Beyond Pseudonyms: Ethics and Politics of Ethnographic Representation

DENIZ YONUCU

Newcastle University

and

CAROLINE MARY PARKER

University College London

In this issue's Direction Section, the authors delve into the ethical and political dimensions of ethnographic representation. Since the emergence of the discipline, there have been recurring discussions addressing concerns regarding the potential misuse of anthropologists' professional roles and the essential need to protect our research participants. Frantz Boas, often hailed as the father of US anthropology, was among the earliest to voice concerns about anthropologists who he thought were exploiting their research positions by conducting espionage in Central America during the First World War (Price, 2000). Although the case that Boas brought into discussion represents an extreme example of anthropologists betraying their research participants, the afterlives of ethnographic research continue to raise substantial ethical and political questions, irrespective of the political leanings of ethnographers.

As highlighted in Erica Weiss and Carole McGranahan's (2021) recent discussion on pseudonyms, the use of pseudonyms has become widely accepted as a convenient and sometimes simplistic response to the intricate ethical and political challenges associated with ethnographic research and its afterlives. Substituting real names with pseudonyms is often seen as a sufficient measure to protect research participants. However, while pseudonyms can offer a degree of confidentiality, they are not a panacea for addressing anthropology's ethical dilemmas. The use of pseudonyms represents just one aspect of a broader framework of ethical considerations that ethnographic researchers must navigate. What's more, as Erica

Weiss (2021) and Sara Shneiderman (2021) demonstrate, pseudonyms can occasionally function as what Weiss (2021) terms an "anticitation" practice, effectively denying intellectual authorship and recognition to the communities and individuals from whom anthropologists glean valuable insights.

Nor are names the sole means of recognizing the true identities of individuals, particularly in a rapidly digitizing world. With the proliferation of digital technologies and data collection methods, various aspects—such voice recordings, facial recognition, geographic locations, and other digital footprints—can be used to identify individuals. Vita Peacock's essay (this issue), which explores her research with privacy and data protection advocates in Germany, sheds light on the emerging ethical challenges within ethnographic representation. Peacock's reflections on the implications of the new European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) underscore the importance of critical engagement with regulatory frameworks and ethical standards to navigate the complexities of representing individuals and communities in research contexts, particularly in the context of rapidly evolving digital landscapes and regulatory environments. Constrained by the strict commitment to anonymity from her research participants and the regulations outlined in the GDPR, Peacock introduces the concept of "spirit portraiture." This innovative approach aims to portray a person while removing any details that could potentially de-anonymize them. This encompasses not only physical attributes like hair color, height, or distinctive tattoos but also extends to data types susceptible to computational search or analysis.

Peacock's exploration of the "new landscapes of hypervisibility," and the legal frameworks governing them, sets the stage for a critical examination of the researcher-participant dynamic. Kim Hopper's contribution urges us to revisit an earlier debate sparked by Caroline Brettell's seminal work, *When They Read What We Write* (1996). Hopper's essay delves into the ethical complexities of long-term ethnographic engagements, drawing on the

discussions ignited by Nancy Scheper-Hughes's groundbreaking research in an Irish village imperfectly pseudonymized as "Ballybran" in *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* (2001). Central to Hopper's inquiry is a fundamental question: What happens when the subjects of our research confront and challenge the representations we construct of their lives?

By reflecting on Scheper-Hughes's experiences and the reactions to her work, Hopper compels us to reassess traditional notions of authority and accountability within the discipline. He compellingly argues that the act of "revisiting" our ethnographic endeavors is not merely an exercise in reflexivity but constitutes an essential extension of the original research itself. Approaching the issue from a close to psychodynamic angle, Hopper raises the intriguing possibility that the initial mistake—the inadvertent revelation of the identity of the people of Ballybran—subconsciously paved the way for the generative and infamous debates that have kept *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* relevant and alive in the anthropological imaginary for several decades.

In conclusion, the exploration of ethnographic representation presented in this issue's Direction Section underscores the ongoing importance of critically engaging with the ethical and political dimensions of anthropological research. From the complexities of using pseudonyms to the emerging challenges posed by digital technologies and regulatory frameworks, Vita Peacock and Kim Hopper offer valuable insights that challenge traditional paradigms and call for a reevaluation of our research practices. As we grapple with the complexities of representing individuals and communities in our work, we are reminded of the enduring impact of past research and the necessity of ongoing reflection and revision. Through this dialogue, we can strive toward a more ethical and accountable practice of anthropology that honors the voices and experiences of those whom we study.

References

Brettell, Caroline. 1996. *When They Read What We Write: The Politics of Ethnography.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Price, David. 2000. "Anthropologists as Spies." *The Nation*, 271 (16): 24–27. https://www.thenation.com/article/world/anthropologists-spies/.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2001. *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Shneiderman, Sara. 2021. "Collapsing Distance: Recognition, Relation, and the Power of Naming in Ethnographic Research." In "Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography," edited by Carole McGranahan and Erica Weiss, *American Ethnologist* website, December 13, 2021. https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography/collapsing-distance-recognition-relation-and-the-power-of-naming-in-ethnographic-research.

Weiss, Erica. 2021. "Pseudonyms as Anti-Citation." In "Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography," edited by Carole McGranahan and Erica Weiss, *American Ethnologist* website, December 13, 2021. https://americanethnologist.org/online-content/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography/pseudonyms-as-anti-citation/.

Weiss, Erica, and Carole McGranahan. 2021. "Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography: An Introduction." In "Rethinking Pseudonyms in Ethnography," edited by Carole McGranahan and Erica Weiss, *American Ethnologist* website, December 13, 2021. https://americanethnologist.org/features/collections/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography/rethinking-pseudonyms-in-ethnography-an-introduction.