Ethics and the Role of Humanities in Transdisciplinary Research? A Short Reflection on the KNOTS Project

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In this paper, we reflect upon our role as researchers embedded in humanities in the KNOTS project. In the course of the project, we noticed various misapprehensions among both staff and students stemming, among others, from different cultural, political, and educational backgrounds. While a diversity of inputs and perspectives is considered an advantage for transdisciplinary projects, cooperation among actors with various backgrounds can also be challenging. Based on our observations and previous experience living and working in Vietnam, we created a session focusing on ethics for the last summer school in Ho Chi Minh City. We decided to bring participants' attention to research ethics and issues of cross-cultural communication, and suggested reflection and discussion as a coping strategy. In the course of a three years long mutual learning process, we realized that striving to create a common understanding of research ethics and cross-cultural awareness is an indispensable element of teaching and doing transdisciplinary research in a multicultural environment.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Awareness; Ethics; Humanities; Reflection; Transdisciplinarity

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INTRODUCTION: TRANSDISCIPLINARITY AND POWER

Transdisciplinarity as a new framework of knowledge production and a way of solving 'real world problems' has gained popularity over the last decades. Notwithstanding contestations regarding its exact meaning, the term is widely used nowadays. A transdisciplinary approach is increasingly applied in development studies. While, given their focus on 'real-world impact', natural sciences and social sciences are well represented in transdisciplinary research (from here on, TDR), the role of humanities might be less obvious. The aim of this paper is to reflect on how we as members of the Charles University (CUNI) KNOTS project team, who are embedded in humanities, searched for our place in the KNOTS project (Dannecker, 2020, this issue). Our role in the project included project management and quality management, but we also took part in other tasks, such as teaching at summer schools and field trips, and contributing to the Teaching Manual. In the course of the project, we realized the necessity to reflect and negotiate even the basic principles of scientific work, including our ethical assumptions.

SEARCHING FOR OUR PLACE IN A TDR PROJECT

Both authors come from an old, reputable, and rather conservative Central European university. Having degrees in Ethnology and Vietnamese Studies, we spent most of the time learning Vietnamese language, history, literature, and culture, and basic principles of anthropology in the course of our studies. It is important to say that Czech Oriental Studies were, for historical reasons, influenced by a Soviet orientalist tradition – one where language, culture, and history are considered inseparable to acquire a deep understanding and insight of a place and society. Therefore, area studies, including Vietnamese Studies at our faculty, fall into humanities rather than social sciences.[1] In an effort to reach a comprehensive knowledge of an 'Oriental' culture, students at our faculty often find themselves lost and not sufficiently prepared in the areas requiring more theoretical and methodological thinking. We both experienced this as well. It was not until our participation in the KNOTS project, that the oftentimes blurred borderline between humanities and social sciences became apparent to us. We realized that, while our training was embedded in humanities, our research practice often took place in the field of social sciences. In fact, we experience this transgression of academic boundaries as stimulating and beneficial.

From the very first moment of reading the proposal, the KNOTS project was an exciting challenge for both us. We had rather hazy ideas about *EU Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education* projects, networking projects, and the transdisciplinary approach itself. During the first sessions, kick-off and other meetings with the partners from Europe and Southeast Asia, our role, except the administrative one mentioned above, was not very clear to us (Seemann & Antweiler, 2020, this issue). Preparing for the first summer school in Vietnam, we were still not sure how to contribute to the teaching sessions, since our experience with regards to the project's three major topics of *migration*, *environment,* and *social inequality* was rather limited. However, we gradually realized that our academic background and experience of living, studying, and conducting research in Vietnam had its place in the project.

Since a transdisciplinary approach is based on cooperation among actors with various backgrounds (academic, cultural, social, political, etc.), a diversity of inputs and perspectives is considered an advantage for transdisciplinary projects. However, the plurality within the team can also bring many unexpected situations, challenges, misunderstandings, and sometimes even conflicts (Dannecker, 2020, this issue; Dannecker & Heis, 2020, this issue). In the course of the project, we noticed various misapprehensions among both students and staff during various activities. While this is common in teamwork, in the case of international cooperation and work in various types of environments, however, it can be even more salient.

Some of these misunderstandings were quite innocent, such as our inability to agree on what temperature to set the A/C in conference rooms and classrooms. This could be ascribed to multiple causes. One of them might be culture-specific notions of thermal comfort. Another issue was the different understandings of what is a

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1 We understand humanities as focusing on the study of cultural factors of mankind and how people process and document human experience. Social sciences focus more on various aspects of human society and the relationships of humans within communities. Social sciences emphasize and require empirical research, a theoretical framework, and a robust standardized methodology.

formal or an informal occasion and the suitable attire for it. From the European point of view, the summer school was a rather casual event. As back in Europe, European students usually do not wear suits in school, they chose rather casual and light outfits given the tropical climate, which was inappropriate for the airconditioned indoors. On the other hand, in the Asian academic environments, students usually wear formal dress, which is comparatively warmer. Yet another issue at play is that the use of A/C became widespread among middle-class urbanites in Southeast Asia and could therefore be perceived as a marker of class status (Hansen, Nielsen & Wilhite, 2016; Hitchings & Shu Jun Lee, 2008). In addition, setting the A/C on a low temperature might suggest that the guests are respected and treated well. Other misunderstandings were more substantial, such as challenges resulting from different political systems of the partner countries. For example, we were not able to agree on who were the non-academic actors during the first summer school. While some of us imagined non-academic actors primarily as politically independent NGOs, others had state-related agencies in mind due to specific political contexts. Some situations might have even been slightly shocking, for example, in the case of translating the neutral Vietnamese phrase "*hai dòng máu*" into English as "biracial" when speaking about children born from transnational marriages in Taiwan – something that was perceived as very problematic by some.

There were also debates that arose from the different education cultures. While in some educational environments, group discussions and teamwork are trained and encouraged, in others, more conservative methods of frontal lectures prevail. This created a disproportional environment where some were always vocal and some were always quiet. Thus, there were also different ideas about how to organize a summer school – on one hand, the idea of a content heavy series of lectures, on the other hand, the preference for a workshop format based on student participation. We had to negotiate what the final form would be. The plurality of approaches and attitudes derived from various strands including, among others, culture, language, and diverse academic and political environments/cultures.

ETHICS AND CULTURAL AWARENESS

During the first two summer schools and field trips – the first in Vietnam and the second in Thailand – we also noticed different understandings of ethics and research ethics among both staff and students. Occasionally, certain situations and unwitting behavior were perceived as ethically problematic. Ethical questions surfaced concerning relationships towards research participants, as well as within our team. When is it okay to take pictures of other people or film them? Should our research participants in the field be rewarded for taking part? And if so, how/in what way? How do we handle our field notes? Is it appropriate to share them with others? And to what purposes? Is it fine to pursue our own agendas during the joint work of field trip groups? What kinds of questions are too intrusive? How to work in specific political conditions? Such questions were posed from time to time in the course of summer schools and field trips, but it took us some time to take them up for a wider and more systematic discussion. We all seemed to have taken for granted to some degree our own ethical approaches, based on our disciplines and academic cultures, and it became clear that

we had different ideas about what is and what is not appropriate. Moreover, it turned out that many of the students were not sufficiently aware of the fact that the way people communicate is culturally specific. This did not seem to be linked to factors such as gender, age, or ethnicity, but rather inexperience in cross-cultural communication.

Based on our observations and experience from the first two summer schools and field trips, we suggested creating a session on ethics for the last summer school in Ho Chi Minh City. The session consisted of a part devoted to the specifics of conducting research in Vietnam and creating basic cross-cultural awareness, while another focused more on research ethics required for the upcoming field trip in the Mekong Delta. With regards to the specifics of conducting research in Vietnam, we realized that, with our academic background, we could offer the team our experience of living and working in Vietnam and our knowledge of the country's culture and language. In contrast to our partners and students from Vietnam, who were as insiders immersed in their culture, we had the advantage of being in the position of cultural brokers (Jezewski, 1990) or the "knowledgeable outsiders" (Berry, Poortinga, & Pandey, 1997) and were, therefore, able to bring forward some important points/insights. For example, we brought everyone's attention to a common challenge encountered in communication by foreigners in Vietnam, which is the perceived hesitation of Vietnamese to answer questions negatively. Saying "no" or "not possible", and admitting not to know something, might be perceived as impolite and as a threat to the person's social face (Tran, 2018). Another example is that, while the gesture of a straight look in the eyes of another person is considered a proof of straightforwardness in many Western countries, it is perceived as rude in Vietnam. Also, the public display of intergender affection is regarded indecent. The awareness or possible unawareness of such specifics naturally brings about important consequences for conducting fieldwork in Vietnam. The Vietnamese participants were surprised that we brought such issues up, but much appreciated the opportunity to reflect on some of the ingrained and unconscious traits of Vietnamese communication and behavior from a new perspective. We did not strive to answer all the ethical questions we encountered, but tried to bring participants' awareness to them, so that they could try to negotiate them in their respective field trip groups.

With regard to research ethics, we realized during the project that some of us conceived of them in a rather narrow sense of academic integrity and publication ethics. Therefore, we opted to give examples of existing ethical guidelines and discuss the basic principle of *do no harm* and its implications in field work. We also focused on the power structures linked to gender, ethnicity, political environment, or social status affecting research, and we suggested reflexivity of positionally as an essential coping strategy. We tried to emphasize that research is a dynamic process during which unexpected situations may and, indeed, do occur. It is therefore indispensable to continuously reflect and adjust the research process and make compromises (Palmer, Fam, Smith, & Kilham, 2014). Also, we underlined that many ethical challenges do not have easy and clear solutions.

The students' feedback on these sessions was positive and we felt that creating a shared understanding of ethics, and research ethics specifically, helped field trip groups in their work. Based on the above-mentioned experiences, we prepared a session concerning ethics for the Teaching Manual for Transdisciplinary Research (KNOTS, n.d.), which is one of the outputs of the KNOTS project.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, perhaps trying to figure out the role of humanities in TDR in general was a misguided effort. Every TDR project is unique and, by definition, adapted to specific goals and the 'real-world problems' it aims to tackle, including the decision of which actors and disciplines to involve. Therefore, there is no universal role of humanities in TDR projects. With regards to the KNOTS project, we gradually figured out that our role in the project would be that of the "knowledgeable outsiders" who have a professional and academic insight into Southeast Asian cultures but are not involved in development studies. In the course of a three-year long mutual learning process, we realized that striving to create a common understanding of research ethics and cross-cultural awareness is an indispensable element of teaching and doing TDR in multicultural environments, since it facilitates team work and reduces various tensions. TDR teams need to develop strategies to deal with unexpected situations and create a safe space to discuss ethical issues. Our project was not a full-fledged TDR project, but a project teaching about TDR within the scope of summer schools. Within the limited amount of time, we decided to (only) bring participants' attention to research ethics and issues of cross-cultural communication, and suggested reflection and discussion as coping strategies. This room for reflection and mutual exchange eventually benefited both European and Southeast Asian project members and consolidated our place in the project.

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