From the Field, With Love

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Dear Martin,

As you are well aware, many of your German students fell in love in Pakistan, either during or after fieldwork, got married, had children. What do we make of such long-term entanglements, of blurring boundaries between the private and the professional? For your Festschrift on the multi-sided ethnographer, some of us got together to discuss our German-Pakistani marriages. But what a difficult task, in terms of both finding time in between shuffling kids, careers and married life and moving between two or more countries and then settling on what can and cannot be said! When considering writing about our relationships,[1] everyone's immediate reaction was that this topic would be the obvious choice, albeit it should not include anything private. So, what to discuss, if nothing personal?

Long-lasting relationships with partners from the field seem to have been unthinkable for most of the last century (Dubisch 1995). Plenty has been written on sexual relations in the field since the significant *Taboo* (Kulick & Wilson 1995; see also Goode 1990, Coffey 2018) was broken in the 1990s. The researcher couple is also not a new phenomenon (cf. the Bohannans, the Geertzs, Mead & Bateson, the Rosaldos, Wikan & Barth,

1 Interestingly, it already poses an epistemological problem to label our marriages as binational, bicultural, inter-, etc. and evokes feelings of uneasiness in doing so.

https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839466773-017 - am 14.02.2026, 08:00:07. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

and others; see Girke 2020), and the research project in which you conducted your own doctoral fieldwork in the 1990s also resulted in long-term relationships and marriages (between German project staff), including your own. And why not? After all, most people undertake their graduation and doctorate at an age at which people typically enter long-term relationships, if not marriage. Nevertheless, while the first debate zooms in on brief, sexual relations between researcher and interlocutor, the second one, on researcher couples, remains remarkably silent on the matter of intercultural relationships and almost exclusively presents the anthropologist as having a partner or a family 'at home', possibly bringing them to the field (see Burger and Burger in this volume) – a balancing act that certainly also applies to 'native' anthropologists.[2] Another established trope is the researcher's lasting relationships with key informants (see Lyon in this volume), with some even taken in as kin (cf. Häberlein 2020; Haug 2020) – a practice also quite common in Gilgit, where a local man adopted you as an *unilo poch* (milk or foster son) during your doctoral research. While these fictive kinships certainly entail social obligations and demand forms of solidarity, the anthropologist stays somewhat autonomous and moves 'in' and 'out' of the field – as well as between research objectives, interlocutors and research partners – without much concern.

But what happens when an anthropologist falls in love and marries someone from the field? Although we know of quite a few such – admittedly rather traditional, heteronormative – connections, conjugal relations with (former) interlocutors continue to be relatively underrepresented in the academic literature. In *Into the dark heart of ethnography: The lived ethics and inequality of intimate field relationships*, Katherine Irwin (2006) discusses her marital bond with a man who was also her key interlocutor and lays bare the issues attached to their affiliation. As Irwin argues, structural inequalities continue to exist, and while trying to overcome them, she and her husband possibly even reinforced them

2 Lately, reflections on parental duties during fieldwork have featured more prominently in the anthropological debate (cf. Braukmann et al. 2020; Cornet and Blumenfield 2015).

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through their relationship. In her essay *Anthropology that warms your heart: On being a bride in the field* (Cuba), Anna Cristina Pertierra (2007) points to the fact that it remains a constant and intense challenge to disentangle one's private and professional self. Is this blurred boundary the reason why so many of us struggle to admit the obvious absence of objectivity as well as the permanent struggle in carrying out the various expected social roles? Similarly, Michaela Haug (2020) describes how becoming part of an Indonesian kinship system brings shifting positionalities with it, from daughter, to daughter-in-law, to mother and, over time, also to grandmother – a rich entanglement that not only opens up possibilities for insights but also forecloses other contexts. Notably, most who publish works on their relationships are women, and though rich in detail, a broader comparative analysis remains to be done.

In our case, with more than four couples who established lifelong bonds by (getting married and/or) having children together after having met during fieldwork, the question of an emerging pattern arises. Ilva Ariëns and Ruud Strijp, as early as 1989, noted that anthropological fieldwork, like any professional environment, offers possibilities for amorous relationships. Of anthropologist couples asked to share their experiences, however, very few came back with a positive reply, but those who did so worked in the Middle East – the strong social and legal ostracism of intimate relationships in Muslim societies seems to demand scrutiny. So, here we are, after fieldwork in Pakistan. Let's now take the opportunity to take a closer look at our shared experiences.

Although our field trajectories were quite different, the most striking commonality attached to all of our relationships is that they went beyond the innocuous flirt or short-term sexual encounter and had serious, life-changing consequences, such as marriage, migration and children. However, this was often difficult for others, including family and colleagues, to accept, and even you, Martin, initially wrestled with the thought of perhaps having failed as a supervisor. Moreover, some of our families struggled with the geographic and cultural distance and the often seemingly quick decision to get married. When one after the other announced their intention to marry, one of the German fathers, for example, expressed his momentary resentment by suggesting that some-

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one should "hang the *Doktorvater* (PhD supervisor) by the testicles" for having sent his students to Pakistan and not prevented such intimate entanglements.[3] While marriage is the prerequisite for any kind of socially sanctioned romantic and sexual relationship in Pakistan, it is exactly the opposite in Germany, and so the idea of getting married without knowing each other for a couple of years, or having shared a daily routine, sounds somewhat suspect to most people socialised in Europe. Furthermore, in Pakistan, some of the future mothers-in-law had a not insignificant fear of relationship loyalty, be it because a "white girl" (*gori*) would not stay married for long, be it because she would eventually not enter into paradise with the (Muslim) family (even if she did turn out to be faithful to her husband after all).[4]

Why is the idea that ethnographic fieldwork can result in a partnership with someone from the area so difficult to accept – and why do a few anthropologists still deem it a professional failure? In times of 'native' anthropologists and anthropologists working 'at home', why is a relationship between an anthropologist and someone from 'the field' still labelled and sneered at by colleagues as "going native," i.e., a form of abandoning the dubious distinction between Self and Other (Tedlock 1991; Sluka and Robben 2012)? In *The Vulnerable Observer*, Ruth Behar (2022 [1997]) puts her finger on the paradox within participant observation, namely that one is supposed to "get the 'native point of view' […] without actually 'going native'" (ibid: 5). She grapples with the question that the established manner of scientific objectivity renders us anthropologists vulnerable to criticisms of failing to apply the scientific criteria of verifiability and transparency, since all our ethnographic knowledge is based on highly biographical and subjective fieldwork moments. On the one hand, it is long understood that not only is the place of fieldwork highly situational and contextual, but so is the person of the fieldworker, which is why it is deemed imperative to reflect on one's positionality as well as personal

3 This is a vivid example of the reactions of German family members, friends or ex-partners, revealing the persistence of patriarchal structures.

4 The issue of conversion (as well as applicable laws in the case of separation) remains one with which some families continue to struggle.

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relations (cf. Carsten 2012; Haraway 1988; Okely 1996). Additionally, reinforced by feminist approaches, methodology syllabi nowadays increasingly promote the patchiness of ethnographic entanglements (see, for example, the website patchworkethnography.com). On the other hand, it still seems to be difficult to admit without reservation that the fieldworker is not only a researcher, but also a human being and that no one is able to simply collect and analyse qualitative data without bias. As this edited volume illustrates, the boundaries between private and professional life tend to be fuzzy and blurred.

Notwithstanding this point, though, why is it that so many of us became entangled in serious relationships? In our discussions for this contribution, we discovered that the beginning of all our interactions involved extensive talking, both online and offline, in Pakistan, Germany and places in between – for hours upon hours. We discussed everything with our partners: politics, social norms, academics, poetry, music, emotions and more. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in different parts of Pakistan left a serious mark on all of us; however, it was increasingly difficult to speak about and make sense of these experiences with people who had never been to these places or who were perhaps somehow resistant to academic curiosity.

Nevertheless, we continue to wonder to what extent our attraction to and the perception of our partners were affected by different exoticisms,[5] hopes, dreams and interests. Some may have been interested in escaping the confinement of how things are done ordinarily, others drawn to share their privilege and help someone who was struggling. Having someone who could explain the subtleties and ambiguities of the field, or with whom to share the beauty of their cultural heritage, such as reciting Rumi and Bulleh Shah or discussing Marx and Nietzsche, might have been equally attractive. All of us have delighted in the feeling of transcending worlds and the excitement of explaining our backgrounds to each other with an infinite amount of content to explore and discuss. With this in mind, are our marriages purely personal, or were all of us "not only marrying the partner but marrying a culture" (as one of

5 Possibly, even orientalist biases influenced us to some extent.

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us phrased it)? Ultimately, we (like to) think that it was our curiosity, excitement, deep exchange and endless conversation that made us fall in love with each other.[6] The attempt to reconcile cultural differences, and the resulting ambivalences within our relationships, was however both a challenge to becoming a couple as well as a binding force, thereby adding to the already intense emotionality of a burgeoning relationship. Our marriages, then, were perhaps as much a result of the need to legalise them as of the thrill of doing something out-of-the-ordinary, of pushing normative frontiers. Being equipped with anthropological training, we felt able to transcend (perceived) cultural boundaries. 'Us against the rest of the world' feelings can apparently elevate a common infatuation to the sphere of the magical and thereby intensify the attraction. By entering a long-term partnership, we all chose to hold on to the intense experience of immersion in Pakistan – be it caused by adventurous travels, exciting fieldwork, the warm experience of family or the notion of deep, affectionate commitment.

The structural difficulties that mixed couples face dawned on us only after having sealed our commitments, and with time passing. Although we fulfilled legal (Islamic and German bureaucratic) expectations, we have learned that living as binational couples with diverse linguistic, socio-cultural and economic backgrounds can pose serious problems in relation to navigating different worlds, moving between places, juggling expectations and needs, bureaucratic requirements and social pressures. While Irwin (2006) writes that the structural inequalities of mixed couples become more attenuated "when marginalized men attempt to ride into middleclass [sic] worlds on women's coattails" (ibid: 169), we argue that difficulties apply in any case. Borders, discrimination, adverse child custody rules and other factors always hit the one who happens to be the outsider, no matter where and no matter their passport, gender or class. All of us have struggled with the lengthy processes involved in obtaining and maintaining visas, family reunification or official documents for different countries. All of us were

6 To be fair, the illegitimate sexual encounters experienced by most of us also came with a certain thrill.

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exposed to the intrusive scrutiny of our personal lives, compulsory visits from lawyers and security agencies and ongoing surveillance. To have a Pakistani marriage recognised in Germany, some were subjected to the pervasive suspicion of a sham marriage, and even after successfully resolving these issues, unpleasant and often racist encounters at the German *Ausländerbehörde* (Foreigners Office) were – and remain – a regular occurrence. The daily lives of those who have moved to the other country are affected by discrimination and feelings of isolation. For some of us it has taken years, whilst for others it continues to be a struggle to figure out where and how to live, to find a supportive community for our families and to secure employment for both partners.

Our intimate relationships have also forced us to confront our own stereotypes, unconscious biases and colonial baggage. No matter how genuine the intention and emotional involvement, such relationships raise questions about power and privilege, as well as the potential for perpetuating colonial dynamics. Many of us regularly engage in discussions about patriarchy and racism within our relationships. As white Europeans/European anthropologists, are we not automatically continuing a colonial project? As Pakistanis/Pakistani anthropologists, are we perpetuating the old power dynamics by engaging with Westerners? As couples, are we able and willing to fulfil the expectations set by ourselves, our families and societies? How do we navigate child-rearing and all the issues that arise with different pedagogical concepts and beliefs on what is best for our children? Is the pressure to successfully transcend cultural differences even greater in the light of our anthropological training? Or can the relationship between anthropologists and their partners be a way to disrupt and subvert traditional power dynamics and structural inequalities? After all, when anthropologists form relationships with individuals in the field, they establish a connection that extends beyond the immediate research focus.

Your own approach in the field, Martin, follows more established ways of building rapport and meaningful relations. As a foreigner in Pakistan, you are careful not to pass judgment or intervene in local ways of doing things, and thus you remain emotionally more detached and keep a 'professional' distance that perhaps appears to establish a some-

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what more 'objective' stance (cf. Irwin 2006, Sluka and Robben 2012). Moreover, you engage with interlocutors in a very polite, authentic and empathic manner, yet you follow your own – male, German, academic, anthropologist – logics and ethics. Just imagine how your research persona, your contacts, worldviews and writings would have been taken over by family entanglements had you married there, too. What do you think – would you be able to render an even better and more intricate picture of this part of the world, or would it simply be a different, equally partial one?

"To throw one's self into the field, *body and soul*," as described by Irwin (2006: 157, emphasis in the original), has slowly gained momentum as a research methodology since the interpretive, postmodern, feminist, affective turns over the last decades (see also Jackson 2012; Pinto 2014; Stodulka et al. 2019). Instead of striving to remove the inevitable dimension of emotional subjectivity from our work and leave out private entanglements in the established manner of "quiet political correctness" (Varley 2008: 134), a holistic approach through which we use our whole selves, our bodily perceptions and emotions as instruments facilitates insight (Walter 2019). When research partners become life partners, the field and everyday life merge. A good example is Emma Varley's (2008) very private and open account of her marriage into a Gilgiti family, which she uses to demonstrate how she evaluates protagonists through biased local prisms and personal (dis)regard. This holistic approach is not possible solely through wedlock, as the example of your good friend Monika Schneid, and her continuous engagement in girls' education in a valley near Gilgit town, shows (also see Lyon's chapter in this volume). However, marriage in the Pakistani context comes with quite all-encompassing social effects and seeps into any aspect of one's perception as well as personal identity. While such strong positionality, i.e., being associated with a certain family, offers deep insights, it simultaneously excludes other avenues. And, most importantly, fieldwork is never just over.[7] Consequently, these connections allow for a deeper understanding of socio-

7 This may, however, be increasingly true for many anthropologists who continue their field relations by means of electronic communication: for many anthro-

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cultural dynamics and have the potential to disrupt, challenge and deconstruct (post-)colonial continuities.

We all recognise the value of long-term involvement in South Asia and the different facets we have been able to discover due to the various roles we have embodied over time. Just as we see in your commitment to Pakistan (and particularly Gilgit-Baltistan) over more than three decades, we continue to rotate back and forth between Germany, Pakistan and sometimes third countries, often pulled back by work arrangements, at other times by private interests. Even though these journeys have not always been easy or delightful, they have been rich experiences none of us would want to miss. Dear Martin, we want to take this opportunity to thank you for your indirect role as matchmaker – a position you might not have wished for or even imagined before, but one which you have grown to be enthusiastic about in the face of at least eight 'grandchildren'.

And when we read one of your most recent publications, we realised our experiences have also come to mirror in your teachings: In *Keep research ethics dirty!* (2022), you speak out against the growing praxis of obtaining ethical clearance through research boards before embarking on anthropological fieldwork. You believe, along with Didier Fassin, that "moral and ethical dimensions of human action are empirically and normatively impure" (2015: 177). For example, to fill a standardised questionnaire before going into the field would therefore equate to a "manual of confession to be filled in for the soul-searching of not yet committed fieldwork sins" (Sökefeld 2022: 522) and would also be counterintuitive, given the messiness of fieldwork. Ethics statements in anthropology (e.g., those of the Frankfurter Erklärung, AAA, ASA) are rather vague in this regard, but they do demand that researchers continuously reflect on their positionality and power dynamics with interlocutors and acquaintances in the field. Although there are no official guidelines advising against intimate relationships with someone in the field, given the overall level of ethical scrutiny, they do hint at the notion.

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pologists the old dichotomy of being in the field and leaving it no longer applies (see the special section by Hughes and Walter 2021; Sluka and Robben 2012).

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And despite all kinds of turns in anthropology, an informal moral code (still) tends to delegitimise relationships with partners from the field. Nevertheless, as illustrated in the various contributions provided for this edited volume, the boundaries between private and professional life are always fluid and blurred; fieldwork is as messy and unforeseeable as life itself, and yet it deserves careful examination. Such scrutiny may again remind us of the absence of objectivity and the unavoidable partiality of any ethnographic venture and product. While marriage in the field offers a deep understanding of certain aspects very likely denied to the standard visiting ethnographer, it nonetheless certainly prevents other insights. Moreover, the need to transcend cultural boundaries, stereotypes, biases and socioeconomic inequalities requires perpetual effort. Yet, the idea of doing something out-of-the-ordinary, of pushing normative frontiers through something as ordinary as a marriage, is quite fascinating. Consequently, writing about our German-Pakistani relationships seemed not only the obvious but also the necessary choice. Would a cautionary questionnaire really have prepared us against throwing the (post-)colonial understanding of *us* and *them* overboard?

With love from all of us.

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