recent publication, Peter and Strazzari (2017) have taken the important and commendable step of ensuring more transparency in this field. Based on research experience in Mali and Darfur, they uncover the ongoing securitization of fieldwork in so-called “zones of danger.” Securitization is understood in two ways: “research is increasingly framed as a security concern; and it is framed by security concerns. In both cases, extraordinary means and procedures are invoked in the name of security” (Peter and Strazzari 2017, 2).²⁵ Thus, researchers who deal with sensitive issues or contested fields receive special attention from state, military, intelligence, development, and non-state actors (Hüsken 2019, 20ff). By defining and securitizing zones of danger, these actors can approve or deny access as well as influence researchers and research (Peter and Strazzari 2017, 3). In this respect, zones of danger are a direct result of securitization and differ from the notion of dangerous fields put forward by

Kovats-Bernat (2002). Peter and Strazzari identify three emerging practices that have significant consequences for research and academic knowledge production: remotely managed research; the outsourcing of logistics and fixers; and embedded research (Peter and Strazzari 2017, 7–8). The following considerations take their contribution as a reference point for further discussion.

The practice of remotely managed research is based on the contracting of local researchers to gain access to dangerous areas and to circumvent travel restrictions. These local researchers are used for data acquisition and processing, and often only receive a limited amount of research training from the principal researchers. In such a practice, the principal researcher never personally experiences the context he is studying. The local researchers are often graduate students, local activists, local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or development employees. Their participation in research can be an attractively paid service, but their work usually does not allow them to further pursue an academic career (as in the case of a doctoral student who carries out fieldwork for a collaborative research project), nor is it recognized as an independent academic contribution. When empirical research and contact and interaction with counterparts rests on the shoulders of often only superficially trained research assistants, questions are raised not only about the quality and reliability of information gathered but also, and even more so, concerning the academic knowledge production based on it. In addition, the local team and its interlocutors are the people ultimately potentially placed at risk. In the study of smuggling in warzones such as Fezzan in Libya, this practice is well established within think tanks, among journalists and in development agencies. However, the local researchers involved are seldom mentioned in publications; instead, the principal researcher appears as the genuine author and expert. Equally ambivalent is the fact that field research of longer durations in zones of danger²⁶ relies to a great extent on professional researchers of local or regional origin. These researchers are not research assistants but fellow academics. Their local belonging and regional ties, language and cultural skills often allow them to circumvent travel restrictions and access the field. However, their research is dangerous and often only possible as undercover research or on the basis of pure observation. Nevertheless, their contributions flow (often anonymized for security reasons) into the publications of Western scholars who can afford to publish openly. This practice delegates risk to a group of academics who are already politically and financially precarious. Furthermore, it enhances the asymmetries and unequal relations between Western and non-Western academic production on the global south, in which the latter has been and continues to be underrated and overlooked or serves as the provider of local collaborators for Western researchers.

Remotely managed research has also increased through the digitalization of communication via social media and the internet. Digital ethnography relies (among other things) on content analysis of social media or blogs, mobile phone communication, and online focus and discussion groups, and is undoubtedly an important field of study (Pink et al. 2015). However, digital discursive and performative practices are not necessarily congruent with the non-digital lived practice of people. Emerging research techniques such as the real-time interviewing of local interlocutors or experts via social media and video tools (Peterson 2015) that are integrated into workshops or conferences evoke a questionable representation of reality. In the video stream, local interlocutors (similar to the old-school live reporting of war reporters in television) seem to report directly from research sites where professional researchers cannot go. Reality, it seems, is streamed in real time into the office, meeting or conference room. Although the professional researcher or the academic participants of workshops and conferences are not able to contextualize who these speakers actually are and with what kind of authority they speak, these informants are nevertheless treated as authentic representatives of the real issues on the ground.²⁷ In addition, encounters in digital spaces are far from safe. The digital surveillance

techniques (tracking) of intelligence services can expose local experts and interlocutors to persecution when they speak about sensitive issues.²⁸ Thus this variant of remotely managed research may protect the professional researcher but not necessarily their counterparts.

In the second practice identified by Peter and Strazzari²⁹ – outsourcing of logistics and fixers – fixer agencies provide services to the researcher such as transport and accommodation, guides, translation and interpretation, and research assistance (see above). In 2005, Robert Fisk used the term *hotel journalism*³⁰ to criticize international journalists in Iraq who instead of doing independent research, wrote reports based solely on the services of fixers and research assistants. The role of fixers and research assistants in academic research and knowledge production is still a blind spot and unclear to the academic and broader audience. It marks, however, the shift from independent research based on fieldwork among real people and in concrete localities, towards a commodification of information in a market of knowledge brokers. In countries that are experiencing intense conflict or civil wars (such as Libya), individual brokers or broker networks (often in the institutional form of think tanks or NGOs) have developed into a major source for academic knowledge production. Information and knowledge brokers can be committed to science, they may have purely monetary interests, or deliver knowledge according to particular political goals. All three motives are unfortunately seldom openly reflected by researchers, who nevertheless claim to have authentic information.

In the third practice Peter and Strazzari identify – embedded research – the researcher participates (or is employed) in military operations and international intervention regimes, cooperates with intelligence services, or gains access to zones of danger by benefiting from the security architecture of an international organization. This practice is undoubtedly the one most disputed in the social sciences. This is particularly true for the Human Terrain System (HTS), a United States Army support programme employing personnel from the social sciences, for example, anthropology, sociology, political science, regional studies and linguistics, to provide military commanders with an understanding of the local population in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2007, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) published a statement opposing HTS as an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise that conflicted with the AAA's Code of Ethics.³¹ Most anthropological associations around the world follow the AAA's Code of Ethics.³² In addition, social scientists who officially work for the military have been challenged by critical academic and public debates (Lucas 2008). Some have nevertheless become official parts of the military apparatus and its related institutions (Haugegaard 2020). A more hidden reality of embedded research occurs with regard to the role of intelligence services. All over the world, intelligence services pursue an active recruitment policy which focusses on researchers who work in danger and conflict zones or deal with illicit practices such as smuggling. Intelligence services offer concrete advantages such as payment, visas and travel permits, and technical equipment to their academic collaborators, but they may also appeal to the civic duties of researchers as loyal citizens to convince scientists to collaborate.³³ Due to the secrecy policies of intelligence services and the lack of transparency among academics, it is difficult to say how many researchers are involved in these practices and how their academic work is affected by this form of embeddedness. In any case, involvement with intelligence services draws science into the logics of spying and secrecy, which makes an open and trusting collaboration between researchers and counterparts impossible. A much more common form of embedded (or assisted) research in zones of danger takes place in the context of international organizations, peace missions, and development cooperation. International organizations can provide security, and can also facilitate access to the field or even offer the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in the context of the security architecture of an international organization. However, embeddedness and involvement come with consequences that can

compromise research. Interlocutors and local populations may identify the researcher with the respective international organization. Thus, the interaction between researcher and counterparts can take the form of a donor–beneficiary relationship that clearly differs from a relationship based on reciprocal learning and exchange. Just as local populations may identify the researcher with an international organization, the researcher too may adopt the normative perspective and the organizational interests of the security provider.³⁴ A particular case is the ensuring of security for researchers by regional or local security forces. These forces may belong to the state, but they can also be local militias or vigilante groups. Here, the researcher can become entangled in conflict formation and dynamics (Kovats–Bernat 2002) that are difficult to anticipate and may affect his position as an independent researcher.

Based on my own research experiences in Libya and the research for this article, the practices described are currently increasing.³⁵ They are thus the effects of the global trend of securitization inscribed in independent research. This is certainly a worrying prospect. However, there may still be valid ways out of securitization. In the concluding section, I would like to explore these.

Hic sunt leones! Sed autem socii!

The seminal volume *Fieldwork under Fire*, edited by Nordstrom and Robben (1996), discusses the effects that violence, threat and confrontation with suffering can have on researchers and research. At the same time, it exemplifies how local populations organize normality in war or in risk-filled and violent circumstances. The empirical cases show how agency, resilience and inventiveness confront and overcome vulnerability. This does not mean that vulnerability disappears or no longer needs to be addressed, but the cases nevertheless help us not to overvalue it. All over the world, the populations of borderlands are showing remarkable resilience to state-orchestrated policies of control or to the threat of non-state actors such as organized crime networks or militias. These populations assert historical cross-border connectivities and use them in productive ways, even in difficult times (Scheele 2009; Feyissa and Hoehne 2010; Korf and Raeymaekers 2013, Hüsken 2019). Researchers can benefit from these experiences and skills if they achieve local acceptance and, ideally, are able to embed their research in local safety practices. In a recent article, Henig, Marsden, and Ibañez–Tirado (2016) have highlighted skilled forms of “everyday diplomacy” which distinguish local populations in their capacity to handle challenges (such as securitization). This is in my experience particularly true for the provision of safety in insecure fields of action such as borderlands. From mid-2012 on, my own research in the borderland of Libya and Egypt was confronted with criticism, avoidance and then also with threats by radical Islamist groups. I was stopped, held and interrogated at militia checkpoints several times. In 2018, I spend two weeks doing research in Tobruk with my passport held at Tobruk airport by local tribal security personnel. However, I could always rely on the safety networks of my counterparts – not only those of local politicians, entrepreneurs, and tribal leaders, but also those offered to me by ordinary people. Based on their local knowledge and learned competency, these counterparts either prepared me for problems, showed me limits, or solved precarious situations pragmatically and competently. Even more valuable than this was the fact that the awareness and joint anticipation of risk and potential vulnerability proved a key element in relationships of trust and reciprocal solidarity (Hüsken 2019, 15ff). Thus, the researcher can find allies even when there are lions around. Embedding research in local assessments of risk and local safety practices can be a way out of the “security archipelago” (Amar 2013) created by the regimes of securitization described above. Of course, this form of embedding and the safety that comes with it only succeeds via repeated

research over longer periods. It also requires courage (including the courage to accept and admit failure) and the willingness to engage in thick participation.³⁶

However, I do not wish to downplay risk, nor do I intend to glorify or romanticize research in dangerous fields. Risk requires safety precautions, methodological pluralism and a particular form of everyday diplomacy. Useful and pragmatic guidelines for safety precautions in dangerous fields have been provided by a number of authors (Kovats-Bernat 2002, Goldstein 2014) and these need not be repeated here. It goes without saying that methodological pluralism is a potent remedy in difficult research fields. The methodological developments and advances of the last few decades offer an almost inexhaustible reservoir of possibilities, which is exemplified in many textbooks (Iphofen and Tolic 2018). Multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995), tandem and team research (Lecocq et al. 2013; Schlehe and Hidayah 2014), indirect questioning, pure observation, choosing neutral places for conversation, etc., have great potential for the study of smuggling. In addition, online tutorials (Schönhuth 2021) include checklists and self-tests on assessing risks, methods, and research ethics.

In dangerous fields, and even more so in securitized zones of danger, the researcher enters a complex field of relationships, negotiations, compromises, and research adaptation that can be anticipated only partly by the above-mentioned prescriptions. Here, researchers need to develop a particular form of everyday diplomacy in order to cope with these challenges. Caution, a realistic assessment of the possibilities and limits of research (involving local expertise), and a critical reflection of the possible consequences of one's own actions for others must be the basis for responsible diplomatic judgements and practices. This refers to ways of coping, avoiding, or cooperating with international organizations and the military, and includes negotiations and forms of coexistence with border authorities (Spener 2009, 1ff). It also requires careful tactical distance (including exit options) from violent groups such as militias or organized crime networks and other potentially harmful counterparts in the field; last but not least, it concerns our responsibility for our counterparts in the field.

The everyday diplomacy of fieldwork, however, must allow for tactical behaviour on the part of researchers too, as long as they do not compromise the ethical principles laid out in the declarations of our associations. In an earlier publication, I have suggested the notion of discretion (Hüsken 2019, 18ff) as a way to cope with the challenges of research in times of turmoil in Libya. In the novel *The King David Report* by the German writer Stefan Heym (1973), a historian assigned by King Solomon to write the official history of King David is confronted with the complex process of writing a political history. In order to protect himself and his work, he develops the concept of "discretion" and defines it as "truth domesticated by wisdom" (94). I believe that for any researcher confronted with risk or actors who try to compromise the freedom of academic research, a practice of discretion is necessary and legitimate.

I agree with Peter and Strazzari that whenever access to people and areas is determined by policies and practices of securitization, we as researchers must pay particular attention to methodological transparency and ethical reflexivity. Only by revealing the limitations and dilemmas of our research can we improve the quality of our scholarship and enhance the actual security of researchers travelling to zones of danger. When we disclose and share the conditions, processes, and practices of research and knowledge production without omitting the difficulties, ambiguities and dilemmas, we are doing what we ought to do: good science.

Notes

- 1 See Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, last modified 2018, <http://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/smuggling>.

- 2 See Duden, Verlags Bibliographisches Institut GmbH, last modified 2018, <http://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/schmuggeln>.
- 3 For example, this is true for the prohibition of the production, sale and transportation of alcoholic beverages in the United States between 1920 and 1933.
- 4 With the term “counterparts” I refer not only to informants, interlocutors, associates, collaborators, consultants, hosts and friends, but also to wider networks of relationships.
- 5 Empirically, this article is based on my own research in the borderland of Egypt and Libya (Hüsken 2019: 13ff). In addition, in 2020 and 2021, I conducted 18 conversations (open talks on the issue of research ethics) with fellow researchers, experts (i.e., members of think tanks and development organizations), journalists, and other interlocutors (such as local politicians), from Egypt, Germany, Libya, Mali, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. I have integrated some sections from Hüsken 2019. All of these sections have been partly rewritten and adjusted for this article. I would like to thank Daniel Rolph for copy-editing this article.
- 6 See <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/ethnav/nine>.
- 7 See <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/ethnav/seven.phtml>.
- 8 See <https://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.html>.
- 9 See <http://ethics.americananthro.org/category/statement/>.
- 10 See <https://www.apsanet.org/TEACHING/Ethics>.
- 11 See https://en.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GAA_Research-Ethics-Reflection-Sheet.pdf.
- 12 See https://en.dgska.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GAA_Risk-Assessment-Sheet.pdf.
- 13 The importance of research ethics for the DFG can be measured by the fact that it exceeds the scientific part of the application. See https://www.dfg.de/formulare/54_01/54_01_en.pdf.
- 14 In practice, these boards (for instance, in the case of Rwanda) are also used to prevent politically unwelcome research.
- 15 See https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/from-evaluation-to-grant-signature/grant-preparation/ethics_review_en.htm.
- 16 In the recent case of an approved project on Mauritania, fieldwork was limited to such an extent that qualitative empirical research in the country became impossible. (Information given by a fellow researcher who wishes to remain anonymous).
- 17 See https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/6_h2020_ethics-soc-science-humanities_en.pdf.
- 18 In medical science, informed consent is a process for obtaining permission (in the form of a written statement) before conducting a healthcare intervention on a person, for conducting some form of research on a person, or for disclosing a person’s medical information.
- 19 For a more detailed discussion on informant consent, see the following blog by Carmen Delgado: <https://interpreting-ideas.com/2017/09/>.
- 20 Bronislaw Malinowski was an anthropologist whose writings on ethnography, social theory, and field research have had a lasting influence on the discipline of anthropology.
- 21 See Schramm 2005, Rooke 2009, Faria and Mollett 2016, and Hanson and Richards 2019.
- 22 Adapted from the title of the international conference: No country for anthropologists? Contemporary ethnographic research in the Middle East, University of Zürich, November 2018.
- 23 On 25 January 2016, the anniversary of the Egyptian revolution, Giulio Regeni, a 28-year-old Italian PhD student at the University of Cambridge and visiting scholar at the American University in Cairo (AUC) was kidnapped in the Egyptian capital. Regeni was conducting participant observation on informal trade unions opposing the post-2013 regime. On 3 February 2016, Regeni’s corpse was found beside the Cairo–Alexandria desert highway, displaying clear signs of torture.
- 24 At the international conference: No country for anthropologists? Contemporary ethnographic research in the Middle East, University of Zürich, November 2018 (Akcinar et al. 2018).
- 25 See also Buzan, Wæver, and De Wilde 1998.
- 26 Based on my research, this is particularly the case in Northern Mali, Northern Niger, Chad, Sudan, and the Libyan region of Fezzan.
- 27 I personally witnessed this practice in several international workshops dealing with Libya. In addition, a large proportion of recent publications about Libya are based almost exclusively on survey techniques via the internet or mobile telephone.
- 28 For some time now, my Egyptian and Libyan counterparts have preferred not to talk about sensitive issues via social media at all.
- 29 In the original text, this is practice number three. For the sake of clarity, I have treated it as the second one here.

- 30 See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/long_reads/robert-fisk-iraq-hotel-journalism-baghdad-b1639391.html.
- 31 See <https://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1952>.
- 32 See paragraph 6 in the Code of Ethics of the AAA: "Responsibilities to one's own government and to host governments" states that "no secret research, no secret reports or debriefings of any kind should be agreed to or given." <http://www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1656>.
- 33 See Hüsken 2019, 20.
- 34 See Hüsken and Klute 2015, 321.
- 35 Peter and Strazzari (2017, 16) do not seem too optimistic about transparency in this field when they state "that the trend within the social sciences seems to be in the opposite direction."
- 36 Thick participation involves training and practice, the complementarity of observation and questioning, and the involvement and productive use of all the senses: listening and watching, touching, smelling and tasting, and physical and mental feeling (Spittler 2014, 213).

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