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**SHORT STORIES OF DEPENDENCY 2.0 –
ETHICS IN ECONOMICS RESEARCH THREE YEARS LATER**

Abstract

The paper describes how the idea of reflexivity has been used throughout the author's PhD research in order to organise and set "ready for answers" the ethical issues which have arisen during the research project. The paper as well as the issues explored are divided for analysis purposes, into three categories: the first deals with ethics concerning the terminology, vocabulary and narratives during or after research; the second, discusses the ethical issues connected to the interaction with participants, especially two issues: their acceptance to participate in the project and the information exchange; and the third part, discusses the extent to which the researcher can be involved in the activity which belongs to the object of the research, while that activity was expanding beyond any expectation during the time the research project was taking place.

Keywords: ethics, field research, reflexivity.

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SHORT STORIES OF DEPENDENCY 2.0 –

ETHICS IN ECONOMICS RESEARCH THREE YEARS LATER¹

Part I: Context of ethical questions

1) Introduction: the idea of reflexivity

The research project I am working on is titled “Exchange networks and parallel currencies: Theoretical approaches and the case of Greece” is quite peculiar, because we have not any other research projects undertaken before mine on the same topic for the same geographical area. Moreover, there are not any theoretical inquiries that would satisfactorily provide me with some framework from which I could start asking questions. The project faces a phenomenon, or a multiplicity of phenomena connected to parallel currencies, exchange networks, exchange groups and free bazaars.

The phenomenon could be summarised into the phrase “transactions without official currency” or “economic activity without official currency”. The initiatives studied in this project are either organised networks, or just groups of people not structured in any “formal” way. Each initiative seems to facilitate either transactions concerning specific goods (f.ex. traditional varieties of vegetables, trees, fruit, etc), or transactions concerning specific aims (f.ex. recycling, education) or both or to be dedicated to transactions of all types. For reasons of definition, one could add that this “economic activity” does not comprise any activity within the framework of family or relatives’ structure. The people might be related in origin, but family bonds are not the important point for the activity the project examines.

Therefore, it seemed that the idea of reflexivity (and reflexive research and reflexive researcher) fitted best to the situation of field research. It also seemed to offer an analytical tool for understanding the ethical issues that have arisen so far or that one might, given the actual circumstances, anticipate for the future. By the term “reflexivity” I understand that the research is an ongoing process of mutual learning and “teaching/informing/exploring” between the researcher and the research participants, as well as the other humans involved more or less directly with the research project: academia and public.

The reflexive researcher “returns” at all times and occasions of the research to his/her self to question terminology, hypotheses, methods, results, writings, analyses, etc of the research project as well as to bring the information gained through research process as knowledge to be studied, examined and questioned. This is particularly important, because, not only concerning the topic of the research, but also concerning its ethics, the researcher has to treat him/herself and participants as what they are: persons who, even if the researcher would try to avoid it, contribute all together to a social process², whether this is a parallel currency scheme or the research project itself.

¹ This paper has been prepared within the framework of the student’s PhD programme under the supervision of Professor George Stathakis (University of Crete, Dept. of Economics). This version is prepared especially for the WEA Conference 2012 and you may contact the author for the full version of this paper, in case you need to quote. A much earlier version of this paper has been presented at the 1st Conference of the Academic Society for Political Economy, co-organised (19-20.06.2009) with the 11th Conference of Greek Historians of Economic Thought, titled “Economic Crisis and Economic Theory” and held at the University of Crete in Rethymnon (Gallos University Campus), Greece. For more information about the project, please see <http://erevnaantallages.blogspot.com> (in Greek) & <http://ccresearchgreece.blogspot.com> (in English) and the facebook page *Ανταλλαγές Παράλληλα Νομίσματα* (in Greek only).

² Aull Davies (1999), pp. 5-10, 17-23. Silverman (chapter 6 in Caplan 2003), p.127. Rorty’s view about reflexive humans as quoted by Cherryholmes (1988, p. 449) is also very interesting, because it emphasises that reflexivity is the human approach to express solidarity, through their story of contributing to the community. Gill (2003) also seeks a methodology “capable of critical introspection” when she comments on Brennan’s “Economics and Ethics” (Brennan 2003). See also Hirschheim & Klein (1994), p. 6, linking self-reflection with self-transformation. See also Nash & Wintrob (1972) pp. 527-529, Shore (1999) p. 45 and Gardner (1999), pp. 50-51. Abma, Molewijk and Widdershoven (2009), describe in detail a very reflexive research process with several practical implications. However, they use the term “reflexive” once only: to remind that the design of the research project not only emerges from the research process itself, but also, that this is done to make it link it

This might be an ethical solution in its own right, because even if there are no rules of conduct for economist-researchers, any economist researcher has to find ethical solutions. Therefore, reflexivity best satisfies the need that even if the researcher cannot find the absolute truth in his/her field and in ethics, he/she is bound to be truthful in any case about the research process and the research outcome. The case where there are not any theoretical criteria for moral action, does not mean there are not any criteria at all, nor does this mean there is no possibility for the research to be morally and responsibly conducted. The method for this is that the researcher describes “truthfully” the process and his/her role in it¹.

Some might criticise reflexivity as an approach which creates unjustifiable

- inability of decision-making by the researcher about its own project²
- extended powers to the participants to influence the research project more than they should
- mess, because it does not necessarily exclude any critical approaches to field research and epistemology, much less does it give any hints about ethical issues in research, but it rather permits a mixture of them, along with the researcher’s personal experience, stance and psychology³
- boredom, because instead of “hard facts” or, in the case of ethics, clear solutions, it permits an endless intellectual wandering and endangers the research project into becoming a researcher-centered narrative⁴.

2) Background of the research project

Given that there are not any Ethics Committee or any other Research Ethics Approval procedure, I included some ethics rules in the proposal on my own initiative (with the approval of my supervisor, of course): particularly, the proposal included the clause that the research will be negotiated as being done with the research participants, that their demands about “writing down” any information they give will be respected, concerning confidentiality or any other issues they want to keep beyond publicity. I was really worried whether the University of Crete would accept those clauses, but at the end, not only the University accepted the clause, but even in the most “harsh” negotiations with scheme participants, this clause gave a “professional” and “scientific” aura to the research and the University appeared to be really in control of what the student is doing. So, instead of being an obstacle to the project, this very “weird” clause made the project acceptable to reluctant research participants and permitted the inclusion in the project of very interesting (see: important) initiatives related to the research topic.

One could immediately observe that the project became dependent on the research participants. This is true. The question is: why not? This is what THEY are doing, THEY are working for, THEY are taking the risk about, why not be THEM to have control over the information they give for the project? There is also the view that they own their contributions, even have intellectual rights to what they say or write to respond to the researcher’s questions⁵. From a legalistic point of view, this is true. From an ethical point of view this is more than ownership (which is anyway a notion that does not fit reflexivity at all).

However, the issue of dependency is much more complicated than this question and, of course, the idea of dependency did not help me to feel relieved in front of the research participants. Because, in this project, just like in many others, humans are doing research on humans, or among humans or

to society “reflexive of the social condition”. Reflexivity is also one of the responsibilities of the researcher according to Cannella & Lincoln (2009), p. 279. Shaw (2008), p. 410, asserts that the (qualitative) researcher seeks reflexivity while designing and performing the research.

¹ Brinkman & Kvale (2005), pp. 174-176.

² Shore (1999) pp. 25-30. Horton (2008), p. 363-364.

³ See Silverman (chapter 6 in Caplan 2003), p. 128. Horton (2008) p. 364, 366.

⁴ Nash & Wintrob (1972) p. 532. Shore (1999) p. 29.

⁵ Oliver (2003), p. 31.

with humans. What is ethical to do in such case or in each such case? How far the idea of reflexivity can take the options for resolving ethical issues?

Part II: Content of ethical questions

I could distinguish, just for analysis purposes, the issues into three categories:

A) Terminology, vocabulary, narratives

B) Dealing with participants: I) how can they accept to participate in the project?

II) how to manage info exchange and ownership

C) Help and intervention.

* * * * *

1) Terminology, vocabulary, narratives

The ethical issues of what terminology to use while speaking with research participants and what words to use when writing, are not something new. There is extended literature on that and it will continue to increase in volume, given that any type of social research is done with words, even if social scientists may use nowadays visual material, too. It is a matter of interpretation, actually of narrating things. The problem I really faced is that, due to the theoretical “vacuum” of the project, I have no real specialised terminology to use. Even the initiatives the project studies, have not “regular” names. We have “alternative”, “complementary”, “secondary”, “social”, “local”, “parallel” currencies, “exchange bazaars”, “free” or “gift” bazaars (χαριστικό παζάρι in Greek), “exchange networks” or “time banks”, barter, countertrade, non-monetary transactions, accounting units-money-currency-monies. Of course, this complaint might also hide my intention to transfer my responsibility to others, e.g. those who under other conditions might have established a widely accepted academic jargon about the topic.

If it was for theory only, that would be fine, in the sense that the vocabulary I might use, would of course have been affected by my own beliefs, ideas, ideologies, hopes, study efficiency, etc. but this would be just my own narrative of the phenomenon. But field research is not about the researcher’s narrative only. It is about the research participants’ narratives, as well. Particularly in this case,

- a. where there is not any established terminology
- b. nor any previous research on those networks in Greece,
- c. nor any extended research experience in other projects abroad,

what I “write down” becomes terminology whether I like it or not, whether the research participants like it or not, whether the University likes it or not. It is like a “monopoly of interpretation”¹. Therefore, the questions that arise from this situation are the following:

I) To what extent should the researcher use the research participants’ vocabulary?

II) How acceptable is it to use the already existing terminology intending to fit it into what the researcher “meets with” in real world?

III) What is a real research result? The thing that the participants say during free interviews, or the thing they respond to the researcher’s questions, previously formulated according to hypotheses?

IV) Who is speaking through research results: the discipline structure, the researcher, the research participants, a combination of them?

The methods used so far to tackle the above questions have been:

- free discussion with scheme and group participants,
- use of original material (texts) from their websites and their leaflets,
- effort to use as “neutral” vocabulary as possible
- effort to define in each time the terms I use, so that it is easier for anyone to criticise, resist, discard those terms,

¹ Brinkman & Kvale (2005), p. 164.

- there has been mentioned to the participants that they will have access to what has been written about them, before the text is final.

The reflexive way is to examine the assumptions the researcher has about the congruence of meanings with the research participants. Then, the researcher has to be aware of the recording methods of data/discussions/notes¹. To my great relief, many scheme participants “correct” me when I speak or write to them, when they feel I misunderstand what they are doing or what they are saying. Their corrections not only permitted me to understand better what they are doing, but also have given me ideas about theoretical questions or approaches I had not thought of when I started this project. My worry is that not all participants will have this courage or frankness, especially because “a researcher coming from the University” is enough a deterrent for the participants not to express themselves in a free way.

2) Dealing with participants I. How can they accept to participate in the project?

The reactions I faced from scheme and group participants varied from happy acceptance to complete indifference and non-response. There were people who were very happy with the research and they somehow had been waiting for it and they actually said that they are looking forward to receiving the results of the research so that they have some evaluation of what they are doing. Therefore, they accepted immediately. There have also been people who asked for more information, identification of the researcher, research funding details, even if they accepted at first instance to work for the research. There have been others who asked for details, but have not replied yes or no, due to the fact that they needed to consult with their group members. There have also been others who were very reluctant and distrustful at the beginning and wanted to clarify every detail about commitment and the cooperation procedure before accepting. There are also some who have never replied to any contact (we tried several times) that has been done toward their group.

The problems I had to face were the following:

I) How to present the research project? I tried not to use any terminology that might deter people from participating or that might give a false image of the research. This, however, was not possible in all cases, because sometimes people denied that they were networks or any type of organised initiative, in other cases they did not want to use the “exchange” term, not only because this was not in conformity with the official presentation of the group, but also because they saw reciprocal activity dispersed through time as not exchange but as something else (however, they were very happy to participate in the project, if I clarified that this “something else” was also of great interest to the University). I must also admit that, after discussing with potential research participants, I was in many cases unsure about what was included in the project or not, and I needed the participants’ (and my supervisor’s) advice, plus weeks or months of consideration. My intention was that all participants or candidate participants can at any case have access to information about the research (so they also have all my contact details) and that they have something “stable”, e.g. written text to refer to when talking with the other scheme/group participants. Moreover, they have been able to contact other schemes and let them know about the research and all details about it – of my part, I always ask them to forward the information to whom it may concern.

II) The fact that we depend on the research participants for the project existence and success creates the problem of commitment. What if they accept now and after some months they completely deny to participate? How to agree about the project? How stable the negotiations may be? This is important not only for the essential part, e.g. about the information we need from them, but also about the time schedule and budget of the project.

¹ Aull Davis (1999), pp. 112-116. I also tried to avoid as much as it was possible to distance my own terminology from the terminology of the participants. This might have created absurd situations where academic colleagues were telling me that “the participants use the terms in a wrong way” but on the other hand, my research was not to prove that participants have not read the economic textbooks, but to show that they construct their own meanings despite the textbooks. See for this the excellent discussion by Halse & Honey (2005).

III) The issue of the consent and actually the informed consent of participants is also interrelated with the commitment issue. Actually, there are people who support the idea that the researcher does not need to give all available information about the project, but just what is really necessary for the project to take place. On the other hand, there is the view about the fully informed consent, e.g. that people who participate in the research project should have all available information so that they are really able to decide whether they want to participate or not. The other question is, of course, whether the consent is given at the beginning and this is fine for the entire project, or whether the consent of the research participants is an ongoing process, e.g. a continuous negotiation with the researcher. Personally, I opted for the second view and fortunately this was something, as already mentioned, that the University had agreed to. This option of course led me to negotiate openly with the research participants and not only this – it permitted me to use the “unequal commitment” method, e.g. the one where the researcher commits herself orally and in written toward the participants, but the participants are free at any time to change their minds and renegotiate their participation. In other words, the researcher is committed to methods and rules of cooperation, the research participants are not. They can at any time opt not to participate, or ask for more details, or ask for less publicity, or ask for different methods of research, etc¹.

No doubt, this might create serious problems to the research project. However, I thought that using “written consent forms” would be really deterring participation – it would also create an atmosphere that something “ambiguous”, “bad”, “illegal” was about to happen during research. In some cases, I explained that not even their emails were binding them, although my emails were totally bounding me and the University about this research. I can tell that, contrary to my expectations, this way of tackling reluctance worked very well even in difficult “situations”, where the denial of the participants was expressed in plain words. I think that this freedom provided with to the participants, makes them very positive to the project and hopefully to a long-term positive attitude toward research in general².

IV) The issues of confidentiality were actually the easiest to tackle with. Apart from the fact that there is the legislation concerning use and disclosure of personal data, which in any case applies to the project, I promised to the participants that they will have access to the texts that will be relevant to their activities and they will know what is going to be published about them. They will be able to comment or maybe ask for non-publication of details or results that might not want to be widely known³. This, no doubt, raises the question, whether this might inhibit research. However, I prefer to have all information available, even if part of it is “off the record” and be able to evaluate the phenomenon I study, than oblige participants to hide information from me. At least, a group that might want to keep details not publicised might give me ideas for research with other groups that are more open about the results to be publicised. However, so far, nothing have been flagged as “off the record” and all information, as the participants tell me, is for research use, which is very relieving for me and very helpful for the project⁴.

V) The issue of not doing harm to the research participants and the researched initiatives was also raised. Some of the participants have expressed their worries about being targeted by the tax

¹ Consent is seen as an ongoing process, too. See Aull Davis (1999) p. 46-50. Silverman (chapter 6 in Caplan 2003), p. 117. Laws with Harper & Marcus (2003) p. 239-240. Goduka (1990), p. 334. Also, Jorgensen (1971), pp. 328-330.

² In any case, even the written consent forms would not resolve the issue. They usually have also the clause that the participant will be able to stop cooperation at any time without any reason, see f.ex. Boynton (2005) pp. 91-102. Therefore, the written consent forms exist rather to protect the researcher from scrutiny (because if the researcher wants to extend the research scope beyond what is written on the form, it can be done without the third parties to be able to detect it) than to protect the participants from abuse. This is also obvious in Denscombe (2003), pp. 62-63, where the author, after admitting that full information provision to participants is difficult, requires that the consent is given by participants in written. Hay & Israel (2006), pp. 60-76, point out the difficulties of the written consent method. See also Oliver (2003) p. 47 and Horton (2008) pp. 364-365, 375, Eysenbach & Till (2001).

³ This is considered to be a right of each participant. See Brewer & Crano (2002), p. 351. Gardner had a hard time with data that was difficult to acquire and much more difficult to publish (Gardner 1999, pp. 63-69).

⁴ Laws with Harper & Marcus (2003), p. 242, consider this access of the participants to the writings concerning them as their own right and highly ethical issue.

authorities, after the research is published. I reassured them that they at least have opportunities to comment on the dissertation parts related to their activities and that there is no intention of the University's part to create any problems to their initiatives. Personally, I have not seen anything that might be considered tax evasion or tax law infringement – to the contrary, the initiatives cover social provision activities that in other countries or under better financial situations are done and financed by the state itself. In any case, my concern is that nothing in the dissertation or the research process harms the schemes or groups that accept to participate in the project¹.

VI) I would like to insist a bit more on the difficult questions I faced so far, because this revealed a different world of research to me. I realised that people wanted to take part in the research, but were really afraid to do so. They sometimes did not believe I was a student. In other cases, they were telling me stories about researchers working for companies that they used the information participants gave them and never again appeared to give any feedback. The “researchers” never published the results of the research, so participants do not know even today, who they were really talking with, what they were looking for and why. This is why in some cases, they asked questions about the funding of the project. I also saw people who are scheme administrators to reveal through hints that they try to avoid their group members being bothered by people, because this behavior (spamming) is very common for marketing or for other purposes. The questions also revealed bad behavior by researchers in general, which means, instead of persuading about what I am doing, I have also to persuade people about what I am not, what the University wants not, what the project is not about². All difficult questions were answered and this at least has been received with positive attitude (as not something common in research!). I felt really responsible not only for the University where I study, but also for all researchers that might try to contact the same schemes later, after me. A bad behaviour of my part will destroy not only my project, but probably the projects of others. As I am dependent on my predecessors in research, others are also dependent on my conduct for their projects tomorrow.

To summarise the methods for tackling the problem of how to persuade people to accept to take part into the project, I can say that I used: full information about the research, freedom arrangements (unequal commitment), discussion, I pointed out the ultimate control the participants they will have for their own contributions, I answered all questions posed to me.

Moreover, this researcher's self-imposed regulation was useful to tackle most of the issues, probably because both the researcher and participants can get prepared for possible future situations. At the same time, this “self-regulation” sets a responsible precedent for the following part of the research project³. On the other hand, there is no way to tackle situations where participants' or possible participants' reaction gets insulting to you⁴. What makes me continue “research as usual” is that those reactions are participants' clumsy efforts to complain or even struggle for better treatment by researchers and research institutions or to turn my attention to issues I had not thought of. In a sense, they express their fears and their determination to defend themselves and finally, they help me⁵ to conduct a better and more considerate project.

3) Dealing with participants II. How to manage info exchange and ownership?

¹ See for the issue of not doing harm, Hay & Israel (2006), pp. 95-111.

² Contrary to the researchers' idea that what they are doing is important enough to persuade people to participate, Silverman's point that people started interacting with her as a researcher only after they managed to know who she was, might need further investigation (See Silverman, chapter 6 in Caplan 2003, pp. 118-119). In any case, if the important thing is “who the researcher is”, then the codes of ethics are not enough and the individual quest for morality in the research field is not enough and maybe researchers should at least work on their collective identity and morality as well.

³ Self-regulation is discussed in Dr. John Horton's unpublished research notes (vignette no3), sent to me by personal correspondence on October 2nd 2009.

⁴ Insults or anything (like f.ex. hints) addressed by participants to the researcher to embarrass the latter, is discussed in Dr. John Horton's unpublished research notes (vignette no5), sent to me by personal correspondence on October 2nd 2009

⁵ In *Advanced Learner's Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, edition of 1989, 8th impression 1993), “embarrass” is defined in two ways: a) cause somebody to feel self-conscious, awkward or ashamed, b) cause mental discomfort or anxiety to somebody. I think, this is the case with participants' tough reaction: they make the researcher anxious, ashamed and self-conscious...

This part of ethics is something I consider to be extremely difficult and exists as an issue from the very start till the end of the final draft of the research dissertation. The real thing is that the researcher seeks information and knowledge from the research participants and then the researcher becomes the one who will transfer the information and knowledge to others, e.g. the people who will attend conference presentations, or read the researcher's papers and texts in general. Unfortunately, reflexivity describes the situation but does not resolve the issues apart from giving a general principle of mutual respect. Therefore, the questions that arise in this case are the following:

I) How to present researcher's personal beliefs and ideology and hopes that undermine the so-called objectivity of the research procedure? It is implied that perfect objectivity is impossible (and I believe that objectivity is not what really we need from a researcher). So, how to deal with the fact that the researcher, no matter how conscientious he or she might be, affects the position of the project, even by the vocabulary he or she uses in dealing with the research participants, in describing what the field research appears to give to the observer, in formulating hypotheses, in evaluating and analysing data, in writing reports, papers and presenting the research results?

II) How to avoid making research participants means to an end, e.g. the research results, much worse means to a PhD degree or means to enhance one's beliefs or to answer questions related to one's ideology etc. Actually, this is the problem of the role of research participants – how do they act within the research project? It is not an issue of participation only, because, participation does not speak about ownership, nor about decision-making procedures. So, it is also about decision-making, e.g. power relations, developed between the researcher and the participants. Fortunately, there are cases where people from the initiatives I study, try to educate me about anything concerning their own projects which might be misunderstood by me. But, does the fact that others have accepted my "narrative" without commenting or correcting mean that they just agree or that they do not want to dissent from "someone from the University"?

III) How to tackle with the fact that research participants might also have a similar stance, e.g. they use the researcher and the research project as well as the University's authority for their own purposes (f.ex. to advertise their schemes, propagate their ideas, enhance their personal power within the schemes, etc)? In principle, this might be not a problem. But, it is possible that this attitude by the participants might lead to give other information than what they really know or think, just to turn the research results to a direction they think it is better for their purposes. This is particularly important if we consider the case of gatekeepers, e.g. people who by position have access to information and/or the research participants. There are many cases till now where this question haunts me, especially when I face extreme reactions: gatekeepers who consider the group members as already having accepted to participate or gatekeepers who want to transmit all information themselves from the researcher to the participants and infiltrate the entire research process that concerns their scheme. I try to explain that research participants have to be informed first about the research before any commitment of the gatekeeper is done and I also try to involve gatekeepers more in the project, f.ex. if they deny to give me any access to the group, I tell them that if they want, they might disseminate questionnaires if this will be the case where the group does not accept a direct communication from me. This is something I am really concerned about, because in this case the researcher cannot know whether the group members have been under pressure to answer or to answer in a specific way to give a certain image to the researcher. Moreover, the principles of confidentiality and anonymity of the research participants are at stake. One could suppose that the group members might feel more comfortable with their coordinator to collect data instead with a stranger, but on the other hand, the internal group politics are got to continue concealed as well as the bias they might imply for the research results¹.

IV) How to "write down" discussions, and all oral information that is accumulated at this first stage of field research? This "writing" will affect seriously the formulation not only of hypotheses, but

¹ On the other hand, this "paternalism" propensity of the researcher should also be under question: who am I to decide about those people, whether they want to talk directly with me or they prefer to be represented by a person they already know and trust? The fact that if I was at their position, I would not like to be represented like that, does reveal only my own preference, not theirs. Those thoughts or doubts have really been raised after my reading Dr John Horton's unpublished research notes (vignette no 8), sent to me by personal correspondence on October 2nd 2009.

also of theoretical perceptions of the research project, given its peculiarities about the “theory void” mentioned previously. Moreover, this question is deeply related to later stages of field research, too: hypotheses, questions, interviews, data, results and analysis will need to have this question answered.

On the other hand, I do not believe that a researcher without her own values is able to conduct satisfactory research in any way, much less, to conduct research that can be later analysed and judged by the participants and academics¹. Searing (1970) states that value judgments may intervene in a research project without creating biases. This happens because value decisions are inherent in the research process and it is an issue of methodology of the inquiry. This approach seems to me as expressing high confidence to the reason of the researchers who will be able to work in a logical way in order to make value choices.

Another approach is what Aull Davis proposes² for interviews (interaction), stating that the researcher and research participants are equal within the research process and this makes their contributions and perceptions equally meaningful. The methodological impasse this might create is “resolved”, at least in theory, according to Aull Davis, by the idea that the researcher’s work is to reconcile the different results of different data gathering methods, because each method does reveal another aspect of the same social process. That way, the use of various methods prevailed as an option, despite the extra work this might bring to the researcher, so that I am able to explore different aspects of the same economic activity.

I also opted for having myself being researched too, by performing auto-ethnography on the... researcher, although the original material from this parallel project is not included in this research project. This stemmed from Josephides’ views, who proposes that the researcher should see participants as ends and be modest toward them, because field research might be a sort of “hybris” to individuals and their communities. At the same time, it might be the occasion the participants sought for themselves to speak with authority and through authority. So reflexivity becomes authorial, in the sense that one may face this intertwining situation using the autobiographical strategy to permit to him/herself and to the audience to trace the way the researcher has treated the participants throughout the entire process³.

In support for those options, there comes Cherryholmes who adopts Foucault’s analysis and proposes, that the researcher be aware of “the political processes and institutions by which truth is produced” and “be prepared everyday to make ethico-political choices about which constructs constitute the main danger”⁴. I understand this statement as following, using also feminist approach to reflexivity⁵: recording, writing and reporting in field research should be under self-reference scrutiny along with power-analysis, e.g. the researcher as person who receives and exercises power through research has total responsibility for this and the ethical issues that this power use creates.

One could also add what Brinkman & Kvale⁶ propose: “Ethical as well as scientific objectivity is about letting the objects object to what we as researchers do to them and say about them”. They also propose as a method the confronting interviews: Platonic dialogue; agonistic interviews (derived from the Sophists), dissensus research, advocacy research⁷, active interviews aiming at public argument and Socratic attitude.

Abma, Molewijk and Widdershoven propose that the empirical work should be organised as follows: a) Data should be gathered together with participants and not by the researcher about participants, b) The interpretation of data should be done with the use of dialogue with participants and c) The dialogue focuses on the consequences of empirical data for theory and on the consequences of theory for empirical data. This holds not only for the ethical issues, but also for the main core of a

¹ It is possible that a value-free researcher and a value-free research project is not desirable either. See Harding & Norberg (2005).

² Aull Davis (1999), pp. 99-110.

³ Josephides in Caplan (2003), pp. 67-69.

⁴ Cherryholmes (1988), p. 440.

⁵ Ackerly & True (2008) pp. 695-700.

⁶ Brinkman & Kvale (2005), p. 170.

⁷ See also unit III.11 of the present paper.

research project. The aim is an “emergent design” of the project, e.g. the plurality on which the project is based implies that the research design methodologically gradually emerges in conversation with the participants, and it is spontaneous and reflexive of the social condition. The precondition for this methodological option is that the researcher keeps track of his/her role in the research process. On the other hand, apart from using common qualitative research tools (like focus groups, brainstorming sessions, discussion meetings etc), this approach creates a cyclical way of research work. Instead of the linear process of hypotheses formulation, data gathering, data analysis, result discussion, the data is continuously created and analysed throughout the entire process, because the findings from one participant or group are used as input to conduct research with the next participant(s) or research phase, and the experiences gathered through research are introduced via “stories” as issues for discussion in the next part of fieldwork. Therefore, theory becomes the tool of making crucial points on the participants’ stories and connect them from a general perspective¹.

Another idea is that what is written down is as much as possible separated into “information” and “comment” or “discussion”. The second idea is, that the research texts might provide all available information about how the ideas were formulated, how the hypotheses were chosen, how the interviews were conducted. Even if it will be impossible for the reader to trace exactly where the researcher’s attitudes have affected research, at least it will be possible to point out where the research results might be biased anyhow or which methods were more prone to that or not. Reflexivity and self-questioning might be useful as an approach, although this might fill up the text with “I”s.

The above have been extremely useful, given that during the three years of research, the schemes and their activity expanded beyond what I could have imagined in February 2009, when this project had started. Exchange networks, free bazaars and parallel currencies became very popular as structures but also as mass-media news, then it has been even more difficult, not only to discern the phases of the research, but also to see how my research has possibly influenced and been influenced by this expansion. It is true that several reporters and journalists have used material (therefore, terminology too) from my published papers and so has happened with the schemes themselves. On the other hand, I can say that the schemes get organized and publicise their views and activities in a very autonomous, therefore, interesting, way. In that sense, I have watched the schemes and their people changing during the last three years and myself changing both as a person and a researcher, with different understandings of terms and of structures now, than what was really possible to be done three years earlier. Then interaction with participants and continuous dialogue with them has been the only way to keep up with the entire evolving situation and activity, permitting me to understand what has probably been happening and permitting the participants to access the researcher at any time, ask questions, inform her of new schemes, criticise her, bring new issues into the discussion and at the end, educate her in ways that she could not find in (non-existing) literature. Obviously, this interaction means that I could not have been neutral at all, but this has not been my intention anyway² and on the other hand, it would be absurd to stick with my 2009 views and beliefs while the studied economic activity is heavily transformed day by day.

4) Help and intervention.

Actually, I wanted at the beginning of the project to give the title “Aid and intervention” to this unit, because it reminds me of aid provision structures well used so far for developing countries (Majority countries). This is, no doubt, the toughest part of all ethical issues, maybe because I was least prepared to face situations like the ones described below; or, maybe because the idea of the researcher assisting in schemes the researcher studies in his/her project is something that reminds colonialist practices. The issue has as following and it already comprises several types of problems:

¹ Abma, Molewijk & Widdershoven (2009), pp. 241-242, 245.

Problem 1: There have been several cases where I have been asked to help and participate in the design and construction of an exchange network. Throughout this research project, I explained in every occasion that I do not agree to have an active role in the founding and structuring of the schemes, but on the other hand, I am able to answer questions that the schemes might have, or to assist with information or academic material, f.ex. literature. The reason for this arrangement is (it is also mentioned in my communication with many schemes, as well) that I do not want that the research project arrives to be an experiment with humans. Moreover, I really do not like that some scheme coordinators-to-be want to use the knowledge-authority a researcher from the University brings with her to persuade his acquaintances or an entire community that they should establish this or that non-official transaction mechanism. In cases where my involvement was meant to be more than the assistance described above, the schemes to be established have been exempted from the research project. Because, as Winship states¹, it is also a reflective researcher's ethical stance to avoid "experiments" and maybe limit his/her research, so that we know, when something emerges, that "it has emerged organically and not because it has been stimulated by research procedure".

Problem 2: Some of the schemes have invited me to participate as a full member, which enabled me to perform transactions with other members. In all cases, I publicised as much as I could my researcher-identity so that all members are aware that their activity is "under observation". I admit that this participation (and the observation by participation) was really very educative for me, but it created several ethical issues:

a) In most cases I needed to refrain from activity so that I avoided to become "very popular" or to create any "obligation" for scheme members who would see me as very active within their group. In a case where my activity would seem that it might be something like a big offer to network members, I arranged that my "offerings" are disseminated in an anonymous way (only the coordinators knew about my offering and about the reasons this was better to be done without my name appearing), so that the members do not feel "obliged" to answer my questions, fill-in my questionnaires, etc.

b) In other cases, I needed to know where my... intervention should stop. What if I see a serious, structural problem in a scheme that it is probably leading the scheme into failure or inequalities' enhancement? Should I intervene and to what extend? In a case, I let the scheme coordinator know, however he did not pay any attention to my observations; then I discussed the same problem in private with some scheme members, who nevertheless thought that we should first wait for some time to see how this problem develops. Should I have insisted? Should I bring this problem up to a collective meeting or assembly? Wouldn't this be too intrusive because the other members do not consider this same problem as imminent? Or, given that I have some more knowledge and experience on the topic, I should not let them experience the problem when this will be too big to tackle with?

c) Most important: what happens if i understand that some members, knowing better the scheme structure than other members, are trying to exploit heavily the scheme and its members and at the same time to violate essential principles of the scheme itself? Do I leave the situation as it is, to see what happens or should I intervene? When such a situation emerged in my research, I decided that no matter how neutral I have to be, I need not to legitimise with my silence the exploitation events which I was clearly watching to arrive. Speaking up, of course, was not easy either: first, I needed to stick with arguments that do not insult people and do not picture them as exploiters (even if they deserve such picturing); second, I accepted that I would be possibly portrayed as the "intruder", "exaggerating", badly-behaving" researcher (it also happened, obviously *only* by the people I wanted to stop from exploiting the system); third, I accepted the risk that I was going to suffer public attacks and even to be asked in the rudest way to quit the scheme, although this might have come from those same people well involved in the exploitation attempt; fourth, I needed to stick with the behaviour I would undertake if I did not perform the research at all, because what was most important to me was to stop the possibility of exploitation, even if this might lead to the scheme prohibiting me to continue my research with them; fifth, I decided that I cannot become the scheme protector, much less to become the scheme

¹ Winship (2007), pp. 179-180.

policeperson, then, I just expressed my views to all members of the scheme without accusing anybody and I waited that the collective decision-making would protect the scheme members themselves.

I mean, as a human and a researcher, I was brought into the impossible situation where on the one hand, I needed not to legitimise and participate in exploitative situations by keeping my mouth shut, on the other hand, I should not use my research experience to become over-intrusive in a group that might prefer to try the “exploitative” option. At the end, as a researcher, I need to accept that all scheme members are also able, just like I am, to understand a situation and to pick up the best for themselves. The case is still under collective consideration by the scheme members and the scheme as a group has not created any problem to me yet, concerning the performance of my research¹.

At this point, I would like to say that I am totally opposed to the “action research method”², for the same reasons I mentioned above. So, my dilemma is: I do not want to make my project an experiment with people (if people want for themselves to experiment with schemes, exchange, economic structures, etc, this is something they decide on their own, with their own methods and procedures), but I do not want to keep in secret any information or to stand back from helping those who ask for assistance, nor do I want to silent myself while some people exploit others in front of my eyes and while I am doing research. In any case, even if I do not help them, this is also an “experiment” in the sense, that I leave them on their own and watch them to see how they manage without the information or experience I have.

At the same time, I am aware of the macro-ethics of the cases presented above, but also of the macro-ethical issues of the research project as whole. Macro-ethical issues are all those concerning communities involved in the project and the entire society, as well. Research can be ethical in micro-level (when f.ex. I respect the individual participants’ rights) and unethical in macro-level (when the research might harm the community, or the initiative studied or the local society, etc). And, perhaps “interventions... become unethical within larger social contexts with opposing interests”³. Things might be worse than we imagine, because of the “helicopter research” attitude, where the individual-ethics-focused researcher does appear one day and disappears another, leaving the communities vulnerable to any project implications⁴.

Part III: Theories of ethics and ethics of theories

¹ That was perhaps the most difficult “ethically important moment” of my research project. It is obvious that I make this research bringing to the project all my ideologies and one of them is that I prefer seek non-exploitative structures in economy than exploitative ones. One could say that it is my own ideological stance that created the problem and not the scheme members who seek an arrangement, which in my eyes seems exploitative and deceptive but in other people’s eyes might seem normal interest-utility seeking. That the scheme itself has as its main principles solidarity and condemns exploitation might have been a good argument. But even if the scheme had not such principles announced, I would still point out the problem – then, the “ethically important moment” has been the direct involvement of the researcher’s principles in the research environment. It might have been a serious mistake, but I am not sure what other options I would have if I am expected to be not just a good researcher, but also an ethical researcher. For “ethically important moments” in research, see Gillam & Marilyns (2004).

² Action research is as widely accepted method, also considered to be very progressive in the sense it permits researchers to “try change”. See, Laws with Harper & Marcus (2003), pp. 338-340, Denscombe (2003), p. 80, Bain (1951) and Evered & Susman (1978). Hay & Israel (2006), p. 7. Boser (2006) describes in detail the ethical issues and methods used in action research. The question one would raise after reading Boser (2006) is whether the progressive research attitude (like, the “democratic ethos” and the attention to power relations) are enough to justify action research. Therefore, apart from the question of the means (action research) justified by the end (knowledge and/or change), the other question raised would be whether the end (knowledge and/or change and/via action research) gets better, when the means get better (progressive research methods).

³ Brinkman & Kvale (2005), pp. 167-170.

⁴ Flicker, Guta, Meagher, McDonald & Travers (2007), p.; 479. Same attitude (is it a coincidence that both papers belong to the health sciences field?) has Glese-Davis, Janine (2008), pp. 149-150 about that.

This paper could be categorised into the field of applied ethics¹, which means I already used any practical idea found in the literature and could be relevant for the issues I have faced. However, I feel that even when typically the ethical questions have been answered, this has been only a preliminary or temporary solution. Because, no matter how difficult an issue might be, the researcher should bear in mind that ethics cannot be constructed and reconstructed at will and that he or she should be able in any case to face skilfully the ethical reality of each situation of the project. And, in any case, the researcher should be ready to stop thinking about possible rules in possible situations and look for practical solutions, “for at same point we have to act”².

In 2009, it seemed reasonable to review all possible theories used or applied in research when ethical issues arise. I easily rejected the approaches which seemed to favour the researcher, by presenting her as able not only to decide what is good and right for the participants but also as inherently good person and well-intentioned in everything she does. Because, what we need concerning research ethics is first to be able to question the researcher and her research in all possible aspects – and most theoretical approaches do not really permit that. The issue is not whether the researcher and her project are ethical or equally ethical to the participants, but how the research can be done while all, including the researcher, are aware of the power relations developed within and because of the research project.

Then, I have dismissed as possible guides the consequentialist³ and neo-consequentialist⁴ approaches, virtue ethics⁵, teleological expressivism⁶, principlism⁷, ethical relativism⁸ and the ethics of care⁹. Moreover, no matter how interesting they might be in theory, it seemed that other, more inclusive, approaches have had great problems when it arrived to be implemented on real situations. As a consequence, I had also to practically put aside contract-based ethics¹⁰, coventantal ethics¹¹ and structuralist ethics¹² - to those I added casuistry¹³, exactly because it could not help in advance, although I was sure that all issues I faced within this research project would be good precedents to follow or to avoid in my future research.

Therefore, I was left with several approaches that even if they were not enough, they at least provided me with some framework to work with.

¹ I completely agree that “ethics are more about everyday practice of ethnography” [in my case “of economic research”] as Caplan thinks (Caplan, 2003, p. 22). However, Hay & Israel (2006, p. 13) define applied ethics as the part of ethics which “involves investigating how normative ethical theory can be applied to specific issues or to particular situations and circumstances”. They (Hay & Israel, 2006, p. 12) define ethics quoting Beauchamp & Childress (1994) as “a generic term for various ways of understanding and examining the moral life”.

² Brinkman & Kvale (2005), p. 158 -159.

³ See, Hay & Israel (2006), pp. 13-14. Loue (2002), pp. 61-66. May (1980) pp. 360-363.

⁴ See, Hay & Israel (2006), pp. 14-16. Loue (2002), pp. 60-61. May (1980) pp. 363-364. Varoufakis (1996) p. 160.

⁵ Hay & Israel (2006) p. 17. Loue (2002), p. 65.

⁶ Parker (2009), pp. 204-210.

⁷ Hay & Isreal (2006), pp. 18. Loue (2002), pp. 58-60.

⁸ Hay & Israel (2006), p. 20.

⁹ Hay & Israel (2006), p. 21. Loue (2002), pp. 48-54. Despite the fact that I am a feminist, I felt that the ethics of care, which originate in the feminist philosophy, is the equivalent of “paternalism” in research. At the end, when power relations are involved, we need to question everything that might conceal those relations, even if this “everything” includes feminism itself. See for this Ackerly & True (2008), Harding & Norberg (2005).

¹⁰ Loue (2002), p. 64, Abma, Molewijk and Widdershoven (2009), pp. 245-246. Shaw (2008), pp. 405-406, refers to House’s theory derived from Rawls’ theory of justice, in order to present the theoretical background for the ethical design of a research project. The reference is: Rawls, John (1978 [1971]): *A theory of justice*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-London-New York.

¹¹ May (1980) pp. 367-369.

¹² See Stent (1976).

¹³ Hay & Isreal (2006) p. 19. Loue (2002), pp. 45-46 . The curious thing is that, although many authors use it to discuss ethics in research, they usually do not include it as an approach to ethics. The impression that this gives is that “casuistry is the best approach till we agree on some other more elaborated approach”.

The easiest among them was... ethics derived from the economic theory. Actually, I tried not to forget that in the society I am performing my research, there are social classes and morality is often related to one's own class position¹. Of course, the easy part stops with this general recognition, because my own class position could not fit the typical criteria, nor was possible to define the participants' class position either. What was easy to define, though, has been that as a PhD student, I was representing an institution (university) which is positioned in terms of class, no matter what class the researcher might belong to. Then, I decided to perform my research accepting that I represent a middle class-bourgeois structure and that the participants will see me as middle-class bourgeois researcher and will resist and criticise my research and me as a researcher of an institution that is middle-class bourgeois institution (and even if I am not middle-class bourgeois, I definitely tried not to use my real class position to become more... "popular").

Another approach which was useful in this research was communitarianism. This approach promotes the idea that ethics should emerge from a shared philosophical understanding with respect to communal goals and the communal good, because there is need to integrate what is now a fragmented ethical thought, but also to provide a community reference point instead of focusing on the individual ethics². One should also have in mind Eikeland's view³, who considers the researchers' ethical dilemmas as challenges originating in the transition from non-existent to emerging peer communities of inquiry around real intellectual commons, through openness and exposure. That means, the researcher needs to be(come) or see him/herself as a member of one or multiple communities where ethical issues should be discussed and commonly arranged. Practically, the action to be taken within this framework is: first, to discuss the ethical issues with the research participants themselves, second, to present the issues to the academy colleagues, so that a related discussion is hopefully opened.

This has not been easy either. Understanding myself as just an ignorant student who tries to finish her dissertation and at the same time has the great chance to write down and observe economic phenomena of major importance as those phenomena emerge and develop, creates a great obligation and worry to me, to have accurate research results and at the same time respect the activity and the effort of all those people and communities who establish or take part in the schemes. In other words, if we accept that the non-official transaction mechanism initiatives are themselves communities or a big community extending all over Greece, I need to do my research not only avoiding any harm to them, but also providing them with benefits from my own research, because it is them who create the knowledge I am writing down in my dissertation⁴. Then, it has been really tough for me to decide and imagine what this community or those communities would want me to do in cases like the ones I described in the previous chapters. It is obvious that I cannot discuss several ethical problems in detail because this would reveal the identity of a scheme or a scheme member that might be linked to a certain ethical problem. Then I must respect confidentiality and at the same time, I must respect the fact that a mistaken choice of my part might affect the prosperity not only of a certain scheme or group but of the entire community of the schemes and their people.

At this point, advocacy research has been of great help to me. This is a special theory which emphasises the "positive tie" between the researcher and the participants. In other words, the researcher is a facilitator of the researched community's goals while maintaining a commitment to the truth. On the other hand, the research participants have "a right to expect from the field researcher something more substantial than bourgeois respect, courtesy and honesty; they have a right to the social power that

¹ Varoufakis (1996) pp. 161-162, 167-169.

² Loue (2002), pp. 47-48. Shaw (2008), pp. 401-404, 409.

³ Eikeland (2006), pp. 43-46.

⁴ Of course, when I imagine that there are such communities, then the discussion turns to several methodological and ethical problems. What are my responsibilities to unstructured communities? What are my responsibilities to structured communities, to tightly structured communities or to loosely-structured ones, or to people who perform transactions without official currency, but do not want to participate formally in a scheme? How am I going to understand and explore the risks my project create to all those people not only as individuals but also as members of larger collective entities? See for this Botkin et al (2010).

comes from knowledge”¹. Nevertheless, the militant basis of advocacy research might induce a researcher to intervene more than he or she should in a community, under the idea of the “positive tie”. At the end of the day, the researcher has his/her own communities to belong to and intervene to – why intervene that much in the community studied? On the other hand, if I do not respect my commitment to the truth (or at least to the best of my knowledge), it is as if I cheat the schemes and scheme members themselves, because what everyone will think of a research dissertation would be “she searched, she verified, what is written must be the truth”.

What is impossible though, it is for me to be... neutral to the problems. I have already mentioned that in a case where exploitation was obvious to me, I decided not to remain silent and try to stop the exploitation attempt. Neither do I remain silent to the possible problems non-official transaction mechanisms might have, and this has created in some cases a peculiar situation of me being accused by some scheme members or coordinators as being hostile to the schemes. Obviously, there are people in some schemes who think that even if one points out even in theory f.ex. the inequalities which might develop in a scheme, this person is against the schemes and the entire effort. There are people who understand critique or warnings as “calls to quit the effort”, but there are also people (and they are still the majority in the schemes) who want to experiment with economic structures in order to improve their lives and not to make them worse. Then, I rely on this major collective aim to decide that I need to keep telling my own views, correct or not, but genuine whatsoever, and be aware of collective self-consciousness² which I am part of, once I am involved so much in this activity due to this research project.

This does not relieve me from my own personal responsibilities. Quite the opposite, every single moment it makes me question myself and my findings. What if the majority of the schemes decided one day that they really do not care about exploitation cases within the schemes? The idea that my research project is finishing soon does not help much. Then, reflexive ethics is my main way of thinking as described by Cannella & Lincoln³. Reflexive ethics is considered to be directly connected with a critical approach not only toward research and researchers, but also to itself, i.e. the reflexive ethics. It also includes a “concern for transformative egalitarianism, attention to the problems of representation and continued examination of power orientations”. The aim seems not to be ethics for ethics alone, but an effort to support through social science the “knowledges that have been discredited by dominant power orientations...” and “go beyond countering domination to construct unthought ways of being”.

In any case this is possible, I try to discuss ethical problems with research participants. Therefore, to be reflexive I use hermeneutic ethics and responsive evaluation processes, which means that I establish dialogues with participants and I seek discussion opportunities in all possible ways⁴. Then, conclusions are reached through interactive processes between researcher and participants and at the end, I hope that as a researcher I have become the facilitator of negotiation “between stakeholders” [i.e. participants], as they can easier manage without mediators their own engagement with reference to the issues of (their) concern⁵.

¹ May (1980) pp. 365-367. Advocacy research, although not mentioned with that term, seems to be a main concern for Abma, Molewijk and Widdershoven (2009), pp. 240-241, where they use the notion of “voice”, to describe the active involvement of participants, in the research process, as equal partners of the project. Also, advocacy research (again without this term used) is the conclusion of Brinkman & Kvale (2005), p. 178, where they claim that the rationale of research is to lend a voice to that which is other than oneself and they also claim that this is at the same time, the core of ethics.

² Comment by D.G. Epstein to May (1980) at the same journal, p. 533. It seems rather a Marxist approach but it is also very elaborated and includes the epistemology aspects of it.

³ Cannella & Lincoln (2009), p. 279-.

⁴ The facebook page of the research project has helped a lot, given that the research blogs, despite the number of visitors, do not seem handy for discussions.

⁵ Abma, Molewijk & Widdershoven (2009), pp. 238-242, 248.

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