RECIPROCAL VULNERABILITY

Violence, Privilege, and Solidarity From Fieldwork to Academia

Introduction

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Abstract

In this special issue, we seek to uncover the vulnerabilities of researchers in anthropological fieldwork and academia, tracing their political and epistemological potential for the creation of ethnographic knowledge that is based on practices of reciprocity and solidarity. We bring together contributions that explore how anthropologists recover from various experiences of discomfort, harm, and violence by creating bonds of care and support with others, including interlocutors and other researchers, that critically shape and reshape their perspectives and the knowledge they create. Vulnerabilities are powerful and revealing encounters with what makes us human in an entangled and unequal world. Building on reflexive and feminist anthropology, we introduce the concept of "reciprocal vulnerability", recognizing that vulnerabilities are relational, shifting, and situational experiences and positionalities that can connect people across differences and inequalities, allowing for new forms of exchange and reciprocity to emerge and thrive in fieldwork and anthropology more generally.

Keywords: *vulnerability, ethnographic fieldwork, academia, reciprocity, privilege, solidarity, care*

Introduction

Vulnerability is a controversial concept in anthropology and cognate disciplines (see Ferrarese 2016). While it is used to focus on the structures and conditions of human exposure to violence and harm, the notion has also been criticized for reducing vulnerable people and communities to the position of passive victims who supposedly lack agency and therefore need to be rescued by more powerful others (Marino and Faas 2020). In this special issue, we seek to move beyond such victimization and its critique by conceptualizing vulnerability as an embodied and ambivalent human experience, which is not only about social or bodily weakness but also involves what might be called the strength of the weak. With Judith Butler (2004; 2020), we contend that vulnerability is about social suffering and precarity, but also intimately linked to the human capacity and willingness to persist and heal from all forms of violence. We want to trace this capacity to repair a shattered world in the everyday

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lives, relationships, and practices of anthropologists experiencing vulnerability in ethnographic fieldwork and the university beyond. Our aim is to uncover the political and epistemological potential of vulnerabilities and to explore how anthropologists recover from trauma, injury, and heartbreak by creating bonds of care and solidarity with others that crucially shape and reshape their perspectives and the knowledge they create.

The authors of this collection explore researchers' diverse experiences of structural, physical, symbolic, and institutional vulnerability and violence, both in the field and in academia, which manifest themselves in multiple and ambivalent emotions, including failure, shame, guilt, anger, fear, insecurity, irritation, but also empathy and a sense of togetherness and belonging. Common to all the contributions is a feeling of discomfort, dismay, or even outrage at how researchers' vulnerabilities are ignored or reproduced by academic institutional practices, including research, teaching, and publishing.

With Ruth Behar (1996), we argue that anthropologists are often both politically engaged witnesses of human suffering as well as vulnerable observers whose fieldwork and writing are deeply entangled with their own lives and histories, including painful experiences. Such personal entanglements of fieldwork and of anthropology in general have been increasingly recognized in recent decades, leading to reflexive and relational ethnographic knowledge creation (Behar 1996; 2021; Mahmood 2008; Theidon 2014; Weiss 2023; Walter et al. 2024).

At the same time debates about engaged anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995; Low and Merry 2010; Ortner 2016) widely assume that anthropologists are privileged, not only as witnesses to human events and suffering, but also because of their advantageous position in structures of race, class, caste, and gender, which gives them both the power and responsibility to speak out against forms of oppression and injustice. While recognizing the privileges of anthropologists in relation to the lives of research participants, these debates largely ignore researchers' own vulnerabilities as well as the growing diversity of research positionalities more generally (see Berry et al. 2017; Juan, this issue).

As a growing body of literature shows (Thurmann 2020; Sikic Micanovic, Stelko, and Sakic 2020; Markowitz 2021; Nair Ambujam 2021; Schild 2021), researchers' vulnerabilities are often silenced in academia, dismissed as individual experiences, professional failures, and personal weaknesses rather than being recognized for what they are: the result of the indeterminacies of fieldwork combined with a researcher's positionality both in the field and in the university—a position based on race, gender, ethnicity, class, caste, sexual orientation, disability, and age.

We argue that anthropologists are not always in a privileged position that protects them from harm and enables them to stand up against the violence they experience on their own bodies or those of research participants and colleagues. In certain situations, they are vulnerable and condemned to silence. Therefore, we see the need to examine the privileges, power, and ethical responsibilities of anthropologists together with their vulnerabilities and experiences of powerlessness, as both privilege and vulnerability shape the positionalities of researchers and their "situated knowledges" (Haraway 1988).

As disturbing and traumatizing as experiences of vulnerability can be for anthropologists, we propose that they be understood not as mere obstacles to research and the creation of

knowledge, but as critical, powerful, and revealing encounters with what makes us human in a world shaped by social and political power disparities.

Vulnerabilities can connect people and places, enabling new perspectives and relationships, including practices of solidarity across social and political divides. We argue that human exposure to violence and harm involves multiple, situational, and shifting experiences, entangled with power relations and inequalities between people, groups, and institutions. At the same time, vulnerability is relational in the sense that it is existentially shared by human beings, providing possibilities for empathizing with others and forging bonds of care and support, as shown by several authors in this collection (Jousset; Juan; Nguyen, this issue). We introduce the concept of "reciprocal vulnerability" to show how experiences of vulnerability can connect us with others across social and political differences, allowing for new forms of exchange and mutuality to emerge and thrive in fieldwork and in anthropology more generally.

In what follows, we critically engage with discussions of privilege and ethical responsibility in anthropology, where the vulnerabilities of anthropologists have been largely ignored. We then turn to the silences within academic institutions, where a narrow understanding of research ethics aims to protect universities rather than vulnerable and traumatized researchers. Through an overview of the individual contributions, we then discuss our understanding of reciprocal vulnerability in more detail, showing how authors here draw on the concept to relate their experiences of vulnerability and violence to those of research participants, and to trace how vulnerabilities can be shared across differences, inspiring forms of reciprocity and solidarity in fieldwork and the university. We conclude this introduction by tracing some of the ways in which the concept of reciprocal vulnerability relates to further debates about ethics, care, and solidarity in anthropology.

Vulnerability and Privilege in Ethnographic Fieldwork

Vulnerability, broadly conceptualized as the exposure to harm (Butler 2020), is a constitutive part of ethnographic fieldwork and academia for many anthropologists, including the authors and guest editors of this collection who are all women and early-career researchers in European universities. At the same time, their experiences of vulnerability vary widely. While some of the vulnerabilities discussed here and in the literature result from specific events of rupture, including extraordinary experiences of violence and abuse during fieldwork (Bugnon; Fuchs, this issue; Mahmood 2008; Schneider 2020; Nair Ambujam 2021), others take less spectacular forms and emerge from ordinary relationships with interlocutors in the field (Jousset; Juan; Nguyen; Woensdregt, this issue).

Inspired by the writing culture debate of the 1980s and early 1990s, anthropologists have increasingly embraced their vulnerabilities and all sorts of uncomfortable experiences and awkward feelings during fieldwork, creating more reflexive and relational forms of ethnographic knowledge. In 2009, Amy Pollard's article "Field of screams" described a wide range of unpleasant experiences and emotions that she and colleagues throughout the UK went through while carrying out ethnographic fieldwork. From loneliness to feeling unwell to

harassment, Pollard shows that experiences of vulnerability in the field are not exceptional or a sign of failure but are inherent to the serendipitous nature of ethnographic fieldwork. Expanding on this understanding, serendipity, as Julie Giabiconi (2013) argues, does not necessarily lead to success in fieldwork, but rather is a source of discomfort. In this sense, we stress the epistemological potential of listening to such emotions (Jousset, Juan, Woensdregt, this issue).

In a recent interview marking the 25th anniversary of Ruth Behar's *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), the author explains that she wrote the book at a time when researchers believed that "by concealing [their] presence, [their] feelings of vulnerability as an observer, and how the social world [they] observe connects with [their] own life, [they] would supposedly be 'unobtrusive' and 'neutral' and 'more objective'" (Behar 2021). We agree with Behar that this has undoubtedly changed. Together with the authors gathered here, however, we observe that at some point in our careers we have all struggled with fears of failure because we felt we could not live up to professional expectations, were not "objective enough," or were "too close" to research participants (see Juan, this issue). In our time of reflexive anthropology, we wonder where these fears of academic credibility come from.

We assume that not all experiences of vulnerability can be written about, but only those that conform to certain notions of "good" fieldwork (see Nair Ambujam 2021). Anthropologists, for example, often write about initial difficulties and forms of clumsiness in the field that they can ultimately translate into ethnographic "success stories": entertaining heroic tales of how they successfully turned adversities into opportunities to create anthropological knowledge. But when it comes to disclosing and writing about more painful experiences and unresolved feelings of guilt, grief and regret, broken hearts and wounded bodies, researchers are reluctant and wary. As several authors in this special issue and beyond point out, it is difficult to talk about vulnerabilities, let alone reflect on them in an academic paper (Fuchs; Juan, this issue). There is also a specific temporality at work in writing about experiences of violence, a slow pace in uncovering and understanding what has happened to oneself and others (see Bugnon, this issue; Schild 2021). The reluctance to disclose one's suffering shows that "unveiling" vulnerability in academia may come at a personal cost (Fuchs; Juan, this issue). This is partly because anthropology is still practiced and taught in many universities today in ways that encourage students and academics to suppress painful and violent experiences during fieldwork (see The Fieldwork Initiative 2024).

While silences often indicate an ability to turn away from one's own complicity in power relations and in the oppression of less privileged others, engaged anthropology has come to see its primary role as breaking such complicit silences and speaking out against injustices. For Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the act of witnessing "positions the anthropologist inside human events as a responsive, reflexive, and morally committed being" (1995, 419). However, her ethical claims about anthropological research assume that researchers are inherently privileged in relation to their field and the people they work with.[2] The privilege of

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[2] The ethical responsibility ascribed to anthropologists who "study up" is not so different from that of those who do research with the oppressed, and lies in witnessing how their privileged interlocutors are implicated in causing human suffering (Low and Merry 2010).

anthropologists as witnesses of human suffering and struggles comes with an "ethical obligation to identify the ills in a spirit of solidarity" (1995, 418–19). Yet, such an ethical obligation can only be taken up by those anthropologists who have the power to speak out against forms of oppression and injustice. In other words, silences are not always a sign of privilege, but also result from vulnerability, trauma, and fear of violent retribution. As Maya Berry and her colleagues point out (Berry et al. 2017), the assumption about researchers' privileged position and related ethical and political responsibilities tends to ignore the fact that anthropologists, and particularly Brown, Black, Indigenous, women, and queer researchers, can also be, and often are, vulnerable and exposed to harm and violence during fieldwork in ways that make it impossible for them to speak out.

We therefore examine how vulnerabilities, in their various forms and entanglements with privilege and power relations, shape the way anthropologists do ethnographic fieldwork and co-create anthropological knowledge, and how the exposure to harm makes anthropologists do things otherwise and see things in other lights. The authors draw on different notions of vulnerability and privilege, pointing to relational variations and diverse experiences of vulnerability and privilege. For some authors, their privilege in relation to the field and interlocutors was entangled with forms of vulnerability and was "weaponized" against them by academic publishers and peer reviewers (Fuchs, this issue), or led to feelings of uncertainty, powerlessness, and guilt (Bugnon; Jousset, Juan; Woensdregt, this issue). For others, however, it is the situational suspension of the privilege ascribed to white and relatively wealthy researchers from the Global North that exposes them to physical violence and abuse in the field, in many of the same ways as their local research participants (Bugnon, this issue). In contrast to violent and harmful experiences of vulnerability, Phuong Nguyen (this issue), who shares her interlocutors' structural position in terms of age, nationality, class, and level of education, shows how intimate practices of reciprocity and friendship emerge when anthropologists share facets of themselves with interlocutors which go beyond professional self-image.

What becomes clear from all contributions is that vulnerabilities bear an epistemological and political potential, allowing anthropologists to engage in ways of knowing that would otherwise not be possible and, therefore, to counter structures of "epistemic injustice" (Fricker 2007). After all, anthropologists witness vulnerabilities and forms of violence during fieldwork not as passive and distant researchers but as sensible and empathetic human beings who regularly end up feeling *with* their interlocutors and sharing some of their painful and traumatizing experiences (Jousset; Juan; Nguyen, this issue). This relationality and "sharing" of vulnerabilities can also inspire practices of mutual care and solidarity between researchers and interlocutors. However, before discussing practices of reciprocity and solidarity in more detail, we now turn to vulnerabilities and forms of violence in academic institutions.

Precarity and Risk in Neoliberal Academia

Academia has often been portrayed as an ivory tower in which privileged individuals follow their passion while being sheltered from the struggles and power relations that shape society

at large, without much reflection on the living and working conditions these researchers are subjected to. Feminist scholars in particular have deconstructed this myth by showing how discrimination based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation permeates the university and its institutions. In addition, the neoliberal restructuring of academia has increased forms of precarity, affecting researchers' bodies and minds (see Gill 2016; Mountz et al. 2015). As a result of the ongoing neoliberalization, universities and researchers are increasingly placed in competition with each other. At the same time, precarity in academia is unevenly distributed among university staff and affiliated researchers, rendering early-career academics particularly vulnerable and exposed to exploitation and abuses (see Pritchard and Edwards 2023). While contending with short-term contracts and social and personal insecurities, they are also under increased pressure to "publish or perish" (see also Fuchs, this issue). Such competitive environment often creates an erosion of solidarity between peers in academia, and leaves space for the weaponization of vulnerabilities and other harmful behaviours, such as moral harassment, mobbing, or bullying. When individuals lose sight of the human fragility and precarity of their colleagues – notwithstanding the fact that psychological distress is widespread in academia – , individual interests end up prevailing over acts of care for one another.

As elsewhere, universities in Switzerland are hierarchical institutions in which supervisors often act as gatekeepers for junior and precarious employed researchers, leading to dependencies in which early-career researchers must not only conduct research and teach courses but also constantly prove themselves to their seniors as "good" academics, worthy of being employed, recommended to colleagues, and involved in publications and the organization of conferences. As a result, doctoral and non-tenured postdoctoral researchers and those from other precarious, underrepresented, and disadvantaged backgrounds in academia are particularly vulnerable to harassment, bullying, and sexual abuse (Pritchard and Edwards 2023; Ahmed 2021). They fear that speaking up against hierarchies and forms of oppression within universities and in other academic contexts, including publishing (see Fuchs, this issue) and the awarding of grants, could lead to the end of their academic careers (see Schwarzenbach 2016; Furger 2018; Noack 2018), as has happened to academics who dared to complain (see Ahmed 2021). At the same time, researchers are often unable to speak openly about their fears and experiences of violence as their academic credibility can be contested. It is precisely this silencing and being silenced that are produced by the neoliberal, patriarchal, and racist structures of the university and its institutions, but also reproduced by universities individualizing the vulnerabilities of researchers and making them appear exceptional.

Anthropologists are in the situation that they must contend with both precarities and silences in neoliberal academia and the indeterminacies and vulnerabilities of fieldwork. Here, universities adopt a paradoxical approach to vulnerabilities and risks. Risk and vulnerability are closely related concepts. In institutional contexts such as universities, risk means the potential for harm and has become the primary objective of security and safety management guidelines and assessment procedures. In relation to vulnerability, risk can be conceptualized as the probability that vulnerability will result in harm.

In 2021, the Ethical and Deontological Think Tank, a commission of the Swiss Anthropological Association, conducted a survey to understand how universities and anthropology

institutes in Switzerland deal with researchers' risks in fieldwork. The survey shows that risks and vulnerabilities are rarely addressed in discussions with supervisors and formal exchanges between colleagues. While security and safety guidelines and risk assessments can be useful in raising awareness and initiating conversations between students, researchers, and supervisors about potential risks and resources prior to fieldwork, they do not guarantee that harm will not occur (Johansson 2015; Nair Ambujam 2021; Schneider 2020). Given the "impossible task of controlling the unpredictability of human engagement" (Schneider 2020, 174) that is at the core of anthropological fieldwork, risk assessment procedures are meant to protect institutions rather than their researchers. If harm does occur during fieldwork, these procedures enable universities to pass on responsibility to the individual researcher, blaming them for not following security and safety guidelines and sometimes even demanding that they disclose their traumatizing experiences of violence in order to assess their professionalism (Schneider 2020).

As feminist scholars have noted many times and the contributions curated here maintain once again, survivors of violence must not be blamed but given care and support. Pascale Bugnon (this issue) and many other anthropologists, including those who started The Fieldwork Initiative (2024), remind us that universities need to work towards an institutional ethics of care, addressing the risks and vulnerabilities of researchers in more substantial and inclusive ways in academic teaching, research, administration, and publishing. Therefore, we insist on the responsibility of institutions to support and care for researchers who have experienced violence and harm in the field, while defending the "right to risk" (see Schneider 2020) of anthropologists to conduct ethnographic fieldwork despite its unpredictability.

Reciprocal Vulnerabilities

Breaking the silences about the vulnerabilities of anthropologists, the contributions to this special issue examine human exposure to harm and violence as a source of connection and mutuality.

Reciprocity in fieldwork relationships is a widely held ideal in anthropology. This notion describes practices of exchange where different parts mutually benefit and where prestige is circulated. Through practices of reciprocity, anthropologists often seek to redress the power disparities between researcher and interlocutor and avoid exploitative forms of anthropological knowledge creation. However, for researchers, the ideal of reciprocal research relationships often comes with ambivalent feelings (von Vacano 2019). In discussing shame, guilt, coercion, insecurity, friendship, belonging, care, and solidarity, authors here point to such emotional ambivalence in fieldwork relationships, which can itself be experienced as a form of vulnerability. They find it difficult to live up to normative expectations of ethical research and to build reciprocal relationships with research participants, replacing hierarchies with more egalitarian forms of exchange and collaboration. While the expectation of the importance of reciprocating can be materially and emotionally difficult to handle (both from researchers and research participants), we believe that the reverse is also true, that vulnerabilities can lead to reciprocal relationships between people and groups, including researchers

and interlocutors. The concept of "reciprocal vulnerability" explores forms of mutual exchange between anthropologists and their research participants based on shared and relational experiences of vulnerability and violence, and to draw from these relationships and relationalities new ethnographic insights into practices and possibilities of solidarity in anthropology.

At the heart of our concept of "reciprocal vulnerability" is the observation that anthropologists are vulnerable and can be exposed to various forms of structural and physical violence (Mahmood 2008; Sikic Micanovic, Stelko, and Sakic 2020; Markowitz 2021), and that these vulnerabilities are what connects them with interlocutors as well as with many other human beings (Berry et al. 2017). With Judith Butler (2004; 2020), we understand vulnerability as a universally shared human condition: we are all vulnerable due to our bodies being dependent on each other for support (Altermark 2023). At the same time, we recognize that vulnerabilities are individually experienced and unequally distributed, depending on the location of individuals and groups within local and global structures of power. Therefore, the concept of "reciprocal vulnerability" is permeated by the tension between commonalities and differences, between sharing and not-sharing of vulnerabilities and privileges: we are all vulnerable but in different and unequal ways. We argue that experiences of vulnerability and violence open an epistemic horizon, as they offer a way of knowing and relating our vulnerable bodies to those of other human beings.

In our thinking about reciprocal vulnerabilities, we are inspired by existential anthropology (Jackson 2005), which assumes a shared humanity between researcher and interlocutor, and related attempts to bring anthropologists' emotions out of the methodological margins of ethnographic fieldwork and to consider their potential to offer new insights (Davies 2010). In this way, we seek to realize the epistemological potential of vulnerabilities by relating our experiences of vulnerability as anthropologists to those of our research participants, exploring their entanglements and overlaps without ignoring the differences and inequalities between these experiences.

Authors of this collection discuss various uncomfortable, disturbing, and traumatizing experiences in the field and in academia, including emotional distress (Fuchs; Hänni; Jousset; and Juan, this issue). In one way or another, they all examine what these vulnerabilities "do" with them as anthropologists and their work, and how they connect them to the lives of research participants, inspires forms of mutual care and support. As Butler argues, vulnerability is a constellation that "only makes sense in light of an embodied set of social relations, including practices of resistance" (Butler 2020, 131; 2016). In other words, vulnerability is never only about weakness, but also about the possibility of gaining strength by bringing people together to confront oppressive conditions. Drawing on the experience of the violent death of an interlocutor and friend during fieldwork, Pascale Schild (2021; 2025) shows how, in the face of trauma and violence, anthropologists and their interlocutors can turn to practices of care and solidarity for healing and survival.

In this special issue, the authors discuss diverse and ambivalent relationships that emerge from the intimate connections between researchers' uncomfortable, disturbing, or painful experiences and the vulnerabilities of the people and groups with whom they work and interact in their everyday lives. For Lise Woensdregt, the feeling of uncertainty, shame, and guilt

about her interlocutors' financial expectations, combined with her and anthropology's reluctance to compensate research participants with money, ultimately allowed for a better understanding of the vulnerable lives and care networks of her research participants in Kenya. These networks included her. As a white woman from a privileged Dutch background conducting research among relatively poor queer male sex workers in Nairobi, her position placed her in the role of a friend and a person to whom her interlocutors felt they could rightfully turn for material support. In the context of psychiatric institutions in Switzerland, Paola Juan shows how her personal experience as family member of someone who suffers from long-term psychological difficulties not only served as an emotional driving force for her research but also allowed her to build relationships with people and groups to whom she otherwise would not have had access, and to feel and share their anger and guilt. In a similar way, pointing to the blurred boundaries between a researcher's professional and personal life, Phuong Nguyen traces how she entered vulnerable relationships of friendship, replacing outdated expectations of professional "distance" with reflexivity and ethical research aimed at "giving back" to interlocutors-turned-friends. Fieldwork in all these contexts is fraught with uncertainty, as both unequal relationships and friendships are processual and negotiable, and therefore a potential source of anxiety for both researchers and interlocutors. However, instead of understanding these vulnerabilities as obstacles to fieldwork and the creation of knowledge, we argue for embracing the uncomfortable and disturbing experiences and emotions of fear, guilt, and uncertainty as reflexive and ethical research practices. Annemarie Hänni takes us to the heart of the "vulnerable observer" (Behar 1996) by showing how reflexivity is itself a vulnerable practice that constantly confronts anthropologists with irritations and epistemological uncertainties: how do I know what I know about myself, my field, and my interlocutors? Exploring ways of knowing and doing ethnographic reflexivity collectively, Hänni's contribution points to alternative and relational practices of interpreting ethnographic material, in which researchers support each other in making sense of fieldnotes and reading between the lines. In her discussion of reciprocal vulnerabilities, Amanda Jousset reflects on how, in reading her emotionally charged fieldnotes, she suffered a "vicarious trauma" from witnessing physical and symbolic forms of violence against her interlocutors during fieldwork. While her vulnerable and emotional entanglements with the lives of her research participants helped her to understand their suffering more deeply, she struggled to find ways to write about these vulnerabilities beyond "classical" academic representation. Pascale Bugnon draws on her traumatic experiences of violence in the field to show how academic silences and lack of institutional support from the university exacerbated her distress. However, when she discovered similar personal accounts of violence by anthropologists to which she could relate her own experience, a process of recovery and healing began to take shape. In discussing the entangled vulnerabilities of anthropologists in relation to fieldwork and the university, her contribution is also a powerful call for the creation of an institutional ethics of care in anthropology. However, as Sandhya Fuchs reminds us, not all vulnerabilities are reciprocal and enable connections across differences. Rather, neoliberal academia with its pressure to "publish or perish" and the lack of "care review" (Allegra Lab 2022) has individualized vulnerabilities, essentialized differences, and disconnected academics, limiting the possibilities for relationships of care and solidarity between researchers.

In promoting reflexive research practices, the conceptual lens of reciprocal vulnerabilities calls for an understanding of research ethics that does not only commit us to "do no harm" to research participants, but also takes seriously the responsibilities to care for others and ourselves in an entangled world. The concept of reciprocal vulnerability allows researchers to understand themselves as vulnerable human beings who depend on others for support. By recognizing vulnerability as diverse and relational rather than representing identical experiences, anthropologists can discover and invent social and emotional forms of reciprocity across differences both in the field and in academia, creating anthropological knowledge beyond colonial and extractive research methods and the inequalities of the neoliberal world we live in (see Harrison et al. 2016).

Solidarity and Ethics of Care from Fieldwork to the University

While thinking about vulnerability in fieldwork and academia raises questions about risk, violence, and privilege, a less explored dimension of human exposure to harm is the possibilities it may offer for researchers and research participants to explore and nurture ethics of care and solidarity in anthropology. Here we see how our discussion can inspire further research and debate in moral anthropology (Fassin 2012) and the anthropology of care and ethics.[3]

The project materialized here also emerged in response to the challenges we experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when our "normal" everyday life as researchers, as well as that of many other people around the world, was severely disrupted. In this context, the need to think about care and solidarity appeared to be more crucial than in "normal" times. For some of us, the pandemic hit while we were in the middle of fieldwork, causing severe distress and uncertainties about our personal and professional future. One of us was conducting research in Ecuador, a country with many shocking images in the media of people dying in the streets. In April 2020, she left on a humanitarian flight organized by her country's embassy. All this unfolded without her university checking how she and other researchers doing fieldwork abroad were coping with the situation, not to mention offering help and advice. Checking in on colleagues who were also confined in other countries via social media became a small but important act of caring. While researchers felt vulnerable, they also supported one another where institutions utterly failed (Cîrstea, Johnson, and Phiri 2024). This is one of the various instances where care and solidarity emerged from "shared" vulnerabilities and relational experiences of distress and uncertainty (see Cox et al. 2024). As David Loher and Sabine Strasser (2019) point out in the introduction to a special issue on precari-

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[3] While the focus of the contributions is not on ethics but on vulnerabilities and related forms of reciprocity, we recognize how anthropological perspectives on ethics can deepen our understanding of ethnographic research and, in particular, research ethics. As anthropologists of the "ethical turn" in the discipline have argued (see Lambek 2010; Fassin 2012; Laidlaw 2014; 2023; Keane 2016), the ethical is not an ephemeral and separate dimension, but a constitutive part of social life, including the everyday practices of fieldwork. Therefore, research ethics must be seen not only as a set of rules and normative claims and expectations, but also as ordinary ethical practices that emerge from the necessities and demands of sometimes adverse circumstances both in the field and in academia, including experiences of vulnerability and violence.

ties in academia, acts of care and support among researchers show the contradictory entanglements of individual vulnerability with possibilities for collective practices of resistance in and against the neoliberal university. While academics are exposed to "new forms of vulnerability, exclusion and exploitation resulting in precarious lives, they are also offered (…) new professional networks as well as transnational networks expressing solidarity and critique" (Loher and Strasser 2019, 7).

In line with current debates and feminist perspectives in social anthropology and neighboring disciplines on political solidarity, we conceptualize solidarity as relations of support and care forged through common struggles against all forms of oppression and injustice in the world (Scholz 2008). Solidarity, including care, is an ethical project. For a long time, feminist scholars have claimed to see care as "the ontological ground of ethics" (Mattingly and McKearney 2023, 561) because humans are relational, dependent, and vulnerable beings. In anthropology, understandings of care have been complicated by ethnographies showing how practices of care, particularly state and institutional care interventions (Ticktin 2011), can involve hierarchy, coercion, and neglect rather than reciprocity and responsibility. At the same time, the recognition of unequal care relations has led to new anthropological perspectives that undermine the common assumption that ethics of care are always based on equality.

While anthropologists of ethics have debated how care and other forms of exchange are and can be ethical in social relationships, including research relationships, marked by inequalities and dependencies (Mattingly and McKearney 2023), scholars of political solidarity have engaged in controversies over the conceptualization of difference and commonality to understand relationships between members of "solidarity groups" (Scholz 2008). What links these debates and controversies, we argue, is the question of the possibility or impossibility of reciprocity and solidarity across differences and inequalities. For some (Glick Schiller 2016; 2020; Rakopoulos 2016), solidarities and related forms of care are necessarily built on pre-existing commonalities and shared experiences and fears of dispossession and suffering. Conversely, other researchers (see Eckert 2019; 2023) argue that solidarity is not only an outcome but also a driving force for bridging differences, responding to interdependencies, and creating new commonalities, as it allows people to develop trust and empathy and share vulnerabilities despite—and across—different and unequal experiences.

As for engaged research practices, we see the possibility that solidarities in anthropology allow for more responsive and responsible practices of care to emerge when anthropologists recognize their vulnerabilities together with their privileges, including their complicated entanglements with the global power relations that unequally shape their lives and those of interlocutors and colleagues. From the "in-between" position of the "implicated subject" (Rothberg 2019)—neither a victim nor a perpetrator of, nor merely a bystander to, political violence— people can understand how they indirectly contribute to, while benefiting and/or suffering from, inequalities and forms of oppression in the world and work towards their "disengagement from implication" (Rothberg 2019, 145). Solidarities then emerge with the recognition of a global "connectedness that makes us concerned" (Eckert 2019).

Authors in this collection trace "trajectories of solidarity" (Cinalli and Sanhueza 2018) in which positions of power, privilege, and vulnerability shift over time and across contexts,

and "in-betweenness" becomes the relational connection between different and unequal experiences of vulnerability, enabling anthropologists and interlocutors to imagine a shared and implicated human connectedness. This connectedness allows for ethics of care, as it makes humans responsive to, and feeling responsible for, one another. In other words, the "in-betweenness"—of being a researcher *and* a relative (Juan, this issue), a close friend (Nguyen, this issue), a vulnerable witness (Jousset, this issue), a material provider (Woensdregt, this issue), a survivor of violence (Bugnon, this issue), or an observed observer (Hänni, this issue)—is constitutive of the relationality of vulnerabilities and how power can be "momentarily transferred in the research process between research subjects (researchers and other participants)" (Huizinga 2024, 620), leading to new forms of togetherness.

The in-betweenness and shifting of position is what has allowed anthropologists, including our authors, to recognize connections across differences and engage in reciprocal practices of care and solidarity with interlocutors and colleagues, ranging from emotional care (see Nguyen; Juan; Jousset, this issue), to legal advice, to financial support (see Woensdregt, this issue), to political mobilization, to collective reflexivity (see Hänni, this issue) and other forms of collaborative knowledge creation (Asante et al. 2021). Here, we find solidarities emerging from reciprocal vulnerabilities not only through material practices but also through emotions (Luzynski, Caretta, and Tanner 2024). At the same time, emotions and feelings of solidarity and "being concerned" have an analytical strength, as they enable anthropologists to find creative ways of knowing and narrating positionalities, differences, and commonalities, which do justice to different yet related experiences of vulnerability and violence (Jousset; Hänni, this issue; Huizinga 2024).

As Fuchs (this issue) reminds us, vulnerability does not necessarily lead to solidarities and resistance. It may also enforce the status quo and structural differences, which is sometimes a prerequisite for survival and persistence not only in academia or fieldwork, but everyday life in general. However, vulnerability can bring people together and inspire practices of care that allow lives to persist and recover from harm and violence (Candrian and Fortney, 2014). It is from these lives that vulnerabilities potentially emerge as political strength and mobilizing forces for resistance and solidarities aimed at countering forms of oppression and injustice in the world (Butler 2016). Human life is vulnerable. And while there is life without resistance, there is no resistance without life nor, as Veena Das reminds us (Das 2012; see Laugier 2016), without the everyday relationships and practices of care and solidarity that enable human bodies to recover from trauma, harm, and injury (Schild 2025). By uncovering the political, ethical, and epistemological potential of reciprocal relationships based on shared vulnerabilities, we hope to contribute to ethics of care for oneself and others that is conducive to bridging differences and countering inequalities and forms of oppression in anthropology, and in academic institutions more generally.

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