"Ethics, Epistemology and Ethnography: Ethical Review Boards and the Special Case of Germany"

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Over the last years, debates on research ethics – and the way the ethicality of ethnographic research can be assessed by specific boards and committees – have flourished in international anthropology, and the social sciences at large. This paper discusses the state of the debate in Germany where ethical review boards have remained so far largely absent in regard to anthropological research and where the commitment to “act ethically” during fieldwork (and beyond) remains until today largely voluntary and self-imposed. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork on HIV/AIDS and social relations in rural and urban Tanzania, I highlight that medical anthropologists may face particular ethical challenges in their work, due to the often close relationship of their research with human suffering and the moral conflicts conversations (and observations) on the topic may entail. Furthermore, I argue that the sub-discipline can raise important questions concerning the potential institutionalization of ethical review processes in anthropology in Germany, and the pitfalls that should be avoided with regard to the “fetishization” of certain ethical doctrines (such as the informed consent process) as they have proven largely incommensurable with the core epistemological assumptions of the discipline.

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