EthnoScripts

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Anthropology Anonymous?
Some Comments to Julia Vorhölter

Abstract

This brief comment discusses the methodological and ethical implications and complications of anonymising ethnographic research. Special attention is given to the possibility of use of pseudonyms and its hazards and to the moral imperative of trust.

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Julia Vorhölter's article 'Anthropology Anonymous? Pseudonyms and Confidentiality as Challenges for Ethnography in the Twenty-First Century' is a wonderful contribution to this special issue and to the growing number of discussions on the ethics of and in anthropological fieldwork. I welcome and admire her openness, which has produced an exciting self-reflection on fieldwork and a balanced overview of the dilemmas accompanying our attempts to be honest to our research participants, to our academic colleagues, and to ourselves. Her focus on how to deal with confidentiality and the anthropological tradition of anonymising research participants and fieldwork locations in order to protect the participants' identity shows that each 'solution' has its problems and none is perfect.

Julia's article raises a number of questions, some of which are mentioned only in passing and may deserve more attention. When the editor of this special issue invited me to review the manuscript, since the author discusses my own struggle with confidentiality and anonymity, I hesitated. Having often been subjected to the tyranny of peer reviewers myself and having been invited (read: forced) to also mention such and such an author, article, or issue (satisfying the reviewers' personal tastes or even including their work), I wondered if I should list all the questions that emerged in me whilst reading the text. It is usually annoying to have to include so many other aspects that a reviewer might want (I am still speaking of my own experience). Obeying the reviewer is likely to disturb the flow of the author's argument and may turn the text into a hotchpotch of many additions and small excursions.

I was therefore thinking of an alternative: instead of the conventional double blind peer review, I could just as well write a few pages of comments to which the author (Julia) could then respond, if she wanted, somewhat similar to the renowned *Current Anthropology* format. I thought that ethical issues based on a wide variety of fieldwork experiences would lend themselves well to this type of dialogue/discussion; this approach allows them to come more to life. Both the editor and the author agreed, and thus I wrote this brief text with my thoughts about Julia's thoughts, and about my experiences versus hers. Although numbered headings are 'not done' in anthropology, I have used them here for practical reasons: the comments are often too closely connected to deserve separate headings.

1

Using or not using pseudonyms is the question that runs through Julia's article. Starting from the ethnographic usance of applying anonymisation when in doubt of possible harm to participants, she sums up several problems connected with this custom. One is that anonymity does not work, at least not anymore. In the pre-internet age it may have worked, but with today's countless tools for searching the internet, it has become a futile strategy. I agree only partly. The internet has also proven very effective in concealing people's identity. It is now possible to say anything about anything or anybody without readers knowing who the speaker is. Similar techniques could be applied when anonymising research participants, locations, and even authors.

2

Does the anonymity of participants and – certainly, as in my case – of the author obstruct the transparency of the research? To limit myself to the latter, correspondence via internet with a Wolf Bleek (my pseudonym of many years ago) would be very simple and comfortable today. There is no need for a personal or institutional postal address and colleagues could discuss and raise questions about my research without knowing my identity. I could even reveal that my name is a pseudonym, without endangering my anonymity. If a fellow anthropologist had good reasons to ask for my identity and/or the exact location of the research, I could tell that specific person on condition of confidentiality. There are several devices I could use to hide my location and other identifying data. Only clever hackers would have the means to trace me, though they are unlikely to be interested in anthropology.

3

At the same time, however, it is indeed possible to discover ethnographic fraud through the use of current digital media, even when an author conceals information about research location and the identity of informants. Quick international communication can reveal that certain data in a particular region or country are untrue and made up by the researcher – as was the case when a Dutch anthropologist who published several (English) articles about Bosnia was highly criticised by Bosnian and Croatian colleagues. Fifty years ago he would have written in Dutch and, in the absence of circulation of his work through the internet, local academics would not have noticed his fraudulent imagination.

4

Julia writes: 'true anonymity requires very high levels of abstraction, which may not be conducive if researchers want to contribute to discussions on real places and issues'. I hold the opposite view: by anonymising people and places, we are rather able to describe the small (and very private) details and 'imponderables' (Malinowski's term) that make a good ethnography. We can do so *because* the participants are unknown. When the participants are known, the author feels obliged to cut out information that may invade their privacy. Of course, if the anonymising fails, this does not apply. I should, therefore, explain what I mean with solid anonymity. The most effective 'trick' to achieve the protection of participants' identity is the introduction of red herrings: providing false information about irrelevant details of the participants. Dependent on the purpose and context of the research, one could, for example, turn a baker into a butcher, a teacher into a cleric, even a boy into a girl. A seven-year-old can become a twelve-year-old, a Roman Catholic church can turn Methodist, the number of inhabitants or the number of children someone has can be changed, etcetera. By giving exact (but incorrect) information about a person or place, without in any way changing the thrust of the ethnography, the reader may never identify the participants. This would provide external as well as internal confidentiality, a crucial distinction Julia makes. The use of red herrings should be mentioned in the methodological section of the study, where the use of fictitious names is reported. Sarah Lamb (2018: 67) too modified a few identifying details to protect anonymity of single women she interviewed in India. I do not claim that this is a 100% effective way of guaranteeing confidentiality, but it nearly is. Within the community, amongst the participants, people may suspect who is who, but they can never be sure. Doubt will remain and so will anonymity.

5

I fully agree with Julia's concern about the ethnocentric or paternalistic imposition of a pseudonym on people who never asked for it. Giving them another name can be understood as stealing their identity or reducing them to an object. Rachel Spronk's (2012) solution – inviting her participants to choose their own pseudonyms – is indeed a respectful and elegant way to avoid this unpleasant experience. Sarah Lamb (2018: 67) selected names that fitted her sense of the participants in her research, based on the fact that Bengali names have a specific meaning. I sometimes did the same by choosing names of characters in popular Ghanaian Highlife songs, though I never asked the person's permission (Van der Geest 2011: 139). Respect for one's participants must always be the guide to choosing the best way of dealing with people's privacy. In one case it could be anonymisation, in another the

opposite. In my own research, as discussed by Julia, I first decided for anonymity, but for my later conversations with older people I applied the ultimate openness about their names, as this would fulfil their and my wish to contribute to their memory, a crucial thing in the context of their veneration of ancestors (Van der Geest 2003).

6

This leads me to the role of ethical commissions which – without consulting the people involved – tell researchers what is ethically right and wrong. Let me quote Julia, quoting me: 'ethical rules and feelings about right and wrong are as much subject to cultural variation as the topics and themes we study'. Somewhere else I have expanded on this ironic odium of ethical rules for anthropologists (Van der Geest 2011). Personally, I have never been subjected to the judgment of an ethical commission, but several of the students I have supervised have had to. Their experiences were sometimes both frustrating and absurd. One student had to resubmit a bulk of about 30 copies of his research proposal because they had been printed double-sided and had to be one-sided (or the other way around). This may not be a good example of ethnocentric ethics as such but of the bureaucracy of ethics. The experiences of two Bangladeshi researchers are absurd to the point of being comical (Zaman and Nahar 2011). Papreen Nahar, who was to study childlessness amongst women in Bangladesh, was told by an Australian ethical commission that her interlocutors should have access to a counsellor since the topic was highly emotional. When she explained that there was no such person anywhere near the village in which the women were living – the closest would be in the capital city Dhaka, about 200 km away – she was told to at least provide the women with the telephone number of a psychiatrist there. Nahar gave up trying to explain to the commission the conditions in rural Bangladesh and obediently gave some of the women the telephone number. The women were surprised – after all there was no telephone in the village that they could have used – whilst the researcher had protected herself and the commission.

7

The cultural variation of right and wrong ethics with regard to protecting participants' identity is linked to the cultural variation in the perception and experience of privacy in different societies and layers of society. Anthropologists, who often study intimate, private matters, have given little thought to what privacy means in the cultures in which they are working. Obviously, this omission has caused uncertainty about the right way of dealing with participants' identity in their publications. Privacy – currently one of the hottest

issues in public and academic discussions in my own society – also needs our attention in anthropological research abroad.

8

Some degree of 'paternalism' with regard to protecting participants' identity is sometimes needed and prudent, as is illustrated in two cases in Jacobs (1987). Whilst participants may request that their real names be mentioned in the publication, the researcher might believe that they are not well aware of the consequences that this could have for themselves and for others. Revealing their names may, for example, lead to the identification of vulnerable others. Relatives, neighbours, or colleagues may be not amused by what is said about them. Ideally this dilemma should be discussed with the people concerned before publication, but this may not be possible for all kinds of reasons. When in doubt about the possible consequences of revealing people's real names, it is wise to be careful and to keep their names hidden; once their identity has been revealed, this can no longer be undone.

As I mentioned before, I was quite pleased with my decision to present the identity of the older people in Kwahu Tafo to readers all over the world. I posted a gallery of the elders on my website, with their portraits and a brief caption on their life history. One of these captions read:

> *Nana Kwasi Antwi was a tailor who became famous for his speed. People gave him therefore the nickname 'Five-Minutes-Batakari' [meaning that he could sew a Ghanaian smock within minutes]. From the money he earned he was able to build his own house. He had seven children, most of whom settled abroad. When I met him he was almost blind and unhappy. Old age was miserable, he said, because he could not work as before. Moreover, he was suspicious of the people staying with him in the house and complained about their behaviour towards him. I never fully understood his complaints but felt sorry for him that his successful life ended so sadly. He died in September 1994, less than five months after I got to know him. The family used this picture, showing him behind his sewing machine, during his funeral.*

About ten years after I posted Antwi's portrait with the above text, I received an email from the old man's granddaughter, who was living in Canada, telling me that I should remove both the picture and the text. What I had written was untrue and the family was very upset about my words, she stated. I explained to her that I had had conversations with the old man, one of his sons, and his wife. Neighbours had also told me about the affair. What I had written reflected exactly what I had seen and what I had been told.

The granddaughter's mother then took over the email correspondence and threatened to sue me and make me pay dearly for the lies I had published about her father. She also accused me of having betrayed the trust of innocent people. I told her that I would not remove her father's portrait and my brief summary of his life but that I would give her father a fictitious name, which I did. With this our correspondence stopped. But I kept on thinking about the reaction from Canada and how different people's reactions to (non) anonymity can be. A significant aspect of this was that the *Canadian* relatives had protested whilst the *Ghanaian* relatives never raised any objection but rather had assisted me in the research and shared with me their sorrows about 'Nana Kwasi Antwi'.

9

Julia called my decision to take a pseudonym for myself a creative solution. She may be right, but it certainly is an unusual one. Other examples are rare. When I asked William F. Whyte in 1976 if he had never considered the option of going into hiding whilst writing his *Street Corner Society* (1955 [1943]), he responded: 'I wanted to get whatever credit was due that work'. Then he added: 'there might also be a more respectable reason: if a book makes any sort of mark at all, it may stir up a discussion in the profession, and it is rather important for the exchange of information to include the author in that discussion'. I discussed this aspect in my first comment above, and admit that in Whyte's period, discussion on the book would have been difficult without his name being leaked. In addition, his research was 'at home', which would probably make a pseudonym impossible to maintain.

In my own case I felt that I had no choice but to assume a pseudonym, after I had promised those who had placed their trust in me that I would take care that nobody would find out what *they* had told me. Theoretically there were two other choices: keeping my ethnographic description at a very high level of abstraction or not writing at all (both possibilities mentioned by Julia). For me, both of these alternatives were one and the same and out of the question. 'Abstract ethnography' is a *contradictio in terminis*, or rather not an ethnography. And, obviously, I was not prepared not to write.

10

Interestingly, when my PhD appeared in the Netherlands, it attracted some publicity – not for its contents but for my pseudonym. I was invited to write about my reasons in the Dutch anthropological journal *Sociodrome* (Bleek 1976). An ambiguous pleasure. A few colleagues reacted to this, to which I again responded. Apparently using a pseudonym was a way to attract attention rather than an effective manner to remain invisible. One journalist

wrote that my pseudonym was a pseudo-pseudonym and another wrote that I should keep silent if I indeed wanted to stay unknown. She was probably right, but it is also true that this discussion took place in Dutch in the Netherlands and never reached Ghana, where it was critical for the pseudonym to remain in place.

11

Finally, the most remarkable thing in Julia's reflection is the fact that – in spite of her anxiety about anonymising and confidentiality – she failed every time to discuss this with her participants whilst she was still with them in the field. I share her conclusion that this should indeed be the first and most important thing to do before deciding. It not only demonstrates the respect that research participants deserve; it also shows our recognition that they, more than we, are the owners of the data that we publish for the rest of the world to read.

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