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Time, Co-Creation and Collaborative Research: Moving from a Sympathetic Commonality towards Empathetic Distance

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Abstract

Prioritizing empathetic distance over sympathetic commonalities enables inclusive and collaborative research that attends to relationships in all their forms, even those based on negative emotions or opposition. Exploring how emotions and positionalities influence rapport allows anthropologists to explore "what is" rather than solely seeking "what if" or "what ought to be." A multi-temporal understanding of research time as commitment and relation emphasizes the importance of rapport, positionality, and depth. This raises the question of how to balance researchers' desire to control research endeavors with institutional demands to reduce time spent on research and its follow-up, and the need to conduct fieldwork in ways that align with the values of our collaborators. How much control are we willing to relinquish to empower the people with whom we do research, and what outcomes can we expect? By sharing the benefits, risks, and challenges of relinquishing control, I examine the tension between academic epistemology and lived experience, trust and security, engaged and vulnerable ethnography, and research bureaucracy.

Keywords

empathetic distance – sympathetic common – research methods – ethnography –
applied anthropology – research design – collaborative research

Negotiating Fieldwork Together: From a Sympathetic Common to an Empathetic Radical Individualism

Many ethnographic publications highlight the long-lasting friendships that
researchers have formed with their study participants.[1] They emphasize the
importance of creating reciprocal bonds that endure beyond the research
period, rather than treating research as a one-sided extraction.[2] These
publications describe how researchers have learned from the people who
welcomed them into their homes, and the warmth and hospitality they
experienced. Although some publications describe conflicts or suspicious
collaborators, as well as moments where ways of being in the world collide, these
accounts are less common.[3] Despite knowing that human relationships are
complex, multilayered, and often friction-laden, the literature on methodology
often overlooks the epistemological, ethical, and practical challenges of
discord. Researchers are tacitly guided to presume that positionality and
opinions are fixed and rarely learn about tensions or contradictions within
researchers. This is particularly surprising considering the "liquid times" we
live in where "negative globalization"[4] is promoting endemic uncertainty,
and where social and ecological relations are seen to be in crisis. I urge us to
consider relationships that are based on negative emotions, as well as those
that sustain themselves through opposition or antipathy, as active political
projects worthy of our ethnographic attention (see David Graeber's cultures

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1 See e.g., Jackson, M. (2004). *In Sierra Leone*: Duke University Press. Indeed, Michael Jackson
   has been writing and speaking about his friend Sewa throughout most his career. An
   important reflexive piece which reflects on friendship as method is Tillmann-Healy, L. M.
   (2003). Friendship as Method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(5): 729–749.
2 Enria, L. (2015a). Co-producing knowledge through participatory theatre: reflections on
   ethnography, empathy and power. *Qualitative Research*. Special Issue: *Feminist Participatory
   Methodologies*, 1–11; Enria, L. (2015b). *"An Idle Mind is the Devil's Workshop"? The Politics of
   Work Amongst Freetown's Youth*, DPhil Thesis, Department of International Development,
   University of Oxford.
3 Bowen, E. S. (1964). *Return to laughter*. Anchor Books.
4 Bauman, Z. (2013). *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty*. Polity.

of refusal).[5] Marilyn Strathern argues that anthropology has been guided for too long by empathy, proximity, and trust, while mistrust, antipathy, or refusal have been treated as the absence of relations.[6] We need to examine how such relationships are negotiated and the impact they have on our research, analysis, and conclusions. Anthropological collaborations are messy, and if we do not want to paint a one-dimensional picture, we need to account for the lessons learned from friction.

How, then, are such relationships negotiated? What impact do they have on our approach to research, data analysis, and the conclusions we draw? And should we adjust the way we present anthropological collaborations to account for the messiness, the disdain not just the esteem and the lessons learned from friction?

This article is based on 3½ years of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork with houseless individuals in Leipzig, Germany, conducted between October 2018 and March 2022. Our focus was on understanding how people without housing can exercise their fundamental rights to privacy and intimacy, identifying the barriers to realizing these rights and protections,[7] and communicating these findings to relevant stakeholders and the public. My houseless research collaborators ranged from teenagers to individuals in their late eighties and came from diverse backgrounds. Our research took various forms and included participating in activities, informal conversations, extended periods of closely accompanying collaborators through their everyday lives and multimodal research communication via radio, television, newspapers, policy forums and municipalities.

I reject the notion of researcher objectivity or neutrality and do not claim to be either. We will always take sides—it is impossible not to do so—and we are always positioned—it is impossible not to be—but it is crucial that we make clear to ourselves and to others "whose side we are on" and how

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5   Graeber, D. (2013). Culture as Creative Refusal. *Cambridge Anthropology* 31(2): 1–19; Lather, P. (2009). Against Empathy, Voice and Authenticity. In: A.Y. Jackson, and L.A. Mazzei, eds., *Voice in Qualitative Inquiry: Challenging Conventional, Interpretive, and Critical Conceptions in Qualitative Research*. Routledge, p 1.

6   Strathern, M. (2006). Isaiah Berlin Lecture. Useful Knowledge. Proceedings of the British Academy 139:73–109; Strathern, M. (2015). Detaching and Situating Knowledge: Comment. In: T. Yarrow and T.M. Candea, eds., *Detachment: Essays on the Limits of Relational Thinking*, Manchester University Press, pp. 256–262; Strathern, M. (2020). *Relations. Anthropological Account*. Durham University Press.

7   Schneider, L.T. (2022) My home is my people homemaking among rough sleepers in Leipzig, Germany. *Housing Studies*, 37(2): 232–249.

we are positioned.[8] Consequently, I employ analytic autoethnography and critical phenomenology in my approach, writing, and analysis, which involves reflecting on my own positions, opinions, background, emotional world, and bias, as well as those of my collaborators, in the creation of theory. Indeed, it would be a rather strange exercise to discuss the positions and contradictions of my collaborators without exposing my own to similar scrutiny. I am a white feminist woman in my early thirties. I am sexually fluid, and politically green with a firm disdain for the violence inherent in Eurocentric nation-state logics which reject shared responsibility. I believe in a politics and ethics of care that co-creates and co-labors via participation instead of representation. I oppose the violence that arises from presumptions about a common humanity and subsequent surface-level diversity (see below) without considering and addressing the structural roots of inequality. Instead, I believe in a decolonial practice that lives plurivocality without centering or hierarchizing. However, I learned that I am far more rigid than I had believed myself capable and that when being confronted with opposing perspectives and positions, I develop tunnel vision and fall back on comfortable totalizing perceptions which assign what I believe to be "bad views" to "bad people."

My houseless research collaborators hold a broad range of politics, opinions, and worldviews, and it would be a gross misrepresentation to describe all of our values as aligned or even in proximity. For example, some of my collaborators exhibit racist attitudes, making highly problematic comments about Romanian, Syrian, or Senegalese refugees. Others actively work against such harmful attitudes and build strong alliances. Some of my collaborators care for elderly houseless individuals, those with mental illness, and those in ill health. However, others hold extremist views or commit severe crimes. Some male research collaborators explained feminism as a tool for oppressing men, which leaves men no option than to begin hitting those women who maltreat them. Some even went so far as to say that women cannot be surprised if they end up dying at the hands of those (ex) partners whose dreams they trampled upon. I have seen physical confrontations between romantic partners and some collaborators justify or excuse violence. One of my female research collaborators was killed during my fieldwork and her brutal death was a stark reminder of the dangers in such statements. But there have also been women, men, and LGBTIQ+ collaborators who started a feminist collective, who tried

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8 AcSS, Iphofen, R. (2013). Research ethics in ethnography/anthropology. *European Commission*, p16; See also Becker, H. S. (178) *Problems in the publication of field studies*. Routledge; See also, Hammersley, M (ed.) (2000) *Taking sides in social research: Essays on partisanship and bias*. Routledge.

to destabilize such harmful masculinities and who reject violence in all its forms. Overall, our research includes people who hold extremist opinions, people whose opinions change depending on whom they speak to, people who claim to have no opinion and people who simply do not care. Whereas some of these people hold onto their worldviews and positions, others seem to change them near constantly.

The question of whether synergy in opinions, politics, and positions is crucial for my research collaborators and me raises broader questions about the role of anthropology and how we understand humanity, difference, and distance. I think that as anthropologists our task is to study humanity in all its diversity and to approach our work by striving to understand phenomena from the perspective of those we work with and alongside. And I believe that whom we work with and alongside should not be chosen based on sympathy, commonality or rapport. In this regard, agreements are not the most important factor. Instead, it is ethically and epistemologically significant for us to reflect on and consider the influence of contestations—the moments when our views clash—on our understanding and interpretations. By doing so, we can deepen and expand our knowledge of diverse perspectives and of the complexities of human experience.

Our collaborative research endeavor put discord and disparate views front and center and was focused not on overcoming them and reaching a place of sympathy but built around enabling "empathetic distance" as described by Luisa Enria, which entails setting boundaries while remaining empathetic in interactions.[9] This approach allows to critically engage with our interpretations and subject our own critiques to ongoing questioning, creating space for differences to become conversations. To start with myself, as I wrote above, I learned through this research how biased and shortsighted my assumptions and my conclusions can be. This uncomfortable insight has allowed me to work hard on deconstructing the process by which I totalize and reduce. Let me provide another example:

> Of pearls and trullas
> I am sitting cross-legged on the floor in the 30smth square meter social housing apartment J lives in. J sits on his perfectly made single bed and rolls a joint.

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9   Enria (2015b: 41f); Schneider, L. T. (2022). Humanising Through Conjecture: Recognition and Social Critique among Houseless People. *Ethnos*: 1–19.

T sits opposite him on the only chair, his body in an upright position perfectly aligned with the backrest, seat and legs of the chair: feet flat on the ground, knees at the same height, hands resting on his thighs he keeps his upper body in an upright position.

They are talking—as is quite common—about women. T reflects on his dating life. He presents his theory about women: that they can be differentiated into "Perlen" [pearls] and Trullas [hags]. The vast majority of Trulla's are completely useless non-persons who deserve no place on this earth and are definitely not sexually attractive. Perlen, on the other hand, are attractive women who can seldomly, be nice and kind but are mostly man-eaters. One such Perle had left him after he had only slightly beaten her. What a cunt. Another did not agree to sleep with him after he had taken her to an expensive restaurant. Again: cunt.

Much like counting sheep when too anxious to sleep, I had counted the bobbles on the carpeted-floor to calm myself down but now I do look up and say: "not cunt."

"What?" replies J.

"Do not call women cunts" I reiterate.

"But they are cunts" he says.

"No, sorry, cunt is a demeaning word for a vagina and a vagina is something beautiful which I am sure you agree. I find it offensive that the word is misused in such a way."

"But I don't even mean vagina, it's just like a bad word for women" J says seeming confused.

"OK, but whether you mean it or not, it has a meaning. It matters" I reply.

J (whose opinion about women is no different from T's) looks up from his task, smiles and says with a nod in my direction: "As irritating as I find these angry little feminists, I agree. I liked vaginas. From now on, no more cunts in this house."

5 minutes later J adds "Such bitches do not deserve to be called cunts anyways since their pussies are so stretched f****** them feels like throwing a sausage into a corridor."

Into the silence I say: "Listen, I understand that you both have been hurt by some women, but I find your statements to be hurtful and demeaning to all women and I therefore feel the need to say something against this."

"You can say whatever you want but we are still right. You women are no longer the poor hurt weaker sex."

Me: Can we agree to disagree?

T: "Sure we can"

J: "Does this mean you hate us now?"

"No, of course not. It just means that I disagree. Do you agree with me?" I
ask and look first at T who replies immediately and wholeheartedly "hell
no" and then at J who just shakes his head and shows me a thumbs down.
"Will you still work with us even though you think we are sexist pigs?"
wonders J

"I will try" I say with a laugh.

Such discussions not only bring to light positions but also contradictions
including, in this case, my own belief that one should not generalize from
personal experiences to entire groups, even though I have done so myself. Or
the view of my conversational partners that overall trends could be assessed
based on a few examples, something which anthropologists often do but
would refute in this case because the "evidence" is based on doxa not episteme.

This approach of conversation over conformity does not aim to resolve
ambiguities or incongruities in what people say or do but instead explores
them as part of how people make sense of and navigate their world. This does
not mean, however, that people with conflicting ways of being in the world
can easily work together or that we can completely rid ourselves of bias. In the
case of T and J, for example, our conversation reinforced their labeling of me
as angry feminist and enhanced my distaste for their sexism. What is more,
our time spent together tended to circle around women and how they should
or should not be treated and was, for everyone involved, quite challenging.
Practically, it would have, of course been easier to avoid T and J but their views
were far from uncommon and excluding them would have biased findings.
Methodologically, rigorous coding and analysis can account for such affective
appendages whereas moving beyond the premise of shared understanding,
acknowledging these tensions and engaging with them, aids the creation of
theory.

To destabilize "received wisdom"[10] and "unexamined doxa"[11] and create
valid and relevant knowledge, we must critically examine whom we prioritize
in the field and why. Personally, I found it particularly challenging to work
with people who identified as right-wing skinheads, as well as spend time
with those who harbored hatred against women and people without German
citizenship. I also found it difficult to engage with people who blamed "the
state" but responded with lethargy or rejection to any attempts by friends
or stakeholders to help them. To overcome my bias, I tasked myself with not
avoiding such people and, instead of prioritizing collaborators with whom I

10   Mattingly, 2019.
11   Ibid.

almost always had a good time and from whom I learned a lot about things I value, I spent an equal amount of time with collaborators with whom I found it difficult to see eye to eye.

David Delaney wrote that our involvement with each other is—

> characterized by lived convergences, by partially (if necessarily incompletely) shared experiences. Kruks, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, references the co constitution of an "interworld" or "a common ground … woven into a single fabric …" "We are," she writes, "collaborators for each other …" (1990: 125). This "interworlding" happens even when a situation is experienced very differently by the various participants, even when "world-making" is experienced as world-destroying, (38–40)[12]

It is in connection—be it through clash or convergence—that we experience, think and understand. My collaborators and I engaged in heated debates on a wide range of topics. Through multimodal communication, involving e.g. speech, non-verbal communication, body language/embodied work, silences… anthropologists can gain a deeper understanding of not only "what" position someone takes, but also "why" they hold those views. This allows us to learn how these opinions are formed, what purposes they serve, and how they are enacted, reinforced, or destabilized. To return once more to Delaney it is through situations that sociality is created because it is here where "power, meaning, and forms of knowledge circulate, crystalize, are dispersed, or disintegrate" where power is negotiated and meaning made.[13]

During this research, I have gained valuable insights into how individuals develop extreme views and opinions.[14] Although these life stories are personal and individual, there are shared lessons that can be drawn from them. For example, differences in aid systems for foreigners and citizens can lead to a lack of understanding and engagement as well as to resentment against those who are prioritized, while the feeling of being overwhelmed by state institutions can create a sense of lethargy that paradoxically slows the wheels of power and provides moments of freedom. As someone who has never been entirely dependent on the state or had to navigate complex aid systems, I was ignorant of these differences and feelings and so incorrectly judged behavior.

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12 David Delaney (2010). *The spatial, the legal and the pragmatics of world-making: nomospheric investigations.* Routledge, pp. 38–40.

13 Ibid, p 40.

14 An important work in this regard is Winlow, S. and Hall, S. and Treadwell J. (2017). *The rise of the right: English nationalism and the transformation of working-class politics.* Policy Press.

Indeed, I learned a lot about my own misguidedness. To share a final example, in the past, I subscribed to the notion that hatred and empathy were mutually exclusive, and I often saw myself as an open-minded individual who was immune to bigotry. However, I came to realize that this was a false binary, and that one could hold both empathetic and bigoted views simultaneously as I did in relation to those people I had a hard time working with.

These examples highlight the importance of collaboration not only in data collection but also in data analysis. Working in collaborations that are based on empathetic distance allows us to critically examine contestations, expose our own views and positionalities to scrutiny and ensure that our analysis accounts for these dynamics.

Creating Community Continuously and Collectively

Collaboration and co-creation in anthropological fieldwork involve the process of building a community together, which includes defining its boundaries, assigning meaning, and setting shared goals.[15] Since research communities are not ontologically grounded in any inherent way[16] but constructed by individuals who come together to study a particular topic or question, individuals come to occupy different roles, based on their respective knowledge and experiences.

Before my anthropological training, I subscribed to an "ideological universalism",[17] which led me to overlook differences and assume that a shared humanity was sufficient to bind individuals together in a research community. However, I came to understand that this approach was problematic, as it could lead to a colonial and Eurocentric perspective that failed to account for the unique experiences and ways of being of individuals. This presumption fixed the ontology of the community without letting it organically develop. Instead, I adopted an approach that was more in line with the Urarina notion of equality

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15   Fluehr-Lobban, C. (2008). Collaborative anthropology as twenty-first-century ethical anthropology. *Collaborative Anthropologies 1*(1):175–182; Lassiter, L. (2005). Collaborative ethnography and public anthropology. *Current Anthropology 46*(1): 83–106; Campbell, E. and Lassiter, L. E., and Pahl, K. (2018). Twelve: Collaborative ethnography in context. In: E. Campbell, K. Pahl, E. Pente and Z. Rasool, eds. *Re-imagining Contested Communities*. Bristol, Policy Press, pp. 91–106.

16   Esposito, R. (2011). *Immunitas: the protection and negation of life*. Polity. Richter, H. (2016). Beyond the 'other' as constitutive outside: The politics of immunity in Roberto Esposito and Niklas Luhmann. *European Journal of Political Theory 18*(2): 216–237.

17   Stratton, J. and Ang, I. (1994). Multicultural imagined communities: Cultural difference and national identity in Australia and the USA. *Continuum* 8(2): 124–158.

without equivalence, which emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals on their own terms, rather than assuming a shared essence.[18]

This approach recognizes that community must be "continuously and collectively produced."[19] This involves establishing affective, cognitive, and linguistic relations that recognize and embrace the differences between individuals, while also finding ways to create commonalities that do not reduce these differences to an abstract subject or collective.[20] In this way, collaboration and co-creation in anthropological fieldwork can become a level-playing field, where individuals can contribute on an equal basis.

Not only did this challenge my Eurocentric thinking about individualism and equality, but it also made me realize that this research wasn't just "my research." I couldn't make executive decisions without consulting the other people involved, as I didn't own the research or have exclusive control over it. Moreover, I learned that I couldn't define what the research "is" or "does" nor impose static rules for how we will work together or what roles we will occupy. Instead of me categorizing people, research, and phenomena,[21] we collectively created and produced the research aims, strategies, and process in an ongoing, flexible and adaptive manner.[22]

As a result, I started to view our differences not as things to be overlooked, but as important and foundational components of the empathetic research endeavor we were creating. Patti Lather warns researchers of the "liberal embrace of empathy that reduces otherness to sameness,"[23] and Luisa Enria adds that we should acknowledge the necessary "incompleteness of intersubjective understanding."[24] Adopting an approach of empathetic distance "does not amount to seeing respondents simplistically as victims of their situation [but] ... enables a more rounded view of participants' lives, of the multifaceted and contextual nature of their character and existence."[25] This applies not only to the participants but also to ourselves.

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18   Walker, H. (2020). Equality without equivalence: an anthropology of the common. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute 26*(1): 146–166.

19   Ibid.

20   Walker 2020, p. 146.

21   Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (*2nd edition*). Edinburgh University Press.

22   Biehl, J., and Locke, P. (2010). Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming. *Current Anthropology* 51: 317–351.

23   Lather 2019, p. 19.

24   Enria 2015b, p. 41

25   Ibid.

At the same time, this approach allows us to reflect on the difference between empathy and sympathy and on their role and place in qualitative research engagements. When presenting on how I had approached actively violent right-wing skinheads who were part of our research through the lens of empathetic distance, I was often advised to "create difference" so not to muddle the waters between "me" and "them." The fear seemed to be that our deep research engagement with each other would somehow change my positionality. Such advise reveals a confusion between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is premised on the ability to understand the feelings of another based on one's own experience with similar feelings. Understanding the behavior of another is not a requirement. One can, for instance, empathize with the pain of someone's experience of loss based on knowing from experience how painful loss is without agreeing on how this loss came to be. By contrast, sympathy is based on an understanding between people and a common feeling. If differences are foregrounded and consciously confronted they maintain their role and place within interactions and empathy does not collapse into sympathy. In Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre writes how many positions are unaware of their own solipsism and hence see all objects and "alien egos" (read, others) only as contents of the consciousness of their own ego which is considered to be the only real thing. Hence, we treat all other positions and people as mere objects to be positioned around our own subjectivity. Stepping outside our immediate relation and assessing the relation itself allows us to treat others not solely in relation to our selves and other positions in relation to our own but recognize that we are all so related and that contact does not equal convergence. Sartre's famous keyhole analogy is illustrative of this. In it, he peeps through a keyhole and looks at the other as object, is then caught and, through the shame he feels by being caught, he understands what it means to be subject to the look of another. By becoming the other's object he realizes the others freedom. By understanding that our position is simply **a** not **the** position and that others position themselves with freedom and subject us to their own interpretations too, we can accept their plurality. This enables us to have intensive contact with others without fear that our boundaries will become porous. After engaging with T and J regularly for 3 ½ years, I did therefore not see them as less sexist and they did not perceive me to be less delusional. My position did not change theirs/them and theirs did not change mine/me. I emphasized with the pain and hardship they endured while, on a personal level, I rigorously objected many of their actions and positions.

Engaging with the Media

This focus on empathetic distance also influenced the results, achievements, write-up, and communication of our research. It transformed the purpose of our research and what it should accomplish.[26] In particular, communicating our findings became a crucial aspect of our work.

Media portrayals of houseless people impact the lives of many of my research collaborators. One station regular expressed, "Well, hobos make for a quick soap opera," after not less than four different television and radio teams had shown up in a single week. Indeed, houselessness is often highlighted in the media during certain times of the year, such as December, when temperatures drop below zero and donations increase. Housed people can view the struggles of the poor from the comforts of their homes, follow their lives from a particular perspective for a moment, before the media moves on to other topics, and such documentaries disappear until the next year.

To give an example, a well-known German television channel (which I won't name) produces a documentary series spanning several seasons that purports to "show the lives of drug addicts."[27] In it, "drug addicts" report on their breakdown and the daily struggle with addiction." The producers claim that the documentary "accompanies the drug addicts in their everyday lives as they try to raise enough money to get hold of hard drugs such as crystal meth, heroin, or crack. The addicts are mostly homeless and can no longer see a way out of their situation."[28]

Around a year into our research in mid-2019, I learned of this show for the first time. Many of the people depicted in it are part of our research, and we could observe how their situation worsened as a result of being filmed regularly for the documentary. One rough sleeper who slept behind the main station explained that

> they [the reporters] drove xxx[29] in their car to the road where his dealer lives and paid for his drugs so that they could film him while he injects

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26 Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous people.* London: Zed Books.

27 Note the language used here "drug addicts" instead of a more person-centered language such as "people struggling with addiction" which reduces subjectivity to one factor: addiction.

28 ibid.

29 Another rough sleeper whose name and pseudonym I omitted for reasons of anonymity and safeguarding.

heroin. They are using the illness and suffering of our people to put on a good show.

One participant faced increased police attention after appearing on national television. Places where people slept, consumed drugs, or sought safety were often raided after the episode aired. The family of a young houseless woman who participated in the show faced stigmatization by neighbors who knew little about the family's circumstances and blamed them for the woman's situation. They could not believe that the woman "had to live like that" and held her family responsible.

Whereas empathetic distance foregrounds differences it does not hierarchize them. By contrast, in the case of the show difference is operationalized to create a negatively loaded distance which uses disgust, rejection and disdain as warning signals. Here then the lives of people become the opposition against which a "we" can form. Indeed, I asked a reporter of another similar show why he reduces people's stories to their addiction and shows almost only moments where they display negative emotions and "act out" instead of accounting for the majority of times in which they are not. He told me that the show is not aimed at creating empathy towards the people depicted but at warning others that if they do drugs or frequent "such people" they would "end up like them."

Well aware of the sensationalistic reductionism with which such shows operate, some of my research collaborators strategically use these appearances to earn money or present themselves in a certain way, often different from their daily lives. However, these individuals are in the minority. One collaborator said to me—

> Such shows are only for self-promotion, say by social workers or other people who want to show off how amazing they are. And they are for the sensation. They do not want to show how the lives of people actually are and what they deal with, and they are also not for us hobos. No, we are supposed to shock those at home so that they watch it when the next episode is out and maybe also to stop other people from doing drugs. For us it is too late they think. So, that is why those of us who think it through... we use this. We don't really say or show anything about us, but we talk about what they want to hear like drugs and crime and death and bla bla bla...if you really believe them and say something true like some of these poor guys did then your life is F***** then the police will never leave you alone anymore, your people will kick you out of your camp and so on.

A biased portrayal can thus lead collaborators to themselves discard honesty and openness for a strategic using of the project for their own ends. If both

sides use each other without openly showing how, what results is a double-fake portrayal which does paint a picture albeit not one representative of any experience or existence. And indeed, many depictions of houselessness in mainstream media tend to reduce houselessness to a problem of addiction. By contrast, my research collaborators are primarily minors, retired or employed individuals as well as invisibly houseless persons which means that they do not use any services designated for people experiencing houselessness. Taking their multilayered stories and life worlds seriously shows us that houselessness can happen to anyone and is thus a much more probable experience than the portrayals of addiction would have one believe.

What to do then, when as researchers we are regularly confronted with public depictions of our topics that are much less layered and deep than the lives of the people with whom we conduct research with allowed us to uncover?

I have been regularly approached by radio and television channels to participate in conversations about houselessness. At first, I declined these invitations as I was concerned that my involvement could potentially reinforce reductive stereotypes. Moreover, I felt that my presence could take away the opportunity for those directly affected to share their stories. However, after discussing with my research collaborators, we came to a consensus that there may be value in offering alternative perspectives to these reductive, sensationalist depictions. Many of my research collaborators want the public to be more aware of their struggles. Others find it important to share the knowledge about institutions and aid structures they now have but did not have when they first became houseless. However, most of these individuals do not wish to appear on television or radio themselves nor do they wish to speak to practitioners and policy makers. The reasons for this range from insecurities, to fear that such appearances may negatively impact their safety or livelihoods. Therefore, I began acting as a bridge between those directly affected by houselessness and those who are interested in learning more about their lives. I began accepting speaking events and appearances after carefully reviewing proposals with my research collaborators.

To give a few examples, I was featured on ARD[30] and ZDF,[31] Germany's flagship public television programs. In my talk on ARD, I discussed pathways

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30   Schneider, L.T. (2020). Leben ohne Privatsphäre"—Was Wohnungslose über unsere Gesellschaft sagen. Ard Alpha, 20.07.2020. Online: https://www.br.de/fernsehen/ard-alpha/sendungen/campus/obdachlose-leben-ohne-privatsphaere-luisa-schneider-campus-talks-100.html.

31   Neidlinger, M. (2022) Leben ohne Zuhause Wenn das Geld zum Wohnen nicht reicht—Film von Max Neidlinger. ZDF, 06.10.2022. Online: https://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/zdfzoom/zdfzoom-leben-ohne-zuhause-102.html.

to houselessness and emphasized that it is a social issue that can happen to anyone, which we must address collectively. On ZDF, I contributed to a documentary that primarily focused on invisibly housed individuals. In my segment, I highlighted how securely employed people in stable relationships who have permanent housing can end up houseless in a short period of time. I discussed the absence of a coordinated political strategy and the urgent need to end involuntary houselessness which would be possible with such a strategy. Furthermore, I have made several appearances on the radio, mainly to provide context to policy decisions, and urgent issues like corona vaccination for houseless people.[32]

Together with my research collaborators, we review and reflect on what they believe is important to share, and we discuss things they do not wish for me to mention. We watch our joint productions and I consider their feedback to adapt my approach for future valorization activities. However, we tend to disagree on the extent to which we should criticize aid agencies and state institutions. While some of my collaborators prefer more critical views to be expressed, I see a need to maintain a working relationship with actors who can bring practical changes to the aid system. Our disagreement over the issue did often mean that I was more critical than I would have desired to be, or, if I really could not defend such an approach, that we ended up rejecting the opportunity altogether.

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32 Selection of other appearances in the media: Karkowsky, S. and Schneider, L.T. (2021). Wer lebt auf der Straße? *radioeins rbb*, 19.06.2021, 10.40 o'clock; Hausdorf, T., Goedde, L-L. and Schneider, L.T. (2021). Ach, Mensch! Luisa Schneider über Wohnungslosigkeit. *detectorf. fm*, 16.06.2021. online: https://detektor.fm/wissen/ach-mensch-luisa-schneider-ueber -wohnungslosigkeit; Puppe,M M. and Schneider, L. T. (2020). Obdachlos in Leipzig: „Wenn es so bleibt, wird es immer neue Zeltstädte geben. *lvz*, 21.09.2020. URL: https://www .lvz.de/Leipzig/Lokales/Obdachlos-in-Leipzig-Wenn-es-so-bleibt-wird-es-immer-neue -Zeltstaedte-geben; Ilker, L. and Schneider, L. T. (2020). Corona-Video-Podcast: Nachgefragt! Folge 64. Luisa Schneider, Anthropologin. *Apothekenumschau*, 17.06.2020. Online: https ://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7eVeVbyQNd4; Gärtner, J. and Schneider, L.T. (2020). Zweiteiliges Interview über Dr. Schneider's Forschung und Wohnungslosigkeit in Zeiten von Corona. *Grünstreifen, Deutschlandfunk Nova*, 13.06.2020; Verschwele, Lina. (2020). Wohnungslose in der Corona-Krise: `Die Ersatzfamilie bricht weg.' Wortlautinterview mit Anthropologin Luisa T. Schneider. *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 09.06.2020. Online: https://www .sueddeutsche.de/wissen/obdachlos-corona-krise-1.4928767; Zöller, W. (2020). Leben wie in einem Vakuum. Wie die Corona Krise Obdachlose belastet. *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*. 14.04.2020, p. 26. Online: https://www.mz-web.de/leipzig/aengste-und-unsicherheit-wie -die-corona-krise-obdachlose-belastet-36554370; Zöller, W. (2020). Bei den Menschen ganz unten. Article about Dr. Luisa T. Schneider's research with people without housing. *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, January 15, 2020 in print.

Although anthropology is not necessarily about changing people's views, the purpose of public collaborative anthropology is to involve publics in knowledge production and to utilize the knowledge gained from research to inform larger audiences.[33] To my mind projects are punctually not consistently collaborative if methods, processes and findings are simply discussed with research participants but if they cannot continuously influence them. Collaborating also means not working only according to one's own tune, speed or rhythm. That being said, such collaborations may lead projects to take significantly longer, stagnate, break-down or end with much delayed-or without any discernible outcome. Co-creating the parameters of collaboration consistently, creating a framework for how to deal with disagreements, how to reach decisions and how to divide tasks can go a long way in decreasing frustrations and preventing break-down. While I would have taken different decisions had this been my project only, I think that a critically applied anthropology also needs to step over its own shadow instead of paralyzing itself by waiting to act until everything is just "right."

Engaging with Practitioners

Our research takes place within a context where rough sleepers are either in hiding or their lives are intertwined with various professionals, such as social workers, street-level bureaucrats, criminal justice employees, activists, and others who aim to change their predicaments with or without their consent. As an anthropologist, my approach differs. Although the anthropological toolkit is diverse, one commonality is the need and willingness to engage with people on their terms, to unlearn what we believe we understand, and to relearn from the people we work with.

At the start of our research, collaborators tended to narrate their experiences in terms of achieving certain goals and milestones. They spoke about the steps they had taken to regain housing or what was preventing them from doing so. However, I repeatedly emphasized that I wanted to learn about their lives and hear about the things they find meaningful. One collaborator remarked: "What you do is different because you ask us *what is* not just what could be and what if things would be different." Gradually, our interactions changed. One of my closest collaborators put it this way: "We represent something for everybody,

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33   Lassiter, L. (2005). Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology. *Current Anthropology 46*(1): 83–106.

but no one thinks we are worth the trouble of getting to know. I don't know why you do this but you certainly take the time".

Interestingly, this approach led us to conduct deep analyses of the aid structure and the chances, problems, and pitfalls it produces for both those who wish to remain on the streets and those who wish to leave. From the outset, I introduced our research to all relevant stakeholders in the Leipzig context and informed them that we are keen to share our insights.

Initially, they kept me at a distance. However, over the years, and especially since the Corona pandemic, it became crucial to understand what rough sleepers need to adhere to distancing measures and later, to get vaccinated. Consequently, my position changed, and after discussions with my research collaborators, I began serving as an academic advisor for policy forums on houselessness in Leipzig, such as AG Recht auf Wohnen and Fachforum Wohnen. Additionally, I also advised practitioners and policymakers in cities like Cologne or Munich.[34] Before such meetings, my collaborators and I reflected on what needs to be shared and how best to propose changes.

At the beginning of the pandemic, when aid organizations were asked to modify their working practices, I contacted stakeholders and called for the creation of a network to exchange needs and create structures that adhere to social distancing measures but do not lead to a breakdown in support. Together with my collaborators, we collected urgent needs and communicated them with stakeholders. We also developed a plan for how emergency shelters can adhere to quarantine regulations. Productive cooperation between practitioners, researchers, and political decision-makers in Leipzig has aided in finding and implementing inclusive and workable solutions to assist people. For instance, the city set up an additional emergency shelter, and night shelters were open during the daytime, offering free beds and meals. Furthermore, individuals suspected of having contracted COVID-19 received medical care, even without having health insurance. Together with houseless individuals, we developed suggestions to ensure the continued provision of basic necessities to those who most need them.

To me, this is an example of the power of the social sciences to not only identify failures and weak spots in our society but also to help mitigate them. With such an approach, workable solutions can be created by and with those directly involved, rather than simply for them. By conducting public, engaged,

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34   To name just a few, I was approached by the city of Cologne to present my findings at a colloquium with practitioners, academics, and policy makers to initiate their reformulating of their houseless response. I have also been giving sensitizing workshops to practitioners for instance of the city library Munich.

and empathetically distant research, social scientists can demonstrate what they have to offer society, not just during crises. Because of their access to social groups that are otherwise difficult to reach and their focus on understanding lived experiences and lifeworlds, anthropologists can help to reduce prejudices and stigmatization. Based on this, it becomes possible to identify problems and develop appropriate reactions in a timely manner. Empathetic distance matters in the triage between balancing what one would like to do and say with the wishes, needs and ways of research collaborators and practitioners keeping the overall goal in mind and engaging with differences rather than avoiding stakeholders who are "difficult" or collaborators who are "too demanding." To give one example, my collaborators were really focused on one stakeholder and developed regular suggestions which I was supposed to bring forward. That stakeholder regularly responded by shouting at me and sending me back with messages I could impossibly convey. Wanting to maintain dialogue I focused on establishing barriers regarding proposals which were too demanding or responses which were too harsh, worked on helping each perspective consider the other without asking anyone to actually sympathize with it and, finally, clarified where my own line is and that I will neither be shouted at nor bring forward needs which can impossibly be met. Our research adhered to what Philippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg call a "critically applied public anthropology,"[35] which, instead of immobilizing itself by self-criticism, opens itself up to engaged and reflexive collaborations that consider power dynamics and politics of representation. Asta Vonderau summarizes that "critically applied public anthropology" practices being reflexive and not inflating its own role, and it conducts a "good-enough ethnography" that has scientific, political, and practical potential.[36]

The Cost of Collaborative Research Endeavors: A Note on Time and the Lack Thereof

The approach I have described requires two essential things: time and a willingness to relinquish control. Working collaboratively with research partners necessitates surrendering control and abandoning rigid timelines often outlined in research plans. Anthropology distinguishes itself by the amount of time invested in engaging with people on their terms, but the value of such time is often overlooked in today's academic landscape. This

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35   Bourgois, P. and Schonberg, J. (2009). *Righteous dopefiend.* University of California Press.
36   Personal conversation with Asta Vonderau 01, 2022.

raises important questions about balancing researchers' control over research endeavors with the demands of academic institutions and funders to spend less time on research. How much control are researchers willing to relinquish to prioritize the needs and desires of those being studied, and what will be the outcome of such decisions?

Over the course of 31/2 years, I worked closely with my collaborators to gain insight into the lives of those who are invisibly houseless and do not typically engage with aid structures. Building contacts with these individuals took about six months, and it took another year for me to be invited to join court sessions, be present when custody arrangements between the state and their children were negotiated, visit them in hospitals or prisons, and witness how their lives unfold. Through these experiences, I was able to understand where it is possible to live the rights to privacy and intimacy, as well as where it is not, and why.

To achieve this level of access and understanding, I had to prioritize my research. I received phone calls at all hours, including in the middle of the night or on Sundays, when someone was facing eviction or arrest, or when someone was in poor health. Some of my collaborators wanted to spend just a few hours with me, while others asked me to spend weeks or even months with them in the field. They felt that if I genuinely wanted to understand their lives, I couldn't simply come and go. Instead, I needed to stay and experience things with them.

Our collaboration was a constant negotiation between what my collaborators asked of me and what I could give. I let go of control where I could and placed limits around things that were non-negotiable for me, and my collaborators did the same.

It would have been impossible for me to balance this project with other commitments, such as a heavy teaching load. Devoting all my time to the research allowed me to follow the lead of my collaborators and explore uncharted territories in their experiences of being houseless.

As the project progressed, I began communicating with a steadily growing network of stakeholders, which required additional time commitments. This is why I believe that conducting public anthropology that is deep and relevant requires us to resist the pressure for rapid research and commit to projects that take time. However, this doesn't mean that time must only be spent in the field. When I moved to Amsterdam and had to reduce my research as my teaching tasks grew, I was able to continue the project and redefine the dynamics of field relations because I had already established the necessary rapport with my collaborators.

Rather than simply advocating for one particular form of research, we must rethink what research time means. Traditionally, research has been seen as the time a researcher spends in the field, followed by analysis and writing-up stages. However, politically engaged, vulnerable, and fugitive approaches prioritize building rapport and maintaining long-term commitments over simply measuring research time in terms of duration spent in the field.[37]

The career stage, expertise, and relationship between researchers and collaborators are critical in determining how much time should be spent on research and in what manner. Some projects may only require a few weeks of fieldwork, while others may require researchers to move in and out of the field over an extended period. Practical considerations also come into play, as full-time research is often only available to PhD students or researchers who have secured substantial funding.

Furthermore, university ethics and research procedures are increasingly requiring researchers to provide detailed plans, leaving little room for unforeseeable circumstances that make anthropological research unique.[38] These incalculable factors differentiate research with human subjects from laboratory experiments and are an essential aspect of what makes anthropological research valuable.

If anthropology wishes to conduct research that captures the messiness of lived experiences of real people in real places and sheds light on socially relevant phenomena in highly politicized and contested fields, it must push back against reductive interpretations of fieldwork and research time.[39] To achieve this, we need to fully explore debates such as "patchwork ethnography"[40] to allow more researchers to deconstruct harmful codifications and improve our understanding of fieldwork as a relational practice.

While year-long research is a luxury, we can negotiate with our departments and institutions to enable "deep research." For example, we could have teaching-free and teaching-heavy periods instead of spreading teaching commitments throughout the academic year. We must also engage with research ethics, safety, and approval boards to negotiate flexibility, plurivocality, and dynamism.

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37   E.g. Gökçe, G., Varma, S. and Chika Watanabe. (2020). A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography. Member Voices, *Fieldsights*, June 9. Online: https://culanth.org/fieldsights /a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography; Berry, M. J., et al. (2017). Toward a Fugitive Anthropology: Gender, Race, and Violence in the Field. *Cultural Anthropology* 32(4): 537–565.

38   Schneider LT (2020). Sexual violence during research: How the unpredictability of fieldwork And the right to risk collide with academic bureaucracy and expectations. *Critique of Anthropology* 40(2):173–193, p. 182.

39   Ibid.; Law, J. (2004). *After method: mess in social science research*. Routledge.

40   See Gökçe, G., Varma, S. and Chika Watanabe (2020).

However, giving up the driver seat and negotiating research collaboratively does not equal being consumed by research. It is crucial to take a step back and reflect on what we have learned to see the road ahead more clearly. I communicated this need clearly to my collaborators and, while at first some felt rejected and responded very negatively if I was not available or drew a line, with time this helped us in seeing one another as complex persons with needs instead of total entities such as "researcher" or "researched."

To understand ethnographic research as a commitment and relation, we must focus more on the quality of our engagement rather than just the duration. This perspective highlights the importance of other aspects of research temporality. We must think of multi-temporalities and balance time in the field with time away from it. This allows us to pause, look back, reassess, and let the process guide us in determining how much time to spend and whether to change a place, a question, or a hypothesis.

Moreover, this approach includes considerations of impact, harm, and wellbeing for everyone involved. Therefore, relational time stretches beyond its temporality and considers the fabric, rhythm, pace, and dynamics of engagement. It is a relation between time and other aspects that creates the web of research processes. This non-linear temporality, commitment, and relation allow us to dwell on the question of *what is*, rather than solely focusing on *what if*.

Collaborating with Empathy while Maintaining Boundaries

In summary, assuming fixed identities, a fixed research agenda, or community does not produce empathy. Instead, learning from people how they think and act generates empathy.[41] By thinking through and explaining how one feels, what one is willing to give, and where one encounters barriers, boundaries are established. The combination of empathy and boundaries results in empathetic distance, which avoids blind sympathy based on an idealized notion of a shared humanity that bridges all differences. With empathetic distance, the research is not ontologically assumed or fixed, but rather a constant negotiation. This allows us to focus on "what is" instead of solely on "what if" in our understanding of each other and the research. For instance, we can investigate how people make their lives meaningful, rather than asking hypothetical questions about their opinions or behaviors. For instance, rather than asking "what if you'd change your opinion" or "what if you would no

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41   Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2003). Friendship as Method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *9*(5): 729–749.

longer be on the streets" or "what if you would no longer consume drugs" we can ask instead "what is important to you and why?"

In other words, we become able to "critique concepts not merely via other concepts but experientially…through investigating forms of experience."[42] Moreover, clear priorities, interpretation, and use of data, along with an understandable rendering of our work's circumstances and our own role in it, enhance transparency in research processes and products. Collaborative research endeavors require decentering and disowning the research, making it part of the common of the research team. This results in a more realistic, honest, and complex process that avoids one-dimensional descriptions of researchers and collaborators. Communicating the results with a wider public creates possibilities for change and makes what we have learned visible to collaborators and publics alike.

In conclusion, by emphasizing empathetic distance, collaborative research processes, and transparent communication, we can create a more meaningful and impactful research experience. It is an approach firmly grounded in the possibilities of the present while imagining and working towards research which is less extractive, less hierarchical and less contained. In his work on housing in India Arjun Appadurai suggests that by focusing on possibility, we "can offer a more inclusive platform for improving the planetary quality of life and can accommodate a plurality of visions of the good life."[43] While Appadurai's focus is conceptual, mine is methodological. I believe that for any research project and theme, regardless of whether it aligns more with what Ortner called "dark anthropology"[44] or with Joel Robbins' notion of an "anthropology of the good",[45] and regardless of the collaborator's role and place in society and the imaginaries they attract, it is equally important to focus on the possibilities of research relations and their multiple aspects. By concentrating on the possibilities of research engagements in all their manifold forms and on relations in all their aspects, we can not only enhance the process of our work but also improve its findings and the contribution it can make.

As I have previously demonstrated, part of this process involves leveling positionalities. Consequently, research no longer "belongs" to researchers and academia no longer to universities, but to research communities and the

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42   Mattingly 2019.

43   Appadurai, Arjun. (2013). The future as cultural fact: Essays on the global condition. Verso, p. 299.

44   Ortner, S. B. (2016). Dark anthropology and its others: Theory since the eighties. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 47–73.

45   Robbins, J. (2013). Beyond the suffering subject: Toward an anthropology of the good. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19(3): 447–62.

world at large. Through an empathetic, vulnerable, and collaborative process, we can keep certainties unsettled and realities multiple. This enables critical thought and practical commentary on the lived experiences of people in all their diversity as well as the development and communication of possible improvements to challenges which are developed with the people who are affected by them not for or about them.