Unspoken Practices: Balancing Power Dynamics and Subjectivity in Anthropology

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexities of the researcher-informant relationship in ethnographic research, focusing on the challenges of balancing power dynamics, positionality, and reflexivity. We explore how personal emotions and relationships influence fieldwork, particularly when researchers study their own communities. Through examples from our scientific practice, including the research on the Avion building in Bratislava (Voľanská) and visual anthropological projects (Gyarfáš Lutherová), we discuss the ethical dilemmas and methodological issues that arise when working with familiar subjects. Emphasising participatory approaches and emotional engagement, we argue for a more adaptive, open, and reflexive stance in research practice. This paper is an autoethnographic reflection on how researchers navigate shifting roles in the field, advocating for slower, more thoughtful academic processes that challenge conventional research boundaries.

Introduction

In 2023, we attended the plenary session at the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (SIEF) congress. After the discussion on methodology with invited experts, the audience posed questions through an online platform. Besides various inquiries on specific theories and methodologies, one question struck a chord with the attendees in the auditorium: "What should I do if I do not like my informants?" asked an anonymous researcher. The question provoked lively yet partially perplexed reactions as we reached the grey zone of unspoken and intuitive practice in scientific research. What is our relationship with our informants as partners in research, and how do we balance the power dynamics that come into play when we do anthropology?[1] A feminist human geographer, Susan Smith, remarked decades ago that relationships within research are multifaceted, and researchers can adopt various stances towards the 'researched,' ranging from supplication to intimidation (Smith, 1988).

At the SIEF congress, the seemingly straightforward question posed by the anonymous has opened Pandora's box of intricate issues. As scientists and researchers, it challenged us to explore the different aspects of our relationships with the individuals we encounter during our research. After all, feelings and relations do not necessarily need to be on the negative side;[2] on the contrary, we might do research with people to whom we have a direct positive emotional attachment or who are part of the same social group as we are (be it in our family, neighbourhood, peer group, or elsewhere).[3] Inspired by the concept of going native (Geertz, 1973) in our paper, we decided to consider the implications of researcher positionality and power dynamics in field research, especially when being in or building close relationships with subjects.

Balancing the dual role of being both a member of a particular community and a researcher can be complex. Anthropologists may struggle with how to present themselves to others, whether as fellow members or as observers. Ethical issues arise when researching one's own community, particularly concerning consent, privacy, and the potential impact of the research on relationships. We may face pressure to avoid topics that could be sensitive or controversial within the community. As insiders, we often find it difficult to critically analyse the terrain that we ourselves are a part of, which could result in a lack of critical engagement or overly sympathetic interpretations. Moreover, while one might assume that being an insider facilitates access, it can sometimes have the opposite effect. Community members may be more guarded or reluctant to share information with someone they know personally, fearing judgment or breach of privacy.

How do our conscious or unconscious subjective stances towards them, the research topic, and the fieldwork context shape our perspectives? More importantly, how do we navigate these complexities?

1 Drawing inspiration from the concept of 'doing gender' in gender studies, 'doing anthropology' refers to the continuous process in which anthropologists immerse themselves in and execute the practices, methodologies, and reflective activities of their field. This encompasses not only the examination of cultures and societies but also the embodiment of the roles, ethics, and identities inherent to being an anthropologist. However, it seems there isn't a specific, widely recognised publication that formalises the concept of 'doing anthropology'. Nevertheless, there is a growing interest in understanding the performative aspects of anthropological work (see also Borofsky, 2019).

2 Ethnographic research with informants that a researcher dislikes is also both challenging and rewarding. It requires a high degree of reflexivity, ethical awareness, and methodological rigor. See examples Hervik, 2020; Pasieka, 2024.

3 See for example Taylor, 2011; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998.

Doing the dance

In the beginning, ethnographic research was based on the expectation that the ethnographers would gain deep access to the communities they were researching without being equally transparent about their private worlds—at least not in the same manner or to the same degree. As John Jackson further indicates, after their fieldwork, the researchers return home to locations that remain inaccessible, even to the most curious informants. Moreover, "the ethnographer is always managing a complicated cross-cultural dance in the field, and he may perform missteps that portray him in ways that he would prefer to mask. Even still, he could always hide some of his backstage material inside his proverbial tent." (Jackson, 2012, p. 493)

However, for years, numerous voices have scrutinised the relationship between researchers and their subjects in anthropology, advocating for reflexivity as an essential tool for overcoming the researcher's struggles and doubts during the research (e.g., Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Bell, 1993). They highlight its various dimensions, from the researcher's positionality regarding the research process to the subjectivity, biases, and related ethical considerations that must be addressed.

For some, reflexivity is "a self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as a researcher" (Smith, 1988, p. 82). However, others object that it is a 'vague' concept sometimes used as a shield—in the worst case, to cover the downsides of the researcher's methodology (Finlay, 2002). These critical voices caution researchers to immerse themselves in the endless process of deconstructing the deconstructions, which might not necessarily produce better research data and knowledge.

While the issues we discuss are pertinent to all anthropological fieldwork, they assume heightened significance in projects that broaden the discipline's traditional boundaries. This is pertinent in at-home research, where nuanced power dynamics emerge between the researcher and their informants due to pre-existing relationships, shared cultural backgrounds, and personal biases.

Critical reflection on one's own environment also creates knowledge and self-knowledge—for both the observed and the observers. In anthropology abroad, one seeks to understand the unfamiliar through cultural translation, finding connections between two different languages and adapting to the other's home language. Even when studying the exotic other, the anthropologists cannot remain detached from their field. The link is inescapable, and to avoid it would, in fact, defeat the purpose of anthropological interaction. The ethnographic field is not a sterile room but a space where human emotions and actions are under scrutiny. And deciphering their intertwining is how we try to understand the world.

The ethnographer's position in the field is thus constantly shifting and subject to repeated renegotiation with informants during the research. In this regard, it is perhaps worth pointing out how, along the continuum of insiderness-outsiderness (Surra & Ridley, 1991), the 'dance' that the indigenous ethnologists/anthropologists perform in the field by concealing aspects of their identity to get closer to, or conversely to gain distance from, their informants is in no way different from how the non-indigenous ethnologist/anthropologist moves on a scale of relative distance from the indigenous other under study. When one is at home, one tries to find parallels and comparisons between different instances of self-knowledge and to adapt one's own perspective to that of others. Is the pursuit of distance, then, even possible?

We have entered the field of anthropology at home (Gullestad, 2009; Mughal, 2015), which has been gaining more and more attention at a time of social constraints related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Góralska, 2020). Indeed, research within cultural and social anthropology largely takes place outside one's territory, in a particular place, and in the present. Ethnologists/anthropologists seek to describe what they observe in the here and now. Until a few decades ago, doing anthropology at home was not the preferred way; it was even recommended that researchers leave their own environment for their research; researchers were thus defined mainly by their terrain (Lévi-Strauss, 1963).

In the Slovak environment, similar to other countries in the Central-Eastern region, the widespread tradition of German-speaking countries in researching populations and communities in the sense of Volkskunde (ethnography) considers the terrain at home to be relevant and not belonging only to the domains of sociology, psychology or demography. Moreover, ethnographic research methods were used at a time when researchers could not rely on large-scale statistical calculations and in contexts where there were almost no archival records of different communities. Therefore, researchers were forced to generate their own data. However, the ethnographic method is proving to be very useful even in complex contemporary societies where a lot of documentary material is available.[4]

Although emerging from different historical and methodological contexts, the anthropologists also focused on studying their own societies, recognising that the same rigorous methodologies used abroad could be applied to familiar contexts. The approach of doing anthropology at home has become a recognised

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[4] For example, in the anthropology of organizations, it can be difficult to do ethnographic research in institutions such as large corporate institutions or government institutions at different levels of government. In this case, access to information may be hampered by various internal rules and restrictions.

and respected part of the broader anthropological discipline, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how culture operates in familiar settings and challenging the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' that characterised earlier anthropological work.

Our study is based on examples from our research; we discuss the positioning of the researcher within the context of the research, the perks and perils of participatory approaches in all stages of knowledge production (from creation to dissemination), as well as emotional aspects when dealing with topics related to home, family, friendship, neighbourhood, etc.). We had to continuously question the role and the impact of our identity and positionality on our research, how we navigate our roles, and the implications of our actions in the field.

Ľubica Voľanská has experienced the dilemmas mentioned above when doing her research on Avion, a historic building in Bratislava, where she has lived since birth and where her parents still reside (Voľanská & Haberlandová, 2021). The book situates the building within the historical developments of the 20th century, mainly focusing on its position and symbolic meaning during the interwar period and the survival of the ideas connected with the house through various political regimes. Whereas her co-author, Katarína Haberlandová focused on detailed insights into the design, construction, and evolution of the Avion building, highlighting its importance in the broader landscape of modernist architecture, Ľubica based her research on the qualitative ethnographic approach, working and interviewing her former neighbours.

Similarly, as a visual anthropologist, Soňa G. Lutherová faces challenges in maintaining methodologically and ethically balanced relationships with her informants as partners in multimodal projects intersecting with artistic practice. Throughout the documentary filmmaking process, the relationships between the involved social actors often evolve, becoming more profound and intimate due to years of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and constructing situations that would be otherwise unseen and inexperienced in more formal or public interactions. Moreover, the public presentation of an anthropological film as a representation of someone's life story significantly alters the dynamic between the informant/protagonist and the anthropologist from the project's development to the post-production.

In our discussions, we realised that we both need to focus on reflexivity and a participatory approach[5] in ethnographic research in a way that would go beyond declaratory statements, providing practical solutions to our methodological and ethical challenges. In our experience, research contexts often require researchers to re-evaluate their position towards the informants and the field and engage in what might be perceived as radical reactivity in the subject-object relationship.

Our practice has underscored the need for deep and adaptive engagement with participants as research partners, challenging conventional boundaries and fostering more fluid, participatory, and responsive interactions. In the paper, we will examine our research endeavours to challenge further the notion of the researcher's clearly defined positionality, highlighting its ever-changing characteristics in actual research practice.

In many ways, this paper (and its writing process) is more beneficial for its authors than the readers. It is more a recorded autoethnographic dialogue of two anthropologists/ethnologists challenging their assumptions and insecurities in their research process (Ellis, 2013) than an actual report on the particular research or its outcomes. Similar to the mutual interview between Monika Vrzgulová and Peter Salner (Vrzgulová & Salner, 2020), it is an open flux of thoughts rather than an attempt to propose general rules. In the direction of Jenny Wüstenberg (Wüstenberg, 2023), who proposes slow memory and slow remembrance, we call for slow academic thinking and writing, as opposed to the mass scientific productivity bounded by the idea of the impact factors and quartiles. This text is our way to do so.

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5   There are several ways of understanding participatory research. In general, it involves engaging research participants in the process, allowing them to play an active role in shaping the research. The participants can be involed in both the research and the implementation of findings (Burns et al., 2021; Urbaniak & Wanka, 2023).

Fluid positionality

In the paper about her research with Kurdish men in Turkish Anatolia, Gülay Türkmen reflects on the fluid nature of the researcher's positionality in the field (Türkmen, 2023). Many aspects and forms of being an insider or outsider have particular implications for our findings. In the research process, Türkmen approached reflexivity as the awareness of the impact of her multiple identities on data collection and knowledge production (Türkmen, 2023, p. 148). Different authors use various terms and classifications to express the fluidity of boundaries between the researcher being an insider and an outsider in the field, with no clear delineation between them (e.g., Bourke, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; McDougall & Henderson-Brooks, 2021). What emerges is a complex hybrid category of 'in-out-sider' (Bayeck, 2022), constructed through interactions with the research participants via the interplay of space, context, and identity that shape the researcher's status.

While Türkmen's reflections on positionality underscore the shifting, complex boundaries that researchers navigate in the field, they also resonate with broader calls within the discipline for anthropologists to reflect and engage actively with the socio-political landscapes of their field sites. Over two decades ago, Nancy Scheper-Hughes advocated for a militant anthropology, as opposed to cultural or moral relativism, that must be politically committed and morally engaged (Scheper-Hughes, 1995). Others proposed that anthropology should be politically relevant (Smith, 1999), activist (Hale, 2006; Kirsch, 2018), or publicly engaged in social and political issues (Low & Merry, 2010). All of these voices refocused attention on the question of public and societal responsibility of the researchers: to their partners in the research and to society as a whole. They asked them to move beyond the conventional researcher and informant relationships.

These complexities deepen when the research theme intersects with politically sensitive or socially charged issues, but ultimately, they are relevant to every anthropological research. The research or its findings may reopen societal 'wounds,' unearth hidden traumas, or even inadvertently reinforce stereotypes, contributing to narratives that could legitimise socially harmful perspectives and inadvertently placing specific individuals or groups in a vulnerable or stigmatised position. The reflexively approached commitment to public engagement and social relevance should then involve considering how our research is part of a social world shared with our subjects (Ginsburg, 1997).

At its core, the idea of the researchers' fluid positionality in the field is the relational aspect that shapes anthropologists' engagement with research partners. Despite their efforts to reflect on this relationship throughout the research process, it unavoidably remains hierarchical and uneven (Frers & Meier, 2022) as there are different things at stake on the different sides. However, informants should not be presumed to be merely passive and vulnerable, as their positionalities and subjectivities are also fluid (Schulz, 2020). Schulz warns against these sorts of assumptions as they are often based on "essentialist and infantilized portrayals of research participants" and deepen "the neo-colonial assumptions regarding the research relationship" (Schulz, 2020, p. 1).

Therefore, the way out of this 'muddy puddle' should not lead through a descriptive listing of anthropologists' identities, characteristics, and prospective social labellings in their academic papers (Folkes, 2023). On the contrary, they should constantly reconsider their position in the research context and create an open dialogue with their informants as autonomous agents in knowledge construction. This process, albeit necessary, might get confusing sometimes and even 'painful' for the researchers, as they necessarily need to hand down part of their symbolic power and consequently shed off their 'coat' of presumed scientific objectivity, which many still use to shelter themselves with as the knowledge is mainly produced and presented out of the reach of research subjects (Frers & Meier, 2022).

Having a pact

One of the ways to enhance the engagement with the partners in the research and to bring the knowledge to the broader public is multimodal anthropology that goes beyond text-based research and utilises various media forms while addressing contemporary issues in a more collaborative and sensory-rich way (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón, 2019). The multimodal approach includes visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking (Collins et al., 2017), which principally does not only include the mere production of the film but, as a process for many years, engages a visual anthropologist-filmmaker with the protagonists, informants, and also the broad audience.

In ethnographic filmmaking, an anthropologist is in a specific position as the author of the documentary storyline, putting the life story of the particular social actors into a broader context and constructing the film's reality. Informants, or protagonists if you will, pose as the 'owners' or the 'ultimate experts' of their own life story represented in the film. Therefore, the anthropologists in this scenario must learn to navigate complex power dynamics in the relationships with the other social actors in this process. The situation is fundamentally different than in a traditional research setting because researchers typically offer their partners greater anonymity, reducing their vulnerability. On the other hand, protagonists of anthropological documentary films often have access to the movie before its finalisation and pass judgment on the accuracy and wholesomeness of the representation of their story with some level of 'veto' in the process[6].

In my practice, I (Soňa) find the aspects of documentary filmmaking that happen 'behind the scenes' just as intriguing and knowledge-producing as those observed or constructed in front of the camera. These aspects require the anthropologist to get deeper into the process by focusing on the research side, engaging in additional participant observation, conducting off-screen interviews, and maintaining an autoethnographic diary. Thus, a nuanced relationship between the anthropologist as a researcher/author and the researched/protagonist requires careful consideration and understanding of numerous layers and subtleties.

When I was working on the film *Flooded*, I focused on the phenomenon of family memory and Holocaust trauma in the family of my husband. The trauma transmitted over generations in the family was objectified through the lost family heirloom—a historical mansion in Central Slovakia. The building belonged to the family until it was confiscated, first by the fascist and later by the communist regime. Before participating in the film, the Holocaust generation members in the family (the grandmother and her sister, who were over 90 years old at the time) had scarcely spoken spontaneously about their memories of the fascist era with their relatives (G. Lutherová, 2020).

Both sisters constructed their biographical narratives throughout the film-making process, as I interviewed them repeatedly on and off camera. My main concern was the possibility of re-traumatising my partners, even though once they agreed to participate, neither of them ever expressed any regrets about their decision, nor did they show any direct concerns about how their story would be presented in the film. During the interviews, the younger sister (my husband's grandmother) declared that she could not remember her past well, as she was in her early adolescent years during WWII. However, throughout the interview, it soon became apparent that she could recall events in formidable detail. At one point, she refused to continue talking, rationalising her reluctance by claiming a lack of memories again, which seemed more like a self-protective approach: "I do not dwell on the past," she said. "I am not that kind of person, and... it would be too much for me." She was a very active and determined person, and discussing her trauma meant reliving the sense of powerlessness, vulnerability, and loss of agency (Lester, 2013). I have decided to make the author/protagonist relationship as transparent as possible—constantly explaining the idea of asking specific questions on and off camera and shooting particular scenes to construct the story. At the core was the intention to use anthropology to engage with her and her family, to examine and represent the different ways they 'do' human existence (Pandian, 2019). This experience would be later brought forth and shared with the viewers, who would also engage with their stories through the film (G. Lutherová, 2021). This way, the partnership between my informants/protagonists and I became much more balanced and sort of a pact.

After watching the film with the audience, the main protagonist and informant[7] reflected on the impact of being able to experience others becoming immersed in her personal story. According to her, articulating her emotions and perspective on camera and observing the films as a representation of her story triggered a feeling of catharsis. Later on, this enabled her to actively create opportunities for intergenerational communication in the family, talking more openly about past trauma than before. Thus, the film has become a highly functional tool for the in-

depth analysis of the generational transmission of family memories. Still, it has also created an opportunity for emotional healing in the family, which was only possible through the constant and open dialogue between the anthropologist and the informants/protagonists (G. Lutherová, 2020).

Throughout the filmmaking process, it became clear that the borders between art and science have been as illusory and fluid as they often are, specifically in social sciences and humanities (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2015). As a result of the project, I produced not only the film but also numerous scientific papers (2016a, 2020, 2021) and presentations. In this sense, I consider various of my projects to be both artistic and scientific simultaneously—reaching out to different audiences (from expert to non-expert) through various multimodal channels, from non-textual to textual. In this artistic/scientific practice, it seems unnecessary and futile to assign a distinctive line throughout the process (G. Lutherová, 2021) as I construct filmmaking as an artistic and scientific experience and, inevitably, part of my journey. Isaac Marrero-Guillamón and Ethiraj Gabriel Dattatreyan underscore this as the multimodal process of invention, which refers to a creative and immanent mode of engagement with the subjects and objects included, through which unforeseeable pieces of knowledge, events, and encounters may be produced (Dattatreyan & Marrero-Guillamón, 2019, p. 221).

An inseparable part of this process involves ethical concerns, including whether the phenomena, people, and things are represented accurately and holistically: whole bodies, personalities, and behaviours (Heider, 2006). At the same time, my positioning and perspective are shaped by the feeling of social and political responsibility, making my engagement with the subjects and objects with which I work even more complex. In the case of *Flooded*, my perception of the general theme of the Holocaust and its victims was straightforward, and the pressure of knowledge production dwelled more on the personal side of the things—my intimate relationship with my protagonists as my relatives-in-law.

My second documentary feature film, the anthropological film *A Happy Man*, tells an intimate story of a Czech transgender man and his family living in Sweden. Gender transition is not merely physical change but a fundamental shift in how the person perceives themselves (Wiesner, 2017; Stryker, 2006; Van Der Ros, 2015; G. Lutherová, 2016b). In the film, this is reflected in the main protagonist's alternating social roles, while the transition catalyses the transformation of relationships within the family (G. Lutherová, 2021).

During the fieldwork, my position as an 'outsider' was much more complex and fluid than it might seem, given that I had known my informants as friends for many years. Because of this, I dealt with many ethical doubts and challenges and realised that the most fruitful approach would be inviting them to be partners in the filmmaking process, aiming to express their life stories, everyday struggles, and vulnerabilities as accurately as possible. The participatory approach enabled them to take partial control over the representation of the story. After the first

inofficial screening of the rough cut version of the film, their response was not an attempt to 'polish' what was captured or censor some information but rather to add some scenes to make the narrative more holistic and understandable for the prospective audience. Therefore, what I carry back to my anthropological practice is the importance of returning the stories back to their owners, which involves their immediate participatory engagement in the whole process of constructing the knowledge—before and after the fieldwork—and providing them access to research findings. This makes the inequality between the social actors involved in the research slightly more balanced, even though the anthropologist still needs to act as the author responsible for the clarity and accuracy of what is presented.

However, there was another layer to the complexity of my positioning toward the main theme of the project, which was my friend's gender transition and, ultimately, his right to choose who he is and how he wants to be perceived and seen in his everyday life. Since my initial academic engagement with the phenomenon of gender transition—and with the challenges and obstacles transgender individuals face—in research in 2015 (G. Lutherová, 2016b), much has changed in how transgender people are perceived in Slovak society. This topic has become highly politicised in recent years, emerging as a central narrative in current political and ideological discourse—mainly of populist right-winged politicians. Consequently, transgender people are now more visible, yet also more vulnerable, than before. This added to my feeling of social responsibility to the LGBTQ+ community in general and transgender people in particular. I decided that the best approach in documentary storytelling would be to seemingly 'depoliticise' the issue, though not in the strict sense used in political science (Flinders & Buller, 2006; Dohotariu, 2024), but rather focus on my protagonist's everyday life and relationships without explicitly emphasising the broader political implications of gender transition in society. This strategy was based on a reflexive and socio-politically conscious decision to help sensitise the broad audience of the film. At the same time, the open engagement and cooperation with the protagonist, as well as the compassion for their cause, provided me with insight and sensitivity to their struggles to do so.

Doing anthropology at home 'at home'

The case study of Ľuba Voľanská presents an attempt to display the history of the 20th century via the story(ies) related to one specific building. Many of the aspects analysed through the authentic accounts of the residents of Avion are universal to our history. In different variations and shades, they took place not only in other apartment buildings in Bratislava but also influenced and moved the lives of residents in other cities in Slovakia. Thus, the focus is on the social, political or economic events that have affected the lives of the inhabitants of the house and the country as a whole.

To grasp the complex and broad (in terms of themes and geographical area) space of the city is a challenging ordeal for ethnology/anthropology and its research methods. Ethnological research can provide valuable information about culture and society in local communities and help better understand how culture and society develop in different contexts, including local communities and their spaces (Bitušíková, 2011). In the case of urban space, ethnologists study different aspects such as architecture, urban planning, public space, and local communities. As Peter Salner and Katarína Popelková have previously discussed, there is a debate as to whether research in urban space constitutes a separate sub-discipline of ethnology, called urban ethnology, or merely a continuous extension of the field into previously neglected settings (Popelková & Salner, 2002).

The search for a small group suitable for the use of ethnographic methods and in-depth interviews was addressed by Peter Salner in his ethnological research on an urban family (Salner, 1978; Salner, 1987). Similarly, I (Ľuba) limit the community under study to a manageable dimension. Through interviews and archival research, I try to write the story(ies) of 'our' house and, in this way, approach the so-called great story. I am researching the inhabitants' family history, occupations, education, interests, and leisure activities throughout their lives. After the first biographical interview, in which we discussed the biographies of my research partners, we covered a range of other topics in follow-up interviews. Concerning the house, Avion residents focused on how their ancestors or they themselves moved into the house, how and why they changed dwellings within the house, or how they lived in the house as part of their own families, households, and backyard groups of friends. They revisit childhood games related to the indoor and outdoor spaces of the house, friendships, and neighbourhoods that changed under the influence of external events. At the same time, I was interested in how their standard of living and housing conditions changed over time, so I focused on the residents' relationship to the house, their own dwelling, memories of the layout of the dwelling spaces and their functions, and, where appropriate, the changes and adaptations of their house to the changing conditions of household life and cooperative living[8].

On the other hand, specific topics were not remembered and discussed in the interviews, not only because of the standard process of forgetting, lack of rehearsal, or retroactive interference. There are several factors that can contribute to the reluctance or inability to remember and discuss unpleasant past events (e.g., incomplete memories or social stigma).

What, for example, has not appeared in the narratives is the topic of the disappeared neighbours of Jewish origin. Most of the interview partners moved into the house later after they were forced to leave the house (being transported or fleeing the regime cruelty). Still, I have not yet discovered specific fates, even in the intergenerational transmission of memories. We could look for a parallel in the research of ethnologist Monika Vrzgulová, who says that memories of Jewish neighbours if the other inhabitants of the house or neighbourhood did not have close friendship relations with them, are usually not a spontaneous topic transmitted in their intergenerational communication. They may not have been included in their own life story that they told me. It was not primarily their story—unless they were involved as friends or helpers of Jews in hiding, escaping, and the like (Vrzgulová, 2020).

I have thought about writing about my own home and maintaining control over my research in the context of writing the texts that emerged from it. Why did I start this topic in the first place? Apart from feeling the need to capture the memories of a generation of Avion residents who are gradually passing away as part of the rescue research, I wanted to capture its history, or rather the history of its inhabitants, and pay tribute to an inspiring building. At the same time, I found it an exciting challenge to see Avion, the house I grew up in, as a space for ethnographic research at home—as I was interviewing my (former) neighbours during my research. Thus, I ventured into anthropology's relatively unexplored terrain at home and 'at home'.

I supplemented the biographical narratives with further interviews, asking questions about the house itself, life in it, memories of its inhabitants, and the changes brought about by the times. The interviews often covered topics that were not easy to process—the closer to the present, the more sensitive they were perceived from both sides.

8   The specific issue of the history of cooperative housing policies in Slovakia in the 20th century is thoroughly discussed by Katarína Haberlandová (Haberlandová, 2023).

Conversations with my own former neighbours were conducted in Slovak, but sometimes also in German. My research partners enjoyed speaking in their native tongue, which I, of course, respected. In some ways, these were also lifesaving conversations. Indeed, many of the oldest Avon memorials are no longer remembered or gone forever, and anyone, even in fragmentary form, no longer tells their stories.

The advantage of my research was, of course, to speak their language, to know the places and people, and to have a whole network of contacts ready to intervene at my own discretion in any foreseen or unexpected need for help. Many of them have known me since I was a child, and I used to go with their children to play in the yard or at school. I spent time with my informants, asking them informed questions—and responding to what they said. Who is the expert on the topic here? I'm not an expert on a particular historical period—they are.

Despite the distortions associated with the functioning of human memory, I was trying to find certain connections, commonalities, and general structures that stand above subjective experience and exist between people's life stories. Their experiences and memories are woven into a larger whole formed by the social background before which their lives unfold. Finding commonalities leads to a certain level of generalisation, and based on life stories, it is possible to retell certain sections of history through the generational experience of the people who lived it and tell about it as they remember it.

But am I also an expert on living in Avon? After each interview, I searched for a boundary and a way to separate myself from 'cultural immersion', recognising that the definition of 'the other' needed to be constantly re-evaluated.

Indeed, the same ethical and methodological considerations should apply when conducting research 'at home' as for any other type of research. As Douglas E. Foley argues, the reflexive approach discusses the need for anthropologists working 'abroad' to reflect on the terrain or knowledge acquired 'at home', as they inevitably look at other ways of life through their own filter. Such implicit comparisons only improve if we take 'our' part of the data for granted and systematically address it in our analysis (Foley, 2002).

It is no different at home. More than 20 years ago, Sonia Ryang reflected that class, gender, colour, education, gender, and place of origin are the matrices of difference that create otherness in a given society: "...the home country or home province of the anthropologist, it is infested with difference, diversity, and division to the same extent as the anthropology of other cultures and societies, since the self-knowledge we may obtain from studies of such a diverse 'us' is as foreign as 'other culture/society' is to us" (Ryang, 1997, p. 34).

Critical reflection on one's own society also creates knowledge and self-knowledge—for both the observed and the observers. In anthropology abroad, one seeks to understand the unfamiliar through cultural translation, finding connections between two languages and adapting to the other's home language.

Even when studying the exotic other, the anthropologist cannot remain detached from his or her field. The link is inescapable, and to avoid it would defeat the purpose of anthropological interaction. The ethnographic field is not a sterile operating room but a space where human emotions and actions are under scrutiny. And deciphering their intertwining is how we try to understand the world.

When publishing the data, we face the same dilemma—our efforts to publish the results of our research. Even in transcribing our first field notes, we give secondary meaning to the data and our findings, and allowing readers a peek into the kitchen of our research should also be part of its presentation. I, too, wondered how my former neighbours would react to my interpretations of the Avion story, whether they would like what they could read in a book about Avion and their lives there. I tried to stick to emic terms, that is, those used by the male and female residents themselves, but the problem was that not everyone always reflected them equally in their conversations. One example is the division between the 'working class scum'—which is an emic term—and the 'doctor's kids' who were not allowed to play in the yard with them, lest they get their clothes dirty from the coal that had been lying around in the past.

The final text or narrative should give voice to each participant. Since the story of Avion House is a mosaic based on the memories and stories of my former neighbours, often carrying contradictory messages, I decided to discuss the different parts of the final text with them. Each of my research partners had the opportunity to read excerpts from the interviews used in the book and their interpretations of them. An interesting and new experience for me was the situations in which I was advised on what to be interested in in my research, what to write about in the book, what to leave out, and what they thought the book should look like. At the same time, we worked together on whether and how my research partners should be named in my research. This was because many of the stories were unambiguously legible to some residents, and anonymising names would not help in such cases. At the same time, I was constantly mindful that my family still lives in Avion, and they interact with many of the neighbours whose accounts stand out in the book almost daily. This participatory approach can lead to an even more significant blurring of the boundaries of the methodological distinction between 'me' and 'them'.

In my research, Avion residents told various stories about the house, but when given the opportunity to influence the publication of their accounts, they chose to tell mainly nice stories. In doing so, they supported the image they had created of Avion and living there, as well as their own identity. However, the image of who 'we', the Avion residents, are and who 'they', the newcomers, are has changed with time. Older exchanges of inhabitants during the war and post-war period are documented mainly in written sources or vicariously in family memory. Different groups of house residents moved in and out, not all the time of their own volition. Their movements thus reflect the historical events of the 20th century, including

turning points such as the Second World War, the post-war period and the advent of the socialist system in the 1950s, the relaxation of the 1960s, and the period of normalisation. The 1980s, which were remembered with relative optimism, were followed by the 'wild' years of serious reforms of society at the end of the 20th century. The last two decades of the story have been told in the light of catching up on changes in the functioning of the house and its administration. Now that generations are gradually changing, they, too, feel part of the story of Avion.

Through all the narratives of the residents of Avion, the theme of middle-class families, the 'better' families, which, from the very beginning of moving into the house, functioned as a reference point for the standard of living of all its inhabitants, regardless of their occupation, is woven like a red thread. According to Harald Welzer and his colleagues, within the framework of intergenerational transmission, the explicit memory of an event is inextricably linked to an implicit conception of the family; the good story of the family is essential. The latter tends to be largely associated with the extolling of the moral character of common ancestors, members of the oldest generation still remembered by the narrators (Welzer et al., 2002). In the case of the inhabitants of Avion, the reference to family members extends to the inhabitants of the house as a whole.

Legitimising stories, or 'Rechtfertigungsgeschichten', as conceptualised by Albrecht Lehmann, thus play a crucial role in shaping collective memory and identity. These narratives help individuals and communities make sense of their past, justify their actions, and establish a coherent and acceptable version of history. By providing ethical and moral interpretations of events, they help to integrate and legitimise the community's shared values and beliefs (Lehmann, 1980).

In the book, I decided to respect the decision of the Avion dwellers to retell historical events through stories with pleasant endings by focusing on coping with the pitfalls that the different regimes have brought into their lives. I consider their decision to be one of the proofs that the inhabitants' relationship to the house and the place where it was built is positive, mainly because they are aware of its significance, at least within the capital. At the same time, the Avion building would only have retained its uniqueness if its inhabitants had come together at critical moments or if they had made certain specific decisions when they were needed.

To conclude...

In this article, we offered case studies to illustrate the perks and perils of doing anthropology in a familiar environment. Echoing Reyes, who underlined the impossibility of a 'true insider' position (2020, p. 226), many works highlighted the challenges researchers faced when conducting research at 'home' or in their 'native' communities (Mcfarlane-Morris, 2019; Narayan, 1993; Parashar, 2019; Zhao, 2017). The researcher might assume familiarity with the cultural context, leading to less thorough or innovative questioning. They might miss nuances or fail to ask the 'obvious' questions that an outsider would instead pose or feel the pressure not to ask them due to being emotionally over-involved. This over-familiarity can result in gaps in the research, as the anthropologist may intentionally or unintentionally overlook significant details essential to a fuller understanding of the topic. We have tried to avoid this bias of over-familiarity by discussing with our research partners the social issues and historical periods on which they are experts by experience, not by training.

Conducting research in one's community or with close acquaintances can strain personal relationships, especially if the research uncovers sensitive or controversial information. Friends, family, or colleagues may feel exposed or betrayed by the research findings, which can impact them individually or challenge their social worlds. This dynamic emphasises the need for researchers to critically examine their roles in society: making some problems visible and offering perspectives on social matters carries inherently political implications. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate these considerations into the reflexive process of defining one's positionality, both within the field and beyond.

It was a challenging experience for both of us, as it is not a common practice for anthropologists to consult their results with the groups about whom, by whom, or with whom they are doing research. Traditionally, the researcher is seen as the 'expert', holding the power of interpretation, analysis, and publication—how the information is collected, interpreted, and disseminated. This situation can create a power imbalance, where the interviewee may feel that their voice is subject to the researcher's interpretative framing. Moreover, anthropologists/ethnographers are not neutral observers; they play an active role in shaping the narratives that become part of public discourse. They have the power to choose

what aspects of a community's life to study, which details to highlight, and how to frame the narrative. In doing so, they shape how the community is understood by outsiders, often influencing public perception, policy, and even the self-perception of the community itself. Their work can make certain social issues visible, influence policy, and even shape societal norms, thereby positioning them as political actors.

In contemporary ethnography, there's a shift toward seeing the researcher as a listener and perhaps a mediator and informant as an expert in their lived experience. Given these considerations, this dynamic tries to minimise the hierarchical gap. Moreover, the researcher's positionality (whether they are insiders or outsiders to the community) also affects the hierarchical relationship. Insiders may hold less perceived authority or power in interviews because of shared knowledge, while outsiders may appear as authority figures or 'neutral'.

Finally, it is often challenging to separate the various audiences that engage with research results, especially when informants become readers, viewers, or even evaluators of our work. Navigating conflicting expectations can be both painful and intellectually stimulating, forcing us to reflect on how we write or otherwise produce our outputs—be they textual, audiovisual, or other—to discuss our findings and construct our analyses. Speaking about the subject differs from speaking with someone about it, which, in turn, is distinct from speaking to an audience. Additionally, some of us have started to recognise that effectively disseminating research results is not simply about packaging those results attractively; rather, it hinges on the research questions we pose and the collaborative partners we choose.

Thus, the hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the informant is fluid and can shift depending on the context, the approach taken, and the individuals involved. Understanding and navigating this hierarchy is key to conducting ethical and effective ethnographic research.

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