Introduction

Although this issue of the journal is not a themed issue, the articles included here provide an encouragement and opportunity to think and reflect on the nature of ethnographic fieldwork, how it has or has not changed over the years, and about the ethical implications of anthropological research. The studies they describe prompt questions for me about how anthropologists (or other researchers) should be engaged with their 'subjects' and in what manner. How far have 'subjects' been transformed into participants, and what does the researcher give to and gain from this transformation? Is the anthropologist's engagement with the field an obligation that anthropologists have shied away from, or something which is too easily assumed to be a good thing?

Working within a school of health sciences, I am very familiar with debates and activities around user engagement with research, and have been involved in developing methodologies for such work in health research, from research priority setting exercises to involvement in designing and conducting studies as well as commenting on study findings. There is even a well-established journal focused on such issues, *Health Expectations*.

How far has this movement progressed within anthropology, which I believe has traditionally viewed itself as located with the world-views and interests of its 'subjects' but nonetheless expresses hesitations around issues such as advocacy or engagement? Recent articles in this journal, and in other such as *Anthropology Today*,¹ highlight that many anthropologists' work was either naively or consciously used for political purposes, and not always the political purposes of the people who were the subjects of the research, as opposed to its commissioners or users. So, how should anthropologists deal with the issues of engagement?

Over the past couple of years, the Association of Social Anthropologists of the U.K. and Commonwealth (the ASA) has been debating and developing its updated ethical guidelines (<http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>). Similar processes have been completed by the American Anthropological Association, whose updated code of ethics in 2008 (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>) was the subject of much debate. In April, the meeting of the newly combined networks of *Anthropology in Action* and the ASA's *Apply Network* was focused on a discussion of ethics and anthropological fieldwork, with reference to the ASA's new code. The meeting prompted lively discussion among anthropologists working in fields as diverse as product design, international development, global health and anthropology of medicine. We looked at the intersection of the ASA code with other ethical codes that anthropologists may be expected to follow, and particularly with the requirements of formal ethical committees such as the U.K. National Health Service's Research Ethics Service (NRES). Although the NRES committees are multi-disciplinary, include lay membership and have an appreciation of a range of research methodologies, the formal review system was constructed with a primary view to the prevention of risk and harm to NHS patients involved in clinical studies such as interventional trials. We discussed that research methodologies such as ethnography may need somewhat different forms of ethical consideration, such as how to deal with the need for research to be overt when using approaches such as observation, the challenge of maintaining informed consent when research is longer-term and less formally structured, and the potential limitations of 'consent' with people who may be overlooked while not the focus

of study, or who may feel suspicious or worried when confronted by consent forms to be signed. Ethnographic methodology likewise poses different challenges for anthropologists around participation in formal settings, and with professional practices.

This also prompted discussion of the challenges of fieldwork in contexts where the anthropologist is 'studying up',² working within multi-disciplinary research teams, or working for specific commissioning organizations such as development agencies, government departments or commercial companies. Many anthropological researchers face questions about how far they should engage in advocacy, which may threaten notions of objectivity, thought to depend on a measure of academic distance. How do anthropologists define and describe their distinctive role and contribution, and how is the relationship of closeness (to understand subjectivity) and distance (to obtain objectivity) negotiated and balanced? Whose interests is the ethnographer guided by and accountable to, and how can different audiences of research be communicated with effectively?

The articles in this issue contribute in different ways to addressing such common questions for practising anthropologists. First, Gillian Evans's account of her unexpected recall to an older fieldwork relationship, her engagement and advocacy, and reflections on this experience, invite the reader to reflect on the position of the anthropological researcher. It reminds us that the researcher may gain much from an ethnographic encounter, but any attempt to give something back through engagement must be approached modestly, and with care. Her experience suggests that fieldwork relationships which extend to engagement may, nonetheless, have a real value. In her words we hear the voice of the 'subject' echoed indirectly, through the writer's words and reflections, and directly through the voice of 'Tracey' after she herself has read and reflected on the article. Peter Anton Zoettl's article on the use of video in participatory approaches to ethnography

also asks the reader to consider carefully the ways in which researchers engage with their subjects. Genuine engagement may enable researchers and their 'audiences' to see beyond their initial assumptions. Zoettl discusses how the participatory approach enabled him to adopt an advocacy role that was not about taking a lead or speaking 'for' people, but more about facilitating them to explore and negotiate issues of identity and self-representation, while also exploring the role of visual imagery in such identity formation.

Finally, Marc-Eric Gruénais and colleagues' article weighs up the benefits and risks of anthropological involvement in a multi-disciplinary research team attempting to make a difference to maternal health and wellbeing, with the ideal of reducing maternal harms and deaths in resource-poor settings. They caution that not only may anthropologists' approaches be difficult to scale up because of their expensive, time-consuming nature, but if not handled carefully could be destructive, leading to more resistance than change by professional subjects who feel judgement rather than empathy, or opening up fractures in an already fragile context. Despite this warning, it is clear that without the more fine-grained research approaches offered by ethnographic or other qualitative research approaches, the troubles that underlie such problems may remain misunderstood.

Together, these articles offer useful insights into the questions the network meeting discussed about how anthropological research can be handled in an engaged and ethical way.

Christine McCourt, Spring 2012

Notes

1. See, for example, Lutz, C. (2008), 'Selling Ourselves? The Perils of Pentagon Funding for Anthropology', *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 5: 1–3.
2. See, for example, Schweigler, T. (2008), 'Trading Up: Reflections on Power, Collaboration, and Ethnography in the Anthropology of Policy', *Anthropology in Action* 15, no. 2: 10–25.