Ethics Reviews in the Social and Cultural Sciences?
A Sociological and Anthropological Contribution to the Debate

Hella von Unger, Hansjörg Dilger & Michael Schönhuth

Abstract: In the German social and cultural sciences attention to research ethics is growing, with empirical researchers increasingly seeking advice and addressing ethical issues in their research practice. In addition, there is an infrastructural debate in this country about whether the use of ethics review boards for research projects should be widened. Researchers who apply for international funding or seek to publish internationally increasingly are expected to gain ethical approval for their empirical projects.

Ethics reviews are common in the social and cultural sciences in the Anglophone world. But qualitative researchers severely criticize basic aspects of them—primarily the bureaucratization and regulation that such reviews entail and especially the fact that their institutionalized principles and procedures are incompatible with qualitative research. Designed for clinical, medical, or quantitative research, these review procedures may undermine the freedom, quality, and the diversity of methods and methodologies in social and cultural science research. Against this backdrop, what opportunities and challenges do the current developments in Germany present? The Munich symposium entitled "Research Ethics in Ethnographic Field Work" was an occasion to formulate anthropological and sociological perspectives on this question.

We argue for a proactive institutional response, including that of providing ethics review boards to sociologists and anthropologists in Germany as long as such structures remain optional and allow for the methodological diversity and unique features of ethnographic field work. When it comes to fostering ethical conduct, however, we note that qualitative researchers find it far more relevant to promote ethical reflexivity in teaching and research practice than to introduce ethics review boards.

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1. Introduction

The international discussion of research ethics in the social and cultural sciences often resounds with the reproach that the standards and procedures for assessing research ethics in medical research have been extended beyond that field without proper regard for the specific methods and research conventions of other disciplines (ISRAEL, 2015; VAN DEN HOONARD, 2002, 2011). The ensuing incompatibilities become apparent especially through institutionalized

reviews conducted by ethics boards,[1] which are mandatory in the English-speaking world (e.g., Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States). Before research projects in those countries can actually start, they must be reviewed for conformity to principles of research ethics (such as whether the participants will be asked for their informed consent). Furthermore, continuing review occurs and studies are re-examined, for example when changes have been made in the design and methodology. These reviews are a considerable obstacle for some qualitative studies because they require plannable research processes and a particular research context alien to most research of this kind, especially exploratory ethnographic ones. Through the review process, conditions contrary to the nature, principles and processes of ethnographic field work are imposed (e.g., review boards may require early decisions on the study design, including details about the informed consent processes). In ethnographic research, however, the formulation of the research question must be situationally adapted, and relevant actors of the research field are often not known in advance at all. Many researchers believe that the existence, freedom, and quality of qualitative research, especially ethnographic field work, is thus in jeopardy (BELL, 2014; VAN DEN HOONARD, 2011). [1]

Given these reservations, the policies and procedures of ethics reviews have undergone revision in parts of the English-speaking world to adapt them to the social and cultural sciences. Since 1988, for instance, the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS), a binding reference document in Canada for the review of all research on humans, was revised to include in its second version (TCPS2), among other things, a chapter on qualitative research and exceptions to standards (e.g., written informed consent or obligatory anonymization and use of pseudonyms).[2] [2]

Yet despite the efforts to adapt the principles and procedures to the methodological diversity of research in the social and cultural sciences, criticism persists that forms of regulatory ethics are diametrically opposed to the actual purpose of ethical conduct in field work (BELL, 2016). Two basic positions are distinguishable. One is the rejection of any institutionalized review of research ethics because it constitutes a form of regulation that would eventually continually curtail qualitative research approaches, processes, and results (DINGWALL, 2008). On the other hand, however, this lively and complex debate among qualitative and ethnographic researchers sees also those who, though critical of the review processes, do not fundamentally disagree with them and instead favor efforts to revise the existing procedures and formulate more appropriate principles of research ethics (FLUEHR-LOBBAN, 2008; ROTH, 2005). [3]

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1 These bodies—known in the United States as institutional review boards (IRBs), in Canada as research ethics boards (REBs), in the U.K. as research ethics committees (RECs), and in Australia as human research ethics committees (HRECs)—are generally seated in the centers at which the research is pursued. For an overview of the diverse procedures for assessing research ethics in different parts of the world within and beyond the English-speaking countries, see Israel (2015, pp.45-78).

2 http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/initiatives/tcps2-eptc2/Default/ [accessed: August 25, 2016].

In Germany, codes and guidelines of ethical conduct have been drawn up in various disciplines,[3] but the debates have been rather restrained in the social and cultural sciences. Ethics reviews are mandatory in medical research and for experimental studies, as in psychology,[4] but not for most of the empirical research in the social and cultural sciences (VON UNGER & SIMON, 2016). In Germany, data protection legislation addresses several concerns related to research ethics—including informed consent (GEBEL et al., 2015). There are also guidelines on "Good Scientific Practice" (DFG, 2013), although it should be remarked that these address primarily issues of scientific misconduct (e.g., fraudulent data, plagiarism). Ethics reviews along the lines of the Anglo-American model are rare. Thus, until recently, social and cultural scientists in Germany encountered ethics reviews only when conducting research in contexts for which such examination is stipulated (e.g., medical settings, nations that mandate ethics reviews) (DILGER, 2015), or when seeking international funding, or when publishing in international journals.[5] These and other external conditions, along with initiatives within the disciplinary communities which have increased recently, are enlivening the debate and sparking discussion of introducing ethics reviews of social and cultural science research in Germany as well. [4]

In this article, we outline and comment on the current situation and take a position on present developments. We focus on ethnographic field work as a variant of qualitative research that represents the key methodological approach to research in social and cultural anthropology and is prominent in sociology as well— although we are fully aware that this field of qualitative research encompasses a vast range of methods and methodologies.[6] We assume that under certain

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3   For example, the German Sociological Association [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, DGS] and the Association of German Professional Sociologists [Berufsverband deutscher Soziologinnen und Soziologen, BDS] adopted an ethics code in 1993 and slightly revised it in 2014 (DGS & BDS, 2014). The German professional organization for social and cultural anthropology, the German Anthropological Association [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde, DGV e.V.], adopted its ethics code in 2009 (DGV, 2009). Individual DGV working groups, such as the Task Force on Developmental Cultural and Social Anthropology [Arbeitsgemeinschaft Entwicklungsethnologie] and the Working Group Medical Anthropology [Arbeitsgruppe Medical Anthropology], formulated their own ethical guidelines in 2001 (updated in 2013) and 2005, respectively (AGEE, 2013; MEDICAL ANTHROPOLOGY WORKING GROUP OF THE GERMAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSOCIATON, 2005). Interestingly, the degree to which such arrangements are binding varies. It ranges from a "declaration" without any institutionally binding character (as with the DGV) and the more committal "guidelines" (AGEE; Working Group Medical Anthropology) to the "ethics code" (DGS) flanked by an ethics board.

4   The German Psychological Society [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie, DGPs] set up a national ethics board, which has drawn up ethics guidelines of the German Society for Psychology and the Association of German Professional Psychologists (*Ethische Richtlinien der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie und des Berufsverbands Deutscher Psychologinnen und Psychologen*) as well as research-related guidelines. The board also monitors compliance with both sets of guidelines (https://www.dgps.de/index.php?id=96422 [accessed: August 25, 2016]). Ethics boards for reviewing experimental studies exist locally at many universities and research centers as well.

5   For example, certified approval of research ethics is required for all submissions responding to the call for proposals within the framework of the EU Horizon 2020. "The Ethics Review aims at ensuring (where necessary with the help of independent experts) that any research carried out under E[uropean] R[esearch] C[ouncil] grants complies with European fundamental ethical values. The Ethics Review also comprises Ethics Monitoring" (https://erc.europa.eu/glossary/term/255 [accessed: September 8, 2016]).

6   We make no claim to being able to convey the diverse disciplinary cultures, specific methods, and ethical implications encompassed by the social and cultural sciences. However, whereas

conditions an institutionalized form of ethics review is basically purposeful also in the social and cultural sciences. At the same time, we think that a discussion focusing *exclusively* on a formalization of procedures for ethics reviews is inadequate for the topic. We therefore intend this article to initiate a debate on how reflections about ethics and values can be integrated far more inclusively into the everyday work of sociologists and anthropologists. We first describe the current developments in Germany, including the controversial debate on ethics reviews. We then provide a report of a symposium in Munich which demonstrated what kind of ethical challenges ethnographic research implies, and conclude with our own position that we wish to take in the debate. [5]

2. Current Developments[7]

Attention to the issue of research ethics has increased in German social and cultural sciences in recent years. First, researchers themselves are showing interest in research ethics, critically reflecting on their own research practice, and seeking the related counsel and orientation (DILGER, HUSCHKE & MATTES, 2015; SIRI, 2013; VON UNGER, NARIMANI & M'BAYO, 2014). Second, new technologies and digital realities (e.g., social media research and visual data), are posing new ethical questions and dilemmas (SIRI, 2013). Research on social networks, for example, is confronted with the question how to protect informants, safeguard the ownership of data, and get informed consent in the context of social media such as Facebook and Twitter (SCHÖNHUTH, 2014). Third, researchers with an international or interdisciplinary orientation must submit certification of ethical approval but have few, if any, options in Germany for obtaining it (DILGER, 2011). Fourth, some research centers and sources of research funding have shown an interest in developing standards of research ethics and procedures for checking them to create transparency, improve the monitoring of processes, and help preclude accusations, lawsuits, claims for indemnification, and other possible problems of litigation. Lastly, debates and developments regarding data protection, standardization, professionalization and other topics touching on research ethics are also fueling the discussion. They, and the controversies they trigger, are instructive. The debates over the digital archiving and secondary use of qualitative data in recent years (BERGMAN & EBERLE, 2005; SMIOSKI, 2013) have made clear how problematic an indiscriminate extension of standards and procedures from quantitative to qualitative research would be in this respect (HIRSCHAUER, 2014; VON UNGER, 2015). [6]

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sociology generally figures as one of the social sciences, social and cultural anthropology is sometimes placed within the cultural sciences instead. This classification is particularly true of "European social and cultural anthropology" (*Europäische Ethnologie*), which stems historically from folklore studies (*Volkskunde*) and thus comes from a different disciplinary tradition than does social and cultural anthropology (*Ethnologie*, originally *Völkerkunde*).

7 The history of the discussion of ethics has been revisited many times in the German and international literature. We therefore dispense with a review and refer readers interested in social and cultural anthropology to HORNBACHER (2006) and SCHÖNHUTH (2005) on the German-speaking context, and FLUEHR-LOBBAN (2013) on the North American setting. For works on sociology in Germany we recommend, for example, HOPF (2004) and VON UNGER and SIMON (2016). For the many various international discussions of ethics in the social sciences, see the overview by ISRAEL (2015).

In view of this conglomeration of concerns and agendas, numerous local ethics
boards for the social sciences are being formed in many areas.[8] The German
Data Forum (RatSWD) has launched an initiative to support these processes. (A
working group on research ethics is developing guidelines for reviewing aspects
of research ethics pertaining to social and economic studies.)[9] Research centers
and research-funding organizations such as the Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation, Germany's equivalent
of the U.S. National Science Foundation) are addressing the risks of social
science research (DFG & LEOPOLDINA, 2015; KÄMPER, 2016). [7]

These developments attract criticism, too. An especially big bone of contention is
the risk of overregulating the procedures of ethics review, which in the final
analysis would primarily mean expanding the jurisdiction of ad hoc bodies
(DINGWALL, 2008). In the United States, for example, institutional review boards
(IRBs) have become highly bureaucratic control apparatuses that push "risk
minimization" for legally liable universities and research centers (DROOGSMA
MUSOBA, JACOB & ROBINSON, 2014, p.3). Ethnographers stress that the
review processes adapted from medical research represent an "impoverished"
social practice in North America (ATKINSON, 2009, p.17). To these researchers
in particular, ethics reviews mean a regimentation that tends to interfere with
flexibility and reflexivity as far as research sites, interviewees, discussion
partners, and choice of topics are concerned. In addition, the reviews fail to
recognize that ethnographic research is usually a product of collaborative
processes in which research relations are organized differently than in
quantitative research and research data, as well as research questions, are not
the sole possession of the researchers (UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN, INSTITUTE OF
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT SOCIOLOGY, 2015).[10] [8]

Given these controversies over the formalization and institutionalization of ethics
reviews, the question is how to keep from replicating in the German context the
problematic developments that colleagues in the English-speaking countries have
experienced. The North American and British experiences demonstrate that it is
not conducive to narrow the debate on research ethics to the issue of review
procedures. In this contribution we therefore also examine ethical implications of
ethnographic research that go beyond the matter of institutionalized monitoring.
In the following section we explore this line of thought in light of a particular

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8   The ethics board created in the social science department at Ludwig-Maximilians-University of
    Munich (LMU) in 2015 is a case in point, see http://www.sozialwissenschaften.uni-
    muenchen.de/fakultaet/ethikkommission/index.html [accessed: September 21, 2016]. Ethics
    review is optional here and occurs only on the request of the university's researchers.

9   http://www.ratswd.de/en/topics/working-group-research-ethics [accessed: November 4, 2016].

10 In ethnographic research the participating actors have on principle more agency and control in
    the research process than in quantitative or clinical research. Hence, the research relations and
    attendant balance of power are structured altogether differently in ethnographic work than in the
    research conducted in clinical medicine. For ethical reasons, too, specific approaches in
    ethnographic research, especially participatory and collaborative ones, greatly emphasize equal
    standing in the cooperation with partners in field work (FLUEHR-LOBBAN, 2008; SCHÖNHUTH,
    2002).

symposium—"Research Ethics and Ethnographic Field Work"—which took place at Ludwig Maximilian University (LMU) in Munich from June 30 to July 1, 2016.[11] [9]

3. Ethical Aspects of Ethnographic Research: A Symposium

The contributions to the symposium in Munich made it clear that ethnographic field work entails various ethical challenges and, as a style of research, fosters reflection about them in a specific way. As Angelika POFERL emphasized in one of the introductory papers, a key dictum in ethnographic work processes is "Fremdverstehen" (understanding of that which is other or alien to us) (SCHÜTZ) —even if such a conceptual stance is a continuous challenge by itself and can no longer be taken for granted in today's globalized, postcolonial research situations. Ethnography's aspiration to equip us to look at cultures analytically as though they were (and often in fact are) not our own (HIRSCHAUER & AMANN, 1997) encompasses both the systematic reflection by researchers about their own subjectivities and a continual attempt to translate the legitimacy and intelligibility of knowledge among the people participating in research. [10]

The other presentations at the symposium were given essentially by students, doctoral candidates, and postdoctoral scholars from social and cultural anthropology, sociology, and social work, who addressed different ethical aspects of ethnographic processes. Participant observation calls upon researchers to immerse themselves in the field for long periods to comprehend the interpretive processes and action sequences from the perspective of the individuals involved, from the inside so to speak. Doing so requires researchers to deal sensitively and flexibly with the actors in the field and with the routines, values, and norms that apply there. Ethnographic processes also demand that researchers systematically distance themselves and reflect on their experiences by taking field notes and by taking breaks from their time in the field. Immersion, familiarization and participation as well as self-distancing, and analysis are thus combined in an iterative process that nurtures conditions for research that can generate valuable scientific knowledge. This combination also cultivates sensitivity and respect for the participants (interlocutors) and the processes in the field, avoids damage (to the extent possible), identifies ethical challenges early, and helps formulate alternatives for dealing with them. [11]

The papers at the symposium offered examples of the ethical challenges that can arise in ethnographic research practice. Juliane MÜLLER showed that comprehensive informed consent from everyone present can be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve consistently through ethnographic conversations and participant observations in unstructured research situations in the real-life context. The problem is reflected in the Anglo-American literature, too, and raises the contentious question of whether this principle, which was developed for medical and quantitative research, is at all appropriate in ethnographic research, where participation, communication, and access to the field is organized differently (BELL, 2014; FLUEHR-LOBBAN, 2008; SHANNON, 2007). [12]

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11 http://www.qualitative-forschung.de/fqs-supplement/fotos/zoom/16-3-20-d_Programmflyer.jpg
    [accessed: August 30, 2016].

Inevitably, questions about the boundaries of social interaction, the rights of the people involved, and the protection of the researchers arise in highly politicized research fields, as Alice BLUM demonstrated in her study on right-wing extremist milieus that operate on the fringe of legality. Felix RIEDEL, in a paper about his field work on people persecuted in witch hunts in Ghana, illustrated that immersing oneself in social processes and relations in the field poses challenges at many levels when it comes to managing research relations. How can researchers strike an appropriate balance between proximity and distance, between involvement and scientific agenda, in a context that seems to openly call for political intervention? Other papers showed that assurances of confidentiality, anonymity, and use of pseudonyms mandated under data-protection regulations are at odds with the methodological demands of detailing the specific, local context and preserving the heuristic value of the data. The discussion also made apparent that procedures for protecting confidentiality are quickly decodable not only by "insiders" but, in the age of the Internet, by many others as well. As shown by Annekathrin STANGE's research on experiences with abortion, the challenges related to the anonymization of the data and the use of pseudonyms often surface not only during but also after completion of the field work, especially in the publication phase of the research process. This finding calls into question the idea of focusing ethics discussions exclusively on the phase of data collection. Her paper also illustrated that reflections about research ethics can contribute to data analysis and the findings of a study. [13]

Lastly, several poster presentations and flash talks (including some from the student perspective) addressed the question of what ethical responsibilities should be assumed for participants who may be regarded as vulnerable groups (e.g., refugees or children). And to what extent must protection extend to researchers themselves (dependent researchers and students in particular) in such politically precarious and emotionally laden contexts? The fact that research institutions (and not just individuals such as researchers and caregivers) also bear responsibility was illustrated by Aisha Nusrat AHMAD and Angela KÜHNER's presentation of a study in Afghanistan, where local key persons indicated that researchers involved were in acute danger of being attacked or kidnapped. Researchers find that existing codes of ethics offer guidance (however abstract and general) for some of these challenges but not on others. Moreover, only some of the challenges are foreseeable. Codified principles and formalized reviews that come to bear *before* the research starts afford little guidance for handling the ethical questions and challenges that researchers face in ethnographic practice. [14]

The evening lecture by Kirsten BELL offered a useful frame for all these themes and discussions by explaining what happens when the ethnographic discussion of ethics is confined to formalized procedures. Based on the experience with ethics reviews in Canada, three especially relevant aspects emerged for our present contribution and the discussion of introducing ethics reviews in Germany. First, highly bureaucratic review processes—which can be described as regulatory ethics—in North America represent an iron cage of a society permeated by regulations, as Max WEBER (2005 [1921/22]) might have put it. In many cases it

has become a "box-ticking procedure" which negates a "true ethic" and ethical conduct (BELL, 2014, p.519). Second, the discussion about ethics reviews seems to be changing course in the United States itself, shifting in favor of ceasing institutionalized ethics reviews for studies classified as "low-risk" (i.e., most qualitative ones). Third, Kirsten BELL drew attention to the pervasive and problematic perspective of members of ethics boards who assume that social science researchers control the research process and are in charge of the research situation, which is not the case in most qualitative, ethnographic research. She also contended that these processes have formatted thinking about research primarily in terms of "risks" versus "benefits" which have become engrained in these contexts and have positioned research in general as invasive and potentially coercive—in complete contradiction to the ethnographer's more participatory ways of working. Her presentation underscored that the existing codes and review processes do little, if anything, to facilitate and support the exploration of the kinds of ethical issues that social and cultural anthropologists as well as sociologists face. [15]

4. Conclusion and Outlook

In recent years, researchers in the social and cultural sciences in Germany have been increasingly confronted with the obligation to submit evidence of passing an ethics review, whether as part of a research proposal or for the publication of research results in international journals. It can also be required of social and cultural scientists conducting research in interdisciplinary contexts mandating such certification. These researchers need the option of an ethics review that is sensitive to the particularities of the methods and methodologies used in their work. We here expressly emphasize once more that we advocate an institutionalization of ethics reviews in the social and cultural sciences as long as such processes meet two essential conditions. First, they must continue to be optional for the researchers themselves. As discussed above, we reject a blanket approach of obligatory reviews, like those common in the Anglo-American world and currently called for in the European Union program Horizon 2020. Second, such ethics reviews must always give due consideration to the diverse disciplinary cultures within the social and cultural sciences—and, hence, to ethnographic approaches. [16]

Beyond the question of whether to formalize ethics reviews, however, we argue in this text for a more comprehensive debate on ethical aspects of the empirical way of working in the social and cultural sciences. Intense exchanges about ethical aspects of research and teaching have taken place in both sociology and social and cultural anthropology in the English-speaking world for several decades, but ethics has remained a relatively remote topic in these disciplines in the German-speaking countries over long periods (VON UNGER et al., 2014, p.5). With few exceptions in specific fields (e.g., BLISS, SCHÖNHUTH & ZUCKER, 2002; KNIPPER & WOLF, 2004; SCHÖNHUTH, BLISS & WENTZEL, 2001), there is very little literature that could guide either young academics or established researchers in addressing ethical questions. In this context it is also necessary to

anchor research ethics more explicitly in methodological training than is currently the case and to develop corresponding resources. [17]

Following up on the discussions at the Munich symposium, we note that it is important to clearly connect *and* carefully distinguish between the specific logics currently associated with debates on research ethics, data protection, and good scientific practice in Germany. Despite obvious overlaps and individual points in common, legal logic (which dominates the debate on data protection) should not be equated with a logic of scientific ethics, which marks the disciplinary debate on research ethics. In addition, scholars should develop a language for expressing the ethical implications of ethnographic and social science research, one in which the categories of 'risks' and 'benefits' are recognized as both reductionist and epistemologically problematic. Furthermore, we emphasize that treating ethics reviews as lists with boxes to be checked off is not only too narrow but potentially damaging to the methods and methodologies that actually underpin ethnographic research—the building of trust and social relations. Lastly, we see a need for establishing in universities and research centers new spaces of thinking and learning that reflect the complex ethical realities of ethnographic practice—including both close cooperation with the study participants and reflecting the researcher's own position in the research process—at all levels of the scientific endeavor (DOHRN & DILGER, 2016; VON UNGER, 2016). Symposia like the one in Munich can be one of several possible models for initiating discussions on research ethics, which can be organized around methods or issues as well as across disciplinary boundaries. [18]

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Authors

Hella VON UNGER, professor of sociology focusing on qualitative methods of empirical social research, Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich (LMU). Executive board member of the Section on Qualitative Methods, German Sociological Association [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziologie, DGS]. Currently in the Research Ethics Working Group of the German Data Forum [Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten, RatSWD].

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Hella von Unger

Ludwigs-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) München
Institute of Sociology
Konradstraße 6, 80801 Munich, Germany

Tel.: +49-(0)89-2180-6315
Fax: +49-(0)89-2180-17918

E-mail: unger@lmu.de
URL: http://www.qualitative-sozialforschung.soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/personen/professorin/unger/

Hansjörg DILGER, professor of social and cultural anthropology focusing on medical anthropology and the anthropology of religion, Freie Universität Berlin. Chair of the German Anthropological Association [Deutsche Gesellschaft für Völkerkunde e.V., DGV] since 2015, and speaker of the DGV's Working Group on Medical Anthropology from 2004 to 2010. Co-moderator of the collaborative blog Medizinethnologie: Body, Health and Healing in an Interconnected World.

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Dilger

Freie Universität Berlin, Fachbereich Politik- und Sozialwissenschaften
Institut für Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie
Landoltweg 9-11, 14195 Berlin, Germany

Tel.: +49-(0)30-838-56872
Fax: +49-(0)30-838-52382

E-mail: hansjoerg.dilger@berlin.de
URL: http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/ethnologie/personen/professorinnen/dilger.html

Michael SCHÖNHUTH, professor of cultural and social anthropology focusing on culture and development, participatory methods, and impact and network research, University of Trier. Founding and executive board member of the Task Force on Developmental Cultural and Social Anthropology [Arbeitsgemeinschaft Entwicklungsethnologie, AGEE]. Consultant for cultural, developmental, and governmental institutions for many years and for International Network for Social Network Analysis (INSNA) in the area of research ethics.

Contact:

Prof. Dr. Michael Schönhuth

Universität Trier, Fachbereich IV/Abteilung: Soziologie/Ethnologie
Professur für Ethnologie
Universitätsring 15, 54286 Trier, Germany

Tel.: +49-(0)651-201-2710
Fax: +49-(0)651-201-3933

E-mail: schoenhu@uni-trier.de
URL: https://www.uni-trier.de/index.php?id=18079

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