ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN CURRENT ETHNOLOGY Vol. II

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PREFACE
Continuing the Debate on Sensitizing Ethical Designs and Finding Thematically Embedded Solutions

Tatiana Zachar Podolinská

The presented *Ethical Volume II*, titled *Ethical Dilemmas in Current Ethnology*, is a direct continuation of *Ethical Volume I* on ethical dilemmas in contemporary ethnology, which we co-edited in 2024 with M. Kinczer (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024). Both volumes are part of the monothematic series *Ethnological Studies*, which we introduced at the Institute in 2024 with the aim of opening a reflective debate on ethical approaches and issues faced by (1) researchers and research-hosting institutions, (2) research agencies, sponsors from the decision-making or NGO spheres, and other donors, and (3) research participants themselves—interlocutors and the studied groups or communities.

This effort aligns with one of the five key aspirations outlined in the vision and research strategy of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS, which aims to systematically address the challenges of ethically collecting, storing, and communicating data generated by our disciplines over the next ten years.

Ethical Volume I (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024) presents four authorial reflections on ethical dilemmas encountered in ethnological and anthropological research within highly specific environments. The contributions explore: healthcare research among marginalized communities (Cichová 2024), research in senior care homes (Kinczer 2024), studies of online anti-vax groups and communities (Slivková 2024), and the negotiation of orthodoxy in local narratives—contrasting popular religiosity and church doctrine—in post-communist Belarus (Serdziuk 2024). Each chapter critically examines the challenges of conducting ethical research in sensitive contexts, highlighting the importance of reflexivity, contextual awareness, and the adaptation of ethical standards to the realities of fieldwork.

As stated in my consecutive ethical compendium (Zachar Podolinská 2024, p. 7), which directly followed Ethical Volume I:

> "Given the specific contexts of their field research, many students [of ethnology and social anthropology, added by TZP] found themselves in a challenging position of multispectral negotiation when developing their ethical designs."

At the same time:

> "Many of them encountered both common and uniquely specific challenges, requiring them to devise sensitive and innovative solutions."

In the spirit of the tradition initiated by Volume I, *Ethical Volume II* (Marushiakova & Štefanovičová, Eds., 2025) is the result of collaboration between a PhD student and an experienced senior researcher—aimed at mutual enrichment and intergenerational dialogue within the academic community. This volume builds on the earlier discourse by presenting contributions and methodologies from various areas of the social sciences, while transcending the boundaries of narrowly defined ethnological or anthropological research. The authors of the individual chapters critically reflect on both the potential and actual challenges encountered in their research and methods, offering readers their own innovative and contextually grounded solutions. It is particularly rewarding to see how sensitively they address the ongoing need for constant negotiations on a multispectral consensus, and the continual refinement of ethical standards—whether universally defined or context-specific. Their reflections also serve as a valuable mirror to current research practices, delineating their boundaries and limitations.

Iveta Štefanovičová's chapter explores the community of Slovak non-believers as presented in the online space, particularly through public profiles and groups on the social network Facebook. The author selected the six most active public profiles and groups within the Slovak online environment, which represent a broad spectrum of activities—from the popularization of atheism and criticism of the Church to secularism, civic activism, and the protection of non-believers' rights. The main objective of the research is to assess whether Slovak non-believers can be considered a community, or a potentially homogeneous community in terms of shared opinions, based on long-term non-participatory online observation. The author aims to identify elements of homogeneity or community expression by examining shared identification patterns, particularly in relation to moral values, political preferences, and attitudes toward civic and legal issues. Methodologically, the study adopts an experimental approach that combines qualitative and quantitative methods across three research stages. The author plans to compare findings across methods to enhance the validity of the results. By employing intentional data triangulation, she aims to capture the diversity of viewpoints and avoid stereotyping the community of non-believers in Slovakia. The research is based on long-term online observation without direct participation, with Facebook selected as the primary platform due to its dominant role in the Slovak online space.

In her chapter, the author primarily addresses the issue of researcher positionality and ethics in relation to

the sensitivity of both the research topic itself (belief/non-belief, human rights, political preferences, moral values) and the selected research sample (several online profiles representing non-believers in Slovakia). She thoughtfully reflects on her own positionality as an inherent component of an ethically framed research design. With self-awareness, she acknowledges sharing certain opinions with the studied community and notes that she has observed expressions of non-believers across a broad range of online profiles and groups over several years. The research is analytically focused, aiming to comprehensively and impartially capture the identity, values, and internal ties of the Slovak non-believer community within the online space. It is conducted using a combination of empirical methods and a reflective approach to the researcher's own position.

Evgeniy Farafonov's chapter deals with the ethical aspects of researching the biographies of contemporary practicing astrologers within the Russian-speaking context. Given the topic and the specific nature of the studied environment, the author emphasizes that researchers must approach participants with full respect for their cultural and spiritual backgrounds, avoiding the imposition of personal biases or judgments. Acknowledging the broader societal stigmatization of astrologers, the author sees it as a core ethical responsibility to protect the identity, reputation, and privacy of the individuals involved—not only during the research process itself but also in the subsequent stages of data publication and archiving. He identifies data anonymization as the foundation and central pillar of his ethical research approach.

However, based on the pilot interviews he has already conducted, the author notes that in some cases, astrologers specifically request that their names be published. This necessitates a flexible and individualized approach on the part of the researcher. In particular, the author addresses the issue of obtaining informed consent as a key requirement in most ethical codes governing the norms and procedures of ethnological and anthropological research. He views informed consent as a dynamic process that must take into account respondents' concerns, especially in environments characterized by distrust or under repressive regimes. Regarding the potential misuse of collected data, the author emphasizes the importance of sensitive and responsible handling of both research and personal data, in order to minimize the risk of misuse or unintended disclosure of interlocutors' identities.

Likewise, he reflects on the ethical dilemmas of online research, thematizing the fluid boundaries between public and private spheres on the internet, as well as the fluidity of his interlocutors' identities—both of which pose a potential risk of inadvertently disclosing participants' identities. The author approaches sensitive research topics with care, particularly those that arise when exploring personal biographies, such as migration, discrimination, stigmatization, affiliation with vulnerable groups, the legitimacy of one's profession or practice, and engagement in the informal or grey economy. In these contexts, he remains aware of the need for heightened sensitivity and close collaboration with respondents when deciding whether and how to publish data and specific details from the collected life stories. Given the nature of his research, the author acknowledges that his ethical framework cannot rely on one-time, fixed decisions, but must instead be grounded in ongoing communication, negotiation, and adaptation to changing circumstances, legal frameworks, and the needs of all research participants.

Maroš Ondrejka's chapter explores the ethical dimensions of researching individual identities across the spectrum of sexual attraction and gender identity in the Slovak Republic, with a particular focus on the use of visual participatory methods—specifically the 'photovoice' method—within the framework of participatory action research (PAR). The author examines how the research design-making process impacts key ethical concerns, including informed consent, data protection, anonymization, transparency, participation, and power imbalances between the researcher and research participants. He highlights the importance of ongoing reflexivity, adaptability, and collaboration with the community, illustrating these principles through concrete examples from his own fieldwork. The chapter offers practical recommendations for designing ethically sound research in sensitive contexts and with marginalized groups, emphasizing the unique ethical considerations of visual and participatory methodologies and their potential to amplify participants' voices and support co-creation of knowledge.

This text contributes to the field of research ethics involving marginalized groups, where sensitivity and participatory approaches are essential. The author emphasizes that such contexts require not only a high degree of reflexivity but also continuous critical evaluation of the researcher's methodological choices and their ethical implications. In addition to providing concrete recommendations on obtaining and documenting informed consent, ensuring data protection, facilitating participation, and addressing power imbalances, the text offers clear guidance through relevant literature and legislation (e.g., GDPR, ethical codes). It successfully interweaves theoretical frameworks with the author's empirical experience.

Furthermore, the author presents a detailed discussion on the use of visual methods, highlighting their ethical specificities and drawing attention to potential pitfalls—such as the risk of non-anonymity, emotional burden, institutional constraints, and others.

The chapter by Elena Marushiakova Popova is a personal reflection on ethical challenges in ethnology and social anthropology, particularly in the context of research on Roma communities. As an experienced senior researcher who has studied Roma across several continents, the author draws on her extensive practical knowledge of both formal and informal research standards across diverse cultural settings. She critically examines the increasing bureaucratization surrounding the approval of methodological and ethical designs in scientific projects. Marushiakova Popova highlights the risks associated with the mechanical application of Western ethical standards in differing cultural and historical contexts, raising concerns about political correctness, anonymization, and the representation of studied groups. She argues that no universal ethical code can substitute for the personal responsibility of the researcher and asserts that the only truly universal principle should be the foundational ethic of 'non-harming anthropology.' This chapter serves as a sincere and scientifically engaged appeal for open discussion and critical reflection on ethical dilemmas not only in Romani studies but also within broader debates on ethical approaches and dilemmas in contemporary ethnology and anthropology. It seeks to inspire deeper engagement with the meanings and limits of ethical norms in the social sciences.

In the concluding part of my previous publication on ethics in ethnological and anthropological research, I expressed my conviction that:

> "The nature of our research is collaborative: during the research process, we undergo a transformation process rooted in mutual trust and understanding. We co-create not only knowledge and data, but also emotional and psychological bonds and attachments. This creates ground for our individual responsibility—not only for 'data management', but also for our co-authors and co-creators, who have placed their complete trust in both our research and us" (Zachar Podolinská 2024, p. 151).

It is with great pleasure that I note how the ethical challenges and proposed solutions thematized in *Ethical Volume I* (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024) and in the publication on ethical challenges and dilemmas (Zachar Podolinská, 2024) have found a direct response among PhD students, while also inspiring senior researchers to critically reflect on both past and present approaches. A critical, open, and reflective discussion not only helps to sensitize our ethical practices but can also contribute to the development of concrete guidelines and tools—thus facilitating the search for innovative, discipline-specific ethical designs within the broader community of social scientists across generations.

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I. ETHICAL ASPECTS OF STUDYING THE BIOGRAPHIES OF CONTEMPORARY PRACTICING ASTROLOGERS (Based on a Russian-Speaking Sample)

Evgeniy Farafonov

Introduction

This work is devoted to the qualitative study of the biographies of modern Russian-speaking astrologers. The research project presented here continues the work initiated as part of my master's thesis, *Contemporary Russian Astrology as an Indicator of Social Change*, at the Department of Comparative Religion, Comenius University. Since the 1990s, immediately after perestroika, when the official ban on the study of esoteric teachings was lifted and the intensive growth of various forms of alternative spirituality and new religious movements began. This development occurred not only in Russia but also in other countries (see, for example, Podolinská 2007, 2010a; Zachar Podolinská, Tížik & Majo 2019). Among them, astrology stands out as one of the most prominent phenomena on the Russian postmodern scene. Over the past thirty years, several generations of practicing specialists have emerged—from the early 1990s to the period characterized by the widespread use of the internet and growing popularity of social networks. Today, there are more than two dozen independent schools, which differ significantly in methodology, philosophical attitudes, and practice. All these changes have not been sufficiently described or critically examined. The results obtained in the course of this research project can enrich the existing understanding of the characteristics of contemporary religious and spiritual practices in other post-communist countries as well (for example, Pollack 2003; Podolinská 2010b; Podolinská, Krivý & Bahna 2013; Zachar Podolinská & Majo 2022).

The key questions I ask in this research aim to understand who the modern astrologer is (1), how people become practicing astrologers (2), and what personal and

social challenges they face in the process of professional development (3). My research, currently in its implementation phase, provides answers to these research questions through the analysis of biographical narratives. The choice of focus is due to the fact that modern astrology in the Russian-speaking space has a rich history and is represented by a wide range of directions, but the personality of the astrologer has not been well studied. It should be noted that the study includes respondents not only from different cities across Russia but also those living abroad, thus providing an opportunity to compare how the surrounding environment and sociocultural contexts are reflected in the biographical narratives of practicing astrologers. In accordance with the theory of P. Berger and T. Luckmann on the social construction of reality, I consider these specialists as "merchants of ideas" (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 19), that is, influential social agents embedded in a wide network of interactions, particularly through pop culture, mass media, and social networks.

In recent years, increased attention has been paid in Russia to the legality of astrological practices. On December 18, 2023, the Commission for Combating Pseudoscience under the Presidium of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAS) issued a memorandum[1] in which astrology was recognized as a pseudoscience. The document emphasized that astrological claims lack scientific justification and may mislead people. The Commission recommended that citizens avoid using the services of astrologers when making important life decisions and urged the media to refrain from advertising and popularizing astrological services. In response to criticism from the scientific community, particularly from the Commission for

1 http://klnran.ru/2023/12/memorandum-3-astrologija/ [accessed March 19, 2025].

Combating Pseudoscience at the RAS, astrologers point to the insufficiency of arguments presented against astrology (Levin & Goloushkin 2017). They argue that objective evaluation requires research and experimentation and aim to demonstrate that astrology and science can coexist and complement each other. In March 2025, State Duma deputy Nina Ostanina announced the submission of a bill aimed at banning the advertisement of esoteric, spiritual, and energy-related services, including astrology.[2] The aim of the initiative is to protect citizens, especially vulnerable groups, from psychological and financial harm associated with such services.[3] Additionally, there has been a rise in criminal cases against esoteric practitioners accused of fraud.[4] Thus, efforts are being made in Russia to restrict astrological practices recognized as pseudoscientific, including advertising bans and legal accountability for fraudulent activity.

The challenges described above can produce ethical dilemmas at various stages of research. The following sections will address a number of questions related to this topic.

Researcher's Position

My position as a researcher is grounded in the principles of cultural relativism, scientific agnosticism, and the ethnographic study of esoteric practice.

Cultural relativism, as an approach in anthropology and other social sciences, was first formulated by Franz Boas (Boas 1995). It posits that each culture should be understood in its own context, without imposing external judgments

2 https://tass.ru/obschestvo/23368155 [accessed Apr 12, 2025].
3 Another striking example of the negative attitude from deputies can be found at https://aif.ru/society/milonov-predlozhil-priravnyat-astrologov-k-moshennikam-i-banditam [accessed Apr 12, 2025].
4 https://nsn.fm/society/obraschautsya-tysyachami-za-tri-goda-v-rf-vynesli-30-prigovorov-protiv-koldunov [accessed Apr 13, 2025].

or norms. The essence of this approach lies in the idea that the moral norms, customs, beliefs, and ways of life accepted in one culture cannot be objectively evaluated from the perspective of another culture. What is considered right or acceptable in one social environment may be perceived very differently in another, and this does not mean that one is "better" or "worse." Cultural relativism emphasizes the importance of understanding a culture from within, with respect for its uniqueness and historical development. It stands in opposition to ethnocentrism—the tendency to judge other cultures based on the values of one's own. In the case of my research, this position is fundamentally necessary, as participants live in different cities and countries.

Scientific agnosticism is an approach according to which science should refrain from making judgments about the supernatural, divine, or unprovable. It does not claim that such phenomena are impossible, but rather emphasizes that they lie outside the scope of the scientific method. Therefore, science does not deal with questions that cannot be verified through observation or experimentation—it simply leaves them outside its purview. The classical formulation of this principle belongs to W. K. Clifford:

> "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Madigan 2000, p. 7).

Scientific agnosticism helps preserve the objectivity of scientific knowledge by separating it from belief, philosophical assumptions, and claims not based on evidence. Following this principle, I, as a researcher, adhere to critical thinking while remaining open to what I may hear from my respondents during interviews.

A particularly useful work for my research project is Susannah Crockford's contribution to the ethnography of esotericism (Crockford 2018). She argues that anthropology, which has traditionally studied various cultures and practices, can offer a unique perspective on esoteric beliefs and practices that often remain on the margins of academic research. Crockford emphasizes that ethnographic research allows for a deeper understanding of how individual and group esoteric practices exist in contemporary societies and how they interact with cultural and social contexts. Her article focuses on an approach that helps researchers view esotericism not as something marginal or eccentric, but as a legitimate part of cultural and religious practices. The author underscores the importance of respecting research subjects, their views and beliefs, and the necessity of taking into account the personal experiences and subjective perceptions of practitioners. She also examines the diversity of esoteric movements and organizations—from new religious movements to more traditional practices such as alchemy or magic—that influence contemporary communities. Additionally, she explores how anthropologists can apply theories from various fields, such as symbolism, mediatization, and social movements, to better understand how esoteric practices function in a globalized world. Ultimately, the article highlights the need for flexible and inclusive research methods to illuminate the many facets of contemporary esotericism and its role in culture. This aligns well with both cultural relativism and scientific agnosticism in relation to the subject of my research:

> "Ethnography describes the emic and contextualises it, by socially embedding the normative terms that people use; theory is produced from this effort. Analytic definitions

are consequently less frequently contested among scholars because anthropologists tend not to universalise their findings" (Crockford 2018, p. 14).

Ethical Standards Guiding My Research Activities

This study employs a qualitative, narrative-based methodology to explore the biographies of contemporary astrologers. Data is collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in two stages: first, a spontaneous narrative is elicited in which the respondent recounts how they became an astrologer; second, a series of targeted questions explores their beliefs, values, professional practices, and social positioning. Emphasis is placed on preserving the respondent's own language and perspective (emic approach). The interviews are transcribed and thematically coded for analysis. This method allows for the examination of identity construction, turning points, and meaning-making processes, highlighting how individual biographies are shaped through storytelling within broader sociocultural contexts.

Since I conduct interviews with respondents living in different countries, I rely on relevant ethical codes in my work.[5] In their fundamental principles, these codes are largely similar. Nevertheless, a responsible approach to research requires taking into account the specific provisions of a given code, depending on the location of the ethnographic study. The coexistence of various ethical codes—national, institutional, and disciplinary—places the researcher in a difficult position. They are compelled to interpret sometimes contradictory norms, aligning them with the cultural context and the expectations of participants. This is especially true in sensitive fields such as contemporary esotericism, where reflexivity, flexibility, and ethical judgment are essential—since universal solutions simply do not exist in such situations.

Russian anthropologists and ethnologists, like their international colleagues, adhere to various ethical principles aimed at ensuring integrity and responsibility in scholarly activity. To this end, they often refer to the Russian translation of the *American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics* (AAA) (Yarskaya-Smirnova 2000).[6]

Adhering to professional ethics in studying the biographies of contemporary astrologers is especially important, as this involves individuals whose professional activities may be perceived by society in an ambiguous way and may be subject to criticism. The core principles of the AAA Code of Ethics, as they related to the subject and participants of my research, can be summarized as follows:

1. Astrologers, especially in the context of debates around pseudoscience, may be at risk of stigmatization. It is therefore essential to ensure that participation in the study does not lead to negative consequences for their reputation, career, or personal life—including, among others, social isolation and discrimination against practitioners, violations of personal confidentiality, and

5 *Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association* (AAA 2009), *Etický kódex Národopisnej spoločnosti Slovenska* (EK NSS 2017), *Etický kódex Slovenskej asociácie sociálnej antropológie SASA* (EK SASA 2013), EC ALLEA (2023), EK FSEV UK (2014), EK SAV (2015), EK CASA, EG CASA, *Code of Ethics of Social and Cultural Anthropology of Ilia State University* (2020).

6 Some useful remarks regarding the safety of the researcher under participant observation can be found at https://www.ethnokomi.ru/pole/publ/ethic/1.asp.html [accessed Apr 12, 2025].

the emergence of negative stereotypes and reductive perceptions of astrology. Attempts to prevent harm must recognize that complete foresight is unattainable—especially when dealing with life stories situated within unstable legal and social environments. An important question arises: what should be considered ethically acceptable, given that notions of harm and care are largely shaped by cultural context? The ambivalence of esoteric practitioners' position—being both marginalized and proud of their practice—must be taken into account.

2. Clarifying the scope and direction of data collection is more than a procedural step—it is a crucial moment for building trust, yet one where misinterpretations may still occur, even with the best of intentions. An astrologer should understand how their words and biography will be interpreted and where they will be published. Participants must be informed about who is conducting the research and why, what the scientific goals are, and who the potential audience is. This is particularly important if participants fear being mocked or misunderstood.
3. Honoring a participant's wish for anonymity—even when they are publicly visible— is ethically important, though it can be complicated; in some instances, informants may prefer to be named as a manner to assert their professional identity or public role. Importantly, both of these situations are real and commonly encountered in the research process.
4. Even if the researcher personally holds a skeptical view of astrology, they must not impose their opinion and should instead strive to understand the world through the perspectives of the astrologers themselves. This requires empathy and cultural sensitivity. For example, during the interview process, it is important to remember that astrologers distinguish themselves from other esoteric practitioners (Daragan 2019, p. 203). Their right to professional self-identification should be respected, especially since this is a central theme of my research (Murphy & Dingwall 2001, p. 342). From my side, it would be more appropriate not to speak too much, but rather to ask open-ended questions and listen attentively in order to minimize the likelihood of making statements that astrologers might consider inaccurate (Murphy & Dingwall 2001, pp. 193–204).
5. It is important to represent research participants accurately and respectfully. The main dilemma here is how to describe a subjective spiritual experience without reducing it to "delusion" or "illusion," while maintaining respect for the worldview of participants. The biography of an astrologer should be presented as a complex and multi-layered narrative, rather than as an "example of pseudoscientific thinking."

Thus, the AAA Code of Ethics helps establish a responsible and respectful interaction between myself as a researcher and the participants, even when the research topic is controversial or subject to public debate.

The following ethical codes constitute the main body of guidelines according to which I organize my research practice. When conducting ethnographic interviews online while residing in Slovakia, I refer primarily to the *Etický kódex Národopisnej spoločnosti Slovenska* (EK NSS 2017) and the *Etický kódex Slovenskej asociácie sociálnej antropológie SASA* (EK SASA 2013). These documents form a coherent ethical framework, which I consider important due to my affiliation with the Slovak Academy of Sciences and Comenius University.

In this way, I have established a coherent framework for referencing different documents should the need arise. While these ethical codes are grounded in similar core principles, they often differ in how those principles are prioritized or applied—requiring the researcher to engage in interpretive work. And because my colleagues also rely on various ethical codes in their work (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024), I consider it appropriate to take a flexible approach when navigating specific ethical dilemmas.

Searching for and Selecting Respondents

Since this study builds on research initiated during my master's program, the sample was partially pre-established. I searched for respondents by reading thematic blogs (mainly on the social network Telegram), as well as by attending free online astrology conferences, where participants voluntarily shared their contact details. In some cases, members of Telegram groups recommended that I contact specific specialists, providing links to their accounts. I have been—and likely will continue to be—a participant in online astrological conferences. Since my study is based exclusively on biographical narratives, I adopted the position of a passive observer at these conferences, limiting my role to simply being present, listening to presentations, and reading chat messages. As such, my influence on the environment was minimized. The main goal was to obtain the contact details of potential respondents (speakers often share them on the title or final slides of their presentations). Even though recruitment took place in publicly accessible digital spaces, personal boundaries tend to be fluid and negotiated, not static—prompting continual reflection on issues of visibility, consent, and the researcher's interpretive authority. Given the research objectives, it became necessary to additionally find several astrologers living outside Russia in order to compare the specific features of their life trajectories. The planned sample size will include 12–20 professionally practicing Russian-speaking specialists from Russia and other countries (e.g., Slovakia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Austria, and Sweden; this list is preliminary and may be adjusted during the course of the study).[7] This will help answer the question of to what extent the social environment is represented in the narratives being studied, and how they perceive and explain the role of social conditions in shaping their life and professional trajectories at different life stages. When selecting respondents, the duration of their professional practice is more important to me than their gender or age—a longer professional history is likely to contain far more valuable details related to biographical turning points, as well as

7 At this stage, the list of respondents includes twelve individuals, which corresponds to the minimum planned number.

professional challenges and the ways they were overcome. One challenge in selecting respondents for this study is that I cannot be certain of their level of professional training.[8] However, this is not critical in this case, since I am studying the biographical narratives of individuals who identify themselves as practicing astrologers.

Negotiating Consent under the Conditions of Structural Mistrust

Informed consent goes beyond a preliminary requirement for fieldwork; it is a dynamic and vulnerable process, continuously shaped by evolving relationships, institutional demands, and the weight of historical mistrust. If it is not obtained, any information collected by the researcher is effectively illegitimate. When conducting ethnographic research in the field of esotericism, one may encounter a number of difficulties in obtaining informed consent from respondents.

First, if the participants themselves perceive their practice as something sacred, intimate, or potentially vulnerable, they may fear that their knowledge will be distorted, ridiculed, or used against them. This can make open dialogue and conscious participation in the study more difficult. Second, the high level of distrust among members of the esoteric community toward "external" observers may be due to the fact that the researcher is associated with an academic or governmental institution. Respondents may doubt the researcher's motives, especially if the latter does

8 Astrological schools that position themselves as institutions of higher education offer courses lasting two to four years. See, for example, the Academy of Astrology by Mikhail Levin: https://astro-academia.ru/ [accessed Apr 20, 2025]. However, even possessing a training certificate does not guarantee that a person presenting themselves as a professional truly is one.

not share their beliefs. The ethical dilemma here lies in how to remain honest with participants without imitating belief or making false promises, while still maintaining a certain level of trust. As a tool for addressing such challenges, I find it helpful to apply the principles of client-centered counseling (Rogers 1951) to establish rapport and maintain productive dialogue.

There are various approaches to studying contemporary spiritual groups. Dallam (2011) examines the difficulties researchers face when choosing between overt and covert methods in the study of new religious movements. In the past, covert strategies were popular because they allowed access to closed communities; however, they involved deception, psychological stress, and the risk of undermining trust. Today, professional organizations discourage such methods, emphasizing their potential consequences for future research. Yet, an overt strategy does not guarantee safety either: the publication of findings that are unfavorable to the group may also provoke a negative response. The author stresses that this choice is not merely methodological but also ethical, affecting the reputation of the researcher and the scholarly community as a whole. Personally, I have not used a covert approach involving the deception of respondents. First and foremost, I do not see the need for it: although my sample is small, it already includes more potential participants than I could realistically interview and analyze. Furthermore, the Russian-speaking astrological community is broad and open, as evidenced by the many free conferences that anyone may attend regardless of their views on astrology.

Conversations about confidentiality should extend beyond mere procedural explanations, as participants may reassess boundaries throughout the research, especially

when political or cultural risks are at stake. As part of the informed consent procedure, we discuss what information will be recorded, how it will be used, and in what form it may be published. In the case of particularly sensitive information, I prefer to obtain additional confirmation for its use or, in case of doubt, exclude it from publication. In practice, I obtain informed consent twice. The first time is when I meet a potential respondent, establish a trusting relationship, and explain the nature of my research and the invitation to participate. The second time is a final confirmation—either in written or oral form, depending on the situation and ethical standards (Fluehr-Llobban 1994).

B. Serdziuk, in his work on the study of the cult of the Virgin Mary in the Republic of Belarus, discusses the fact that some respondents are unwilling to sign an informed consent agreement because they do not want to be associated with the status of a "foreign agent"[9] (Serdziuk 2024, pp. 111–112). This likely stems from the perception that such a document about a study conducted under the auspices of a Western organization poses a potential risk of being added to a special registry. The refusal to sign consent forms highlights how bureaucratic ethics can unintentionally endanger participants under repressive regimes, compelling researchers to balance institutional legitimacy with the safety of those involved.

9 This concept was introduced in accordance with the Federal Law of the Russian Federation dated July 14, 2022, No. 255-FZ "On the Control of Activities of Persons Under Foreign Influence." http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207140018 [accessed Apr 23, 2025]. The term "foreign agent" (rus., *inoagent*) refers to a natural or legal person under foreign influence (e.g., receiving support from foreign states, organizations, or citizens) and engaged in political activities, the collection of information in the military or military-technical field that can be used against the security of Russia, or distributing materials to a wide audience, including via the Internet, or participating in their creation. Foreign sources include foreign states, international and foreign organizations, foreign citizens, stateless persons, as well as Russian citizens and organizations acting on behalf of these sources or receiving support from them. The status of foreign agent is assigned at the moment of inclusion in a special registry, which is maintained by an authorized body, and is terminated after exclusion from this registry.

Thus, I may very well encounter such fear from my potential respondents. Despite my decision to use a written consent form, in cases of a strict refusal to sign an official document, it is possible to limit participation to verbal consent, as this form is also considered legitimate (Serdziuk 2024, p. 112).

There is also the issue of differing understandings of the term "informed consent" itself. Participants may not fully realize how exactly the collected data will be used, despite the researcher's explanations. This is especially relevant in the case of verbal agreements or when the respondent has difficulty understanding formal or academic language. In addition, esoteric practitioners may perceive the very idea of a fixed consent form as contradicting the spirit of their worldview, which is based on trust, intuition, and personal relationships. In this context, formal consent procedures may conflict with esoteric knowledge systems based on trust and relational intuition, creating an ethical dilemma of how to establish rapport without excessive institutional intervention.

Another challenge is the changing status of the respondent during the course of fieldwork: a person may initially agree and then later change their mind, especially if they feel that the information about them is being revealed more broadly than they had anticipated. I also believe it is important to take into account that the boundaries between private and public information in esoteric communities may differ from commonly accepted norms. All this requires the researcher to be flexible, empathetic, and willing to continuously reassess ethical boundaries throughout the project.

A separate technical difficulty is obtaining written consent from participants I meet exclusively online. The process of signing the agreement can be prolonged: after I send the form to the potential respondent, they must sign

it, scan or photograph it, and send it back. In this case, I find myself waiting without the ability to speed up the process. With online interviews, however, we have the opportunity to make a joint decision and conclude a verbal agreement, which will be audio-recorded and stored along with the other materials.

Aspects of Online Ethnography in My Research

In the broadest sense, online ethnographic research is a method of studying cultures, communities, and forms of communication in a digital environment: on forums, social networks, chats, streaming platforms, and other online spaces. While it largely relies on classical ethnographic principles adapted for the study of virtual and digital communities, this format has its own features and challenges (Hart 2007)

One of the key principles of online ethnography remains participant observation—the researcher does not simply observe from the outside but actively or passively engages in communication, participates in discussions, and tracks the dynamics of interactions. Here, the researcher encounters a number of difficulties.

- FLUID IDENTITIES. Online ethnography forces researchers to confront the fluidity of identity and the shifting boundaries of communities, where traditional ethical principles such as informed consent and anonymity are increasingly complicated by factors like performativity, pseudonymity, and algorithmic manipulation. In digital spaces, participants may present multiple, contradictory identities or choose to remain anonymous under pseudonyms, making it difficult for researchers to ensure that consent is fully informed.
- ALGORITHMS AND ETHICAL UNCERTAINTY. The influence of algorithms that curate online interactions and content further complicates the researcher's ability to define clear, stable communities and ethical guidelines. This dynamic challenges the researcher to continuously reevaluate their approach to privacy, consent, and participant protection in the ever-evolving digital landscape.
- BLURRING PUBLIC AND PRIVATE. There is also ethical ambiguity: the boundaries between public and private in the digital environment are blurred, and the researcher must be especially careful not to violate participants' rights. Verifying the reliability of information is also complicated—it is often impossible to confirm who is behind a given statement or experience.
- PARTICIPATION, DISTANCE, AND PLATFORM BIAS. There is a risk of the researcher "dissolving" into the community, making it difficult to distinguish observation from participation and to maintain analytical distance. The features of platforms and their algorithms create further distortions: the researcher does not see the full range of information, only the portion selected by the system, which affects the

completeness of observations. In addition, online ethnography is also reflected in the use of various messengers and platforms (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, and Telegram), through which I can conduct private conversations with respondents—whether to resolve organizational matters related to the research or to conduct the biographical interviews themselves.

- THE FLUIDITY OF THE DIGITAL FIELD. Finally, the digital environment is highly dynamic—communities can quickly disappear, migrate to other platforms, or change their thematic focus, requiring the researcher to adapt quickly and employ flexible methodology. I personally encountered the disappearance of certain communities, as well as websites, forums, and articles during the preparation of material for my master's thesis. Many of these issues have been thoroughly discussed and analyzed from an ethical perspective (see e.g., Slivková 2024).

Negotiating Safety and Visibility: The Ethics of Anonymization and Data Stewardship

Although anonymity is a core principle of ethnographic ethics, putting it into practice often requires navigating ambiguity—striking a balance between safeguarding participants and honoring the authenticity of their self-representation.

Given the social stigmatization of esotericism, even indirect details described in the study may lead to the identification of a respondent, especially within small communities. In this case, I must exercise special caution and attentiveness to every element of the description. As noted earlier, my research is based on collecting and analyzing biographical narratives. This material represents highly sensitive information, where every fragment—whether intentionally or unintentionally disclosed—could harm respondents in their personal and professional lives. Therefore, I face the important task of constantly balancing the accuracy of the description with the protection of my informants.

The use of pseudonyms instead of participants' real names is a standard and widely practiced approach. Names are selected to align with the cultural context while preventing the individual to be identified. However, this is not always necessary or even possible. In the article *Is Anonymity an Artifact in Ethnographic Research?* (2003), W. Van den Hoonaard criticizes the mandatory requirement for anonymity of participants in ethnographic research. He argues that anonymization is often impossible or undesirable, especially in small communities where even altered names can be easily recognized. Van den Hoonaard notes that the standard ethical norms applied by ethics committees often fail to consider the complexity of interpersonal relationships and the cultural specifics of the groups being studied. He also warns that the pursuit of complete anonymity can distort data, as removing names and context reduces the analytical value of the material. In some cases, participants themselves request that their names be mentioned to assert their position or maintain their identity. The author suggests an approach where ethical decisions are made based on specific contexts and participant consent, emphasizing flexibility and empathy in ethnographic ethics.

As for my own research, it seems to me that anonymization is not necessary in all cases. First of all, in one of the studies that inspired my own work, the names of practicing astrologers were presented quite openly. K. Dilanian (2018) conducted interviews with four specialists, two of whom—M. B. Levin and B. E. Boyko—are still well known and continue to practice today.[10] This was done with the respondents' permission. In other words, this option is also available to me, although I am not yet certain whether I will use it in the course of preparing my material.

It is also worth addressing a separate case: if an astrologer who has been practicing since the 1980s agrees to participate in my study—and based on my current contacts, the participation of two such informants seems possible—anonymization may be unnecessary in this context. This applies in cases where the public activity and recognition of these specialists constitute a significant part of their professional biography. Removing these details would disrupt the logic of the narrative. However, if the said specialist wishes to remain anonymous, this will, of course, be fully ensured.

I acknowledge the possibility that respondents themselves may request to have their names mentioned in the publication. The ethical question I would raise in such cases is whether the respondent might be attempting to use my work as a tool to pursue their own goals. For example, they might seek to gain legitimacy through this, as if the academic community—represented by me in this case—were endorsing the astrologer's activities as legitimate or even evidence-based. I am aware of instances where contemporary astrologers refer to themselves as authors

10 https://www.academia.edu/38573435/profile_of_the_4_russian_astrologers_pdf [accessed Apr 28, 2025].

of scientific discoveries. For me, the key principle in such situations is that the researcher's work should not influence the field being studied:

> "Anthropologists must not agree to conditions which inappropriately change the purpose, focus, or intended outcomes of their research."[11]

In addition to names, potentially identifying details need to be changed or generalized in some cases. These may include exact dates, names of specific localities or organizations, and unique elements of a respondent's biography.

Ensuring anonymity involves not only using pseudonyms or removing details from the text that could identify a particular respondent. Since my key source of information is biographical narratives obtained through the transcription of interview audio recordings, responsible handling and storage of these materials is also an essential part of the anonymity preservation strategy.

I prefer an approach in which respondents' personal data—such as names, contact information, and addresses—are stored separately from the main research material, encrypted, and labeled with codes. Access to this data is restricted to myself, my supervisor, and members of the ethics committee, if necessary. Since my sample is small, the list of respondents and the encryption key are also compact and stored without additional markings, separately from the textual transcripts of audio recordings. The files themselves—audio recordings, text transcripts, and their edited versions—are labeled according to a unified system

11 https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/ [accessed Apr 28, 2025].

to avoid confusion and data loss. For example: Int-R01 2024-11-15. In addition, I compile metadata—explanatory notes attached to the files indicating the context in which they were obtained.

To avoid information loss, data with the above markings is regularly backed up on an external drive and also stored on a laptop specifically designated for this PhD project. The internal memory of the voice recorder used for interviews can store about 40 hours of audio, which corresponds to the estimated total volume expected for the project.

At this point, I do not have full clarity on whether it will be necessary to return to the original ethnographic material after the study is completed. However, I understand that this may be required—for example, for additional analysis or reproducing results. Because of this, I have set a two-year period during which I plan to store the data in a secure, restricted-access location.

Violation of Confidentiality during and after the Research Process

The "do no harm" principle calls for nuanced, context-sensitive interpretation—especially when harm manifests not only in tangible outcomes, but also in forms of symbolic misrecognition or misrepresentation. Reflecting on how I might inadvertently compromise the anonymity and safety of my respondents, I identify three primary risks: through careless handling of research materials, through incorrect citation of respondents in published texts, and during oral presentations at various events (especially conferences).

In the first case, the issue lies in the possibility that materials intended for secure storage—audio recordings of interviews and their transcripts—might become accessible

to third parties. Aside from obvious negligence that could result in the loss of a hard drive, recorder, and/or laptop, another potential risk is the seizure of devices during official inspections. This may occur, for example, when crossing a national border en route to or returning from a field site. This scenario also raises the issue of the researcher's own safety. As a citizen of one country (the Russian Federation) and a graduate student at a foreign academic institution (Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS), I face the potential risk of being perceived as a "foreign agent"—a person under the influence of another state. In such inspections, my position that ethnographic materials must remain confidential is unlikely to be taken into account. Nevertheless, it is essential to assert this (AAA 2009, pp. 2–3). However, as long as astrology remains a legal practice, this material does not violate the law in a general sense.

Violations of anonymity through publication primarily stem from the failure to sufficiently conceal identifying details about my respondents. The research results are intended for publication in Russian-language professional journals. Although only selected excerpts from respondents' stories will be used, careful consideration in choosing these fragments is essential for several reasons. Some potential informants reside in small towns where the astrological community is very limited; thus, even seemingly insignificant details might enable readers to identify the individuals described. Among other things, I aim to involve astrologers with many years of experience in the study—often individuals who run their own schools. Given the tense relationship between astrologers and the state, I must ensure that nothing in my publications could lead to their identification. As market participants, these practitioners are not only private individuals but also providers of educational services,

embedded across multiple sectors. Should I make an error, I would bear responsibility for any harm to their reputation or business, violating the fundamental ethical principle of doing no harm to research subjects (Fluehr-Llobban 2013, pp. 26–53). In our digital age, once a text is published, it cannot be fully retracted or removed from the informational space. As a result, its consequences may persist uncontrollably for a long time, potentially causing various forms of harm. This caution applies equally not only to printed publications but also to my oral statements in public forums.

As previously noted, the position of astrologers in Russian society is complicated by the attitudes of the scientific community (Surdin 2007), government officials, and the Orthodox Church.[12] Astrologers, in turn, defend their right to practice and to be treated with respect. Therefore, the tone and language of my work must be carefully calibrated to avoid providing any of these parties with grounds to use what is written as an argument supporting their subjective stance or point of view.

> "Anthropological researchers bear responsibility for the integrity and reputation of their discipline, of scholarship, and of science. Thus, anthropological researchers are subject to the general moral rules of scientific and scholarly conduct: they should not deceive or knowingly misrepresent (i.e., fabricate evidence, falsify, plagiarize), or attempt to prevent reporting of misconduct, or obstruct the scientific/scholarly research of others" (AAA 2009, p. 3).

12 https://monastery.ru/bog-i-chelovek/astrologiya-i-pravoslavie/ [accessed Apr 23, 2025]. https://www.pravmir.ru/cerkov-i-astrologiya/ [accessed Apr 23, 2025].

There is a well-documented phenomenon in which various spiritual groups or individual practitioners use scientific sources to support their positions, even when doing so in a methodologically incorrect way (Karásek 2022, personal communication; Maksimov 1997). Conversely, members of the scientific community may also use what I have written, leveraging the authority of science as a tool for pressure and discrimination against an entire group of people who follow their own spiritual and esoteric principles. There have also been attempts to unite religious and scientific arguments in order to direct them against astrology (Gubanov 2004).

Anonymity can also be compromised during various public events, which include not only academic conferences but also potential media appearances as an invited expert or public lectures. Presenting research findings at conferences, including those in Russian-speaking regions, is an essential part of scholarly work. Therefore, it requires careful preparation and attention to two key aspects. First, the written version of the presentation must be properly prepared—these texts are often later published in conference proceedings. All concerns previously discussed regarding publications apply here as well. Second, particular caution is needed during discussions at conferences, where spontaneous questions from the audience may provoke unintended disclosure of personal information, with unpredictable consequences. This is especially relevant to respondents from minority groups. In Russia, for example, LGBTQ individuals have been labeled as extremists and their movement banned,[13] as it is deemed incompatible with traditional societal values. Thus, even the mention that a

13 https://www.sova-center.ru/misuse/news/persecution/2024/01/d49182/ [accessed Apr 23, 2025].

respondent is part of this group might attract the attention of regulatory bodies. The same applies to published materials. If a respondent's biographical narrative includes a clinically diagnosed disorder or addiction, it is ethically important to prevent the formation of false associations between esoteric practices and various forms of psychological or behavioral deviation. I am aware of cases in which a specific disorder was what led someone to begin studying astrology—in these cases, the individual links these aspects of their biography in a meaningful way.

A specific feature of Russian society is that both astrology insiders and outsiders (that is, researchers and astrologers) may attend the same conference. I know of at least two such instances. From my perspective, this greatly increases the likelihood of a respondent being identified. These moments reveal how fluid the boundary between researcher and informant can be, highlighting the ethical challenges posed by public field sites, where overlapping roles and relationships make confidentiality more complex. This brings us back to the issue of proper anonymization, contextual adjustment, and the removal of identifying details from both oral and written presentations, while still preserving the authenticity of the material.

Addressing Topics Sensitive to Respondents

While working on this project, including material from my previous master's research, I have identified several topics that are among the most challenging for respondents and therefore require special ethical sensitivity at all stages—during interviews, while analyzing the material and preparing it for publication, and throughout the period of storing all raw data (audio recordings and their transcriptions).

1. Crises and turning points in biographies are of particular interest to me, as these moments involve a restructuring of personal identity. However, careless handling of this material increases the risk of causing emotional distress and psychological retraumatization. Emigration may turn out to be one such experience. Respondents living outside of Russia may face a number of specific challenges that must be taken into account when conducting ethnographic research. I recognize the potential for distrust from emigrant specialists, especially if they have had a traumatic migration experience or an uncertain legal status—this can make them cautious in interactions with outsiders, including researchers. Therefore, it is essential to ensure anonymity and data security, particularly when working with individuals with unresolved immigration status. While granting anonymity to participants in ethnographic research is an important ethical measure aimed at protecting them from potential consequences—such as social stigma, professional risks, or personal vulnerability—this decision simultaneously creates a serious research and methodological dilemma. When real names, locations, and contexts are replaced with pseudonyms and generalizations, there is a risk of losing the individuality and unique voice of each participant. This can lead to a flattening of differences between

personal stories, devaluing the cultural and social specificity that I, as a researcher, strive to convey. In the context of studying contemporary esotericism, this issue becomes especially relevant, as the ethnographic approach not only reveals new aspects of esoteric practices but also challenges traditional understandings of them. Added to this is the complexity of differing cultural codes: participants' behavior and statements may be misinterpreted through the researcher's own cultural lens. Access to the research field is also challenging—isolated communities are not always open to contact, and it takes time to build trust. Moreover, migration often leads to rethinking one's own identity, and participants may shift their self-perception and views during the research process, which affects the stability and quality of ethnographic material. Issues of representativeness also arise: the experience of one group of emigrants can differ significantly from another—depending on their reasons for migration, degree of integration, and cultural and social contexts. This complicates the formulation of generalizations. Finally, the migration context is highly dynamic: changes in legislation, the economy, or politics can rapidly affect respondents' living conditions and the broader research context, requiring flexibility and continuous adaptation of research approaches.

2. The respondent's affiliation with stigmatized groups (for example, the queer community, substance use or other dependencies, diagnosed mental health issues). When working with vulnerable communities and their members, one must be especially cautious, as even minor details can lead to identity disclosure. In some cases, a useful strategy is to coordinate with the respondent the specific parts of the text that I plan to publish and to ensure they feel comfortable with how their words and image are represented. This can help not only to protect the participant but also to build a trusting relationship, which is the foundation of quality ethnographic work.
3. Experiences of social discrimination. A practicing astrologer may face several types of social discrimination. First, their profession is often perceived as pseudoscience, which leads to public distrust and skepticism from professionals in other fields. Second, astrologers may struggle to obtain licenses and legal registration of their practice, and face criticism from religious and conservative groups that view astrology as incompatible with religious norms. Additionally, astrologers may experience economic hardship due to condemnation of their profession and may also be portrayed negatively in the media, where they are often depicted as frauds. All this limits their opportunities for professional development and societal recognition.

4. The illegitimacy or illegality of astrological practice in financial terms. As mentioned earlier, there is currently a draft law under consideration in Russia proposing to ban esoteric services. Russian-speaking astrologers living in other countries may also face challenges in legalizing this type of activity, which I may witness during my interviews.

Conclusion

The study of a contemporary astrologer's biography is not merely a sequence of methodological steps, but an ethically complex process shaped by shifting contexts, competing norms, and evolving relationships. While the research draws on principles such as cultural relativism, scientific agnosticism, and the ethnography of contemporary esotericism, these frameworks do not offer fixed answers to the dilemmas encountered in the field. The transnational nature of the sample—composed of Russian-speaking astrologers living both in Russia and abroad —introduces tensions between overlapping ethical codes and legal realities. For those based in Russia, anonymity is not simply a precaution but a necessity tied to potential legal repercussions, whereas others may wish to be named as part of asserting their public or professional identity. These divergent positions challenge conventional approaches to informed consent, confidentiality, and representation. Moreover, the deeply personal and professionally sensitive nature of biographical narratives requires more than procedural safeguards—it calls for ongoing ethical responsiveness. Rather than being resolved, the ethical tensions explored in this chapter remain open and contingent, demanding continuous negotiation in response to political, personal, and epistemic shifts.

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II. “It looked like everyone in the room understood who I am.” ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF INCLUDING VISUAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION METHODS IN RESEARCH DESIGN-MAKING AIMED AT EXPLORING IDENTITIES

Maroš Ondrejka

Introduction

Creating a coherent research design is one of the key elements that leads to the completion of any research endeavor. The nature of social research projects presupposes that anyone entering academia will constantly reflect on how the various parts of a given research project intertwine, inform, and complement each other. Design-making itself can be seen as a living organism, shaped not only by the number of grand theories and concepts that may inspire us, but also by changes in how we think about and understand the research topic and the people involved. Considering ethics in the design-making process, including the needs, capacities, and everyday lives of our potential collaborative partners, may not only take us as far as getting the green light from the ethical committee and extensive informed consent forms. Often seen as “challenges,” they usually serve as a damage-prevention tool, helping researchers prepare for potential risks and navigate the uncertainties of complex social interactions, motivations, expectations, and positionality. Especially when researchers strive for the highest possible degree of collaborative partners’ participation in research outcomes and co-production of knowledge—and decide to include marginalized groups of people—ethical considerations become one of the determining and constituting factors of the design-making process from the beginning to the end of the research project. In other words, what may initially be perceived as a challenge becomes a benefit, even a guideline itself.

My dissertation thesis project is one such case. As a continuation of my diploma thesis project, it aims to explore and understand how the identities of people living in uncertainty are altered, internalized, negotiated, and

communicated in the context of collective/community activities that seek to create safer spaces. My ongoing research thus focuses on individuals across the spectrum of sexual attraction and gender identity living in Slovakia, as well as on organizations/informal groups whose mission is to establish safer spaces for these people. Ethical considerations have informed and shaped the research design of this ethnographic project on multiple levels—from adding case-specific questions to interview protocols to incorporating new methods on top of narrative and semi-structured interviews and participant observations of safer spaces. These adjustments ultimately helped me rethink both the field and my position in it. The following chapter can be viewed as my attempt to tell a story, where questions regarding the ethics and the related efforts to address them opened pathways for implementing methods that accentuate reflexivity and participation, bring the emic perspectives to the forefront. The practical recommendations and thought processes leading to reflexive research design have already been applied in work with two groups across various locations in Slovakia.

The chapter is divided into three parts, each reflecting the natural progression of how addressing methodological issues and potential risks related to research ethics impacted the research design. I began with the theoretical challenge of identity labels that provoked methodological and ethical considerations. This section includes a broader introduction to identity as a research category, as identity is a framing concept for the entire project. Its theoretical conceptualization along with my experience with overcoming identity labels in research is crucial for understanding my decision-making behind the incorporation of specific methods and the implementation of certain practical recommendations. The second part is dedicated to ethical research design, particularly in relation to ethnography both as a method and an approach to producing knowledge through the perspectives of collaborative partners[1] (also referred to as research participants/informants). This section also addresses visual and participatory action methods in the sense of methodological adjustments. The final part examines selected technical aspects of ethical design-making—such as consent forms, data protection, and confidentiality, with examples from my previous research endeavors in the context of adjoint participatory action and visual methods. Practical recommendations specific to participative action methods are also included to circle back on the entire research design process. This chapter will ultimately answer a simple yet ethically significant question: How might the creation of ethical research design be impacted by the application of the photo-voice method in my research project?

Although the topics of the project and the people at its center may differ from those in other contexts, I believe reading the following text may serve as a good starting point for anyone designing new research that involves participative methods and related ethics. With this in mind, I have aimed to highlight the practical aspects and focused on the significant changes that occurred throughout the design-making process—hoping this might help others save valuable time that could be otherwise invested in other research activities.

For the readers unfamiliar with ethnographic methods and their related ethical implications, I recommend going

1 In this chapter, terms referring to persons participating in or contributing to the research are used contextually, in order to respect the histories, methodologies, and academic associated with specific research methods and fields. The term *collaborative partners* is used in connection with participatory action methods (PAR), *informants* with ethnography and *research participants* with social research in general.

through some of the fundamentals before diving deep into the more specialized sections that follow. For the specifics of ethnography as a method, James P. Spradley's *The Ethnographic Interview* (2016) is highly recommended. In this and other work, Spradley advocates for explicit methods to make ethnography more rigorous and transparent, offering detailed insights into uncovering the native categories of thought. When it comes to the ethical dimensions of such a complex undertaking as anthropological fieldwork, the first step should be consulting the ethical guidelines provided by the institution affiliated with the research—be it a university, agency, or research center. However, for looking a bit further or cross-referencing the information, one of the most comprehensive yet accessible and practical sources is *The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association* (1998). Structured around seven key areas, this code explains the fundamentals of ethical implications of traditional field research and includes references to additional sources that may be relevant to the research projects conducted in other areas or with specific groups of people.

Further explanations regarding the specifics of people across the spectrum of sexual attraction and gender identities are not included here, as these would extend the scope of this chapter and shift the focus away from ethics and methods. For more information, I recommend consulting relevant research centers and databases, such as ILGA-Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association – Europe) or The European Institute for Gender Equality (ILGA Europe 2024; Glossary & Thesaurus n.d.). Omitting these topics has allowed for a more detailed exploration of the practical aspects addressed in this chapter.

Research Context and the Issue of Identity Labels

More than fifty years have passed since the broader concept of identity was proposed by Erik Erikson in *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (1968), where he introduced identity as a "fundamental organizing principle which constantly develops throughout the lifespan of a human" (Erikson 1986, p. 159). Erikson's work gave rise to an extensive body of research aimed at conceptualizing identity, particularly within psycho-social disciplines. The generated interest produced several canonical works that contributed to the multifaceted and complex nature of identity as a research category—both as subjectively affirmed internalization (Taylor 1989) and as an externally ascribed, normalizing classification (Foucault 1997). Alongside efforts to conceptualize identity to explain how one truly becomes oneself, researchers also focused on how people's identities change (or alter) and when and why such changes occur. Particular interest in identity changes was marked in developmental psychology, which shed much-desired light on how people's identities evolve over the lifespan. This explained identity alteration as marked by different stages or statutes, usually detailing how people adhere to certain commitments and values over time and in connection to aging (Kroger & Marcia 2011). Later works repositioned identity and its conceptualization within the context of globalization, highlighting its complexity (Amiot et al. 2007; Ackermann 2011; Belgrade et al. 2021). These works explore identity through the lenses of its hybrid/multicultural nature and explain how individuals integrate multiple social identities, contributing to the recent discourse on hybrid identity formation and cultural hybridism. The conceptual framework of cultural hybridism has been further adopted in various fields,

namely transnational migration studies, and has resulted in the conceptualization of "super-diversity" (Ozkazanc-Pan 2019). This concept challenges static or simplistic notions of multiculturalism by emphasizing the fluid, layered, and dynamic aspects of diversity in a globalized world. Super-diversity, as an emerging concept, explains how people navigate and are affected by overlapping systems of difference in various societal institutions, particularly concerning inclusion and inequality. The noted development of conceptualization and theorizing about identity underlines the dynamics and complexity of our understanding of identity, and clearly shows that identity remains a functional explanatory framework for more recent societal phenomena such as digitalization, globalization, migration, international conflict, as well as interpersonal trust and the formation of communities in the context of self-identity and collective identities.

Back in the 1960s, alongside scientific efforts to conceptualize identity as a research category, labeling theory posited that assigning labels to individuals can influence their identities, understanding, and behavior toward others. One of the founding figures of labeling theory, Erving Goffman-Stigma, explored in his *Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1986) how labels and their formation based on societal perceptions shaped individual identities. In one of his most prominent works, Goffman-Stigma delved into the daily experiences of those who deviate from societal norms. The primary purpose of employing identity labels in research at the time was to understand how classifications affect individuals' self-perception and societal treatment. These labels were seen as capable of leading to self-fulfilling prophecies, whereby individuals internalize and enact the roles ascribed to them. For instance, labeling someone as a "criminal" could influence how others perceive that person, as well as how the individual perceives themselves—potentially perpetuating deviant behavior.

Over time, identity labels have been utilized and extended as an interpretative tool beyond criminology to areas such as mental health, disability, sexuality, and cultural studies. Researchers have examined how labels can both empower and marginalize individuals, influencing economic and social status, social interactions, and personal development. However, even the empowerment that labels can bring to marginalized individuals has become contested for their utilization in everyday communication and identity politics. The way we, as individuals, understand labels has changed as labels became a part of the "politics of singularity" (Grossberg 1966), simplifying and categorizing people's experiences—referring to specific categories of belonging rather than to identity itself. On one hand, these labels helped define groups of marginalized people whose voices and life experiences were misunderstood or excluded from the popular narratives, challenged social norms, and contributed to broader societal progress and human rights. On the other hand, labels began to mark individual identities, leaving little space for their reclamation and thus failing to reflect their fluid and temporal nature. This, in turn, poses a methodological problem. In other words, labels became points of differentiation—and even in cases where they could serve as tools for forming opposition against dominant social norms—their inability to reflect the changes and fluidity of identity as a whole began to highlight disparities between people with different socio-economic statuses, historical and personal experiences, and even generations, both inside and outside the labeled group, making them more difficult to grasp in a research context. This difference

may be illustrated by the following quotes from informal interviews conducted in connection with my dissertation thesis research. The collaborative partners were reflecting on sexual identity labels, both responding to the question: "How do you refer to your otherness, and why?"

> CP2: "I talk about myself as a homosexual man. We used to fight for homosexual rights. I wished to be a homosexual man openly and hold hands with my boyfriend… I don't think there's much more to it [note: to being homosexual] than being proud of my relationship."

> CP3: "… I don't want to use that [note: 'homosexual'] anymore. It is a technical term and sounds like a diagnosis… Being gay means I have specific experiences of being different, and that experience is shared by other men like me."

The attraction between two people identifying as men was labeled as both "homosexual" and "gay" at the same time. The label "gay" was further interpreted as more inclusive of other-than-sexual experiences and complex in quality, whereas 'homosexual' was linked to specific past experiences. Later, the cluster of cisgender men talking about their otherness in being attracted to other cisgender men expanded by another informant:

> CP7: "… queer is the closest term that comes to mind. I don't think of myself as simply gay. It's almost like I was saying I like men, and that makes me different. But my experience is somehow connected to other queer people—like trans people, for example. By saying I am queer, I am also saying I feel for them too."

The label "queer" was introduced in the interview as almost a collective attempt to unify all previously used sexual and gender identity labels. At the same time, the utilization of "queer" seemed to push the label "gay" into a category associated with specific past experiences and lesser complexity (e.g. inclusiveness). At this stage, I might have simply concluded that the labels in this context were developing over time toward greater inclusivity, creating a categorization where the more inclusive label would eventually surpass the one previously used. Additionally, the interviews illustrated the overarching nature of labels based on the evolution from "homosexual" to "gay" to "queer" as an attempt for a label to become an identity in itself, as each later variation appeared to expand the list of what an individual employing an identity label would need to know, do, and how they should behave toward others. However, as the interview process continued, I spoke to another, younger (the youngest of the group so far) participant, in the first informal interview:

> CP9: "… when I am with my good friends, I sometimes talk about my relationship, although I don't say it [note: the word 'gay']. I just say that I spent the weekend with my boyfriend, for example."

As illustrated above, labels linked to identities (in this case, sexual identities) have become highly individualized.

While the age of collaborative partners and their past experiences with labels may have played a role, identity labels could also be used to different extents and in a different contexts, depending on how individuals interpret them—some might even refuse to use them altogether. One of the framing points of the later additional interviews (second round of interviews in the induction-centered research design) was the self-identification with, and understanding of, reclaimed or reappropriated terms—words that were at once pejorative but have been brought back to acceptable usage. Within the illustrated group of participants. I decided to specifically ask about the word "*teplý*", which may be seen as such a word in Slovak (a term originally used in reference to hot and humid weather conditions, but also colloquially in reference to homosexual men). The participants' responses when asked about their views of "*teplý*" underlined my initial concerns about the use of labels:

CP2: "That [note: the word 'teplý'] is a slur for sure. I heard that people are using it on socials, but I don't think it's ok to use it outside the circles of homosexual people."

CP3: "I think it's great! I like the fact that it meant something else, but we really took it as our own now. The whole movement is 'teplé'! We should all be just 'teplí'!

CP7: "Using that word is just fine. I sometimes like to use it when I am with my close queers to kind of underline my identity in a group, but I refuse to use it on socials."

CP9: "[note: using the word 'teplý'] may be good for some people, definitely not for me."

In the context of the outlined theories about labeling, identity labels seem like a sufficient tool to explore the impact of the external environment on those who use them or have them ascribed to them. However, the way people use these labels—with ambiguity and temporality—makes them less useful as a tool to explore identity itself. When thinking about the kind of data I could extract from the interviews and observations, identity accounts for each of the collaborative partners now have the potential to represent isolated cases, shaped by their individual self-interpretations. This makes it increasingly difficult to draw any conclusions applicable to the entire group.

Addressing the Issue of Labels—Visual Participatory Action

From a methodological perspective, identity labels seemed to take me further away from the desired outcome—exploring the identities of people belonging to a certain group based on categories (e.g., identity labels) that the entire group would accept and interpret similarly. Is it morally and ethically sound to use identity labels if any interpretation of data beyond isolated cases may result in a subjective simplification? What methodological tools could we apply to minimize the risks of subjectivity? These two questions framed my subsequent considerations, as outlined in the following parts, connecting ethics and methodology. They offer an account of how creating ethical guidelines for ethnographic research projects resulted in the employment of visual participatory methods with case-

specific measures—not only addressing "the challenge" but also overcoming labels beyond verbal utterances. The entire project design became structured and organized around the amplification of marginalized voices and the echo of spaces, with the enablement of collaborative partners to work as a group toward a common goal becoming my primary focus, rather than creating categories through labels. Additionally, my attempt to find my way around identity labels marked the beginning of the process of my self-reflection on what role I can play—as a researcher, collaborative partner, and observer, but also as a community member, event participant, and a person whose presence and specific goal (e.g. conducting research) might influence the relationships and social dynamics of those around me.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) seemed to tick many boxes at once, as it offers a collaborative framework that actively involves community members as co-researchers, enabling the co-construction of identity labels that authentically reflect their lived experiences. This approach challenges traditional top-down methodologies that often impose predefined labels, which may not align with individual or community self-perceptions. For instance, Hutchinson and Lovell (2013) conducted a three-year PAR study with mental health service users, highlighting how participants moved beyond the restrictive "service user" label through active involvement in research processes. This participation facilitated the development of more complex and empowering self-identities.

Furthermore, PAR emphasizes reflexivity and the redistribution of power within the research context. It allows participants to critically engage with and potentially redefine/customize identity categories. For example, Dutta (2017) demonstrated that involving youth in PAR initiatives

enabled them to disrupt stigmatizing and divisive ethnic identity narratives, fostering the articulation of more inclusive social identities. By engaging as co-researchers and working together, participants challenged existing power dynamics and contributed to the creation of fluid, intersectional, and socially negotiated identity categories that did not rely on pre-defined labels. In practice, PAR needs to be viewed as a relatively young methodology, which is reflected in the fact that many of the sources used in the following practice-oriented sections are not based nationally or internationally agreed-upon codes and guidelines, but instead draw on the practices of universities, specialized research centers, non-governmental organizations, or civic sector initiatives.

In addition, the employment of visual methodology in my research design was not coincidental and was not merely intended to add a visual cool factor to the data collection. Integrating visual methods into the research design significantly enhances the depth and authenticity of identity research by providing participants with creative tools to express their experiences beyond verbal expressions and textual data, which are often reinterpreted by researchers. Techniques such as photovoice—which I decided to implement due to its significant benefits for my research project—enable individuals to capture and reflect upon their daily lives through photography, engaging in critical dialogue and empowering participants to document strengths and concerns. This approach is particularly effective in overcoming language and cultural barriers, allowing marginalized groups to communicate their perspectives more effectively (Shaw 2020).

Moreover, participatory visual methods facilitate collaborative analysis and collective storytelling. For

example, a project carried out in Bosnia and Herzegovina combined these techniques to enable citizens to share personal narratives, fostering discussions on citizenship and democracy. This process not only provided insights into individual identities but also promoted community cohesion and social change (Maglajlic 2006). By incorporating visual methods into PAR, researchers can enhance the credibility and richness of identity research, ensuring that findings are deeply rooted in the participants' lived experiences and perspectives.

Methods Application—Toward Greater Participation and from Text to Visual Data

Conducting research involving people requires both expertise and appropriate methodological tools. In this context, most courses offered at higher education institutions focus on the processes of data collection and analysis through various methods, including observation (both participant and non-participant), questionnaires, interviews, life histories, focus groups, etc. These conventional methodologies are typically taught in isolation from substantive issues and social realities, which further impacts how the voices of individuals are heard, considered, and interpreted (Cornish 2023). Moreover, the effect of this isolation can also be perceived in how ethical aspects of such endeavors—although well responsive to the institutional requirements—often lack openness to researcher reflexivity and the participation of those whose stories and accounts are involved—the collaborative partners. The underlying assumption embedded in most curricular structures is that research methods function primarily as instruments—that is, they are presumed to be neutral with respect to specific research topics. Or, as Heidegger critically noted, they are often regarded as "present-at-hand" (Critchley 2009), seemingly disconnected and impersonal in shaping how we conceptualize the world around us.

When seeking alternatives that might strengthen the connection between researchers and research participants, ethnographic and participatory action methods—both with long-standing traditions and undoubtedly significant impact on how social researchers reflect on participation—are typically the options to consider. These two sets of methods, although overlapping, tend to appeal to different audiences.

The methodological sensitivity of researchers familiar with ethnographic methods— particularly in establishing functional, sustainable, close, yet ethically sound relationships with informants they meet within the field—is arguably the one developed historically and through self-reflection within the discipline of anthropology (Imo 2019). The process behind the creation of ethnographic research designs is usually accompanied by detailed discussions about how to manage the potential risks resulting from acquiring close ties in the field. This ultimately leads to the researcher's realization of how impactful their presence and research activities may be on individuals and communities they meet. Ethnographic methods thus offer a wide range of techniques and recommendations aimed at building close ethical/professional relationships. These are often reflected in the ethical considerations and form an integral part of ethnographic research projects—such as employing participant observation, where its successful application presupposes a reflection of the researcher's dual role, when even the timing and the form of announcing the researcher's presence may come with case-specific recommendations (Atkinson et al. 2001; Dingwall 1980).

The effort and emphasis placed on ethical aspects in more recent ethnographic works seem both logical and expected among ethnographers, as getting closer to informants and considering both emic and etic perspectives at every stage of the research process is undoubtedly linked to better data quality, improved writing, and increased research credibility. The details that paint the picture of how others see the world often frame the feedback researchers using ethnographic methods receive from colleagues and reviewers, as they know how this aspect of ethnographic texts makes them rich in content and details. In the final chapter, two fundamental documents formed the ethnographic starting point for ethical considerations and design making. When considering the local Slovak context, I turned to the Ethical Code of the Slovak Ethnological Society and the GDPR—the former offering specificity related to ethnographic emic perspective-centered methods with potential local particularities, and the latter providing the legal basis referencing European legislation on data protection applicable to any research endeavor conducted within EU Member States.

In the context of moving towards greater participation, participatory action methods can be viewed as a complement to traditional ethnographic methods. PAR is a research approach that integrates action and inquiry, with a strong emphasis on collaboration and social transformation. PAR actively involves stakeholders at every stage of the research process—from identifying problems and designing studies to interpreting data and implementing solutions. One of the most comprehensive and complex works I found, *Participatory Action Research: Theory and Methods for Engaged Inquiry* by Chevalier and Buckles (2019), highlights that PAR is not merely a set of methods but a philosophy of engaged scientific endeavor that connects—and even blends—scientific investigation with real-world problem-solving. A key takeaway is that PAR does not treat research as a detached, objective pursuit but rather as a dynamic, context-sensitive, and iterative process of learning and action. Researchers employing PAR view research participants as collaborative partners, often assuming the roles of facilitator rather than interviewers.

Undoubtedly, employing PAR in my experience came with several ethical considerations and accentuated the need for a carefully planned research design. Chevalier and Buckles (2019) also emphasize the ethical complexities of participatory research, given its deep involvement with communities, power structures, and lived experiences—a sensibility reminiscent of ethnography. However, PAR is, in some ways, even more "demanding" in terms of ethical considerations, which include respecting participants' autonomy, ensuring mutual benefits, and maintaining transparency throughout the research process (for more details, see the last part of the chapter). Power imbalances between researchers and participants must be actively addressed in PAR through co-decision-making, equitable knowledge-sharing, and inclusive representation of marginalized voices. Researchers must also navigate the tensions between anonymity and recognition, as some participants may prefer to be acknowledged for their contributions rather than remain anonymous. Furthermore, the long-term responsibility of researchers is often highlighted and presupposes ensuring that findings are not only published academically but also meaningfully contribute to community well-being and systemic change. Ethical PAR demands continuous reflexivity, transparency, and accountability, making it a relational and transformative research approach.

A combination of the documents and methods highlighted topics where practical implications for the research design-making were evident, as well as others that emerged later and were followed by further reflection and practical implications. The following text is primarily dedicated to them. These points constituted the fundamental implications of the changes I made in research design by employing the photo-voice method. For the sake of practicality, the text and the commentary on selected areas is divided into three sections. general ethics-related remarks for ethnographic research (EK NSS 2017; Nariadenie 2016/679 EN GDPR EUR-LEX, n.d.-c), implications of visual methods (Wiles 2008; Wiles 2010), and participatory action research methods (Chevalier & Buckles 2013; Wiarda et al. 2023; *Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice* 2012; Cornish et al. 2023; Hannes & Parylo 2014). As a result, if someone is interested in visual methods but not necessarily in participatory action research, they can easily navigate the text and select the parts that are practically useful for them without having to read between the lines. Examples from my preliminary research and diploma research (the research participants were from a group of people across the spectrum of gender identity and sexual attraction, and the research was aimed at exploring identities as well) have been included to illustrate practical examples.

Practical Implications of Using Visual Participatory Action Methods for Creating Ethical Research Guidelines

1. Consent forms—withdrawals and foreseeing the unknown

Consent forms are undoubtedly essential in the realm of research ethics. They are commonly referred to in ethical guidelines and codes as tools for obtaining the informed consent of research participants before the data collection research stage begins. A practical point to note is that institutions typically have templates for consent forms in place (in the case of the Ethical Code of the Slovak Ethnological Society I mentioned earlier, full recommendation on what a standard consent form should encompass is included) with the logo of the institution and potentially with a reference to the ethical code or guidelines followed. If any specific adjustments to the consent form are needed, it is important to ensure that appropriate institutional approvals are obtained. What we may not often see explicitly mentioned in the guidelines and codes is that consent forms, when used appropriately and designed to prioritize the protection of research participants and only then researchers/institutions, represent one of the first steps in building trust and establishing clear expectations.

Combining multiple references to consent forms (as mentioned in the last paragraph of the previous section), two core principles should always remain at the forefront of a researcher's mind when creating consent forms: voluntariness and transparency. The former emphasizes that consent must be given freely, without coercion, and that participants must be able to withdraw their consent at any time. In practice, this usually means the consent form needs not only to contain these formulations but must also include a set of reflections by the researcher about what may lead people withdraw their participation and identify these barriers beforehand, clearly stating them as potential barriers when creating a research design from the beginning. The questions that follow are ideal to address as soon as the withdrawal occurs: Was the withdrawal caused by a difficulty on the side of the informant that I could not

prevent? Or could it be prevented with changes to interview protocols or the research design as such, for example, by adjusting certain questions? In the case of my previous diploma research, one of the key informants was going through difficulties in their personal life and in connection with their health that did not allow them to carry on with any of their social activities, including research participation. As the signed consent forms stated, the informant in question withdrew from participation completely at a later stage of the research, followed by me completely erasing all the data gathered in connection with that individual.

Practical implications of a potential withdrawal when considering visual methods and/or ethnographic research should always reflect the above questions and, in my case, led to the realization that there are two sets of data impacted by such a situation—the textual and visual data, or data from observations (in my case, observation of the group of informants) and data from the interviews. Since my experience with an informant's withdrawal, "the opportunity to withdraw the consent at any time" within project-related consent forms was complemented by the possibility of partial withdrawal. Partial withdrawal only makes sense when communicated clearly from the beginning of the collaboration with participants, as stating the right expectations is a precursor for truly informed and thus ethically sound consent. It gives a research participant/informant an option to withdraw from the research while allowing for discussion about the later utilization of anonymized data, if it still makes sense, and choosing the type or portion of data that will not be used.

The implications of a hypothetical withdrawal for participatory action methods automatically raise an additional question: How could this situation impact the dynamics within group activities? Researchers employing PAR need to be prepared to reflect on a potential withdrawal not just by themselves but with their collaborative partners as a group. Facilitating discussion about potential setbacks and difficulties on the side of the collaborative partners and incorporating it into the regular group meetings or interactions could help prevent further withdrawals and identify potential gaps in communication or in the regularity of interactions. It could also be a great learning opportunity for researchers to reflect on existing research designs and adjust them accordingly. To allow for partial withdrawal while keeping collaborative partners fully informed, the data gathered in group meetings and individual contributions should be explicitly divided as two sources of data in the consent form, clearly stating the different natures of data and different implications in terms of co-authorship. With PAR, I realized the informed consent must be ongoing and negotiated rather than a one-time event, allowing participants to withdraw or redefine their engagement as needed. Only then can relationships be based on mutual respect and trust, acknowledging the expertise and contributions of all partners.

The latter principle mentioned earlier—transparency—calls for informing the informants about the purpose of the research, how their data will be processed, and how long the data will be retained. Transparency is one of the most complex principles, with several practical implications, and it reaches far beyond "keeping in the loop" with informants and all the stakeholders and partners. It refers to having a clear plan—what kind of data will be collected, at what stage of the research (or at what time), and through what activities the goals will be achieved. Transparency thus requires researchers to do both—try to mitigate the risks

of the unknown and be honest, sometimes even about not knowing.

The practical implications of foreseeing the unknown are related to how I approached data management and the longevity of materials, both visual and textual. I would further advise considering the potential future use and longevity of images in the public domain and ensuring that participants know of these possibilities. In my experience, the actions one can take here are not necessarily about adding specific provisions to the consent form but rather about the discussion at the beginning of the data collection period. For instance, before the informal interviews in my diploma thesis research, I facilitated conversations about how and when I would be taking pictures, how I would store them, and how the other parties (project partners, gatekeepers and stakeholders, participants) could participate in the final selection of pictures that best fit my interpretations. Involving participants in creating or selecting images that represent them gave them control over how they were portrayed and greatly contributed to the ethical value of the research project.

In the context of using PAR methods, collaborative group sessions are advised as a fundamental mode of work. They should be present in every part of the research and are not limited to the acquisition of consent forms. In the planning phase, engaging all stakeholders—including community members and researchers—in the planning process ensures that the research addresses community needs and respects local contexts. After the planning phase, regular collaborative group meetings are organized not only to advance the research but also to potentially rewrite existing guidelines with the community, as well as to allow transcripts to be read and added to by collaborative partners.

In the case of my dissertation thesis research, I planned group training sessions and linked them to the distribution and designation of three sets of consent forms (detailed in the final part of the chapter). The organized group trainings for each participant group, based on their location/residence, focused on the planned project outcomes along with recommendations on how the research participants should take pictures in compliance with the GDPR. This was tied to an additional consent form for use by participants in case they decide to include someone else in their photos with a visible face or other personal identifiers. The trainings also included discussions about the planned use and potential misuse of pictures in the public domain—in this case, a planned exhibition of the photographs taken by the collaborative partners, accompanied by an outlook of how the final presentations would be arranged. This stage automatically ties in with all the possibilities of anonymization and data protection, which are outlined in the following part, as these encompass various specifics and could lead to case-specific recommendations.

2. Data Protection and Data Anonymization

When reviewing various sources on ethics in social research, I identified two main principles that one should keep in mind when discussing and considering data and their anonymization—data protection and confidentiality—aimed at ensuring data is stored securely and safeguarding the personal information of research participants. In terms of the first steps in creating a research design, the local context and legislation served as a great starting point in my case. There are technical and organizational measures one could take based on the GDPR. From a technical perspective, legislation recommends measures such as encryption and

secure storage to protect data from unauthorized access. I strongly recommend limiting access to personal data only to members of the research team or collaborative partners who need it for their work, especially when working in a team or with a group of people with different levels of involvement in the project. Although most online storage spaces I used were relatively intuitive in using multiple layers of access to stored data, ensuring regular data protection training on the GDPR is another measure one could take or suggest within the institution, as the recommendations may differ from one institution, state, or research topic to another. Researchers should also consider the relevance of the collected data and gather only the personal data necessary to achieve the research objectives, using anonymized or pseudonymized data to minimize the risk of identifying individuals whenever possible. It is important to note that the institution's good practices need to be taken into account first and foremost, especially concerning data protection. These good practice recommendations often come with useful tips, such as which available data storage alternatives are the most efficient and economical. Often, secured digital storage options are provided within institutions, along with extended licenses and agreeable terms for use.

In the context of data protection, both PAR and visual methods require detailed attention to data protection to uphold ethical standards and safeguard participant privacy. Visual data, such as photographs and videos, inherently carries a higher risk of revealing identifiable information, making traditional anonymization techniques less effective. As mentioned earlier, researchers should conduct comprehensive ethics training sessions for collaborative partners to enhance their awareness of privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality concerns. Such training empowers them to make informed decisions about data collection and dissemination, fostering ethical sensitivity and responsibility.

However, even with the most rigorous training, a researcher's intervention might be required to safeguard participant identities and avoid using identifiable personal data. With the use of visual methods, I have already decided to employ various techniques, such as blurring faces, cropping identifiable features, or using silhouettes to obscure identities while preserving the image's relevance. Alternatively, symbolic representation, such as replacing identifiable images with avatars or abstract symbols, can effectively convey information without exposing personal identities. However, researchers must also assess the identifiability of visual data and remain sensitive to cases where anonymization may be impractical or could diminish the integrity of the research. In my preliminary dissertation thesis research, one of my collaborative partners took a picture of one of the darker alleys behind their workplace at night to capture the situation when they felt unsafe. The picture was supposed to be shared publicly with a comment indicating that the person works nearby and passes through this place often, frequently at night. When discussing the options for anonymization and potential impact, they chose to blur out the company's logo and use the dark animation filter to accentuate the emotions of uneasiness, which also made the objects and buildings in the photo less recognizable.

Additionally, adhering to the principle of data minimization is crucial in PAR projects. This involves collecting only data essential for the research objectives, thereby reducing potential privacy risks. Researchers must also be careful about handling sensitive information, such as political opinions or health data, which requires explicit consent and heightened protection measures.

Establishing clear protocols for data storage, access, and sharing is fundamental to prevent unauthorized use or security breaches. By implementing these strategies, PAR practitioners can effectively balance the participatory nature of their research with carefully designed data protection requirements, ensuring ethical integrity and participant trust.

In PAR, protecting the anonymity of collaborative partners within the collaborative nature of the research raises further considerations. Traditional anonymization techniques, such as using pseudonyms or altering identifiable details, may not suffice—especially when working with small communities or well-known individuals where participants could still be recognizable. Therefore, it is crucial to engage participants in regular discussions about the potential risks of exposure and to obtain informed consent that reflects their understanding and agreement on how their data will be used and shared.

Moreover, in PAR, where participants often act as co-researchers, the conventional practice of anonymization might conflict with the need to acknowledge their contributions (Cornish et al. 2023; *Community-based participatory research: A guide to ethical principles and practice* 2012). In such cases, confidentiality should be negotiated rather than imposed, considering the participants' preferences and the research context. This collaborative approach respects participants' autonomy and enhances the ethical integrity and credibility of the research process.

PAR-Specific Recommendations

Ethical research practices in PAR emphasize fair collaboration and shared responsibility. One key recommendation is to establish clear agreements on the co-ownership of data and findings, ensuring that all stakeholders have fair access, control, and benefit from the research outcomes. This goes aligns with the ethical dissemination of research outcomes and results, which is equally important and requires that findings be shared in accessible formats—ideally with all stakeholders and the entire community. Furthermore, collaborative authorship should be considered to acknowledge the contributions of all participants, reinforcing the principles of inclusivity and knowledge co-production in PAR. Additionally, capacity building should be integrated into the research design by providing training for community members, enhancing their skills and fostering long-term sustainability within the community context.

In the context of research design for an ongoing dissertation thesis project, I implemented several points into the research design to safeguard transparency and confidentiality, as well as the collaborative and participative nature of the research project. After the initial interview to capture the true nature of needs and expectations of the pre-specified groups of people (groups differ from each other based on location and affiliation with the activities of various organizations/spaces), three consent forms/acknowledgments requiring the collaborative partners' signatures were established as a baseline for the commencement of any collaboration. The initial form, concerning overall participation in the project, was supplemented with statements regarding co-authorship based on Slovak copyright law (Zbierka zákonov 2015). The discussion, along with the possibility of choosing partial withdrawal from the research, was also included, together with the options of partial or complete anonymization upon later agreements, as collaborative partners may decide to

change their visibility based on the photographs they take or how they feel about the participation in the research overall. The second consent form included data storage protocols with specified layers of access in shared folders, as well as the roles and responsibilities of individual collaborative partners, including the potential future use of photos and their interpretations, upon agreement, in studies, articles, exhibitions, and workshops for community organizers. The third form was added as an acknowledgment of participation in the introductory session and group training dedicated to taking photographs, specifically stressing the GDPR provisions that apply to photographs taken by collaborative partners, as well as the potential impact of using images in public. At this point, I consider it important to note that an additional special type of consent form, which did not require collaborative partners' signature initially, was also distributed. This form was agreed upon for use, when necessary, in the initial consent form and is referred to as "third-party consent." This simple consent form aims to mitigate ethical risk to non-participants (e.g., family members or by-standers in specific environments) and includes several statements about the participatory nature of the project, along with a short explanation of the co-authorship of the person taking the photographs. With careful facilitation and additional discussion around the presented outcomes and data management plans, none of the collaborative partners expressed concerns so far.

Additionally, two group discussions were added to the project scheduling upon group agreement, and a schedule for individual meetings was suggested, with the possibility of online formats. The group discussions would allow the entire group to reflect on how individuals interpret data—building on individual interviews and interactions—as well as how they took photographs and how they want the process to continue. The overall theme of the project was emphasized, and the discussions were carefully facilitated. The group discussions also serve as a tool for reflecting on participation and providing feedback on the research process to allow my self-reflection as a research facilitator and collaborative partner within the entire group.

Additional Potential Barriers to PAR

While the employment of participatory action and visual methodologies opens new pathways for inclusive, emic-driven research, several additional barriers deserve careful consideration. I decided the mention these as I am aware that researchers considering the use of PAR methods—namely the photo-voice method in connection with people across the spectrum of sexual attraction and gender identity—could face different challenges that did not arise in my project. These could relate to internal processes within the affiliated institution or simply to differences in the group dynamics of collaborative partners and their experience with collaboration. If not taken into account, they may complicate ethical research practices and jeopardize the depth and sustainability of collaboration.

Participatory frameworks assume a degree of collective cohesion among research participants. However, as Crenshaw (1991) has shown, identities are shaped by overlapping systems of power. Within LGBTQ+ communities, for example, class, race, ability, and age can produce intra-group hierarchies that affect who feels empowered to speak, be visible, or contribute fully to visual data creation. A risk thus emerges that participation privileges the more articulate or socially dominant collaborators, inadvertently reproducing

exclusions the research seeks to challenge. Therefore, facilitators should consider not only technical ethics but also sensitivity to these layered inequalities (Wang & Burris 1997). Furthermore, the deep immersion that participatory ethnographic research requires—especially in marginalized or trauma-experiencing communities—can also create emotional strain for both researchers and collaborators. Visual data, by its nature, can surface painful memories or expose vulnerabilities (Hannes & Parylo 2014). Without institutional mechanisms for debriefing and affective support, the emotional labor involved may go unaddressed, risking burnout or disengagement from both sides.

A practical suggestion for what the researchers themselves may do is adjust group interviews to focus on the value of individual contributions and set up the communication framework with each group of collaborative partners separately. This could include switching the order of speaking, providing the opportunity to withdraw from the collaboration, giving trigger warnings, and focusing on common and overall themes—leaving out the details of individual perceptions to individual interviews. Empowerment-focused and context-sensitive individual interviews should always precede group interviews.

Another frequently overlooked barrier concerns the restrictive nature of institutional ethical frameworks, which may be poorly suited to the dialogical process of participatory research. For instance, ethics committees often require fixed objectives and pre-approved methods, while PAR depends on evolving dynamics and emergent co-decisions (Iacono, Symonds & Brown 2016). This structural friction may lead researchers to underreport methodological flexibility or limit co-creation to fit bureaucratic molds, which contradicts the ethos of PAR.

Conclusions

The research design process is undoubtedly complex and requires careful planning, researchers' self-reflection, and a whole set of considerations regarding the clarity and impact of the roles and responsibilities of all research stakeholders. Researchers thus do not act solely on behalf of institutions and as persons exploring "the unknown" of social interactions and relations, but also as individuals in positions of power, with a set of hypothetical positive as well as negative impacts on the people they meet in the field. Primarily as a mitigation of potential risks, ethical considerations should come into play, not merely as a "challenge" that needs to be surpassed to get the green light from the respective ethical and grant committees. Contrastingly, these considerations have the potential to strengthen and enrich the research design by opening it up to new concepts and methodologies, which in turn contribute to how we reflect on ourselves and others in the field.

The resulting adjustment of consent forms and training/discussions, which complement the research design, can be expected. Researchers should consider the local context (the field's good practice and legislation) and the ethical implications connected with the methods they employ. In my case, visual action participatory methods may have added to the complexity of the research design but also created unique opportunities with collaborative partners to explore the research topic even further, as collaboration strengthens trust and mitigates power imbalances.

Adjustments often require case-specific decision-making. For example, collaborative partners in PAR might not always want to be anonymized. The approach of "anonymizing where possible" may even conflict with

some core principles of PAR, as visibility can be the key to individual and group empowerment.

Although ethical considerations play a crucial role in preparing researchers for stressful situations, the situations that may arise in the field may not always be predicted. Such problems may not be entirely eliminated, even with a carefully planned research design and clearly defined roles and responsibilities. In these moments, researchers' reflexivity and presence are key as they allow us to respond to case-specific problems, which may be more important for given problem-solving than any prior preparation.

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III. RESEARCH OF VALUE ORIENTATIONS, POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS, AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES AMONG NON-BELIEVERS IN SLOVAKIA (with an Emphasis on the Online Space)

Iveta Štefanovičová

Introduction

The development of digital technologies presents new challenges for ethnologists and cultural anthropologists (for the Slovak context, see particularly the works by Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024; Slivková 2024; Zachar Podolinská 2024a; Zachar Podolinská 2024b), as a significant portion of people's lives now takes place in the online space. The internet and social media have become crucial platforms for sharing, spreading, and—last but not least—shaping major social narratives: "Narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse; story is an event or sequence of events (the action); and narrative discourse is those events as represented." (Abbott 2008, p. 19). Many users seek out and establish connections with like-minded individuals, leading to the formation of countless online communities. Non-believers also have a significant presence within the Slovak online environment, and their online activity is the subject of my research.[1]

The community of Slovak non-believers is prominently represented on the internet and social media. Profiles such as *Ateisti.sk*[2] (which shares a broad spectrum of content, including the popularization of atheism and scientific thinking, criticism of religious influence in politics, support for secularism, and advocacy for human rights, often drawing content from the other profiles listed below), *Ethos*[3] (a humanist, secularist, and activist-oriented civic association), *Irreligiousness*[4] (a satirical critique of religion

1 In the 2021 Population and Housing Census, 23.8% of Slovakia's population selected the option "without religious affiliation" when asked about their religious belonging (Ivančíková & Podmanická 2023, p. 54). However, this figure indicates only the absence of formal church affiliation and does not necessarily reflect personal beliefs or religious practices (Zachar Podolinská, Tížik & Majo 2019, p. 17; Zachar Podolinská & Majo 2022, p. 452).
2 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/ateisti.sk/?locale=sk_SK>.
3 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/sekularisti?locale=sk_SK>.
4 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/irrelegiouspeople?locale=sk_SK>.

and faith), *Podporujem odluku cirkví od štátu*[5] (a civic activist group advocating for a secular state), *Predajte Vatikán a nakŕmte svet*[6] (a critique of religion and especially the church), and *Spoločnosť Prometheus*[7] (a humanist civic association focused on protecting the rights of non-believers) are the objects of my research. These profiles have thousands of followers, presumably mostly non-believers. The selection of profiles was based on their high level of activity, number of followers, and content diversity. Facebook was chosen as the primary platform due to its dominant position in the Slovak online space, where the observed community is most active.

The specific focus of my research[8] emerged from a preliminary content analysis of these profiles. All the mentioned pages produce content that reflects the current social and political situation in Slovakia, particularly in the context of the values and attitudes promoted by politicians (not necessarily Christian ones) who frequently invoke Christianity and traditions as the pillars of Slovak society. Based on this, they construct and disseminate specific narratives, which, in some cases, translate into ideologically driven legislation. The aforementioned atheist, secularist, and humanist pages critically engage with this approach and emphasize the necessity of upholding the principles of freedom and democracy. Therefore, my research focuses on the value orientations, political orientations, and attitudes—primarily towards human rights issues—of non-believers in Slovakia.

The aim of this research is to determine whether, based on long-term non-participant online observation of internet groups of non-believers, non-believers in Slovakia

5 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/odluka?locale=sk_SK>.
6 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/predajtevatikan?locale=sk_SK>.
7 Available on: <https://www.facebook.com/spolocnost.prometheus?locale=sk_SK>.
8 The research is part of the dissertation project Value Orientations, Political Orientations, and Attitudes of Religious Nones in Slovakia (Ethnography Online).

can be considered a community—or even a homogeneous community—with shared patterns of identification and a consensually shared set of values and moral attitudes.

Additionally, the research focuses on identifying the unifying foundation of this community, i.e., the aspects in which consensus prevails among the studied groups. Another goal is to explore the relationship between the value and political orientations of non-believers, analyzing the extent to which an individual's value orientations are influenced by their political preferences and examining the dependence of political preferences on an individualized worldview and the personal mindset of individuals.

Introduction to the Research and Research Methods

The research focuses on analyzing the online environment of non-believers in Slovakia, with the main aim of examining the value, political, and social attitudes of this specific group. The study consists of several phases, each employing different research methods. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods will allow for capturing the complexity of the phenomenon of non-belief in the online space and its relationship to broader societal issues. The research is divided into three phases: analysis of online content, a questionnaire survey, and the conducting of in-depth semi-structured interviews.[9] The reason for dividing

9 It is important to note that not all members or followers of the analyzed Facebook pages necessarily identify themselves as non-believers. Some individuals may have joined or followed the pages out of general interest in religious or societal topics, without personally sharing the views expressed on these platforms. This potential heterogeneity was taken into account in the interpretation of the findings. In the questionnaire itself, participants were explicitly asked to respond only if they consider themselves non-believers, regardless of their religious practice or formal affiliation. The same selection criterion will be applied when recruiting respondents for the interview phase. However, in the analysis of online data (such as reactions or comments), it must be acknowledged that a certain level of deviation is possible, as content may have been viewed or responded to by individuals outside the intended target group.

the research into three phases is to ensure maximum diversity of data and to capture a wide range of opinions and attitudes of non-believers, thus avoiding the creation of stereotypical images of this group (Eynon, Fry & Schroeder 2008, p. 39). As part of my research, I will also focus on identifying different attitudes within the non-religion spectrum, which includes atheists, agnostics, apatheists, as well as other groups such as humanists, secularists, and so on. Therefore, in the context of the study, the term "atheist" is understood as a general term falling under the broader non-religion category. As David Václavík notes in his analysis of Czech atheism,

> "most relevant surveys show that truly atheistic positions are held by only a small minority of people. Czech atheism is often confused with other religious phenomena, such as deinstitutionalized religiosity and apathy toward religion (religious apatheism)." (Václavík, Hamplová & Nešpor 2018, p. 112).

The first phase focuses on analyzing the six public Facebook pages mentioned above, which bring together non-believers in Slovakia and create communication platforms where non-religious narratives, opinions, values, and attitudes can be created and disseminated. The selection criteria included the popularity of the pages, the duration of their existence, the number of followers, and the level of interaction with followers. Data (posts) were collected continuously over the course of one year, from September 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024, to adequately capture how non-believers reflect not only cyclical cultural and societal events (such as holidays or anniversaries) but also everyday topics. Each post was archived in a secure database, with the following data tracked: date and time of publication, topic, type of attachment (photo, video, link), quick reactions (type and number), comments (type—supportive, dissenting, neutral—and number), number of shares, the origin of the post (original, original/shared, shared), and, in the case of shared posts, their original source. By August 31, 2024, a total of 2,494 posts had been collected. This database will then be analyzed from various perspectives, including content analysis (Altheide 1987), discourse analysis (Hanks 1987; Schiffrin, Tannen & Hamilton 2001), contextual analysis (Van Dijk 2008), and emotional analysis (Lutz & White 1986; Kusal et al., 2022), supplemented with network analysis of interactions among participants in the discussions (Trotter 2000). The research contributes to a deeper understanding of how the value-based and moral identity of non-believers is formed and expressed through online interactions, as well as to the analysis of the dynamics of their discussions—including patterns of agreement, disagreement, and argumentative strategies used in response to social and political issues.

The second research phase involved the distribution of an online questionnaire among the followers of the analyzed pages. The questionnaire was distributed via private groups associated with the analyzed profiles—*Ateisti.sk* and *Odluka cirkvi od štátu*—which together have over 9,000 members. The selection of these groups was based on the fact that they belong to the monitored profiles and are the only groups that bring together Slovak non-believers. The questionnaire was created through a synthesis of relevant sources and supplemented with questions derived from preliminary research, as well as questions from the European Values Survey (EVS) and the World Values Survey (WVS). It consists of seven thematic sections.

The first section covers demographic data, focusing on basic respondent characteristics such as age, gender, marital status, education, place of birth and residence, ethnic affiliation, employment status, and monthly income. Special attention is also given to experiences of living abroad, as these can significantly influence value and political orientations. The second section examines attitudes towards religion and belief, exploring how respondents perceive their identity as non-believers, whether they practice any religious or spiritual activities, their trajectory towards non-belief, and which pages they follow. A key aspect here is the frequency of their interaction with the content of the analyzed pages.

The third section of the questionnaire focuses on moral foundations, utilizing the internationally recognized Graham and Haidt questionnaire. This tool allows for analyzing respondents' moral orientations based on five key dimensions: care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation (Graham et al. 2013, p. 68). The next section examines basic values, using a shortened ten-item version of Schwarz's value questionnaire, aimed at identifying the most important values for the respondents (Schwarz 1994).

The fifth section delves into political orientation, based on the political compass concept, which tracks respondents' positions along two axes: left/right and conservatism/liberalism. Respondents indicate their degree of agreement with statements about the market, economy, the role of the state, and social order. The following section focuses on attitudes toward abortion, LGBTQ+, and euthanasia. In addition to measuring agreement with statements, this section also explores personal experiences, as they can significantly influence these attitudes. The final section, titled Social Background, Society, and Relationships, examines basic characteristics of the respondents' past and current social environments, their relationships, and personal traits. This section also includes questions designed to detect potential response biases.

In the third phase, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with the administrators of the analyzed pages and selected followers who have been identified based on their online activity or those who express interest in participating, as indicated in the invitation at the end of the questionnaire. Approximately twenty qualitative interviews are planned. The information obtained from these interviews will help deepen the data and identify the causes behind findings from the previous research phases.

Due to the nature of the research environment, the chosen methods, and the focus on sensitive topics in certain parts of the study, several ethical considerations have arisen. These have already been reflected upon and will continue to be carefully addressed in the upcoming research phases.

Motivation and Positionality in Balance

Perhaps the fundamental ethical challenge faced by every ethnologist and cultural anthropologist is reflecting on their own positionality in research, which can be particularly difficult when the researcher is part of the community being studied—as in my case. I have never been religious, which may influence my perception and interpretation of topics related to both religion and non-religion. In terms of the four dimensions of religiosity—believing, bonding, behaving, and belonging (Zachar Podolinská & Majo 2022, p. 464) —I do not believe in any deity or higher power, I do not affiliate with any church, I do not practice religious rituals or ceremonies, and I do not belong to any religious group. Regarding the

trajectory of religiosity, I am consistently non-religious (Schwadel et al. 2021, p. 868). This same characteristic applies to my parents as well.

As a non-believer, I was disturbed by the lack—or complete absence—of scientifically verifiable facts in religion. I was also deeply concerned by the attempts of some religious individuals, particularly within political circles, to impose rules based solely on faith on society as a whole, including non-believers or members of different religions. Similar rhetoric was expressed by emerging atheist pages and profiles, which I began following around thirteen years ago. However, over time, some reactions to individual posts began to include dissenting responses from other non-believers, particularly on topics such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and euthanasia. As the number of users grew and the political and cultural situation became more polarized, these dissenting voices increased. My de facto stereotypical image of the "critically thinking, but fundamentally tolerant atheist" began to break down.

In this context, I began to ask myself why non-believers do exactly the same things that they condemn in "religious individuals," or how it is possible that they identify certain "inconsistencies" within one group of the religious spectrum, yet fail to recognize the same inconsistencies in their own behavior and thinking—that is, within the spectrum of non-belief. In this context, a picture emerged of a nationally rooted definition of the "Slovak atheist," who often holds more conservative values and political orientations that, in many cases, align with those of "traditional believers" in Slovakia. This personal motivation gradually evolved into a scientific hypothesis—or at the very least, a research question—and became one of the research objectives of my PhD dissertation.

The analysis of narratives presented by "atheists" in the online space, along with their subsequent comparison

to data obtained through the survey and interviews, is by no means aimed at "criticizing religion and faith" from the position of an "engaged atheist." Nor is the goal to portray non-believers as the "ideal segment" of society. On the contrary, I do not perceive religion as a determining factor in value orientations and attitudes; that is, value orientations and attitudes can be identical among both believers and non-believers, and their formation is influenced by other phenomena, which this research aims to identify. The research may also contribute to deconstructing the stereotypical perceptions of the polarity between "believers" and "non-believers." In this sense, it is worth noting the existence of so-called "progressive believers" who share similar opinions with most non-believers (referred to as "liberals") and so-called "fundamentalist believers," who share the same values, attitudes, and political convictions as a segment of conservative non-believers. In interpreting my findings, I constantly reflect on my personal value positionality compared to a neutral scientific positionality. I consider whether I have managed to maintain attitudinal neutrality, and where I am unable to completely distance myself from subjective (personal) viewpoints, I always present these as an acknowledged subjective perspective.

When deciding on the initial or framework ethical design for my research, I ultimately chose to apply the so-called ethical relativistic approach, which, according to several scholars, is the most suitable position (not only) in the online environment (Hair, Akdeveliogli & Clark 2022, p. 4). The researcher can apply ethical relativism in two ways. First, in relation to all types of data obtained—meaning that the researcher should avoid evaluating the data or their authors in the context of judging their "rightness" or "wrongness" (e.g., in the field of morality). In my case, every

opinion and attitude represent equally valid research data for me, so in my interpretation, I will focus more on finding correlations. The search for mutual connections, using three different types of methodologies, will hopefully lead me to an understanding of the causes and reasons, and ultimately to answers to the initial research questions and assumptions. Ethical relativism, as a framework approach to the research ethics themselves and codes (which are mainly created by the academic community and largely embody the principles of relativism), or even to legislation, is also seen by me as an expression of my personal stance toward generically conceived norms that are not "absolute truths" and that depend significantly on specific cultural and social contexts (see also Zachar Podolinská 2014a, b). This approach also allows me flexibility in forming methodological decisions and interpreting data.

However, relativism can, in the case of formulating general and theme-specific codes (Zachar Podolinská 2024b), prove to be a methodological trap. A common problem with ethical codes is their ambiguity—for example, even the basic principles of current ethical research, such as "do no harm" or "preserve dignity," can have diametrically different meanings depending on the specific context—whether for the researcher, the funding institution, or the research participants. Ethical codes often represent a set of generic recommendations that are not very helpful to the researcher when dealing with specific situations. Naturally, the more general the area of research they cover, the more general their vocabulary and tools become. In this sense, Slovakia has several national codes (EK NSS 2017; EK SASA 2013; EK SAV 2015; Code of Conduct for Research Integrity and Ethics in Slovakia 2025), which provide basic ethical guidance for ethnological and anthropological research conducted in Slovakia.

Ethical Guidelines for Internet Research

There are numerous ethical codes—whether international, national, or internal (e.g., EK FSEV UK), issued by individual research institutions for their own purposes—which define the principles of "traditional offline" ethnographic research. Although online research differs in its technical specifics, the basic principles—such as respecting respondents, protecting their privacy, and ensuring confidentiality—remain unchanged (Ruihley & Hardin 2014, p. 12). However, the field of research in the online environment, particularly with regard to its technological aspects, is in most cases still completely neglected or insufficiently addressed. In this context, it is essential to consider both the time when individual codes were created and the rapid development of technologies, which has radically changed not only the expansion of the online environment itself, but also its blending and interaction with the offline world. These developments have contributed to a lag not only in global online research but also in the development of ethical designs for such research.

In Slovakia, we primarily follow the *Code of Ethics of the Slovak Association of Social Anthropology* (EK SASA 2013) and the *Code of Ethics of the Ethnographic Society of Slovakia* (EK NSS 2017). While the SASA ethical code does not address internet research at all (which again must be understood in the context of the time of its creation, i.e., 2013), the NSS code dedicates one subchapter to this form of research (EK NSS 2017, pp. 7–8). The NSS code defines internet research as follows:

> "Internet research refers to the internet as a tool for research, but also the internet as a

> location of research. Some internet research projects can be carried out solely through the internet, while others may use social networks as a tool for recruiting research participants and combine them with other, traditional ethnographic research methods. Internet research needs to be distinguished from the research of the internet as a social phenomenon (communication channel/ communication technologies), although research of the internet typically includes research conducted on the internet" (EK NSS 2017, p. 16).

The NSS Ethical Code, however, further defines internet research primarily in the context of mutual online contact with respondents. In my case, however, the internet serves only as a tool for data collection, so the relevant considerations are mainly those related to the distinction between "private" and "public" content.

Slovak researchers conducting ethnographic or anthropological research online often rely on international texts when designing correct ethical frameworks, as these tend to be more comprehensive (e.g., EC ALLEA 2023; EG ASA 1999; EC CASA; EG CASA), or specifically address internet research. The first academic discussions on the ethics of internet research abroad date back to the 1990s. A major contribution in this area was a special edition of the *Information Society journal* in 1996, which was entirely dedicated to the ethics of internet research. This publication was followed by a 1999 workshop with support from the *National Science Foundation* and the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*. The resulting report from the organizers has since become a fundamental reference

point in the field of ethics in internet research. In the same year, the *Association of Internet Researchers* was established (Buchanan & Ess 2008, p. 3).

One of the few sets of rules specifically designed for online research is the *Ethical Guidelines for Internet Research*, published by the *Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR).[10] Founded in 1999, AoIR regularly updates its ethical guidelines to reflect technological developments. The most recent version, the third edition, was published in 2019. However, a limitation of this document is that it does not provide detailed guidance or instructions for addressing all possible situations that researchers may encounter on the internet. A similar document is the *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research* (BPS 2017), which addresses key issues such as distinguishing between public and private domains in online spaces, securing collected data, ensuring participant anonymity, obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants' right to withdraw from research, the consequences of research, and potential risks that may arise for both participants and researchers.

An ethical code exclusively designed for online research, which takes into account all the specifics and potential situations that researchers and participants may be exposed to, does not exist yet (and likely cannot exist due to the diverse nature of different types of research). Instead, this role is often fulfilled by academic texts on research ethics, where researchers share specific ethical issues they faced during their studies. The publication you are referring to is an example of this kind of contribution.

10 Available on: <https://aoir.org/>.

Some scholars highlight the need to develop a global ethical code for internet research (Buchanan & Ess 2008, p. 32). However, this idea contains a fundamental flaw—the diversity of ethical frameworks, stemming primarily from the basic differences between Eastern and Western traditions, suggests that achieving a universal consensus in research ethics may, in fact, be impossible. Cultural specificities and varying interpretations of terms like "privacy," "autonomy," and "collective responsibility" represent obstacles that would likely prevent the creation of a unified global ethical framework. Moreover, it is not only the significant differences between Western and Eastern traditions; internet research transcends national borders, subjecting it to multiple legal and socio-cultural frameworks. This further complicates the possibility of clearly defining universally applicable rules (Eynon, Fry & Schroeder 2008, p. 38).

N. Slivková also pointed out the limitations of existing codes in online research. As she notes:[11]

> "[…] when dealing with certain ethical dilemmas, sometimes even consulting existing and valid ethical codes is of no help, especially when we open topics that go beyond the classical framework of research."

She further emphasizes that the ultimate responsibility for the course of the research rests with the researcher and the relevant ethics committee (Slivková 2024, p. 91).

11 The text is part of the publication *Etické dilemy v súčasnej etnológii I* (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská 2024).

Boundaries of the "Private" and "Public"

The basic unit of the first phase of my research is a Facebook post. Each post from the analyzed profiles is stored in a separate database, organized in table format using MS Excel. This raises the potential question of whether such posts are public or private. However, after reviewing the relevant codes, we can unequivocally conclude that the posts constitute publicly available data, as they meet all the definitions for being considered public.

One of the key factors is the availability of the post to other internet users. In this regard, the Ethical Code of NSS states the following:

> "If the activity of one or more internet users (textual, visual, or auditory) is accessible to any other user without the granting of specific permission or authorization, this activity can be considered public behavior and the information publicly accessible" (EK NSS 2017, p. 8).

In the following sections, the NSS ethical code addresses specific types of online environments, with a passage about social networks being relevant for my research:

> "Information placed on social networks that is accessible and available without restriction to any registered user can be considered public behavior, publicly accessible information, or information located in the public space, even though access to the website itself may be restricted to

> individuals who have created an account on the site" (EK NSS 2017, p. 8).

In the case of my research, however, access to the monitored pages is not restricted exclusively to registered users—individual profiles can be searched for and viewed through a web browser without the need to log in to Facebook.

The post's availability is closely related to the nature of the profile. In my sample, none of the monitored profiles represent private individuals or other types of profiles that restrict their accessibility. According to the information on the respective pages, these profiles belong to non-governmental organizations—civil associations (*Ethos*, *Spoločnosť Prometheus*) and online communities (*Ateisti.sk*, *Irreligiousness*, *Podporujem odluku cirkví od štátu*, *Predajte Vatikán a nakŕmte svet*). In terms of applying ethical research only to "public communities," these specific communities might initially appear "ambiguous." Another aspect that also needs to be considered is the purpose of the post:

> "If individuals deliberately share information on the internet, this information can be considered publicly accessible unless existing legal regulations, data protection policies, and the terms of use of the specific internet portal declare that it is private information" (EK NSS 2017, p. 8).

When analyzing the content (along with their implied purpose), it becomes evident that these communities can also be considered public (if we do not take into account the availability of the posts). The *Ateisti.sk* profile serves simply as the Facebook equivalent of the website ateisti.sk, which is also publicly accessible. Additionally, the profile has created a private Facebook group with a different character of posts, access to which requires administrator approval—this group, in accordance with the ethical principles outlined above, is not included in my research. Another profile, *Podporujem odluku cirkví od štátu*, can also be considered public since it is primarily focused on civic and political activism, for which public reach is essential. The profile *Predajte Vatikán a nakŕmte svet* already indicates its appeal on religious representatives by its name, from which we can infer the intention to spread its posts, with content nearly identical to the earlier mentioned profiles, as administrators mostly just share posts from other listed profiles. The *Irreligiousness* profile, although it mainly creates its own content, similarly to the previous examples, consists primarily of political comments and activist-oriented posts—this time, in the form of satire.

The political content of the posts and comments is therefore a significant criterion for labeling them as public. "Authors expect and want unknown people to follow them in order to express a political stance they want others to read" (Townsend & Wallace 2017, p. 205). However, some researchers question the criteria for what can be considered "public" in the online environment. As Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2017) point out, we cannot automatically assume that individuals who choose to be online or publish content online consciously accept that their activities will be considered public. This stance raises an important question about whether "public" in everyday life can be directly equated to "public" on the internet (Eynon, Fry & Schroeder 2017, p. 39).

The boundaries between public and private spaces on the internet constitute a complex and often ambiguous issue in research ethics. Although various codes of ethics attempt

to clearly define the public and private online spaces, when working with data, we must also consider other ethical aspects, such as the fundamental principle of non-harm (AAA 2009), which I will address later. It is important to note that while internet users are generally aware that the content they share may be globally accessible (except in cases where they themselves restrict the privacy settings of the posted content to selected users), there is a problem here that can be likened to that of physical public spaces. If we imagine any physical public space (e.g., a street, a store, a workplace, etc.), the "participant" is aware that they are in a public space, but without their consent, it is not permissible to capture or spread their image. At first glance, online activity might appear to be a similar situation. However, the key difference lies in the fact that internet users actively decide that the content will be made public, and by posting it, they essentially give permission for it to be captured and to have a static online presence. One could argue that, just as an individual in the physical world would consent to having a photograph taken, they do the same by sharing content on the internet. Even so, it remains questionable to what extent the internet and physical public space can truly be compared. The specificity of the internet as a medium lies in its ability to capture and store information, which radically changes the dynamics of user participation and the subsequent use of this data.

Anonymization

From the perspective of public and private content labeling, the responses from followers are problematic. According to the legislation and the definitions of the public online space, comments on individual posts are also considered public. An individual is aware that their comment will be visible to all users (ultimately, if they do not wish their comment to be visible, they have the option to change the privacy settings of their post). Additionally, the primary purpose of commenting on public posts is to share one's opinion, which, in essence, means sharing it with the public. From this perspective, comments can be handled freely during research; however, it is necessary to consider other ethical aspects of the research as well, such as the principle of non-harm. A significant portion of comments addresses sensitive topics, and a large number of comments are negative or hateful. For this reason, it is crucial to ensure the anonymization of commenters. This approach helps minimize risks and ensures that the research does not harm the communities or individuals being studied.

Although some researchers argue that scholars may directly quote public posts, provided they remove names or other personal details leading to the identification of the author (Townsend & Wallace 2017, p. 205), simply removing such data is not sufficient for this purpose. One of the key practices for protecting respondents' identities in this case is not to quote comments literally but to use the paraphrasing method, which involves rewording the original text so that the author of the comment cannot be traced back—even a short excerpt of the original text can allow for retroactive identification of the author (Huang, Cadwell & Sasamoto 2023, p. 169). When paraphrasing, several principles must be followed. First and foremost, it is essential to ensure that the paraphrases accurately reflect the original context and meaning. Paraphrasing should not distort or alter the author's original ideas, even when attempting to simplify the text. Additionally, sensitivity to the topic must be considered, and care should be taken to avoid using formulations that could provoke further controversies or be interpreted as judgmental or biased.

Just as with public comments on social networks, anonymization is a key aspect of protecting respondents in personal interviews as well. It is therefore crucial to ensure the thorough protection of their identities and not disclose any potential identifying/personal information such as names, addresses, or other specific details that could lead to the identification of the respondent. Special attention must also be paid to the technical aspects of data protection. For example, in the context of my research, interview recordings will be securely stored in an encrypted format after transcription using Sonix software and then deleted after processing the relevant data. Transcripts will not contain direct identifying information, and each respondent will be assigned an anonymous code that cannot be retroactively linked to their identity. As other researchers recommend, it is advisable to use an alternative identification system that separates identification keys from the data file itself (AoIR 2019, p. 10).

Informed Consent and Managing Relationships in Online Research

When preparing my research, I considered the question of whether to contact the administrators of the monitored profiles and inform them of my intention to monitor their content and subsequently obtain their informed consent, or perhaps ask them to publish a post about the ongoing research. Such notification could contribute to the transparency of the research and help build trust with the community. On the other hand, I was aware that this step could influence the natural behavior of the administrators and other users, especially when commenting on sensitive or controversial topics, the capture of which is crucial for the research. Therefore, I decided not to inform the

administrators and to conduct this phase exclusively by employing the method of passive observation or covert research.

> "Covert research is research that is conducted without obtaining informed consent from the participants of the research." (EK NSS 2017, p. 15).

Although this research method is somewhat controversial in traditional ethnographic studies, in the case of online environments—and especially with the vast amount of publicly available online data—it is ultimately necessary. Since my research does not only analyze posts published exclusively by the administrators of selected profiles but also comments on these posts, obtaining informed consent from all involved users would be practically unfeasible. In research ethics, it is crucial in this case to focus primarily on the thorough protection of the obtained data, especially the anonymization of users (AoIR 2020, p. 10; Hair, Akdeveliogli & Clark 2022, p. 10). Moreover, obtaining informed consent in the online environment could increase the risk of identifying participants. In such cases, it is recommended to combine a non-intervention strategy with responsible data management (Huang, Cadwell & Sasamoto 2023, p. 169).

On the other hand, the NSS ethical code addresses the issue of obtaining informed consent in online research as follows:

> "If the researcher uses the internet as a means of data collection containing personal data of participants in the research (even if the researcher designates the internet site

> or portal as a public space), they must ensure that they obtain informed consent from them." (EK NSS 2017, p. 8).

At first glance, it might seem that obtaining informed consent is necessary even in public spaces. However, a crucial part is the mention of personal data—this is not part of the data I collect or, if so, is further anonymized.

> "In general, researchers are allowed to freely handle material from open forums without the need for consent from the participating parties. This must be balanced with the requirement to respect the privacy of the individual." (Jakubcová 2018, p. 24).

The issue of obtaining informed consent can be viewed through the lens of the earlier distinction between "private" and "public" spaces. Public forums are generally perceived and recognized by users as "public spaces." The content shared on these platforms is typically intended for public consumption, and participants are aware that their posts are visible to a wide audience. This means that such posts can be considered public acts, and working with them does not require informed consent from the authors. However, researchers are obligated to take appropriate measures to prevent the personal identification of individuals and minimize the risk of harm (Rodham & Gavin 2006, p. 94).

The choice of the non-participatory observation method also influenced the timing of the distribution of the questionnaire. During the year-long monitoring of the pages, I was aware that releasing the questionnaire in Facebook groups could raise questions from administrators and users regarding the research, which could lead to the disclosure of research methods. This information could subsequently influence their natural interactions, reducing the authenticity of the data collected. For this reason, I decided to distribute the questionnaire only after the monitoring phase and data collection had been completed.

However, I did require informed consent from the respondents who completed the questionnaire. Along with basic information about the research, the consent form was included at the end of the questionnaire, and the confirmation of consent preceded the submission of the completed form. In the next research phase, which involves in-depth individual interviews, obtaining informed consent will also be essential. A common practice in ethnography is to obtain written consent that documents the respondents' conscious decision to participate in the research (Hair, Akdeveliogli & Clark 2022, p. 10). This step is crucial to ensure their awareness of the purpose and use of the collected data. At the same time, it allows respondents to explicitly agree to participate in the research, thereby reducing the risk of ethical issues related to their participation. In my research, I decided to use this form of informed consent for the interviews.

Sensitive Topics

In most types of advice focused on effective communication and building interpersonal relationships, themes that may result in conflict, misunderstanding, or discomfort are often emphasized. These so-called communication taboos primarily include religion, politics, and issues related to human rights, which are considered deeply personal matters in most cultural contexts. These

three areas are also the main sources of conflict, as they are regarded as questions of morality and values. My research, which primarily focuses on these three sensitive topics, finds itself in a particularly vulnerable position when it comes to implementing ethical design. However, I cannot avoid them programmatically, because non-believers in Slovakia, whose online self-presentation is the main subject of the study, produce content related almost exclusively to these three thematic areas on social media. These themes serve as the figurative communication axes or pillars of online communication, or online presentation, of non-believers active in the online environment. One of my research questions is to explore whether these three thematic areas are also dominant in the offline world. The data obtained from the online environment will thus be confronted and integrated with the "offline" world through personal interviews and questionnaires. Therefore, I cannot avoid situations in which it will be necessary to ask respondents relatively sensitive and delicate questions regarding unbelief, political and human rights views, and personal morality.

In the case of the questionnaire, this was not a significant problem. The questionnaire was anonymous and distributed exclusively online. For questions deemed sensitive, the note "Answer only if you are comfortable with it" was provided in parentheses. This approach allowed respondents to answer questions within their comfort zones.

The third research phase will involve traditional ethnographic interviews based on personal meetings with informants, as well as online interviews. The decision to include "online chat interviews" in the research methods was motivated by several factors. The research focuses on the online environment, and therefore it is methodologically appropriate to use the internet as a tool for data collection in the final phase as well. This also allows for the comparison of online and "offline" responses from respondents. The second reason relates to the ethical aspects of dealing with sensitive topics in the research. It is essential to provide respondents with the option to address sensitive issues without the need for a face-to-face meeting with the researcher, which could be uncomfortable for some participants. The online form of communication thus offers respondents a higher degree of anonymity and privacy, which can reduce concerns about being judged and encourage openness.

K. Rodham and J. Gavin highlight the advantages of asynchronous communication. In addition to allowing participants to respond at times that suit them, this type of communication alleviates the pressure of immediate responses. This enables participants to direct their cognitive resources more toward the content of the conversation rather than managing the conversation itself. Such an approach enhances the reflexivity of participants, as it provides them with time to think more carefully about the questions and express their opinions (Rodham & Gavin 2006, p. 93). This way, the authenticity of the responses increases, which is particularly important when exploring sensitive topics that might provoke emotional reactions or social pressure, especially in a face-to-face interview. Another significant advantage of asynchronous communication is its potential to reduce respondents' concerns about judgment. The anonymity provided by the online environment reduces the social pressure that could influence the honesty of their responses, allowing participants to express their opinions and feelings more freely. Online forms of communication create space for expressing an authentic "self," which can be constrained by social norms and concerns about judgment in face-to-face interactions (Rodham & Gavin 2006, p. 95).

This aspect is particularly relevant when studying sensitive topics that may require a high level of self-disclosure. Reducing concerns about public judgment is a key factor that encourages honesty and openness in respondents.

Protection of the Researcher

When conducting research, it is essential to ensure protection not only of the respondents but also of the researchers themselves. This need arises from the nature of the topics being studied and the interactions with respondents, which can be challenging, especially when respondents hold differing opinions or value positions. The researcher may encounter distrust, negative reactions, or even the risk of personal harm (AoIR 2019, p. 11). In this context, it is important to take measures that minimize potential conflicts and protect the researcher throughout the research process.

Although I did not need to address this issue during the phase of online unobtrusive observation, it was necessary to consider how to post the questionnaire in terms of my privacy in the selected groups before distribution. I ultimately chose the option of an anonymous post. This way, my identity remained hidden, and users could not review my profile to gain information about my political or value positions. The presence of photos with religious motifs, although resulting from my visits to historical sites, could also create a false impression of my religious affiliation and lead to misunderstandings. This could raise doubts about my neutrality among some respondents, increasing their distrust of the research and reducing their willingness to participate. These factors could potentially lead to online attacks or hostile reactions.

My contact information in the form of a personal institutional email (for any questions or expressing interest in participating in the next phase of the research) was accessible only at the end of the questionnaire. This theoretically could have allowed respondents to identify me on Facebook, but given the length of the questionnaire, which took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete, it can be assumed that it was filled out primarily by individuals with a genuine interest in the research topic. This suggests that respondents demonstrated a willingness to cooperate and respect for the research process, which also minimized the risk of unethical or inappropriate behavior from participants.

In the third research phase, which will involve personal interviews, it will be necessary to contact potential respondents through my Facebook profile. At this stage, the challenge of respondents potentially attempting to verify my identity will arise again. Therefore, it will be necessary to consider measures such as restricting access to certain parts of my profile, thereby minimizing the risk of misinterpretations. I am also considering creating an institutional project profile specifically for research purposes, which could enhance the credibility of communication with respondents and reduce personal risk. Given the nature of the topics being studied, it is also crucial that all interviews take place exclusively in public places. This approach reduces the risk of physical harm and provides a safe environment for data collection.

Conclusion

Research ethics is a fundamental pillar of scientific inquiry. However, it extends beyond merely adhering to formal rules and codes of conduct (see, e.g., Zachar

Podolinská 2024a, b). It is essential to acknowledge that every research project involves certain compromises and complex negotiations, not only regarding the design of research ethics but also their practical implementation. As T. Zachar Podolinská states:

> "Given the multi-actor, multi-level nature of the process of constituting ethical systems and procedures, in which the stakeholders are not inherently in a symmetric starting position and tend to protect their particular interests, ethical procedures are largely a listening dialogue, assertive communication, and negotiation leading to a consensus in good faith aimed at protecting interests and preventing possible harm to all parties" (2024a, p. 130).

On the other hand, we must acknowledge that a perfectly "ethically correct" research study— one that would not in any way, at any point, and at any phase of the research (not only during data collection but throughout their entire lifecycle) infringe upon the comfort zone of respondents, studied groups, or researchers, or interact with the ethical, administrative, or even legal boundaries and definitions of the participating institutions or the state—is likely very difficult, if not impossible, to carry out. In my case, strict adherence to the law could involve the obligation to report expressions of hate or the approval of criminal acts (as defined by Article 338 of the Criminal Code of the Slovak Republic on the approval of criminal acts and incitement to hatred). In the online environment, this could particularly apply to the many comments with such content. While

the law may impose certain obligations, scientific practice must adhere to principles of confidentiality and an ethical approach to "research subjects." Ultimately, research ethics lies in the ongoing dialogue between the researcher and their personal and scientific moral compass –seeking a careful balance between respecting the integrity and dignity of the subjects under study, applicable legal norms, and the scientific integrity of the researcher themselves.

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IV. LOOKING BACK. THE CHALLENGES OF ETHICAL NORMS: BETWEEN EAST AND WEST, PAST AND PRESENT

Elena Marushiakova

The primary motivation for writing this chapter is to contribute to the discussion on ethical challenges within our disciplines—Ethnology and Social Anthropology—which, although distinct, are closely related in many ways (Bitušíková 2017, pp. 211–229). Additionally, I aim to share my firsthand experience conducting ethnographic and historical research in the field of Romani studies across two different periods: the era of communist rule and the present day. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work in two culturally and historically distinct regions, each with its own traditions and contemporary academic contexts—in the East (former Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria) and in the West (Germany and the United Kingdom). This has allowed me to gain an "outsider's" perspective in analyzing and reflecting on these differences. It is essential to emphasize that this chapter is not a conventional academic study, but rather a personal account and reflection on my experiences and insights related to the topic. I hope this perspective will shed light on the challenges and dilemmas that scholars from our region have faced and continue to face.

The topic of ethics in ethnological and anthropological research has become central to both disciplines. This is hardly surprising, given that ethnographic fieldwork—a fundamental research method in both fields—inevitably involves working directly with people. Unlike many other scientific disciplines, where ethical considerations may take entirely different forms, ethnology and anthropology must continually navigate the complexities of human interactions. A vast body of literature has been dedicated to this issue, including monographs, studies, and articles—sometimes entire works, sometimes individual sections. The field has now reached a stage where researchers are no longer merely outlining general ethical principles; instead, they are delving

into specific ethical questions related to particular research topics that extend beyond standard guidelines (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds. 2024; Zachar Podolinská 2024).

In recent years, it has become nearly unimaginable for academic work to exclude a section on ethical considerations. Likewise, almost every research grant application now mandates a detailed ethical review. In summary, by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, ethical requirements for research have grown increasingly stringent and complex. Professional associations, national and international institutions, universities, and research institutes have established their own ethics committees, adopted ethical codes, and implemented sets of ethical guidelines. This has resulted in the creation of an entire bureaucratic framework governing research ethics. However, these requirements have at times become so intricate that they can render fieldwork extremely challenging to conduct, or, in some cases, practically impossible—at least for researchers who wish to adhere to the letter of the law strictly.

The increasing complexity and ongoing expansion of ethical guidelines have undoubtedly led to greater sensitivity and accountability among researchers. However, they have also created an unintended countereffect: a growing permissive attitude toward these rules. In many cases, compliance with ethical requirements has become merely a formal declaration—a necessary checkbox to satisfy grant-giving institutions, ethics review boards, or journal editors, rather than a truly meaningful commitment.

Another key consequence of the growing emphasis on research ethics is its impact on the research subjects themselves. Information about ethical guidelines has reached many communities and groups being studied, making them increasingly aware of their rights and more

demanding in their interactions with researchers. While some of these demands are entirely justified, others may be more questionable. Some research participants now impose their own conditions before agreeing to provide information or collaborate with researchers. In extreme cases, bizarre situations have arisen where interlocutors demand financial compensation in exchange for granting consent to participate in a study. Consequently, the relationship between researcher and informant does not position them as equal bearers and disseminators of knowledge; instead, it transforms into a relationship between patron and client, or buyer and seller. According to a statement made in an informal conversation by our colleague from Leipzig, Udo Mischek, who has studied the economic activities of Gypsies in Istanbul, such relations have led to the emergence of a new source of income, which he termed "the anthropologist as a resource." Moreover, to justify the payments they receive, some interlocutors provide irrelevant or entirely fabricated data tailored to what they believe the researcher expects to hear.

Overall, contemporary conditions place researchers in a complex situation that requires them to navigate the demands of ethical codes, the expectations of informants and representatives from various communities or groups, imposed requests for political correctness, and the academic obligation to uphold honesty and responsibility—ensuring that science is neither profaned nor defiled (the third commandment from Sternberg's Decalogue[1]). In the pursuit of equality and the enhancement of scientific ethics, particularly in Romani studies, certain extreme measures have been taken, raising numerous questions—

1 About Sternberg's Decalogue, see below and also in Zachar Podolinská 2024, pp. 35–37.

including ethical ones—that sometimes border on the absurd. Today, an increasing number of scholars emphasize that the current situation allows certain Roma authors to categorize academics within the field of Romani studies based on their ethnic background. This has raised questions about the rights of non-Roma researchers, based on the assumption that they are incapable of genuinely feeling and understanding the specificities of the Roma community, to conduct scientific research on Roma topics (Paszko 2024, p. 250). A striking example of this trend is the growing insistence that any research project regarding Roma must be led by scholars of Roma origin or that any author writing on Roma topics must include Roma as co-authors (Matache 2016–2017). This is often accompanied by implicit (and at times explicit) accusations directed at non-Roma researchers of exoticizing the Roma or adopting a colonial approach toward them. In general, non-Roma researchers tend to refrain from responding to such accusations for various reasons. Perhaps the only notable exception in this regard is the brilliant and ironically styled article by Adam Bartosz, tellingly titled *The Confession of a (Former?) Colonizer* (Bartosz 2023).

In this context, numerous colleagues—albeit not publicly—have voiced concerns about the at times assertive and even confrontational approach adopted by certain Roma authors, including those active within academic contexts. From my perspective, however, the central moral and ethical issue lies elsewhere: namely, in the presence of a considerable number of non-Roma researchers who, for various reasons, not only endorse and reproduce this approach, but—as Roma academic Huseyin Kyuchuk (formerly Hristo Kyuchukov) aptly notes—"aspire to be more Roma than the Roma themselves, and to become the mothers and fathers of the

Roma." In practice, this translates into attempts to control and steer the field of Romani studies (and, more broadly, the Roma movement) on behalf of the Roma. In my view, such a position is ethically untenable in relation to the community with which the researcher is engaged.

At the same time, the question of developing a Roma academic school—that is, a new generation of Roma scholars engaged in Romani studies—is of paramount importance. The urgency of this task is, in my view, indisputable. Over the years, I have devoted considerable time and effort to supporting this process by encouraging and motivating young Roma (and not only young Roma) to pursue academic careers, and by mentoring them, both formally and informally, along this path. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that this development should not proceed through the dichotomization of authors into Roma and non-Roma categories, and particularly not through antagonistic positioning between them.

To date, I have served as an academic mentor to several Roma, including four women of Roma background (with diverse identities), each of whom was working on her doctoral dissertation. In each of these cases, the first question I posed was: "How would you like me to relate to you in our collaboration—as I do with all other doctoral students, or in a different, more specific way?" In all four cases, the response was unequivocal: "As with everyone else—without any distinction."

In recent years, the so-called collaborative approach—often referred to as *reciprocal ethnography* or *friendship ethnography* (Gay y Blasco 2019)—has gained increasing prominence within academic discourse. One notable outcome of this methodological shift is the growing practice of including Roma individuals as co-authors in scholarly

publications. However, this development raises important questions regarding the extent to which such practices facilitate genuine inclusion and equal participation of Roma within the academic sphere.

During my tenure at a university in the United Kingdom, I observed a notable example: an Honorary Master's degree was awarded to a "Gitana," a longstanding "co-author" of one of my colleagues. A formal ceremony marked the occasion—the recipient delivered a public speech, received a diploma, and was visibly moved by the recognition. However, shortly after, she returned to her community in a marginalized neighborhood in Madrid. Concurrently, a young Roma scholar from Bulgaria was working at the same university as my research assistant. He had completed his higher education, successfully defended a doctoral dissertation in the UK, and published a monograph, without co-authorship, through a reputable international academic press. These two cases illustrate contrasting models of Roma engagement with the academic world. It remains an open question as to which of these trajectories offers more sustainable and equitable opportunities for the academic advancement of young Roma scholars.

Speaking personally, especially given my own highly mixed background (and even more so that of my children and grandchildren), I fundamentally reject the notion that individuals should be judged based on their origin or identity. Accordingly, I oppose the division of science and the assessment of scholarly achievements along ethnic lines. The first historical analogy that comes to mind in this context is the distinction drawn between "Aryan physics" and "Jewish physics" in Nazi Germany. For this reason, when selecting collaborators for various research or publishing projects, the principal (and indeed sole) criterion applied has always been professional competence. Naturally, I have consistently welcomed the participation of Roma among these collaborators, but not at the expense of upholding professional standards. In the most recent large-scale research project I directed, an ERC-funded initiative titled *RomaInterbellum: Roma Civic Emancipation between the Two World Wars*, more than two dozen researchers from various countries were involved in different capacities, with over one-third of them being of Roma origin. Nevertheless, I have never described the project as a "collaborative" initiative with Roma participation. The Roma researchers involved were selected based on their qualifications and capabilities. This approach spared me the kind of uncomfortable situation recently faced by colleagues in Romania, who emphasized collaboration with the Roma community in justifying their research project, yet, in practice, carried it out without any meaningful Roma involvement. Particularly telling, in my view, was the response from Roma voiced on social media following the publication of the project's findings:

> "We are not opposed to non-Roma writing about Roma, and we value the quality of the results achieved. What we object to is the practice of securing project funding by claiming Roma participation that, in reality, does not take place."

Alongside the increasing scrutiny and tightening of ethical guidelines—or perhaps due to them—the late 20th and early 21st century anthropology has been marked by a series of professional scandals. Some of these remain known only within closed academic circles, impacting

only those directly involved, while others attract broader public attention. Such incidents have not only adversely affected the credibility of the discipline itself but also the reputations of scholars within the field. Furthermore, they have weakened the very ethical principles, regulations, and oversight bodies intended to ensure academic integrity. Cases of academic misconduct, including the abuse of scholarly positions, have become more common—or perhaps more widely exposed. Researchers are increasingly found to violate ethical and societal moral standards, sometimes manipulating or even fabricating field data while operating under the guise of officially approved ethical clearances. Two of the most infamous scandals highlight this issue. The first involves Napoleon Chagnon's research on the Yanomami people, wherein he falsely claimed that they lived in a "state of chronic warfare." His misrepresentation had severe consequences for the community itself and was even used to justify certain attitudes toward them (for details, see Zachar Podolinská 2024, pp. 89–91). The second case concerns M. M. G. Bax, whose name has become synonymous with academic fraud. His works on the massacres at the pilgrimage center of Medjugorje during the Bosnian War (1992-1995) were later revealed to be entirely fabricated (Zachar Podolinská 2024, pp. 91–93). The example of Mart Bax demonstrates that ethical regulations and oversight mechanisms, rather than preventing misconduct, can sometimes enable the direct falsification and fabrication of data in the pursuit of academic prestige. These and other examples of scientific misconduct emphasize a critical issue: even the strictest ethical guidelines and ongoing oversight cannot fully ensure responsible and ethical research.

Considering the current situation in our academic field, I find it entirely justified and logical to reflect on my personal memories and look back at a previous era—one in which science operated without formal ethical codes, yet ethical abuses were not prevalent. This does not imply that our disciplines were free from misuse at the time—perhaps such abuses were even more widespread—but they were of a completely different nature. Their causes lay outside the academic sphere itself, as it was directly subordinated to the authorities of the prevailing socio-political system. However, this does not absolve individual scholars of responsibility for the outcomes of their research.

A reasonable question arises in this context: Are these reflections merely an idealized recollection of youth, subtly edited by the subconscious into a nostalgic vision of "the good old days?" If so, to what extent are they relevant and instructive for the present? Answering this question is difficult, not least because the ethical requirements of the socialist era—when ethnology and anthropology developed in distinct ways on both sides of the Iron Curtain—remain largely unexplored. Apart from what is written in Tatiana Zachar Podolinská's book on Ethical Challenges in Ethnology and Anthropology about Slovakia (Zachar Podolinská 2024), we know almost nothing about how ethical guidelines functioned in other countries of the socialist bloc or whether such rules existed at all. My memories of this period primarily concern the situation in Bulgaria; however, they are also relevant to other countries within the so-called socialist bloc, where scientific cooperation and mutual influences were notably strong. From what I recall, during my university studies, there were no specialized lectures, exercises, or seminars dedicated to research ethics. Socialist ethnography (as ethnology was called at the time, considered equivalent to Western anthropology) seemingly did not perceive the need for a formally prepared and institutionalized ethical code.

When conducting ethnographic field research—whether by students, doctoral candidates, or researchers—there was no requirement to fill out forms or obtain any kind of ethical approval from academic institutions. In other words, adherence to ethical standards in research was left entirely to individual researchers and was not subject to formal oversight. The only thing that was monitored was the final research output, which is an entirely different matter. This does not mean, however, that ethical norms were totally absent during socialism. While there were no formal ethical codes, certain ethical principles nevertheless guided ethnographers in their work—similar to how physicians adhered to the Hippocratic Oath. For our generation, the equivalent of such an oath was the so-called *Ten Commandments of the Ethnographer*, authored by Russian and Soviet ethnographer Lev Sternberg. I no longer remember in which lecture or recommended book I first encountered these principles. However, in recent conversations with some of my former doctoral students, I discovered that they, too, still remember and cite them today. This suggests that these commandments have been widely accepted and practiced over the years. Since Tatiana Podolinská lists and analyses these "commandments" from an ethical perspective, there is no need to repeat them here; instead, I refer the reader to her book (Zachar Podolinská 2024).

During a recent research visit to the Russian Federation (in the summer of 2025), I took a particular interest in the ethical frameworks guiding scholarly practice in this multiethnic context today. It became clear that, as in earlier periods, scientific ethics in Russia is not governed by formalized codes or institutionalized norms. Instead, it continues to rely on the principle of individual moral responsibility, whereby the scholar is expected to be guided by personal conscience rather than externally imposed rules. Of particular importance is the ongoing relevance of Sternberg's Decalogue, which remains a familiar reference point and is still incorporated into university curricula. In certain institutions—most notably at the University of Yekaterinburg—students independently organise oath-taking ceremonies based on the Decalogue. These are seen as a form of initiation ritual, symbolising entry into the professional community of ethnologists and anthropologists.

Let me now return to my reminiscences. The profession of an ethnographer, as it was viewed at that time, required—strange as it may seem in today's world—qualities that society considered highly moral and ethical. This is why both lectures and the mandatory and recommended academic or popular science literature often showcased examples of dedicated scholars in ethnography. These researchers frequently sacrificed comfort, stability, and a well-ordered life in their pursuit of uncovering scientific mysteries and achieving significant academic results. I recall a book recommended to students, written by Soviet ethnographer Rudolf Its, who described the responsibilities of ethnographers as follows:

> "To study the history and way of life of other peoples so that we may appreciate human creativity and respect it, regardless of skin color or race; to learn about different customs, rituals, and beliefs, another language, and other legends; to always be on the road, to search, to discover new friends every day—this is our enviable fate. Our field is one of the most humane. Our research is conducted by people and for people.

> Encounters along the ethnographic path allow us to witness images born from the life and imagination of another people in a world that, at first glance, seems so familiar" (Its 1977, p. 11)

The idea of drafting formal ethical guidelines for conducting research during socialism seemed unnecessary and completely redundant. From a formal perspective, the main reason special ethical norms and rules were considered unnecessary was that, despite the institutional practice of archiving field materials—including details like the name, gender, age, and place of residence of informants—this information was not presented in published works. Paradoxically, the primary reason for the perceived lack of need for specific ethical research standards stemmed mainly from the methodological foundations. Although Eastern ethnography and Western anthropology were theoretically regarded as the same discipline under different names, little attention was given to the reality that significant and fundamental differences existed between them. Eastern European ethnography concentrated on various types of ethnic communities, while Western anthropology focused on individuals within those communities. In practice, ethnography adhered to the principle of "saturation sampling"—even though it was neither explicitly formulated nor defined at the time—by emphasizing what was typical for a given community while overlooking individual cases. In contrast, Western anthropology adopted the opposite approach, using personal cases as the foundation for developing theories about broader social patterns. Consequently, in the first approach, scholarly texts provided generalized information on a given topic—a broad, depersonalized picture rather than its individual dimensions. This, in turn, protected informants from exposure to details that could harm or discredit them, ensuring that no ethical norms were violated.

Transitioning to the realm of personal narrative, I will briefly recount my initial encounters with ethical issues, as perceived by my Western colleagues, following the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Iron Curtain that divided East and West. More specifically, I will discuss the mutual misunderstandings, and at times both covert and overt rejections, of the very nature of these issues.

In this context, I benefit from being shaped as a scholar in the East while also spending a significant portion of my life and career in the West and frequently collaborating closely with Western colleagues on various projects. This dual perspective enables me to examine these issues from different angles and with a certain degree of distance.

My first encounter with the requirements of ethical review boards abroad occurred in the 1990s when a young colleague from a U.S. university approached me for assistance. She needed to find a Roma organization willing to sign a formal permission letter for her research on Roma communities, which she had to submit to her university. Without such a document, she would not receive ethical clearance and, consequently, would be unable to travel or conduct her research. At that time, this seemed utterly absurd to me—more like a bad joke than a genuine requirement. There were hundreds of Roma organizations in Bulgaria, and I could not understand why, or on what basis, one of them— chosen at random—should have the authority to represent all Roma in Bulgaria and decide who could or could not speak to them and write about them. I had already encountered a similar system of research restrictions during

Bulgaria's so-called "Revival Process"—the forced renaming of Turkish and Roma Muslims with "Bulgarian" names in 1984-1985. During that period, publishing texts on Roma-related topics was effectively not allowed (even though there was no explicit written ban), with vague justifications like "it might be misinterpreted" or "now is not the right time." However, even then, no one had forbidden me from meeting with Roma, speaking with them, or conducting field research.

The second case, perhaps even more intriguing, involved a PhD student from Canada who contacted me for consultation. In her email, she assured me that my answers to her questions would be anonymized and secured in a metal box, with only one authorized person possessing the key—to ensure that no one else could access them. At that time, I could not quite comprehend why the information needed to be collected only to be locked away and rendered inaccessible. It was only later that I realized the PhD student was treating me as an informant whose name had to be anonymized and whose statements needed to be stored securely, beyond anyone's reach. In fact, my colleagues' and my understanding at that time—that information is gathered to be used—is one of the reasons why, to this day, countries in Eastern Europe maintain archives of field materials that are open to the public—a practice unimaginable in the West.

I also faced challenges while participating in international academic conferences, where my Western colleagues occasionally questioned me about ethical considerations that I found absurd. For instance, after my presentation on the Plague Festival in Vidin during the Gypsy Lore Society conference in Leiden in 1995, where I also screened a documentary filmed during the festival, I was asked during the discussion whether the Roma people were aware they were being filmed and if they had consented to the footage being shown to the public. Similarly, at another Gypsy Lore Society conference, where I discussed Roma weddings in Ukraine, I explained how these weddings were recorded on videotapes and shared among a wide circle of relatives and friends, who often watched and discussed them repeatedly. I even demonstrated examples of these recordings. Once again, I was asked whether our informants understood the purpose of our research and whether we had their permission to use and present these recordings. To me, the answers to these questions were obvious. The Roma people in Vidin could clearly see the cameras and responded to my questions in front of the camera, so it was unclear from whom I was supposed to seek permission, given that thousands of Roma actively participated in the festival. As for the wedding tapes, they were copied and gifted to us by our informants. This, in my view, was clear evidence that the Roma knew what we were doing and why. It had never occurred to me that I needed to obtain written informed consent from them.

The requirement to obtain written informed consent from my interlocutors during field research seems entirely logical and justified in theory. However, implementing this requirement in practice is far from straightforward. There are many situations where it is practically impossible. In many situations, particularly during brief encounters and conversations, there simply is no time for such explanations. I cannot stop a Roma woman begging on the street and begin by explaining that I am not a Roma woman but would like to ask her a few questions, and that she must provide her personal details and sign a document... (In this situation, she would likely refuse to talk to me). Or, for example, consider a fieldwork encounter in Crimea. Walking past a market, I noticed a Roma man lingering near the entrance. I

casually greeted him and asked (in Romani language) what he was doing. He responded just as casually: "What can I do? Gold, currency—Roma business. I got out of prison yesterday, so I have to work." What was I supposed to do at that moment? Stop, explain who I am, ask for his name, fill out a consent form, and request his signature? Anyone can predict the outcome of such an attempt to adhere strictly to ethical guidelines. Does the absence of a signed consent document in this case mean that I should never write about this encounter? Or about the fact that some Roma sustain themselves through illicit activities—something no one in their position would ever agree to have documented?

Here, we confront a serious issue that is not reflected in existing ethical guidelines but is very much present in practice. The undeniable reality is that, throughout the world, there are individuals whose behavior is considered deviant in certain societies, who do not adhere to legal and administrative norms, and Roma people cannot be an exception.

When I briefly mentioned such cases in one of my publications, I faced a surge of accusations and labels—interestingly, all from non-Roma authors eager to publicly showcase their civic engagement with the Roma cause. What does this approach imply? That, in the name of misguided political correctness, we should avoid discussing issues that everyone knows? In Bulgaria, for instance, even foreign travelers passing through the highways notice Roma women involved in prostitution. And now we should not even mention it.

Other authors have likely found themselves—or are afraid of discovering themselves—in a similarly uncomfortable position. Consequently, such topics are infrequently written about, illustrating a clear case of

self-censorship. Recently, this has also become a matter of external censorship. Just now, when I attempted to use Grammarly for spellchecking this text, I received the following response:

> "Can't help with this text. Grammarly assistance is unavailable because the text may contain sensitive content."

As a side note, the Roma people—both activists and ordinary individuals—tend to approach this topic more thoughtfully in conversations. Most often, they believe that these issues *can* and *should* be discussed, but with care, providing explanations and ensuring that such discussions do not reinforce negative societal attitudes toward their community. One particularly intriguing recommendation I have received—more than once, in fact—is that I can and must write about these topics but should avoid revealing the "technology" behind them. For instance, I was advised not to disclose how Roma fortune tellers manage to "find" a small snake inside a broken egg, a practice mentioned multiple times in Romani studies literature. In my view, ethical considerations in such cases should not revolve around following predefined regulations; instead, they pertain to the researcher's personal professional—and fundamentally human—ethics. This is why there can be no universal rules or guidelines.

Speaking for myself, I have decided that there are certain topics I simply will not write about. One such instance was after a lengthy conversation with a Roma woman, a chance companion on a flight, who had been deported to Bulgaria from a Western country due to prostitution. Sometimes, however, the situation is much

more complex, making the decision significantly more challenging. For instance, a young Roma girl once presented me a videotape that contained her personal testimony about being kidnapped for marriage within her community—a practice used by some Roma groups in Bulgaria to arrange marriages. Yet, she managed to refuse the role of bride. She asked me to publicize her story so that other Roma girls would not have to endure the same experience. Remarkably, she succeeded in building a normal family life, albeit outside her community. More than twenty years have passed since then, but I still have not determined whether to write about this topic without anonymizing the woman.

My reluctance to discuss specific topics is based on valid reasons. Recently, a major scandal erupted among the Roma in an Eastern European country over a documentary film that focused on LGBTQ issues within their community. A well-known donor institution initiated, funded, and oversaw both the production of this film and a widespread promotional campaign supporting the LGBTQ movement among the Roma. This entire initiative resulted in extremely negative consequences for the Roma community in that country, including tragic outcomes for certain individuals. According to tradition, the so-called *Romani kris* (the Roma court) expels anyone suspected of homosexuality from the community. This ruling also applies to those who continue to associate with them, including close relatives. My Roma friends specifically asked me not to share further details about the case, as the community has declared the topic taboo.

There are many situations in which the requirement for informed consent is not only impractical but also seems absurd. As is well known, both ethnography and social anthropology rely heavily on participant observation as key research methods. When I am invited to a Roma wedding

with several hundred attendees, from whom am I supposed to obtain written informed consent—every single guest? Moreover, such observations are not always intentional; they can occur spontaneously. For example, if I am merely walking around and come across a Roma street musician and stop to listen for a while, does this mean that, without obtaining his informed consent, I should not be allowed to write about his repertoire? This repertoire includes songs that are publicly performed, heard by all passersby, and willingly shared with the entire "audience"—myself, as a researcher, included.

The concept of informed consent raises additional questions for me. First and foremost, do those who sign it truly understand what it entails? Explanations about locked metal boxes storing materials from conversations can confuse many people, particularly those with lower levels of social literacy. In theory, everything seems correct (and it generally is), but in practice, many who sign such consent forms have little to no chance of exercising their rights under them. I find it difficult to imagine, for instance, how a Roma woman from Karaganda could request a change to the information she has provided or withdraw it (even in today's globalized world). How would she know precisely whom to contact, what language to use, or who to complain to? Therefore, I understand my colleagues' perspective that viewing the acquisition of informed consent as a bureaucratic formality leads them to try to avoid it or at least simplify it, enabling them to carry out their research activities effectively.

These and other similar questions revealed to me the vast gap between us—scholars from Eastern Europe—and our colleagues from the West, a gap I later discussed in numerous conversations. My Western colleagues

often shared the significant challenges they faced when conducting fieldwork: frequent refusals to provide information, attempts at manipulation, imposed conditions, and the efforts required to earn the trust of informants who neither understood the purpose of their research nor saw any direct benefit from it. Ethically, these informants needed to be compensated in some reciprocal manner for their assistance to scholars.

Many of these challenges remain relevant today, but what once appeared unthinkable to me has now become a reality—not just in the West but also in Eastern European countries. Moreover, a growing number of anthropologists have begun to critically reflect on their own position as researchers in relation to the communities they study. Issues such as white supremacy, the power imbalance between scholars and informants, the obligation to give back and support the communities that allow researchers to work with (and for) them, the political engagement of scholars, and the need to empower studied communities have all come to the forefront of academic discussions (see, for example, Silverman 2018, pp. 76–98). Numerous scholarly works have addressed these and similar concerns, giving rise to entire theoretical schools—most notably, Critical Romani Studies. Ultimately, these discussions have led to the current push for "collaborative" or "friendship" anthropology, where informants are often recognized as co-authors of academic research (Gay y Blasco & Hernandez 2020; Gamella & Muntean 2024, p. 157; Boyer & Marcus 2021).

During the so-called socialist era, I never encountered such problems, nor did I have any reason to consider them. In my ethnographic research on Roma communities, my efforts to learn about their society and their *material, spiritual,* and *socio-normative culture*—the three categories

into which ethnographic research was then divided—were met with understanding, enthusiasm, and even gratitude. This was largely because studies on traditional culture and folklore were widely popular among the general population, frequently featured in newspapers, radio, television, newsreels, and documentary films. My Roma interlocutors were delighted that someone was finally paying attention to their ethnoculture and making an effort to understand and publicly represent it. In their eyes, this recognition granted them a sense of equality within society. Unlike my Western colleagues, who often struggled to gain access to the communities they studied, I was welcomed with open doors at any hour of the day or night. If there were ever complaints, they were not about my presence but rather questions like: "Why haven't you also come to us? Why aren't you writing about us as well?"

Moreover, in Bulgaria—particularly during the so-called "Revival Process"—such research was, to some extent, regarded as an act of heroic dissent. While I personally did not view it that way, the official state policy at the time denied the existence of ethnic communities of non-Bulgarian origin (with the exception of Armenians and Jews), especially the Roma. This further heightened the Roma's appreciation for the work of the few ethnographers who reached out to them. They viewed us, non-Roma scholars, as natural allies of their community.

However, many (though not all) Western colleagues found these specific aspects of the situation largely incomprehensible. Many viewed—and some still view—scholars from Eastern Europe as backward and uninformed about proper academic procedures. The established scientific traditions and achievements of the region were often dismissed or intentionally ignored, frequently labeled

as “Marxist,” “nationalist,” “essentialist”, or even “racist,” and today also “colonialist.”

Consequently, a “new, more enlightened approach”—informed by Western anthropology—was imposed in their place. To advance this agenda, numerous projects, summer schools, and postgraduate fellowships were organized, all aimed at educating and shaping a new generation of anthropologists free from the “burdens” of the communist past. It is no coincidence that, at the very first meeting of one such high-budget initiative—funded by the EU’s Marie Curie program and titled *Promoting Anthropology in Central and Eastern Europe* (FP6-2004-MOBILITY-2, Project ID 20702)—a key directive was established for those aspiring to become “real” anthropologists: to avoid contact with local scholars in the countries where they conducted their research.

In the context we are discussing, some Western scholars began to accuse their Eastern European colleagues of unprofessionalism and a shocking disregard for academic ethics. As early as 1992–1993, Canadian scholar David Scheffel published an article (in Czech and Russian) in which he somewhat biasedly accused Eastern European ethnographers of using outdated research methods, particularly concerning professional ethics. He claimed that their national associations did not develop ethical guidelines and that Western European notions of anthropologists’ special ethical responsibilities were perceived by them more as examples of liberal indulgence than as models worthy of emulation (Шеффель 1993, pp. 21–22). Scheffel’s numerous criticisms of his Eastern European colleagues are well-known and extensively discussed, including in Tatiana Zachar Podolinská’s recent book (2024). Therefore, we will not delve into them in detail here. However, it is

essential to note that while some of his concerns seem justified, many others do not. Furthermore, direct or indirect responses to several of his claims have already been presented in works published by Eastern Europeans. What stands out unpleasantly is that, despite expressing sympathy for Eastern European ethnologists, Scheffel explicitly emphasizes their *backwardness* from the very beginning of his article. Ultimately, he does not recognize anything in their work as worthy of emulation. Ironically, Scheffel’s own book on the Roma community in Svinia, Slovakia (Scheffel 2005), was later deemed unethical by many Roma activists and some Western Romani studies scholars, and this controversy prompted informal calls for action against the book.

Based on my observations, during the transition to democracy and a market economy, the initial reaction of Eastern European scholars to Western influences in the field of science was one of defeat. The prevailing belief was that, since socialism had been overcome by the capitalist West due to its backwardness, the science developed under communist rule must have been equally outdated. Many Eastern European scholars publicly expressed remorse, renouncing their past—especially those from ideologically driven institutions and disciplines, who quickly positioned themselves at the forefront of the fight against communism. In their eagerness to avoid being labeled as outdated, they tirelessly sought to align themselves with Western academic trends. In this context, a widespread renaming movement occurred across Eastern Europe: ethnographers began rebranding themselves as anthropologists. The term “anthropologist”—whether social or cultural—was seen as an automatic ticket to the camp of the victors, a sign of higher academic quality, enhanced social status, and scientific

prestige. This resulted in uncritical admiration and, often, a rather clumsy imitation of Western models.

One of the earliest examples of this attitude in Romani studies that I recall was a presentation by a Hungarian colleague at a Gypsy Lore Society conference in the 1990s. The speaker claimed that authentic scientific research on the Roma and genuine anthropology in Hungary only began with the arrival of Michael Stewart from the UK. Subsequently, the process of imposing Western models on Romani studies was further promoted by the Open Society Foundations, funded by George Soros. A special program was established to support Romani studies through the publication of books. As part of this initiative, a list of books about the Roma—exclusively by Western authors—was compiled for translation into Eastern European languages, supposedly to "enlighten" their less advanced colleagues from the East. The flagship example of "proper" Roma research on this list was *Bury Me Standing* by Isabel Fonseca (1995)—a book that, I must admit, despite my personal sympathy and friendly feelings toward the author, has very little to do with academic research. In this situation, it is unsurprising that this book was quickly translated into 22 languages. As a consultant for this program, I worked diligently to persuade decision-makers that the list should also feature works by Eastern European scholars with the necessary academic merits. However, despite all my efforts, I ultimately could not convince anyone.

Many elements of ethical guidelines, as formulated in Western universities, were adopted uncritically. Perhaps the easiest to implement was the rule of anonymizing informants and using pseudonyms for the locations where research was conducted. In my recollection, this also marked the first major clash between different academic traditions.

Many scholars, myself included, preferred to be seen as part of the "old school" rather than blindly accepting the requirement for mandatory anonymization of individuals and places in research. One of the most persistent issues is the ongoing anonymization of the settlements where anthropological studies occur. To me, this remains one of the most senseless dogmas of social anthropology—one that ultimately undermines the very purpose of the discipline. As far as I know, no other field of scientific knowledge systematically rejects the possibility of verifying and replicating research findings. On one hand, this practice erases all previous studies conducted in a given anonymized location, allowing researchers to present themselves as the "discoverers" of long-documented phenomena. On the other hand, it disrupts continuity—each subsequent researcher visiting the same place can create a new pseudonym and disregard all prior studies, essentially becoming the next person to "reinvent the wheel." The argument that anonymization shields informants from harmful consequences may have some merit in rare cases (in which scenario, anonymization is justified). However, the current trend is for such exceptions to transform into universal—and even mandatory—rules.

Additionally, there are instances where following the rule of anonymizing settlement names makes research completely impractical and nonsensical. Over the last ten to fifteen years, I have occasionally paused for brief conversations with Roma women (primarily from Romania) who beg on the streets of major cities and tourist spots in Western Europe. I ask just a few simple questions—where they come from, which Roma group they belong to, and so forth. At some point in the future, I may summarize the collected data and prepare a study that includes a map

regarding this specific form of Roma labor mobility and its development over the years. However, what would such a map look like if I were to anonymize the names of settlements in both Romania and Western Europe? What value would such a study have if this crucial information were obscured?

When it comes to the anonymization of individuals, it has, in practice, already been evident in ethnographic publications from Eastern Europe. The vast majority of these works have been written in a summarizing style without delving into individual details, except where folklore performers, masters of traditional crafts, and similar figures are explicitly introduced. This has never posed a problem. Of course, there are instances where informants explicitly request—for various reasons—that their names not be mentioned. Naturally, I have always respected such wishes, both in the past and in the present. However, issues arise when informants contributing to a scholarly work insist on having their names included in published books. This can be easily resolved by expressing gratitude in the preface or in a footnote.

However, the most significant problems arise when anonymization hinders the verification of published information—such as in the previously mentioned case with Bax.

From time to time, colleagues who insist on anonymization for ethical reasons seem unaware that it can take highly unethical forms. A few years ago, during an editorial board meeting of the *Romani Studies* journal, I had a heated debate over an article written by a young author (from Eastern Europe, no less). The article analyzed a case set in an anonymized country, in an anonymized settlement, within an anonymized Roma group, where an anonymized groom was unable to fulfill his marital duties on his wedding night. The text described customary ritual practices intended to prevent or remedy such a situation. I strongly opposed publishing the article in its current form because anyone familiar with the field—including members of the community described (after all, many Roma people today speak and read English and are interested in what is written about them)—could easily deduce which young man and which family were being referenced. This issue could have been avoided with a slight stylistic revision, in keeping with the tradition of Eastern European ethnography: discussing existing challenges that may arise during weddings in a more generalized manner, along with traditional ritual measures used to address them. This approach would have preserved ethnographic knowledge without harming the individual and his family. However, these arguments were dismissed on the grounds that this writing style represented essentialism. In other words, moral and ethical considerations were sacrificed in favor of the "one and only correct" ideology.

Other similar cases—though less scandalous—could also be cited. Nevertheless, the practice itself ultimately resulted in at least some positive outcomes. Today, an increasing number of authors, primarily from Eastern Europe, are questioning the necessity of mandatory anonymization, with many either abandoning it entirely or restricting it to reasonable limits.

I also want to address another significant ethical issue that, to my knowledge, has not been raised previously—and which I have not heard other colleagues encounter—for which I still do not have a clear answer. This issue arises in situations where I must conduct field research in the Romani language. This typically occurs in countries where I do not share any common language with my interlocutors (e.g.,

Turkey, Greece, Albania, Romania, Latin America, etc.), or in specific contexts (such as in the post-Soviet space), where speaking Romani language greatly facilitates initial contact and introductions. In these instances, the vast majority of my interlocutors (if not all) assume that I am of Romani descent, as they find it difficult to believe that a non-Roma person could speak Romani language. I make an effort to clarify that I am not a Roma woman, as I do not wish to deceive anyone. However, they often struggle to understand why I would have learned the Romani language in the first place, and ultimately, they remain convinced that, for some reason, I am deliberately presenting myself as a non-Roma woman. This is why, in the former USSR, the most common question I was asked was why I had come to their town—was it to tell fortunes or to find a daughter-in-law? In contrast, in Western Europe, Romanian Roma women who were begging often assumed I was a local Roma. I still do not have a clear answer to the question of how to convince my interlocutors that I am not deceiving them. This becomes even more difficult in situations involving chance encounters with women begging on the street, who neither have the time nor the willingness to listen to such explanations.

As academic cooperation between East and West progressed, significant changes began to unfold. Many Eastern European scholars joined international academic organizations and networks, pursued studies and careers at Western universities and institutes, gained self-confidence, and even adopted a more critical perspective on the academic models imposed by the West, including ethical norms.

After several former socialist countries joined the European Union as full members, the ethical rules established there became mandatory for us as well. However, Eastern European scholars, who are now—at least formally—fully equal to their Western colleagues, faced a new challenge regarding these ethical norms. Often, especially in the beginning, the only requirement was simply to declare compliance—meaning that signing a statement affirming that the research would adhere to the ethical guidelines outlined in this or that ethical code was sufficient. This approach was entirely formal and was quickly and effortlessly adopted, particularly because it introduced nothing new for scholars who had grown up during the so-called socialist era. Back then, anyone working on any historical or ethnographic topic (ethnography, in most countries in the region, was classified as a historical discipline) was required to explicitly declare that their research would adhere strictly to the "correct" Marxist-Leninist methodology and employ a comparative-historical approach. Perhaps the most striking example of purely formal adherence to established norms and rules—at least for me—is Vladimir Propp's *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale* (Пропп 1946). Propp, an almost forgotten and unjustly overlooked author today–had earlier published the *Morphology of the Folktale* in 1928 (Пропп 1928), in which he applied Jakobson's and Trubetzkoy's linguistic theories to specific folkloric materials, making the work a forerunner of structuralism in social anthropology—indeed, Claude Lévi-Strauss once referred to Propp as his teacher (Гистер 2019). At the very beginning of *The Historical Roots of the Wonder Tale*, Propp dutifully declares his adherence to the "Marxist-Leninist doctrine," praises Stalin's "genius" work *Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics*, and so on—only to proceed with several hundred pages of purely formalist analysis of the wonder tale phenomenon, which blatantly contradicts the methodology he had so dutifully proclaimed at the outset.

However, issues related to compliance with ethical norms in academic research within the European Union are often challenging to resolve. In many cases, some of these norms still appear somewhat absurd to me. At the beginning of my career, when I worked in Eastern Europe and was involved in projects only as a partner, the responsibility for adhering to ethical rules rested with the leading institution or organization. Consequently, I did not have to deal directly with the requirements of ethics committees. However, things became much more complicated when I began working in the West and became a Principal Investigator (PI). It was suddenly clear that, at least in projects funded under *Horizon Europe*, ethics committees possess special powers and can even deny funding to an already approved project if its ethics section does not fully comply with their norms and requirements. As a result, I had to revise and refine the ethics section several times until it was accepted.

The logic behind some of these requirements was understandable; for example, the condition that, since the project involved Roma communities—who are considered a vulnerable group—I had to explicitly declare my awareness of the sensitivity of the topic and state that I would take additional measures to prevent harm, stereotyping, and discrimination. However, many other requirements still seem, at least to me, largely meaningless. For instance, as a PI, I was expected to explicitly declare that I would ensure compliance with the legal and administrative regulations of the countries where the research would take place. Additionally, I had to guarantee the preservation of my own health and that of my fellow researchers by ensuring that working hours were not exceeded and that an appropriate work-life balance was maintained. These requirements were not merely a matter of formal declarations; they were norms that needed to be actively considered at all times. This stood in stark contrast not only to the principles I had been raised on, namely, that a scholar should be prepared to sacrifice personal comfort in the name of science, but also to the practical demands of fieldwork. For instance, how could one comply with fixed working hours while conducting participant observation of a ritual such as a wedding, typically held on weekends and often lasting late into the night?

Comprehending and adhering to these mandatory Western standards has proven challenging even for the next generation of scholars from Eastern Europe. For example, during the hiring process for fellow researchers on the project, one of the mandatory questions candidates had to answer was how they would react if required to work overtime to complete their assigned tasks. One candidate—from Eastern Europe—responded that this would not be a problem for her at all, as she made no distinction between working and non-working hours. However, her answer was deemed incorrect, and I had to spend considerable time convincing the committee that she was the most suitable candidate based on more important criteria from my perspective—and that she should be approved.

Other similar examples could be cited, but one case particularly stood out to me. A younger colleague (also from Eastern Europe), whom I was advising, had secured a research grant to study the fate of the Roma during World War II. As part of the project, she was planning visits to cemeteries where victims were buried. However, at the insistence of the ethics committee, she was ultimately compelled to either remove this part of the project or provide a detailed explanation of how the tragic emotions of the interlocutors and researchers would be mitigated during and after their visits to the cemeteries. This case reminded

me of an incident from the socialist era when, during a student conference in Bratislava, a documentary film on funeral customs by the renowned Bulgarian ethnographer Hristo Vakarelski was to be screened. However, the Bulgarian consulate objected to the screening, arguing that the topic was too gloomy and that Bulgaria should not be portrayed abroad as a depressing country, but rather as a joyful and vibrant one.

The era of communist rule is often remembered as a time when academic writing was heavily influenced by ideological censorship—or more commonly, self-censorship. Following the collapse of the socialist bloc, our initial response was one of euphoria. We celebrated what we believed to be the end of ideological constraints, interpreting this moment as the dawn of true freedom in research and writing. However, it soon became clear that this sense of liberation was, in many ways, illusory. In place of communist censorship, a new form of constraint emerged: political correctness. At first glance, this shift seemed entirely positive, as political correctness encourages the avoidance of language and behavior that might offend, exclude, or harm vulnerable individuals or communities. The prevailing assumption was that such an approach entailed no ethical drawbacks.

Yet a significant ethical dilemma has remained—one that I have consistently encountered since the fall of the socialist regime. This dilemma is particularly pronounced in the field of Romani studies, historically known as "Gypsy studies." Communities once referred to by the generalized term "Gypsies"—both in English and in various local languages—are now commonly classified under the umbrella term "Roma", which is currently regarded as politically correct. European institutions have developed numerous

definitions to clarify which groups fall under this term (Marushiakova & Popov 2018, pp. 385–418). The rejection of older labels and the adoption of "Roma" has increasingly come to signify the "legitimacy of political correctness" (Petrova 2003, pp. 111–161). This shift is widely considered a natural outcome of democratization and European integration. Unsurprisingly, Eurobureaucracy tends to favor broad categorizations and seeks to politicize Roma identity in order to construct a common "denominator of a distinct political object—the focus of the EU's only ethnic policy and of a unique form of transnational governance" (Kovats 2025, p. 129). As a result, ethics committees at various levels, along with editors and publishers, often revise authors' texts to replace "incorrect" terminology with officially sanctioned alternatives. An extension of this trend includes more extravagant efforts—reminiscent of the Victorian era—to avoid using the term "Gypsies," opting instead for peculiar formations such as "G*psies." For reasons that remain unclear, this practice has recently begun gaining popularity in the Czech Republic (see, e.g., Ort 2024). Furthermore, digital tools such as Google Translate automatically convert "Gypsy" to "Roma," and using the former term on platforms like Facebook may even lead to account restrictions or bans. In the end, we find ourselves in a situation where a well-intentioned and appropriate response to a specific issue becomes generalized into a rigid, universal principle—one that, rather than resolving existing problems, creates entirely new ones that previously did not exist.

On one hand, the mechanical substitution of "Gypsy" with "Roma" in this approach renders it impossible to accurately understand and explain numerous historical and contemporary processes and phenomena—for instance, the debates in 1930s Romania among various civil organizations

regarding the self-designation of the community and its representative bodies (Marushiakova & Popov 2021, pp. 306–466) or the current usage of the term *Gypsy, Roma, and Travellers (GRT) people* in the UK. Moreover, this substitution leads to a direct falsification of historical sources—an unfortunate reminder of a well-known practice from the so-called "Revival Process" in Bulgaria during 1984-1985, when local authorities would chisel off "Turkish" names from gravestones and replace them with "Bulgarian" ones in official documents as well.

On the other hand—and far more importantly from a moral and ethical standpoint—is the fact that this approach labels not only individuals but entire communities as *Roma*—communities that have different, non-Roma origins and/or ethnic identities, and who explicitly reject being called by that name. Additionally, while the use of the "Roma" category may be understandable—if not always justified—when used by certain Roma activists and human rights organizations in the academic sphere, this practice ultimately casts doubt on the validity of their findings. There are numerous and diverse examples that illustrate this issue.

As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Marushiakova & Popov 2018, pp. 385–418), I find it ethically problematic to impose this so-called "politically correct" designation on communities that explicitly reject it. From this perspective, it is both unjustified and unethical to label communities with non-Roma identities as *Roma*. There are numerous cases in which specific communities have clearly expressed their opposition to the use of this term and citing them here is unnecessary. Perhaps the most powerful message in this context comes from Balkan Egyptians who, in 2018, submitted a petition to the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the European Ombudsman, and the European Court of Human Rights, requesting formal recognition of their distinct ethnicity[2]. In the petition, they stated explicitly:

> "We are deprived of virtually everything, including statehood. We are obliged to declare ourselves as Roma in order to benefit from various social schemes and government or EU projects, which does not reflect our ethnic reality or identity."

Needless to say, this petition has yet to receive a response.

The ethical dimensions of issues related to the influence of dominant ideological and political norms within a given socio-historical context can be numerous and highly diverse. However, in this article, I will focus on one particular aspect that I consider particularly important: the responsibility of the scholar in shaping and presenting the public image of the community under study. In this context, there are both continuities and fundamental differences between the past and the present.

In both periods, the construction and promotion of the public image of the community—previously referred to as "Gypsies," today as "Roma"—have been justified by the stated aim of improving the condition of the community and, by extension, of society as a whole. However, the resulting public images have been strikingly different. Under socialism, the socio-economic problems faced by Roma were either not to be mentioned at all—which was the more common approach—or, when their discussion was unavoidable,

2 See: https://www.change.org/p/european-commission-eu-to-recognize-balkan-egyptians-as-ethnic-eu-that-violates-the-dignity-of-human-beings [accessed on Apr 16, 2025].

they were attributed to the burdens of a difficult historical legacy. This shift of responsibility for present issues to the past, specifically emphasized today with reference to former communist regimes, has persisted into the post-socialist era. However, unlike in the past, these problems are no longer silenced; on the contrary, they are now brought to the forefront. Not only do they occupy a central position in public discourse, but they also actively shape a new public image of the Roma—as a thoroughly marginalized community.

Certainly, Roma communities across different countries include individuals, families, and even relatively large segments that are more or less marginalized. However, even in Slovakia—often cited as the country with the highest proportion of marginalized Roma—no more than one-quarter of the Roma population resides in detached Roma settlements. Moreover, not all these settlements are inhabited by marginalized groups (Mušinka et al. 2014). Nevertheless, the stereotype that the Roma as a whole constitute a marginalized, vulnerable, and excluded community continues to dominate not only public discourse but also political agendas, NGO initiatives, and even much of academic research. The reasons why—contrary to objective realities—the Roma are not viewed as "normal" people, like other European populations, but are instead represented solely through the lens of their marginalized segments, are numerous and varied. I have written extensively on this issue elsewhere (Marushiakova & Popov 2011; 2017). Therefore, I will only emphasize here that this approach raises serious moral and ethical concerns for researchers who adopt it. Their motivations may differ: some are simply drawn to a topical and fashionable subject area that offers access to funding and project opportunities; others seek to express civic engagement publicly; and still

others genuinely believe that their work can help address the many challenges facing Roma communities. However, existing practice has unequivocally demonstrated that this approach has the opposite effect. It not only fails to resolve the persistent issues facing Roma populations across Europe (Marushiakova & Popov 2015), but also reinforces and perpetuates widespread anti-Roma stereotypes and attitudes in the public sphere (Marushiakova & Popov 2013). Most importantly, it contributes nothing to the advancement of academic knowledge about the Roma.

Recently, I have received several invitations to review research projects from countries that were formerly part of the socialist bloc but are not members of the European Union. The situation there closely resembles what Eastern European countries have already experienced in the past: a complete lack of understanding of the complexities surrounding ethical requirements. In most cases, the sections on ethical norms and risk avoidance are completed with little more than a declaration stating that every effort will be made to prevent plagiarism. It is evident that these countries have yet to undergo a similar developmental process as other former socialist states.

Currently, ethical requirements do not appear to pose major challenges for colleagues from Eastern European countries that are EU members—perhaps quite the opposite. As evidenced by the two preceding books on ethical challenges published by the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology at the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská 2024; Zachar Podolinská 2024), as well as by this current volume, authentic academic analyses are now emerging, focusing on the specificities and new challenges related to ethical regulations. It is crucial to emphasize that the issues discussed in these three books represent only a

fraction of the challenges faced by ethnologists and social anthropologists in the contemporary world. Numerous other ethical dilemmas remain unexplored, particularly those that are newly emerging.

A particularly pressing issue concerns the ethical considerations surrounding the use of sources related to the rapid development of ICT, where vast amounts of valuable ethnographic and folklore material can be found, especially across various online networks. This discussion among our colleagues has only begun. However, as demonstrated by the works of Natália Slivková (2024) and Iveta Štefanovičová in this volume, a significant part of the problem lies in distinguishing between public and private spheres, between open and closed online groups, and in determining how and from whom informed consent should be obtained. Unfortunately, numerous gaps and obstacles remain present in ethical regulations that hinder the ability to conduct high-quality ethnographic research in online spaces. The most critical issue is that the gathered research data lacks adequate protection. To address the shortcomings in conducting internet-based research and the study of ethics in digital interactions, numerous publications have appeared, academic conferences have been organized, and a new interdisciplinary field of *netnography* has emerged (Cilliers & Viljoen 2021). Discussions about the ethical challenges in internet research on an international scale began with the widespread use of the internet. As early as 1999, a learned society, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), was founded in San Francisco and even elaborated on Ethical Guidelines for Internet Research in 2019. Despite the many valuable recommendations made there and in other initiatives, we are still awaiting the establishment of an ethical code for internet and digital media research. So far,

no universally accepted solution on work with ethnographic data retrieved from digital space has been formulated; some authors either ignore the issue entirely or, to be cautious, seek permission from all original authors who post on social networks (Gamella 2024). This dilemma is further complicated because many posts containing ethnographic and folklore materials are shared by their authors with the explicit intent of being disseminated as widely as possible.

This raises the question of whether informed consent is necessary in such cases and who has the authority to make that decision. Should it be the administrators of closed and open groups and networks, the authors of individual posts, or can the very act of publishing in an open-access group be considered sufficient to imply consent? Attention should also be paid to situations where disputes arise among members of the same open social network about whether the data shared within it should be freely accessible for everyone to use.

In the field of Romani studies, there has been a growing number of posts and videos with explicit requests for their distribution. Simultaneously, other members of the network respond by stating that such distribution is unacceptable, sometimes even calling for traditional forms of punishment—such as exclusion from the community—for posting certain types of messages. There are no established norms here, and ultimately, everything is decided by the moral and ethical boundaries set by the researchers themselves.

The internet serves as a virtual refuge for various vulnerable or displaced communities, including the Roma (Hatef 2022, pp. 328–344), which raises questions about the appropriateness of uninvited observers entering this space. Sometimes, excluding external observers from open networks is achieved by using a language or dialect assumed to be unfamiliar to outsiders. In other instances, posts

explicitly specify their intended audience in individual messages—for example, "this information is for Roma from Berlin" (Шаповал 2022, p. 312). However, this offers only a partial solution to the issue.

All these concerns—among many others—remain unresolved, and I doubt that a unanimous agreement can ever be reached. Given these challenges, I fear that research on the internet will proceed similarly to other areas within Romani studies, focusing primarily on tracking anti-Gypsyism and hate speech (Miškolci et al. 2018; Homoláč 2009).

The next major challenge in scientific knowledge that raises ethical concerns is the rapidly evolving field of artificial intelligence (AI). Despite its growing impact, AI is often omitted or only partially addressed in the ethical guidelines of many institutions, most notably in UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Ethics of AI* (UNESCO, 2021, 2024). Some research and educational units, along with integrating AI into their research, teaching, and learning practices, have also issued regulations on the responsible use of AI, often without addressing specific ethical issues (e.g., Internal Regulation No. 2/2024 of Comenius University in Bratislava[3]). However, a more comprehensive elaboration is still awaited. Internationally, numerous warnings have been issued, the most recent of which states:

> "AI is no longer just a tool; it is an active force in global affairs—shaping perception, behavior, and policy" (Security Lab 2025).

In response to this emerging global threat, a general recommendation has been proposed:

> "By prioritizing authentic human interactions, enhancing international cooperation, and rigorously implementing ethical AI governance, we can ensure technology serves as a catalyst for global security, stability, and community trust, rather than undermining these foundations" (Reinisch 2025).

For ethnologists and anthropologists, whose work depends deeply on mutual trust between the researcher and the researched, this poses a critical question. As Philippe Reinisch asks:

> "What happens when trust is no longer built on real human interaction, but instead manipulated by artificial intelligence?" (Reinisch 2025).

As evidenced, AI is not only capable of offering various types of advisory services but is also able to generate articles or even entire books that resemble scientific works and create fictional fieldwork materials. There are even circulating rumors about a European research project that has been successfully funded and created entirely by AI. However, there is more than just speculation in this regard; recently, we encountered an educational video created by AI that completely misrepresents history, such as claiming that the Allies of World War II established the Roma state (*The State of Romaya* 2025). I also encountered a shocking case involving a published article that was likely written or aided by AI (Petkova, 2025). Upon closer examination, I discovered that while the authors cited in the article were real, the referenced works included fictitious titles and non-existent

3 https://uniba.sk/fileadmin/ruk/legislativa/Internal_regulations/VP_2024_02.pdf

publications, allegedly published in legitimate academic journals. After a few months, this article was removed from the internet. However, several colleagues told me that the practice of quoting non-existent publications continues, having found quotations of articles they never authored under their names. This happened to me as well, most recently in connection with an article by Miruna Pandele (2025), published in the journal *Sociologie Românească*. This practice tarnishes the reputation of journals, publishers, and academic institutions, complicating the work of reviewers and editors. It is evident that, from now on, it should involve not only the use of standard anti-plagiarism software but also developing tools for detecting AI-generated texts and even cross-checking all references.

Meanwhile, AI is advancing rapidly, correcting errors that help us quickly identify AI-generated text. As an experiment, I asked ChatGPT to produce a short article composed of abstracts from chapters in this volume. It now appears to include proper quotations, making it hard to distinguish from human-generated content. For illustration, I am attaching it as an annex to this chapter. These issues raise concerns about the reliability of such materials and fundamental ethical questions regarding their publication and subsequent use.

Based on the discussion so far, it is clear that among all potential ethical issues in ethnographic and anthropological research, the only undisputed and universally accepted principle is to "do no harm." This highlights the importance of ethical reflexivity and the necessity for scholars in our fields to critically evaluate the impact of their research on the communities they study. However, establishing clear ethical guidelines and standards that address the full range of existing and emerging challenges, while also ensuring

their effective enforcement, remains a complex and nuanced task. At the same time, the need to protect interlocutors, researchers, and all research participants, as well as to uphold the integrity of ethnological and anthropological work, is becoming increasingly urgent. This results in a closed loop—a Catch-22—where no easy solutions are available to resolve these dilemmas.

In any case, I share Tatiana Zachar Podolinská's (2024, p. 152) view that only sincere and open discussions, along with the ongoing refinement of ethical codes, procedures, and protocols, will help us stay true to the core mission of our disciplines. However, I remain somewhat skeptical that discussions and ethical rules alone can

> "help understand the complex ways in which diverse human communities and groups express themselves in an increasingly complex and interconnected world, thereby contributing to the understanding of humanity as well as the surrounding world we co-create" (Zachar Podolinská 2024, p. 152).

This skepticism is particularly relevant given that the world before us is no longer genuinely global and interconnected; instead, it is increasingly becoming fragmented based on various criteria—such as the strengthening of nation-states and the emergence of new geopolitical balances. Alongside, and perhaps partially as a consequence of, this shift, new and persistent obstacles to conducting research—research that could contribute to the expansion of scientific knowledge—continue to emerge. Nevertheless, through their honest and objective approach, books like the three volumes mentioned above can help

navigate ethical dilemmas and prevent breaches of research integrity, ultimately contributing to the reconstruction of an interconnected world.

That said, I believe, regardless of how thoroughly ethical norms and their enforcement mechanisms are refined, they will never fully encompass the vast diversity of existing and potential challenges in this field. This does not imply that the existence of such norms should be questioned or dismissed; rather, it is crucial to acknowledge that they cannot replace the individual responsibility of the researcher—which ultimately remains the decisive factor in ensuring ethical compliance throughout the research process.

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ANNEX
Ethical Challenges in Social Research: A Critical Analysis

AI-generated text

Introduction

Ethical considerations are fundamental to any research endeavor, particularly in the social sciences, where the intersection of human subjects and sensitive topics generates complex dilemmas. This paper explores the ethical challenges inherent in studying various groups—specifically nonbelievers in Slovakia, marginalized sexual and gender minorities, and contemporary astrologers in Russia. The analysis touches on a variety of ethical issues, such as informed consent, researcher positionality, anonymity, and the balance between scientific integrity and participant well-being. By drawing on multiple case studies, this paper highlights the evolving nature of ethical considerations in social research, illustrating how they shape research outcomes and methodologies (Guillemin & Gillam 2004).

Ethical Aspects of Research on Nonbelievers in Slovakia

Research on value orientations, political orientations, and attitudes toward human rights issues among nonbelievers in Slovakia presents numerous ethical challenges, particularly in handling online data and addressing sensitive topics. The study was structured into three modules: analysis of publicly available social media content, a questionnaire survey, and semi-structured ethnographic interviews. These research methods required careful ethical decision-making at each stage, especially in distinguishing between public and private online spaces (Markham 2012).

One of the primary ethical issues revolved around the necessity of obtaining informed consent. While it is often clear that consent is needed for surveys and interviews, the

use of publicly available social media data poses a gray area. As the study's methodology states, "since this issue remains ambiguous, especially in the first phase of the research (including with regard to existing ethical codes related to online research), strict anonymization was applied to protect respondents" (*Research on Nonbelievers in Slovakia* 2021). This approach reflects the necessity of ensuring participants' privacy despite the ambiguity surrounding the need for consent in publicly available data. Markham (2012) emphasizes that, "researchers need to be vigilant in addressing online privacy concerns, especially when dealing with publicly available data."

Another critical ethical concern was the positionality of the researcher. As a member of the atheist community, there was an inherent risk of bias, even though the goal was to provide a realistic portrayal of the community, including its ideological conflicts. The researcher emphasizes that "the goal of the research is not to portray the atheist community as ideal in comparison to believers—quite the opposite" (*Research on Nonbelievers in Slovakia* 2021). Acknowledging the potential for personal bias, the researcher made a concerted effort to avoid portraying nonbelievers as idealized figures. This process also involved ensuring that sensitive topics such as abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, and euthanasia were approached with respect for respondents' autonomy and comfort. As noted by Fox and Alldred (2013), "researchers must be aware of their positionality to mitigate any biases that might skew the interpretation of data, especially in politically sensitive contexts."

These ethical challenges highlight that research ethics are not merely about adhering to formal guidelines but are deeply embedded in the researcher's decisions and actions. As noted, "a perfectly 'ethically pure' study—one that in no way misleads respondents, institutions, or the state—is likely impossible to carry out" (*Research on Nonbelievers in Slovakia* 2021). Ethical research requires a balance between respecting participants, adhering to legal standards, and maintaining scientific integrity (Guillemin & Gillam 2004).

Ethical Implications of Visual Participatory Action Methods

Research on identity-making and gender and sexual diversity often involves marginalized groups, making ethical considerations even more crucial. This section explores the ethical implications of using participatory and visual methods, such as photovoice, in research design. These methods allow participants to actively contribute to the research process, providing a more authentic understanding of their experiences. However, they also raise ethical concerns, particularly around consent, privacy, and the potential for exploitation (Clover 2014).

As one source on the subject states, "Rather than perceiving ethical challenges as obstacles, this chapter argues that they serve as guiding principles that enhance research quality" (Clover 2014). Participatory action research aims to empower marginalized groups, but this goal must be balanced with the ethical responsibility to minimize harm. The act of labeling or categorizing identities in research also presents ethical challenges, as labels can be constraining and may not reflect participants' lived experiences. As the author explains, "The ethical dilemmas associated with labeling can make it challenging to navigate the complexities of identity and representation in research" (Clover 2014).

The use of visual methods, such as photovoice, adds another layer of complexity. While these methods can

offer participants a way to express themselves and shape the narrative, they also raise concerns about privacy and the potential for re-traumatization. As stated in the study, “Informed consent becomes even more critical in these contexts, as participants must fully understand the implications of sharing their images and experiences” (Clover 2014). This emphasizes the ethical responsibility researchers have in ensuring that participants are fully informed about the potential risks of participating in such methods.

Ultimately, participatory and visual methods are powerful tools for exploring identity, but they require careful ethical reflexivity to ensure that they do not perpetuate harm or exploitation. The researcher must prioritize participants' autonomy, provide clear and ongoing informed consent, and ensure that the research process is mutually beneficial (Clover 2014).

Ethical Considerations in the Study of Astrological Practices in Russia

Studying the biographies and activities of contemporary astrologers in Russia presents a unique set of ethical challenges. The practice of astrology in Russia is fraught with complexities, given the skepticism and opposition it faces from official science, the Orthodox Church, and the state. As one researcher notes, “The researcher faces an important task of not exerting any influence on the area under study—not to act as either a supporting or suppressive factor when conducting interviews and collecting information” (*Ethical Aspects of Studying Astrological Practice in Contemporary Russia* 2016). The delicate task of neutrality is paramount in such a politically charged environment.

Astrologers often belong to marginalized groups and may engage in practices that are legally or socially controversial, making the ethical concerns of anonymity and informed consent even more pronounced. The researcher’s responsibility includes ensuring that participants' privacy is respected while gathering ethnographic data that could be highly sensitive. As stated, “Biographical narratives of astrologers contain extremely sensitive information, and their publication may be dangerous for the public image and even the well-being of respondents” (*Ethical Aspects of Studying Astrological Practice in Contemporary Russia* 2016).

In addition, the Russian astrological market exists in a “gray zone,” where many practitioners operate informally or even illegally. This complicates the ethical landscape, as some astrologers may feel uncomfortable or even threatened by the idea of signing an informed consent form. The study highlights that "establishing a trusting relationship in order to bypass the self-censorship of a practicing astrologer and obtain quality information becomes an important task" (*Ethical Aspects of Studying Astrological Practice in Contemporary Russia* 2016). Researchers working in such environments must be acutely aware of these pressures and ensure confidentiality to protect their subjects (Fournier 2012).

Conclusion

The ethical challenges presented in the research on nonbelievers in Slovakia, sexual and gender minorities, and contemporary Russian astrologers, illustrate the importance of ethical reflexivity in social research. Researchers must navigate complex ethical terrain, balancing the needs of their participants with the goals of their studies. In all cases, informed consent, confidentiality, researcher positionality,

and the sensitivity of the topics studied must be carefully considered to ensure that research is conducted with respect for the participants and integrity of the research process. As noted in one section, “ethical dilemmas are not simply obstacles to be overcome; they are integral to producing meaningful, impactful research that respects the dignity and rights of participants” (Guillemin & Gillam 2004). Ethical dilemmas are not simply obstacles to be overcome; they are integral to producing meaningful, impactful research that respects the dignity and rights of participants.

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CONCLUSION
The Dynamics of Research Ethics—Between Principles, Practice, and Uncertainty

Iveta Štefanovičová

Research ethics in ethnology and social anthropology is not a one-time decision or a set of universal rules, but rather a continuous dialogue between the researcher, research partners, and broader societal frameworks (see also Zachar Podolinská 2024a, b). The chapters included in this publication—a continuation of the thematic series *Ethical Dilemmas in Current Ethnology, Vol. I* (Kinczer & Zachar Podolinská, Eds., 2024)—convincingly illustrate this point once again. The authors, representing different generations and working with diverse methodological approaches in varied field and cultural contexts, agree on one essential aspect: ethics cannot be treated as an administrative add-on to research. Instead, it must be an integral part of every stage of the research process—from design, through data collection, to the publication and archiving of results. This approach reflects a shift away from a formal, bureaucratic understanding of ethics toward its conception as a dynamic process grounded in flexibility, processuality, and reflexivity. This shift clearly demonstrates that research ethics is not merely a set of precisely defined rules found in ethical codes, but rather an open and evolving process in which the researcher must continually adapt to changing societal, cultural, and technological conditions.

The chapters in this publication offer a diverse perspective on how research ethics is applied across different thematic, geographical, and methodological contexts. In writing this conclusion, we have chosen not to proceed chronologically through the individual chapters, but rather to adopt a more analytical approach that builds on the identification of key ethical themes and dilemmas resonating throughout the texts. This method allows us to fully explore the interpretive potential of the volume and to highlight the intersections, contrasts, and complementarities among the various research

experiences. The central themes that emerge include the significance of researcher positionality, the risks associated with the mechanical transfer of Western ethical standards, issues of power and representation, the fluid boundaries between public and private spheres, and, above all, the need for ongoing negotiation and flexibility in ethical decision-making.

Researcher positionality emerges as a fundamental tool in ethical research. Evgeniy Farafonov reflects on his own position in relation to communities facing social stigmatization, emphasizing respect for their spiritual identity and caution in publishing (Crockford 2018). Maroš Ondrejka engages with positionality even more deeply—as a participating researcher, he actively evaluates his own methodological and value-based standpoint, which influences both research outcomes and relationships in the field. In my own chapter (Chapter 3), I note that I share certain perspectives with the studied community of Slovak non-believers, and thus I systematically reflect on my involvement—'being both inside and outside'—in both analytical and ethical terms (Hair, Akdeveliogli & Clark 2022). E. Marushiakova, as a senior researcher, approaches positionality not only as a personal matter but also as an institutional one, reflecting on the researcher's role within the power structures of science and research, including bureaucratic frameworks.

This closely relates to another key aspect of research ethics that becomes evident across the chapters—*the issue of power and representation*. E. Farafonov addresses this theme in the context of representing and publishing sensitive biographical data—although he holds research authority, he consults with respondents what may be published and does not insist on mandatory anonymization for all participants (Van den Hoonaard 2003). E. Marushiakova draws attention

to the institutional and political dimensions of power—who has the legitimacy to speak about various communities, who represents whom, who decides, to what extent these processes are transparent or fair, and how these dynamics are perceived by the studied community itself (Bartosz 2023). She also refers to the idea that informants can be regarded as co-authors (Gay y Blasco & Hernandez 2020). In this sense, the participatory method (PAR) applied by M. Ondrejka in his research appears to be an ideal model (Chevalier & Buckles 2019). This approach helps to reduce power imbalances, as participants significantly contribute to the creation of the research and its outcomes.

The authors also demonstrate a clear *awareness of the risks involved in the mechanical transfer of Western ethical standards* without consideration for the cultural and geographical contexts in which research takes place. E. Farafonov highlights the mismatch between different legal and cultural frameworks when working with transnational communities, noting that universal ethical protocols (AAA 2009) often come into conflict with field realities. M. Ondrejka captures this dimension in a local context, arguing that when studying sensitive topics in Slovakia, it is essential to reflect on the specific features of the social environment and relevant legislation. E. Marushiakova emphasizes this issue most explicitly. Drawing on her research among Roma communities, she illustrates how the uncritical application of Western ethical standards can itself be unethical and scientifically counterproductive.

With the development of communication technologies, research methods have also evolved, and an increasing number of researchers now conduct their work in online environments. In this context, the authors identify *the fluidity of the boundaries between public and private space*

as a key issue—though this challenge is not exclusive to online research settings. E. Farafonov, who studies Russian-speaking astrologers, highlights core dilemmas concerning the protection of identity, reputation, and privacy of respondents, particularly given the stigmatization of their practice. He notes that anonymization is not a universal solution (Van den Hoonaard 2003), as some respondents preferred to be named explicitly. M. Ondrejka demonstrates that visual participatory methods (e.g., photovoice) shift the boundaries of public and private in another direction—making a participant's image public can function as an act of empowerment rather than solely a threat to privacy (Wang & Burris 1997). In my own research, I raise the issue of the ethical usability of data in the context of long-term online observation—even if data are publicly available (including from a legal standpoint), their context and the potential consequences of publication can still encroach on the privacy of the studied community (Eynon, Fry & Schroeder 2017).

What emerges most clearly from the individual chapters is *the need for continuous negotiation and flexibility*. E. Farafonov accurately identifies ethical decision-making as a process of ongoing negotiation, rather than a final, fixed resolution. In contexts marked by hybrid identities, repressive regimes, and digital data, flexibility becomes essential—not only in obtaining informed consent but also in the publication process. M. Ondrejka incorporates this flexibility into a participatory research design, where ethical decisions unfold throughout the research process, in collaboration with the community and individual participants. Although my own research is predominantly non-participatory, I am equally aware of the need to respond reflexively to context and the shifting dynamics of online discourse. E. Marushiakova concludes this line of argument by emphasizing—similarly to other authors—the limitations of any ethical codes (AAA 2009; EK SASA 2013; EK SAV 2015; EK NSS 2017; AoIR 2013 etc.). Ethical responsibility, therefore, can never be fully delegated, but remains solely with the researcher, requiring constant sensitivity and adaptation to changing conditions and newly emerging situations.

It is essential to recognize that ethics is a historically and contextually conditioned process. This is most explicitly reflected in the chapter by E. Marushiakova, who addresses the issue of research ethics over time—what was once considered ethically acceptable may today be seen as problematic, and likewise, what is considered acceptable now may not be viewed the same way in the future. Ethics, therefore, is not a fixed set of eternal rules but a tool that evolves alongside science, society, and currently prevailing value frameworks. This perspective also retrospectively illuminates the research presented in this volume—all of it demonstrates that ethics is more of a process than a system, and above all, more of a reminder than a guarantee.

In this context, ethical codes and rules do not function as clear-cut guidelines, but rather as reminders of responsibility. They are not concrete instructions, but more like a warning finger pointing at the researcher—reminding them that the 'well-being, dignity, and safety' of research participants must always come first—whatever these terms may mean in a given context. These values are neither universal nor objective; each individual and community interprets them differently.

Even the most sensitively and carefully designed research is always the product of a specific cultural, social, and technological context—and may, in hindsight, expose participants to risks that did not even exist at the time of the research.

a) Technological conditions and the possibilities for distributing, storing, or linking data may change, thereby retrospectively increasing the risk that anonymized or seemingly harmless data could be misused or re-identified;
b) Cultural norms and societal views of what is considered acceptable, appropriate, or ethical may shift—meaning that research approved by an ethics committee today might, a decade from now, be viewed as insensitive or even as violating the rights of the individuals involved;
c) Statements or opinions freely expressed by participants during the research, and perceived at the time as socially or legally acceptable, may later be considered problematic within a new sociocultural or regulatory framework.

Research ethics is, therefore, always contextual—shaped by time, technology, and societal consciousness. Ultimately, it comes down to being able, as researchers, to say—within the limits of our own awareness—that we have done everything possible to ensure that our research was conducted sensitively and without causing harm to participants. Even so, we can never be completely certain. For example, obtaining informed consent is currently considered a standard requirement. Yet the mere existence of this consent does not automatically guarantee that the research was ethical or that no harm was done. Human life is dynamic—a person may not perceive any risks or problematic aspects at the time of giving consent, but their perspective may change significantly in a later stage of life. Research that once felt unproblematic may, in retrospect, be experienced as harmful or stigmatizing.

Such risks can never be entirely eliminated. Ethical simply cannot be followed to 100%, nor can they be perfectly defined. The only thing a researcher can do is to apply the highest possible degree of sensitivity in a given moment and context, engage in active communication with participants, and—crucially—involve them in co-deciding on ethical matters. Research partners are not objects of study; they are co-creators of the research. That is why it is essential to communicate, establish rules together—where possible—and create agreements that are clear, fair, and respectful to both sides. Ethical research, then, does not arise from merely fulfilling formal requirements, but from creating an environment of trust and thoughtful collaboration.

While most of the ethical dilemmas discussed so far focus on the relationship between the researcher and research participants, a new area of ethical challenges is beginning to emerge more visibly—those connected to technological advancement and the critical reflection of research tools and research integrity. As E. Marushiakova points out in her chapter, this concerns the *use of artificial intelligence (AI)*. Some tools now integrate AI into both qualitative and quantitative data analysis (for instance, in ATLAS.ti, a software commonly used by ethnologists and anthropologists). These tools can automatically generate codes based on analyzed texts. After testing this function, I found that many of the suggested codes did align with the those I had manually created; at the same time, however, several clear misinterpretations and inaccuracies appeared. This experience shows that AI cannot be relied upon as an autonomous analyst—its outputs may be helpful in

accelerating or supporting the analytical process, but they always require human interpretation, review, and refinement. Another area in which ethical questions arise is the actual creation of texts. At this stage, it is still relatively easy to recognize when a text has been entirely generated by AI—that is, when both the content and ideas originate from AI rather than the author. However, the verification process can be problematic. I myself suspected that some students whose work I was assessing had used AI, and so I tested one of the available detection tools. The results were surprising—it indicated a high percentage of AI-generated content even in cases where I was quite confident the work was genuinely original. To verify this, I uploaded one of my own older papers, written at a time when AI was not yet publicly available—and the tool also flagged it as likely AI-generated. This clearly suggests that such detection tools are unreliable and cannot yet be considered trustworthy instruments of control. This highlights the need to approach the use of AI in academic and research environments as an ethical challenge. Artificial intelligence can be useful for time-consuming, repetitive tasks (with subsequent human review), such as translations, language editing, stylistic adjustments, or managing formal aspects of texts. However, it should never replace the authorial approach to content nor the responsibility for the research process and its outcomes. For now, we may still rely on the so-called Turing test as a metaphorical boundary between human and machine-generated content—and trust that people can still recognize when they are reading something 'non-human.' But this boundary will inevitably become thinner and more difficult to grasp as technologies continue to evolve.

The discussion around the ethical dilemmas of ethnological and anthropological research in Slovakia is still in its early stages. We are pleased that following the first volume (Kinczer and Zachar Podolinská 2024) and the initial brief outline of the development of ethics from its beginnings to the present (Zachar Podolinská 2024a, b), this new publication further expands and enriches the debate with new topics, approaches, and solutions. As this publication illustrates, the path to ethical research lies less in relying on ready-made answers, and more in openness, reflexivity, and a willingness to work with uncertainty.

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RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN

The second volume of the series *Ethical Dilemmas in Contemporary Ethnology* presents four new scholarly studies that expand both the thematic scope and the range of ethical questions in current ethnological research. The contributions reflect diverse research approaches and methodological strategies, offering stimuli for their critical re-evaluation and development. At the same time, they mirror the authors' individual research experiences, their ability to analytically engage with both domestic and international academic discourse, as well as the particular phase of the research process in which they found themselves at the time of writing. The publication once again confirms the thematic diversity and theoretical maturity of the emerging generation of researchers in Slovakia. At the same time, it offers valuable summarizing perspectives from experienced scholars working across various subdisciplines of ethnology and social and cultural anthropology. Thus, this volume serves not only as a didactically valuable supplementary study material for academic programs in ethnology and social anthropology, but also as a collection of texts that broadens and stimulates the important discussion on how to conduct social science research as responsibly as possible.

Jana Ambrózová

The studies included in the volume address current issues in research ethics, making a significant contribution to the academic debate. They reflect not only on theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches but also on the practical challenges researchers face in the field. By engaging with concrete ethical dilemmas in contemporary research contexts—such as issues of informed consent, researcher positionality, or research conducted in online environments or settings marked by political and social instability and insecurity—they offer valuable insights not only for the academic community but also for future researchers who can draw inspiration from these experiences. The studies respond to the dynamic changes in social and political environments and enable a deeper understanding of how research ethics evolves under varying conditions and how researchers must respond to emerging challenges.

Danijela Jerotijević

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