

WHO CARES?

On fieldwork, family and violence in South Africa and Pakistan

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, we employ a comparative perspective to understand our respective field sites' 'ambiences' of violence and their impact on care work in the field. Both authors have transformed romantic relationships with partners from the countries where they conduct research in into relations of kinship, and they have parented joint children with their spouses. In both cases, gender norms, as well as state legislation and normative practices, influence care relationships, as they come with a possibly violent urge to order social relations. By focussing on the gendered dimensions of our socialization as care-giving field workers into South African and Pakistani social settings, ways of knowing and kinship-making, we seek to contribute to an anthropological understanding of relationality within transcultural research practice.

INTRODUCTION

In the post-doctoral phase, more and more anthropologists conducting fieldwork or aiming to do so are grappling with the question of its practicality as their relational selves change. Often, caring roles in motherhood or fatherhood are taken on after the completion of PhDs. While a temporal 'leaving behind' of partners and children is an option that helps to re-produce research conditions similar to those known, held dear and 'classic', taking partners and children along can be the desirable solution, or also the only one.¹ Moreover, the chances of successful or fulfilling long-term field trips

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¹ Scheper Hughes (1985), Cassell (1987), Korpela, Hirvi and Tawah (2016).

may be felt to be on the rise when partners originate from the countries or regions in which there are research sites (Newman 2019, Haug 2020). In this paper, we consider the positionality of ‘mother’ or ‘father’ anthropologists in places which are their respective spouses’ home countries,² and which feature prominently in statistics of violence regarding political unrest and crime,³ namely South Africa and Pakistan respectively.

The title ‘Who cares?’ simultaneously grasps two levels of analysis. First, by juxtaposing our experiences as field-working carers, we seek to call out the low credit given to care work in academia, where ‘the invisibility of researchers’ caring obligations’ is promoted (Dannenberg 2019: 174) and where no excuses for not doing ‘proper’ fieldwork or not publishing enough are acceptable.⁴ Second, we focus on how violence intersects with the notion of care work as it structures our lives as researchers and parents. Our focus on violence and care work is not intended to deter others from accompanied fieldwork, but to invite scholars to highlight the topic of relationality while producing knowledge.⁵ Parenting and fieldwork relationships both encompass relational ideals of hierarchy and equality. Our goal is to understand the overlap and divergence between our own and others’ social norms and cultural values while performing field and care work in violent settings.

Our collaboration for this article is based on parallels and divergences in our biographies: we are both German anthropologists of nearly the same age who are married to partners from the country where our fieldwork takes place, and both have one child who attends kindergarten. With research interlocutors not only assigned the binary categories of ‘strangers and friends’ (Powdermaker 1966), but also those of ‘relatives’ or ‘kin’ (cf. Strathern 2014), we found our gendered positionalities in terms of care work, place-making

² While working with relevant terms such as ‘father’ and ‘mother’, as well as ‘kinship’ and ‘relatives’ in their English language use, we are cognizant of how these concepts are interpreted and applied in our respective fields with regard to issues such as connection and separation (Liebelt *et al.* 2021, Strathern 2014). Particular interpretations of these terms in the countries in which we conduct research may deviate from our own normative perspectives that were shaped by our socialization in different parts of Germany. Hence, in our everyday lives as researchers, partners and parents, we are constantly challenged with the task of cultural translation between different contexts and normative expectations.

³ Violence may be characterized as having physical, symbolic, psychological, structural and epistemic dimensions that are individually and collectively experienced. Cf. Heide-
mann (2011: 208–209), Spencer (2010: 707–708).

⁴ See also the contribution by Howald and Jousset in this collection.

⁵ On relationality, see Amit (2002), Gibson and Sillander (2011), Strathern (2014).

and violence in both settings stimulating to think with. We thus aim to analyse, understand, compare and explain our respective parenting and fieldwork experiences from a comparative, autoethnographic perspective that focuses on relationality.

Relations between anthropologists and their human and more-than-human others have been theorized in various ways (Welz 2021). The major lesson of the 'relational turn' is to mark an end to one-dimensional representations of the anthropologist as a 'lone hero' or 'lone heroine' or as singular, monolithic, mostly male entity who collects data on 'His' or 'Her' own. Putting the emphasis on the diverse and embedded character of anthropological knowledge production, scholars have, among other things, postulated 'relational spaces' (Gustavson and Cytrynbaum 2003), 'relational models' of thought (Ingold 2000: 132–151) and 'relational selves' (Salmond 1995) that are in 'correspondence' with others, rather than merely writing 'about' them (Ingold 2014: 389–391). Researchers and researched perform in a jointly constructed field setting, in which, under ideal circumstances, both parties make efforts to understand one another (Koch 2019). In order to reach these goals, 'thick participation' (Spittler 2001, 2014) in the lives of those we work and live with, which implies seeking to learn how others taste, smell and see, appears both necessary and inevitable.⁶

Coming to terms with the challenging conditions that our thickly embedded and relational anthropological Selves are confronted with, we aim to make sense of some violent experiences that shape our relations, particularly those in which parental care work and violence overlap. Experiences of violence are often insufficiently reflected in scholarship, as ethnographers treat them as their blind spots (Bähre 2015: 4). We hold that interpreting experiences of violence and their flip-sides, namely the experience of fear or the anticipation of violence through the lens of family responsibilities, contributes to shaping the anthropological gaze of the participant observer in a particular way: thick participant observation while doing fieldwork with the family,⁷ especially in settings where experiencing the fear of violence or violence itself is common, may be regarded as a primary example of 'correspondence' (Ingold 2014) between anthropologists and their interlocutors.

Structural violence, which emerges at the intersection of state law and customary law regulating kinship relations and normative behaviour, leads to a sensorially charged 'atmosphere' (MacDougall 2018) within both of the

⁶ Zehmisch (2017a: 24), Baumann, Strauß and Zehmisch (2024: 28).

⁷ Cf. Burger and Burger (2024).

societies we are working in, and thus sets the context for this article. Seeking to expand the analytical vocabulary in which field and care work operate, we employ the concept of ‘ambient violence’, which the anthropologist Zehra Hashmi used in a conversation with Philipp’s partner. In Philipp’s interpretation, ‘ambient violence’ implies an atmosphere of violence or ‘ambient danger’ – in contrast to ‘situational danger’ (Lee 1995: 3, Warden 2012: 156) – that is contained in and structures the overall ambience of social relations. Ambient violence penetrates at the immediate level by producing fear and causing people to avoid places and situations that are considered dangerous. Philipp’s social network in Pakistan is constantly subjected to ambient violence – not only through experience, but also media consumption, hearsay and circulating master narratives about Pakistan as a violent country (Schaflechner, Oesterheld and Asif 2020). Due to its omnipresence, violence is often relativized and thus normalized as an integral component of everyday life. In the South African case, several of Julia’s in-laws, as well as her husband, have experienced criminal attacks and other forms of violence too.

CARING FOR CHILDREN IN VIOLENT SETTINGS

Discussing *Ten lies of ethnography* (1993), Gary Fine cautions against the problems that arise when practitioners themselves take illusions for real; we argue that the absence of relations with one’s children in ethnographies is one such illusion. Whereas the concealment of romantic or sexual relations has received some attention since the 1970s, the presence of ‘local’ partners and jointly parented children, which makes it impossible to sustain images of an ethnographer’s chastity and privacy, is still comparatively less analysed. Yet, when joint children are part of the process, insights into local norms can be gained from public situations, especially with regard to violence. At first one may choose to ignore the presence of electric fences, military and security-service vehicles and staff or of the indicators of grave social inequalities more generally, but that cannot last long.⁸ As Jonathan Newman put it persuasively, ‘[v]iolence requires daily interpretation by those living amidst the violence’ (2020: 471), who immerse themselves in everyday violence or normalize it. Simultaneously, as Leberecht Funk and Ferdinansyah Thajib pointed out, ‘caring implies a relationship of hierarchy’ (2019: 138), and the

⁸ Cf. Turin (2020).

reproduction of hierarchical relations within a family may itself be contested, more or less violently, by children and their carers.

Looking back in order to look forward, one can see how the terms ‘violence’ and ‘relationality’ have changed for anthropologists who were accompanied by their children. In the 1980s, for Nancy Scheper-Hughes, it was all about ‘managing’ her ‘culture-shocked’ children when they and her husband accompanied her to a Brazilian shanty town. There she scrutinized local women’s maternity-thinking in relation to rampant infant mortality. Her daughter, Scheper-Hughes admits, was ‘traumatized’ by all the stories of neglect and death encountered there (1987: 79). And yet, the rhetoric of management prevailed. Forty years later, the language, influenced by a *Zeitgeist* that puts more emphasis on emotions and the Self, has shifted with a vocabulary of ‘care’ side-lining social engineering efforts (Funk and Thajib 2019). In the present, emotions in the fieldwork process have gained a different valuation as generative and ethnographically productive (Stodulka, Dinkelaker and Thajib 2019).

Paradigmatic shifts in the concepts that frame the existential experience of violence during fieldwork support the argument that concentrating on parenting during ethnographic research has not yet been achieved within anthropology (as a senior male anthropologist once put it to Philipp). On the contrary, the topic needs to be addressed by every generation of anthropologists in new ways. The discipline has to rise to the specific challenges it is confronted with in terms of its practitioners and methods: for example, family constellations change with increases in single-parenthood,⁹ same-sex parenthood or with binational families which are united or separated temporarily in support of research by the anthropologist among them. Moreover, parenting during fieldwork can also become a research desideratum in itself, or, as Marilyn Strathern has put it: ‘Childraising is a compartment [...] of knowledge about the world’, with paternity and its indeterminate nature a particular concern (2014: 55–56). Analysing the combination of fieldwork and parenting therefore sheds light on disciplinary identifications of anthropological researchers as single individuals being the default mode.

In order to contribute to crafting anthropology’s future, we hold that researchers discussing fieldwork in the here and now should find an appropriate language that reflects their relationalities and positionalities. Using ethnographic details we will discuss further below, we seek to highlight in what ways fieldwork practice and the intimate space of everyday domestic

⁹ Cf. Ghodsee (2009).

work are governed by a grid of (state) laws and norms surrounding the attribution of value to certain tasks and phenomena such as care work.

Scholars have debated the sensitivity of violence in and of the ethnographic personae and how to address or avoid them (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009). Scheper-Hughes (1983), referring to Georges Devereux (1967), reminded us of professional defence mechanisms through which researchers cope with anxiety-arousing phenomena, such as omission, ambiguous description, or the rearrangement of certain parts of the material. More recently, Erik Bähre (2015) explored the uncomfortable presence of violence in collaborative ethnographic settings in his relationships with three South African research assistants who guided him over several years. In one case, he had to reflect on his acknowledgment of an assistant perpetrating violence against a third person, thus making him somehow complicit. One arrives at the logical final call to analyse the violent dimensions of one's own behaviour during research too. Yet, one could argue that omitting the description of effects, which the (ambiently violent) research setting may have on the anthropologist's (family) relationships, is a standard procedure.¹⁰ Hence, we start with some short notes on our respective settings.

In South Africa, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act was one of the first new laws passed by the National Party government once in power in 1947. Although the number of 'Whites' marrying 'Non-Whites' had always been very low, now it became prohibited until the statute was annulled some forty years later. The annulment came with a twist: the couple would not be allowed to live together in areas declared 'white', thus continuing to convey the impression that trans-'racial' marriages have no place in South Africa. Finding suitable accommodation is still a topic of concern every time Julia's family stays together in South Africa for longer periods, as feeling safe requires a visibly balanced neighbourhood.

Anxiety-arousing state laws and conditions that inform our family lives are present in the Pakistani case, too. Pakistan was founded on the promise of being a 'pure' (*pak* in Urdu and Hindi) state for South Asia's Muslims when it was partitioned from British India in 1947. As religion became equated with nationhood, the state committed itself to protecting 'core' Islamic values against the perceived enemies of Islam (Ahmed 2009). Ambient violence also emerges out of the specific circumstances under which marriages are solemnized in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. According to the law, modelled on a patrilineal understanding of Islam according to which

¹⁰ Cf. Fine (1993), Gupta (2014), Warden (2012).

the children automatically inherit the religion of the father, it is not possible for a non-Muslim man to marry a Muslim woman, as the children would be non-Muslim and hence would be lost from the global community of Muslims (*umma*). Hence, for the marriage of a non-Muslim man to a Muslim woman to be legally permissible in Pakistan, the non-Muslim husband (in this case, Philipp) has to affirm his conversion to Islam. Philipp associates his own conversion status with a structurally violent normative order generated by (Islamic) state governance that directly interferes in how marriage and hence kinship relations are structured. This positionality directly impacts his ontological and epistemic emplacement in the field.¹¹

These two examples show how state laws inform intimate relations between partners whose children, in turn, are born into that matrix and must find or rather create a place of their own.

HOME-MAKING AND EMPLACED VIOLENCE SURROUNDING THE FIELD

In Julia's previous fieldwork in rural Gujarat and rural South Africa (intermittently between 2009 and 2017), she acquired the fictionalized kinship roles of 'sister' and 'daughter' in 'her' family and was occasionally addressed as a potential spouse in that transnational Muslim community, in which many young men were eager to find ways to 'overseas', meaning Europe or the USA (Koch 2016). In her current research project, however, she often relates to very senior people as she traces the broadcasting of intellectuals' memories of South Africa's transformation in the 1980's and 1990's: the pro-

¹¹ When spending time with secularly oriented progressives and liberals, conversion to Islam has hardly been a topic of discussion. Conversely, interlocutors who deem religious belonging important perceive Philipp differently: when conducting fieldwork with religious minorities, such as Dalit Hindus in southern Punjab, he is often viewed as an implicit ally because of his marriage to a Muslim woman. Marrying a Muslima implies a symbolic contestation to unequal power relations between the Pakistani Muslim majority and non-Muslim minorities. Pious Muslims, in turn, are usually enchanted to welcome Philipp as a new member of the *umma*. Northern converts appear to challenge discrimination against Muslims in the Global North symbolically. This stance links up to widespread perceptions of Islamophobia since 9/11, with the genocide in Gaza being most recent example. Countering uneasy feelings of not being able to live up to pious interlocutors' moral standards, especially regarding ritual practice such as prayer (*namaaz*) and fasting (*roza*), Philipp usually leaves the conversation or turns it to themes he is more comfortable with: for example, local Sufi-saints (mystics) and folk music based on Sufi poetry (*qawwali*), his interest in social service and welfare (*khidmat*), and giving alms (*zakat*) to the poor.

ject is situated in an urban context within a rather widely meshed network of (former) professionals (Koch 2021a). Socio-political change was accompanied by the violence of apartheid and the violent fight against it, that is, against a system which had enforced particular notions of 'racial', 'cultural' or 'ethnic' belonging. In 2017, Julia had married a 'non-White' South African man in South Africa with whom she has had a daughter since May 2019. The family finally started living together permanently in June 2022, since the bureaucratic act of recognizing the marriage and issuing the relevant papers took the authorities three years. Then they spent one year for Julia's recent fieldwork in Johannesburg. The family ran their household by themselves, without the help of what neighbours and acquaintances call a 'domestic', a nominalized adjective circumventing the use of older terms such as 'maid', now recognised as derogatory, 'worker' or 'helper'. In May 2023, the family adopted a small dog from a shelter, whose role was meant to be both companion and alarm bell. The whole family moved back to Germany in February 2024.

Their place of residence, Melville, was the southeasternmost of the so-called 'Northern suburbs' of Johannesburg (Falkof 2022: 159). It was built for the owners and managers of the mining industry, one hill away from the former camp sites and compounds in today's Central Business District. Melville was classified as 'white' during apartheid and is close to the city's two universities and big media outlets. In *Worrier state*, Nicky Falkof (2022: 159) calls Melville a liminal neighbourhood with a bohemian quality, populated by artists and academics. Three of the four adjacent residential areas were classified as 'coloured' during apartheid. Communicating fear, a local community newspaper regularly reported about crime syndicates and ran stories about miscellaneous bullets fired at 'gangster's funerals', which entered houses in the neighbourhood. Not surprisingly, residents of the more prestigious northern suburbs often avoid the area.

The semi-detached house Julia's family rented included an electric fence carrying a skull and crossbones signboard on top of a surrounding wall and the services of a security company. Its staff replied promptly when one night Julia mistook the panic button at the storeroom door for a light switch. Not only did the company call within a minute, but so did, a bit later, the worried landlord, who currently resides in the Western Cape. With everyone in the house waking up, there was no way to avoid explaining the matter to their daughter. Two weeks later, the little one cut an 'emergency exit' into her play tent, and again several months later, she set up bogey-traps for prospective

intruders one lazy Sunday afternoon. Although her parents had assumed that their talk about danger and safety in earshot of the child and the joking 'threat' of placing recalcitrant children on the street as a disciplinary measure were 'only' imaginary exposures to violence, they changed the daughter's ways of playing and being in unexpected ways.

The flipside of this strange mixture of barricades and the instant communication of needs was a feeling of forced separation. Before the trip, one of Julia's German rural relatives, upon seeing the estate agent's video advertising the property, equated this situation to imprisonment. A feeling of being imprisoned was indeed experienced for example, when discussing the feasibility of walking the child for twenty minutes to the kindergarten during the first weeks of their stay in Melville. For Julia, the question that arose was whether this feeling of imprisonment in South Africa – in the yard, in the car – is a problem of 'projection, transference, [or] countertransference' as Scheper-Hughes attributed it to the 'naive ethnographer' (1987: 78), or whether there is something to be learnt about South African society and culture from the experiences of anxiety and surrogate imprisonment that come with the constant discussion of dangers and crimes.

Familial 'care relationships' and 'mutual dependency are charged with conflict and violence', as Bähre (2015: 12) phrases it. Julia observed and participated in an extreme instance of that intertwining one Sunday afternoon at a popular local 'family restaurant' which had an indoor playground next to the dining area. It was the day of the women's soccer World Cup final. Next to Julia sat a couple with two smaller children. All through the last minutes of the match and the whole of the World Cup winner's ceremony, the man swore at the woman, detailing body parts she would be prepared to offer to another man. He spoke English with an Afrikaans accent. Julia noticed her growing restlessness as the restaurant was full, but nobody seemed to care: an 'ambiance of violence' unfolded. Before her daughter came back from the play area for food, Julia lost it when the man threatened to kill the woman. Julia raised her voice and asked him to mind his language, pointing out that this was a family restaurant. As the man was sitting on the same soft bench as Julia, he swiftly swung over, asked her to repeat what she had said and then, after Julia repeated and explained her plea in a softer voice, he relaxed a bit. To Julia's total surprise, he hugged her with both arms, saying 'Thank you, Mummy'. Julia was scared by the physicality and incomprehensibility of the reaction. After the family had paid and left, the restaurant manager came up to Julia and asked if she was alright. She just nodded, swallowing both her

anger at the manager's previous omission and her fear of running across the same man ever again. The man's term of address, a diminutive of 'mother', and his unwished-for hug had overstepped a personal boundary while recognizing Julia as the mother of her child. As he was threatening the mother of his own children in the restaurant, his reaction also showed at once the speed with which the ascription of motherhood could be devalued. It appeared as if joint children could easily be left motherless in the imagination of the father, who verbalized the threat to become a killer.

In Philipp's case, fieldwork and family matters mingle in several dimensions. Having conducted around two years of doctoral fieldwork as a 'lone(ly) wolf' in the Andaman Islands, India, between 2006 and 2012 (Zehmisch 2017a), in 2015 Philipp shifted his postdoctoral research into the territory of India's neighbour and archenemy Pakistan. His research investigates the long-lasting effects of border-making processes between Pakistan and India (Zehmisch 2017b). In 2015, he got to know his current partner, a woman from Islamabad, who is a dancer, choreographer and political activist, while conducting the first spell of fieldwork. Soon after the birth of their son in Munich in 2018 the family moved to Lahore, where Philipp taught anthropology and sociology at the Lahore University of Management Sciences until 2020, when they moved to Heidelberg in Germany. While staying in Lahore, fieldwork implied exploring sites and locations as part of the weekly routine of 'free-time' activities off-campus, where the family had an apartment. Fieldwork with the family also took place in other parts of the country: for example, on tour with the political performance group Laal Hartaal (Red Strike), or when interacting with comrades of a leftist political party, with which Philipp was affiliated through his partner. Philipp and his family also frequently visited his in-laws in Islamabad. During the winters of 2021/22, 2023/24 and 2024/25, their son visited a local kindergarten in Islamabad, providing relief to the parents from taking alternating shifts of caring and professional work. Sometimes, domestic helpers or Philipp's father-in-law take care of their son too, rendering the care situation more diverse and reciprocal.

Philipp's perception of the generalized construct of 'Pakistan' is inevitably shaped by the hegemonic master narrative of the country as a 'crisis-state' (Schaflechner, Oesterheld and Asif 2020). This image builds on dominant media representations of political and fiscal instability, feudalism, environmental crises, patriarchal and class oppression, and religious extremism and terrorism. The crisis-state representation contributes to problem-



On the motorway to Islamabad, 2018 (photo: Ph.Z.)¹²

atically reifying essentialist Orientalist imaginaries of Pakistan as a ‘failed state’ harbouring Islamic extremism, while discursively silencing multitudes of other life worlds in the globe’s fifth-most populous nation-state. Such epistemic violence, however, becomes efficacious when shaping everyday life in Philipp’s concrete surroundings: the visible presence of weapons, checkpoints and armed forces in public indeed contributes to an overall atmosphere of insecurity. Political instability is liable to turn into inconvenience or even physical threats when transport, roads, the internet and telephone networks are routinely blocked during elections and public parades and large demonstrations (Figure). Furthermore, social media reports highlight the

¹² On 1 November 2018, the right-wing Sunni organization Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) blocked the motorway from Lahore to Islamabad due to the Supreme Court’s acquittal of Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman, who had been accused to have committed blasphemy. Philipp, along with his partner, their baby, their dog, and his sister and parents who were on visit, were stuck for several hours on the motorway behind Lahore. At some point the police advised them to leave the area, as large groups of militant youth had arrived at the spot. The police were about to leave too, but were waiting for the army to take over. A couple of hours after Philipp’s family had left the blockade and spontaneously spent the night in their driver’s village, riots broke out, with cars being set on fire.

violent state repression of political opposition movements through torture, enforced disappearances and target killings, and set a context and limit for progressive political work (Panagiotopoulos, Rieck and Zehmisch 2019). In addition, rising crime rates, including armed robbery, murder, rape and domestic violence, cause people to focus primarily on their everyday survival and safety. Insecurity may thus be part of the perceived ambient violence that structures everyday life, including that of Philipp and his family.

How the ambience of violence shapes Philipp's everyday life situations as a father while being in Pakistan may be demonstrated with an anecdote.¹³ Around Easter 2020, Philipp was walking with his then almost three-year-old son in a pushchair to a waterfall in the Himalayan foothills in order to take a bath. Within a few minutes, two young men belonging to the local Pahari (mountain-dweller) community came to the waterfall to ask what they were doing and whether Philipp's son was his own child. They had watched Philipp and his son from a distance and felt that something must be wrong if a lone man were bathing with a child. Philipp, being aware that they might think he were a local due to his dress and looks, responded in Urdu that nothing was wrong. One of the young men insisted that a child should be with his mother and that it looked as if Philipp had abducted the child. This accusation – framed by Philipp's 'culturally incommensurate' behaviour in the eyes of the beholders – made him feel vulnerable towards the young men, who potentially could have become physically violent. Moreover, this incident took place in a valley that is known for its frequent honour killings, leading to blood feuds. Hence, Philipp was generally careful to interact with the locals respectfully in order to avoid any kind of unintentional provocation. The discrepancy between Philipp's behaviour and how it was interpreted by the two young men may be explained by referring to their normative perception, according to which child care is a task for the mother, who was absent from the site. The incompleteness of the family triangle made the scene suspicious, and the locals may have perceived him as someone who was overstepping cultural norms. However, when Philipp's interlocutors realized that he was a foreigner, they became aware of their culturally normative duty to provide hospitality to strangers and invited him for a cup of tea. Philipp politely declined the offer, being taken aback by the structural violence of

¹³ In local normative frameworks, fatherhood of a son implies not only being married but also having reproduced and thus extended one's own patrilineage, which contributes to being perceived as a normatively 'complete' adult. This positionality is also tied to (patriarchal) ideas about honour and respectability.

patriarchy and heteronormativity at play when performing a differently coded notion of fatherhood.

Beyond the embodied experience of being a father, Philipp's positionality as care-giver and fieldworker is primarily shaped by his social embeddedness in a local kin network.¹⁴ One can characterize Philipp's in-laws as upper-class, high-caste (Rajput in the paternal line), English-speaking and liberal – conditions that have made it easy for Philipp to integrate within the family. His family connection also provides him with access to various networks – including relatives, employees, business partners, friends and neighbours. As every Pakistani has an opinion about India and its relation to Pakistan, these relations have turned into a site of participant observation and conversation that is relevant to his research as well. Furthermore, having family in the field has significantly improved his legal status: he now holds a Pakistani overseas citizen card, which is granted to spouses of Pakistani citizens and allows visa-free travel. Lastly, his socio-economic emplacement in an upper-class family is linked to material benefits, such as a place to stay at his in-laws, as well as at other family members and friends' houses.

Turning his private family situation into a site of observation was not Philipp's aim when he started his research, but evolved out of the circumstances of his embedding and positionality. Writing field notes is hence often integrated within the everyday, partly based on what Philipp has observed and experienced and partly coming from sudden realizations and reflections about things that need time to be comprehended in full.¹⁵ This mode of 'integrated research' will necessarily document the opinions, positionalities and actions of those in the close social surroundings and use them to reflect on larger research questions. To frame it in more formalized fieldwork terminology, Philipp's embeddedness in his family marks a shift from an 'observing participant' to a 'participating observer' (Bernard 2006: 347) who 'walks along' with his interlocutors (Fleschenberg and Kamal 2023: 12). In his case, the epistemic positionality of knowledge production has changed along with 'latitudes' in the construction of the Other. Having family in the field thus causes a different quality of social embeddedness, a relationality that implies an epistemic shift, too: here, knowledge is co-produced in collaborative, cooperative or participatory efforts. It often emerges out of circumstantial, random events and realizations in the everyday whenever one has time to observe and participate in the 'imponderabilia of actual life and of typical

¹⁴ See also the contribution by Kuiper and Schönebeck in this collection.

¹⁵ Cf. Burger and Burger (2024).

behaviour' (Malinowski 2002: 16). Such knowledge production is linked by circumstances with the duties and caring responsibilities towards other individuals in the field, causing a dense epistemic embedding that renders the experience of fieldworkers and their perceptions of the field qualitatively different from being in the field without family. The data produced in this way is thus a result of 'proximity' (Heidemann 2013) in a very specific sense: for Philipp, the lone(ly)-hero type of fieldwork is definitely over.

WHEN CARE AND VIOLENCE MEET

The research interests which shape the emergence of a 'field' in Julia's case lie in the practices of South Africa's transformation from apartheid to democracy and in the ways these practices are considered now, thirty years after the first democratic elections by former employees of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC). The corporations' products, namely radio and television, as well as its bureaucrats, managers, librarians, archivists and journalists make up the nodes of the relational field and of the 'group' Julia works with (Koch 2021a, b). Fieldwork and care work encounter one another, for example, when Julia deepens her understanding of how the story of the life and death of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is told during the SABC live reporting of the funeral. Madikizela-Mandela, mother of two daughters, whose father spent twenty-seven years in jail and was herself imprisoned and placed in solitary confinement for over a year, was called 'the mother of the nation' and addressed and referred to during her funeral proceedings by journalists and politicians alike as 'Mam' Winnie'. In her story, as tales of state and anti-state violence are omnipresent, Julia searches for a standpoint from which to analyse and better understand the complex entanglement of motherhood and perpetrating violence in her case.¹⁶ More widely, imaginations of a militarized femininity, which may or may not include the 'abandoning' or even the 'sacrificing' of children, accompanied much of 'the struggle' and its iconography in the anti-apartheid press. Images of women with babies on their backs and guns in their hands, although obviously a romantic fictionalization, became famous. Judy Ann Seidmann (2018: 259) highlights how that image was discussed and eventually 'dropped from the visual lexicon', though in the visual archive of the people it took on a life

¹⁶ The female dimension of the armed struggle against apartheid has been described more recently by Siphokazi Magadla (2023).

of its own.¹⁷ Cultural representations like this, together with literature on the ubiquitous black women minding white children by leaving their own behind, and thirdly, conversations with mothers who work in the SABC or share a long-distance bus ride to or from their family, make the conditional and gendered nature of the compatibility of family and work clear. Within a 'normality' of absent fathers and widespread teknonymy for mothers, the reality of 'absent mothers' is covered. Thus, for Julia, on the one hand talk of the 'absent mother' evokes fears for neglected or particularly vulnerable children, whereas on the other hand the stretching of the (Western) boundaries of belonging and the often group-centred thinking in child-rearing may appear as meaningful counter-model to the German middle-class idea of the nuclear family, offering relief from caring duties.

In Pakistan, several dimensions of ambient violence dynamically shape the conditions of Philipp's care and fieldwork: first, public safety and security are a concern. This implies foreseeing and potentially avoiding dangerous situations. For instance, the family recently decided against travelling to a skiing resort in the Swat Valley because of the reported return of the Taliban to this region, which constitutes a potential threat for tourists. Second, in their rather privileged private lives, their regime of care includes also being vigilant about sexual abuse, as child abuse is a very common occurrence in many households. Hence, the parents are careful not to leave their son alone with other adults for longer periods, except when he is in the kindergarten or with selected trusted individuals.

Third, violence is not only inflicted on the body, psyche or episteme, it is also mediatized, and hence brought into the intimate space of care, directly affecting their son. Here, culturally divergent perceptions regarding responsible media consumption are at play: in the parent's view, their surroundings display too little awareness regarding the potentially adverse psychological effects of screened violence for children in general, and their child in particular. This discrepancy over the pedagogical role of screen time appears, for Philipp, to be rooted in normalizations of violence, but also in a (modern) cultural construction of giving 'love' and 'education' through television, or at least of providing entertainment for children, who often cannot go out because of the very ambience of violence.

Lastly, ambient violence shapes Philipp's and his partner's multiple care responsibilities at his in-laws; beyond their own son, they participate in taking care of Philipp's mother-in-law, who has been bed-ridden for many

¹⁷ Cf. Miller (2009).

years.¹⁸ Ambient violence by neglect looms in the background of this complex care regime: two 24/7 caretakers observe different norms than family members regarding what ‘humane’ care means – especially in terms of physical pain and matters of hygiene – which leads to frequent worries about the patient’s neglect. Furthermore, due to his mother-in-law’s illness, the household lacks – in patriarchal terms – a ‘responsible’ woman to run the house and ‘manage’ the six to seven domestic helpers; this role is taken over by Philipp’s partner when she is present. The domestic helpers, who belong to different social classes, often need psychological care themselves due to traumatic events in their own lives and exposure to violence and inequality. Philipp and his partner usually listen to their grievances and stories and help out, emotionally and financially, whenever they can. As a result, they also become intimately acquainted with people belonging to the opposite end of the class spectrum and their very different emic perceptions of violence as well as the normative and existential questions that result from these. While perceiving such relationality as enriching for their own intellectual and emotional growth, Philipp’s and his partner’s everyday life remain structured by challenges that are particular to the local care assemblage. These challenges vividly demonstrate the ways in which relationality shapes care-giving fieldworkers’ positioning in the society they are embedded in. Such embeddedness causes particular forms of knowledge that emerge due to fieldworkers’ care-giving positionalities: among them, one may count the experience of world-making processes through the eyes of their children, their care-giving partners, or numerous other care-givers with whom one interacts in daily life. Such different forms of knowledge may arise in relation to the overarching question of ambient violence that lingers in the background of many everyday interactions, but also in the form of danger perceived by local more-than-human ontologies that include, among others, ghosts, *jinn*s and witches.

WHO CARES? TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

In this article, we have sought both to attest to and contribute to the slow and incomplete dissolution of the lone hero or heroine model that is prominent in anthropology by highlighting the ambivalent relationality of father-

¹⁸ Unfortunately, Sherry, Philipp’s mother-in-law, passed on 4 June 2025. May she rest in peace.

or motherhood in the field. Based on our gendered experiences of care and violence – both in exercising care and in providing care – while conducting research, we explored the epistemological value of an embedded, relational Self for ethnographic research and writing comparatively. In so doing, we charted a territory beyond the practice of reflection and situational analysis that is prevalent in the existing literature. The strategy of co-authoring this paper (and the others in this collection) implied the search for common ground to map, in our case, how the gendered dimensions of mother- or fatherhood in violent settings directly impacted the relations through which we generate data and, lastly, knowledge.

Conducting fieldwork with one's family brings about a profound epistemic transition, in which the coordinates of home and field are unstable and in constant flow.¹⁹ A change of positionality comes with increasing social embeddedness: one is less distant and neutral than the lone hero, but also more involved with and recognized by local interlocutors; further, one is rather an observing participant than a participating observer; therefore, data often come while 'walking along' and do not necessarily have to be looked for in a conscious effort. The field turns out to be less clearly defined and sometimes difficult to separate from other parts of everyday life. For Philipp, 'going native' implies being a father and husband who somehow belongs to the field, a positionality providing him with social, logistic and economic advantages. The downside of 'going native' is being confronted with often religiously loaded violent normativity. For Julia, this realization continues to process the fact that she is not alone in feeling temporarily 'imprisoned' in her skin in South Africa. The South African walk to freedom still has a long way to go, as the spatial conditions of socio-cultural normativity and individual feeling are deeply entangled. Doing fieldwork with the family in Melville in 2023 literally and sometimes unwelcomely brought home holistic ethnographic 'knowledge' about the fractures and fictions (other) South Africans live by too.

While we perceive the presence of one's family as bringing about emotional and affective stability, the very same constellation can also have potential destabilizing effects, resulting from conflicting demands on the researcher's schedule and emotional embeddedness. Time spent caring does not necessarily overlap with research time, and it leads, among other things, to becoming involved with household problems. Here, caring for someone in the field also involves caring about different notions of violence, be they

¹⁹ See also the contribution by Howald and Jousset in this collection.

patriarchal and domestic, or public and excessive. If one cares, one needs to take violence at face value and respond to these in the field in order to be safe – or, at least, to strive for safety. As much as violence assumes different guises and can be structural or domestic, unintentional or intentional, a means to an end or meaningful in itself, the relationship between acts of care – both in the senses of carefulness and care work – and violent practices permeates everyday life inside and outside our roles as fieldworkers and parents. The mingling of carefulness and care work pre-structures the chances of fieldwork ‘remissions’, such as taking a few days off from the field site for purposes of reflection (Lee 1995: 13), when fieldwork and care work just alternate. When one’s family is the field, then it is difficult to take time off from both legitimately. The mingling of both thus enhances the importance of fieldwork reminders such as the entries in the diaries which help avoid ‘psychological engulfment by those in the setting’.²⁰

Our decision to present episodes in which our respective forms of parenthood became an issue in public shows how our respective children have been part of the fieldwork settings and make us more or less convincingly parents in the eyes of local populations. To exercise and to provide care are both practices that need to be performed as much as recording and reflecting. In contrast to a focus on partnership, in which notions or ideals of equality or companionship complicate accounts of care work, a hierarchical parent-child relationship sets the accountability score straight: next to often cherished ideals of one’s children as ‘friends’, dependence, responsibility and a fierce negotiation of authority are clearly witnessed by those with whom one is in the field. While thinking through one’s emotional and professional attachments when alone has already become more widespread (Stodulka, Dinkelaker and Thajib 2019), our focus on the researchers’ vulnerabilities through the lens of their care work in violent environments counters the established ‘childfree’ carelessness or carefreeness in academia and underlines the need to exercise and reflect on care in the field and beyond.

²⁰ Lee (1995: 13). Cf. Burger and Burger (2024: 185).

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