

EthnoScripts

ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR AKTUELLE
ETHNOLOGISCHE STUDIEN

How to write? Experiences, challenges and
possibilities of ethnographic writing

Volume 23 Issue 1 | 2021

Julia Vorhölder

Anthropology Anonymous? Pseudonyms and Confidentiality
as Challenges for Ethnography in the Twenty-First Century

Ethnoscripts 2021 23 (1): 15-33

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

This article reflects on the delicate issue of confidentiality and anonymity in contemporary anthropological research. It focuses on the challenges of assigning pseudonyms and disguising the identity of interlocutors and participants, especially in the contemporary context of the widespread use of social media and the internet. Drawing on the moral dilemmas, struggles, and failures that I experienced in relation to these issues in my own research, the article discusses the complexity of finding the right balance between respecting research participants' interests and well-being, on the one hand, and living up to both the high ethical standards of the discipline and the desire to provide a meaningful analysis of 'real' issues, people, and places, on the other.

Publisher:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Licence 4.0
International: Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen.

Anthropology Anonymous? Pseudonyms and Confidentiality as Challenges for Ethnography in the Twenty-First Century

Julia Vorhölter

Introduction

Disguising the identities of research participants has long been a key, taken-for-granted ethical principle of anthropological research. Due to the long-term and often highly intimate nature of fieldwork, anthropologists become witness to all sorts of ‘happenings’ in their interlocutors’ lives: not only ordinary daily routines and interactions but also conflicts, personal struggles and failures, secret events, and uncensored behaviours that are not meant for public discussion. Even in predominantly interview-based work, in which respondents are more aware of the research setting and better able to control the information they pass on, anthropologists often gather highly personal – and sensitive – data. Thus, the major strength of ethnographic research – getting to know a particular social setting so well that people forget they are being observed and analysed – is also its Achilles heel when it comes to ethical questions, especially the delicate issue of confidentiality.

Because of this ethical quagmire, students of anthropology learn right from the very beginning that it is imperative for fieldworkers to treat the data they gather with utmost care and responsibility, and to guarantee that no harm is caused to those who become subjects of their research. As we all know, and as decades-long debates about research ethics show, this is much easier said than done. Nowadays, anonymisation of research data is one of the most basic and uncontested principles of fieldwork that students hear and read about in methodology courses, books, and ethic codes. At first blush, assigning pseudonyms to people, places, and events would seem like a simple and effective strategy to veil sensitive information and protect research participants from harmful exposure. In practice, however, ensuring anonymity can be a highly complex and morally ambiguous issue – as I discuss in this article.

In my own anthropological training – first as a *Magister*¹ student at Hamburg University from 2003 to 2008 and then as PhD student at Göttingen University from 2009 to 2014 – the challenges and pitfalls of anonymisation were never discussed in any of the methodology courses I attended. I knew, not least from reading monographs and articles written by anthropol-

1 The *Magister* is the former German equivalent of the master’s degree, based on a five-year study programme.

ogists, that using pseudonyms to disguise interlocutors' identities was standard practice, and it never occurred to me that it could in any way be problematic. However, it is an issue I have continued to struggle with in my research.

This article draws attention to the ethical and practical challenges of assuring confidentiality and anonymity in anthropological research: What exactly does it mean to anonymise one's data? To what extent is the use of pseudonyms really an efficient and legitimate way of protecting research participants and their interests? What are the benefits, and what the costs, of disguising interlocutors' identities? And are there situations where it is possible, or even advisable, not to disguise them? I argue that anonymisation, although nowadays taken for granted, poses an underestimated challenge for ethnographic writing, especially in the context of global mobility, the internet, and social media. The use of pseudonyms is not simply a technical or style issue but fundamentally affects the outcome of the writing and the ways this is shared, read, and received.

The first section provides a brief historical overview of the development of anthropological debates on anonymisation and pseudonyms. I reflect on some contemporary challenges and present two case studies in which anthropologists have tried out different solutions to deal with them. In the second part I draw on moral dilemmas, struggles, and failures that I experienced in relation to these issues in my own research. Here I discuss the complexity of finding the right balance between respecting research participants' interests and well-being (whatever these may be), on the one hand, and living up to both the high ethical standards of the discipline and the desire to provide a meaningful analysis of 'real' issues, people, and places, on the other.

Ignorance, scepticism, dogma: on the history of anonymisation and pseudonyms in anthropology

In the early phases of anthropological fieldwork, anonymisation of research data was not a major concern. Anthropologists generally studied small-scale communities in distant places and many of the people they encountered were illiterate. The hierarchies and unequal negotiating powers between researcher and 'informants' were rarely reflected upon or simply accepted as given. Research findings were credited solely to the anthropologist and few of those observed or interviewed ever read, let alone challenged, the final reports and publications. Whilst there are examples of monographs which were taken back to the field and read by some of the school-educated few, access was limited and there was no ethical imperative to share the research results with the people studied.² Anthropologists hardly worried or considered – naively as it often turned out – that the publication of their research might harm the

2 In fact, whilst this is considered good practice today, there is still no such imperative.

people they studied, and they rarely assigned pseudonyms to disguise the identities of research participants and places.

Not surprisingly, one of the earliest scandals that arose around the issue of confidentiality and participant identity in research based on participant observation occurred not in anthropology but in urban sociology, where most fieldwork was conducted 'at home'. William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society*, first published in 1943, became well-known for the ethical and methodological challenges posed by his ethnography of an 'Italian slum' (so the book's subtitle). Whyte spent four years living in an Italian community in the North End neighbourhood of Boston, United States of America, to study the social relations of street gangs. Although Whyte used pseudonyms for the place (which he called Cornerville) and the protagonists of his study, some of whom had become his close friends, the latter felt betrayed when they read his published work. They recognised themselves and other community members in the text and felt embarrassed by Whyte's revelations of intimate details of their lives. In a second edition of the book, published in 1955, Whyte addressed these issues in a new methodological appendix. He thus became one of the first researchers to draw attention to the ethical challenges of participant observation, and his book has continued to inspire debate on research ethics (for example, Adler et al. 1992).

In anthropology, the first official, professional ethics code to contain explicit guidelines on the right of 'informants' to remain anonymous was developed by the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in 1971 (AAA 1971), following cases of severe misconduct and violations of confidentiality by anthropologists during the Vietnam War (Pels et al. 2018: 392). More broadly, however, anonymisation of research data only became more widespread in the 1980s – because of two quite different developments. On the one hand was the Writing Culture debate that significantly influenced anthropological research and writing practices: ethnographies became more reflexive, and more attention was paid to the ethical and political implications of doing fieldwork and its impact on those being studied (Zenker 2014). On the other hand, especially in Anglophone anthropology, reflecting on ethical concerns started to become a standard requirement in the 1980s when new ethical review procedures were being imposed by universities and funding agencies as part of a wider shift to a neoliberal 'audit culture'. To this day, such review procedures contain rigid prescriptions of what constitutes ethical research – anonymisation being one of them. Yet they have often been criticised by anthropologists for being designed more to protect the reputation of universities and funders than the interests of research participants (Pels et al. 2018, 392). It took much longer for the use of pseudonyms – and ethical reviews more generally – to become standard practice outside of Anglophone anthropology. As late as 1991, for instance, German anthropologists Martin Rössler and Birgit Röttger-Rössler felt the need to defend, and

extensively justify, their use of pseudonyms in a study of a rural community in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, in light of reviewers critiquing their approach as unscientific (Rössler and Röttger-Rössler 1991).

Nowadays, just about everywhere the practice of anonymising one's research data has achieved the status of near dogma – to the extent that little reflection is given to whether, and how, it makes sense. Now it is authors who do *not* use pseudonyms who must justify their decision and fear being accused of violating research ethics. Obviously, confidentiality and the protection of interlocutors' privacy should be major concerns in any research, and particularly research based on long-term fieldwork. However, the matter is much more complex than often assumed. Rather than thinking of pseudonyms as a magic invisibility cloak that can simply be 'thrown over' names and places at the final stages of writing, if, how, and to what extent confidentiality and anonymity can be ensured needs to be considered from the outset of fieldwork and discussed with research participants throughout the process.

Four questions should guide every ethnographer, ideally before starting the research. The list is by no means exhaustive, and different research contexts may call for different solutions. The first is: can anonymity be ensured in times of global mobility, social media, and the internet, and, if yes, how? Or, as Rebecca Nelson (2015) succinctly puts it in a blogpost on *Savage Minds* (now called *Anthrodendum*): 'how can we hide participants' identities when they're on Pinterest?' This is probably one of the most widely encountered challenges of contemporary ethnography. Maybe, at one point in time, simply using pseudonyms for people and places was enough to ensure that outsiders did not discover the research setting unless they were prepared to undertake major detective work. Most research sites studied by anthropologists were remote and relatively inaccessible, and people around the world were less connected. These days, however, research sites and researchers' homes are much closer: people travel everywhere; everyone and everything is on the internet; and more and more anthropological research is done at home. Although academic work is still predominantly published in commercial journals for a scholarly audience, ever more researchers make an effort to share their analyses with their research participants and the broader public, for instance through open access publications or blog posts.³ In many ways, increased interconnectedness and amplified information flows are a resource for anthropologists: researchers use the online communications and websites of the groups and institutions they study as material and stay in touch with interlocutors via social media. Whilst these developments are largely positive, they do make it much harder to anonymise data. It is no longer nec-

3 For an early discussion of the challenges that arise 'when they read what we write', see Brettell (1993) and Hopkins (1993), of which the latter focuses on anonymisation.

essary to be a detective to find out where and with whom research was conducted; a quick Google-search is often enough to find people and places, even if names have been disguised by pseudonyms (Nelson 2015). True anonymity requires high levels of abstraction, which may not be conducive if researchers want to contribute to discussions on real places and issues.

The second question researchers should consider is: do the research participants themselves want to remain anonymous, and what do I do when they do not? The widespread presence of, and online self-presentation by, research participants on social media sites like Facebook or Pinterest raises the question to what extent people actually want to remain anonymous. Could imposing particular assumptions about privacy and hiding people's identities actually be a form of 'ethical paternalism' and ethnocentricity – as Sjaak van der Geest (2003: 17) has suggested? Even more relevant is the increasingly accepted notion that ethnographies are the outcome of a collaboration between the anthropologist and his/her interlocutors, and that the latter should be acknowledged – and thus named – as co-producers of anthropological knowledge. Some anthropologists have discussed how research participants expressed disappointment after seeing published monographs and finding their names and home places disguised by pseudonyms. *The Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology* (Cassell and Jacobs 1987), published online on the AAA website, examines this in two case studies on anonymity (Jacobs 1987). In both cases, research participants criticised the use of pseudonyms and explicitly asked for their real names to be used in future publications; in both cases, however, the anthropologists decided not to follow this request, for fear of violating current standards of research ethics.

The third question anthropologists should examine before starting their research is: how can 'internal confidentiality' be ensured, especially when it is considered good practice to share research findings with participants? Tolich (2004) makes the useful distinction between 'external confidentiality', ensuring that outsiders cannot identify the research community and location, and 'internal confidentiality', taking care that research participants cannot identify each other. Whilst even in times of global mobility and the internet one can find ways to anonymise data so that those unfamiliar with the research setting will not be able to recognise it, it is almost impossible to prevent insiders from identifying themselves or others. And even though the dilemmas posed by this are well-known, as Whyte's *Street Corner Society* shows, ethical codes and review committees tend to focus nearly exclusively on external confidentiality (Tolich 2004: 101–102). Every anthropologist who plans to share their publications with research participants must grapple with internal confidentiality. For some, the concerns about revealing what one has written to insiders are so great that they never return to the field. Although these worries about offending, or even harming, interlocutors may be exaggerated, there is no easy solution to the dilemmas posed by internal con-

fidentiality. In the end, a compromise must always be found between radical censorship and critical analysis.

Lastly, anthropologists should consider the question of how to deal with the new challenges posed by data management and open science requirements. The open science quest to increase openness, integrity, and reproducibility of scholarly research is the latest buzzword in interdisciplinary debates on research ethics. Across the globe, universities are imposing new standards regarding transparency and accountability in data management on researchers of all disciplines. Although the basic idea that science should be collaborative, transparent, and accessible to the larger public is commendable, anthropologists have expressed various concerns about what they feel is a new – and problematic – form of ethics governance (for a good overview see Pels et al. 2018; de Koning et al. 2019). In particular the suggested requirement to make data – including raw data, such as field notes and interview transcripts – available to other researchers, universities, and funding agencies threatens anthropological understandings of confidentiality and anonymity. In the following (albeit lengthy) quote, Peter Pels and his colleagues (2018: 394) proficiently explain the epistemological, ethical, and political factors that distinguish anthropological data from that of other disciplines and make it less suitable for open science data governance:

Anthropologists [. . .] encounter and record research participants in situations and media where personal identification of and the borrowing of cultural knowledge from other people is not just inevitable: it forms the very foundation of scientific knowledge in ethnography. Moreover, we cannot transfer such knowledge to third parties without editing out the connections between names, faces, secrets and interests – which often renders it useless. Our raw research materials are saturated by personal information and (potential) cultural property precisely because they consist of those kinds of knowledge that are not, and sometimes cannot be, commodified – and yet fully determine social life. Extensive processing of raw materials (beyond mere anonymisation) becomes inevitable if others are to reuse them. This explains why ethnographic researchers question the possible commodification of knowledge by pre-signed informed consent forms: they suspect that such quasi-contractual rituals may sign away respondents' rightful claims to knowledge shared with researchers. (Pels et al. 2018: 394)

It is still unclear how open science and related data management requirements will affect ethnographic research in the long run. Almost certainly, however, they will add a whole new dimension to the – already highly complex – challenges of confidentiality and anonymity.

Creative approaches to anonymisation: Van der Geest and Rottenburg

The literature contains numerous examples of anthropologists who have struggled with the issue of anonymisation and confidentiality. Different authors have come up with various, often quite creative answers and strategies to deal with these questions and dilemmas. In this section I present two of the somewhat more unusual approaches, by anthropologists Sjaak van der Geest and Richard Rottenburg, before turning in the next section to discuss some of my own struggles with, and approaches to, anonymisation.

Van der Geest (2003) dedicated a whole article to the dilemmas he faced when struggling with confidentiality and pseudonyms in his early fieldwork. In the 1970s he carried out research in the rural town of Kwahu-Tafo in southern Ghana, focusing on social ambiguities in extended families, sexual relationships, and birth control. Both his studies touched on delicate and secretive issues. As he became more embedded in the community, his interlocutors confided in him about conflicts, witchcraft accusations, abortion, and other secretive or shameful practices. Van der Geest promised to treat these issues confidentially, being well aware that making them public could have problematic, even dangerous, consequences for individuals and the community at large. It was only when he started writing up his results that he discovered how difficult it was to keep this promise (Van der Geest 2003: 15).

At the time Ghana's academic community was small and Van der Geest realised that pseudonyms for people and places would not suffice to ensure anonymity: his name was too closely associated with the town and the people he had stayed with. Thus, rather than only using pseudonyms for the research community, Van der Geest also decided to hide his own identity – under the pseudonym 'Wolf Bleek'. Given that the challenges Van der Geest faced are by no means exceptional, this solution of disguising the researcher's identity is a surprisingly rare practice in anthropology. And, as Van der Geest soon discovered, it came with several of its own challenges: despite his precautions he did not feel comfortable sharing his publications with his interlocutors for his use of pseudonyms had not solved the problem of internal confidentiality. And when he submitted an article on his research for publication, the text was rejected because the editors objected to his pseudonym which they saw as colliding with the requirement that science should be transparent.

Van der Geest's strategy was successful, however: even twenty years after his fieldwork, no one had made the connection between him and his field site. Yet he became increasingly uncomfortable with hiding his research from those he had worked with:

My decision to 'go into hiding' had several consequences which I found both unethical and simply annoying. I had kept the outcome of my research study from my informants, for their own

good'. On the one hand, I had respected their wish (and the first article of the anthropological ethical code) to keep delicate information confidential; on the other hand, I had deprived them of the possibility of reading what I had written about them (an exchange which, surprisingly, is not stipulated by the anthropological code). They would never be able to 'talk back'. Though trying to make their voices heard by writing about them, I had effectively silenced them. (Van der Geest 2003: 16–17)

Finally, twenty-three years after his initial research, Van der Geest decided to return to southern Ghana and bring along a few copies of his PhD thesis. He reasoned that after such a long time the information contained in the book, including his analysis of delicate matters, would no longer be harmful to social relations in the community. Indeed, many of his elderly interlocutors had died and the younger ones were preoccupied with their day-to-day lives and not concerned with 'gossip' from the past. And yet, people were interested in his work – and some of his former interlocutors expressed disappointment that their names, and the name of their town, did not appear in the book.

In his 2003 article, Van der Geest self-critically reflects on his decision to conceal his research from those he had studied and to anonymise his data to the extent that the 'real' people who had participated and supported him in his research were hardly recognisable:

My struggle with confidentiality and the use of pseudonyms has taught me at least one thing: ethical rules and feelings about right and wrong are as much subject to cultural variation as the topics and themes we study in other communities and societies. Anthropologists have done their utmost to combat ethnocentrism in intercultural communication, but they have been ethnocentric in applying their own ethical standards in their fieldwork. (Van der Geest 2003: 17–18)

After experimenting with 'total' anonymisation in his earlier work, Van der Geest chose the converse strategy in follow-up research on aging and old-age care in the same Ghanaian community. He published under his own name and openly identified the town and the people he worked with. By explicitly naming his elderly interlocutors, he wanted to show respect and recognition or, as he put it: 'I want them to be proud of the fact that their life histories – good or bad – and their reflections about being old have been published and are being read by people in different parts of the world' (Van der Geest 2003: 17).

Where Van der Geest chose the thought-provoking strategy of disguising his own identity and keeping his publications from his interlocutors, an-

thropologist Richard Rottenburg developed a similarly radical though ethically less problematic strategy in his widely celebrated book *Weit hergeholte Fakten: Eine Parabel der Entwicklungshilfe* (2002) (published in English in 2009 as *Far-Fetched Facts: A Parable of Development Aid*).⁴ Wanting to conduct an ethnographic study of the processes underlying development aid in Africa and the interactions between various stake holders – development banks, international experts, local managers – he was faced with the particular challenges of studying up. Few experts in the highly politicised world of international development would have felt comfortable knowing that a critical anthropologist was observing their work (Rottenburg 2009: xxxiv). So, rather than setting out to study and write about a particular project or organisation, Rottenburg engaged in a retrospective study of his own experiences when working on a number of development projects in the 1990s – a total of nineteen months of multi-sited fieldwork in nine development organisations located in five African countries and one European development bank (Rottenburg 2009: xviii). In a further step, rather than talking about real places, people, and projects, he composed his account as a fictionalised ethnography in the style of a literary narrative with four voices.

Rottenburg's account portrays the challenges of implementing a large-scale waterworks improvement project in 'Ruritania', a fictive country in sub-Saharan Africa. The project is funded by the 'Normesian Development Bank' and carried out by a private consulting firm – both based in 'Normland' – under the supervision of African project-executing agencies. The story is narrated by anthropologist Edward B. Drotlevski, who appears as the author of the three main parts of the book. The account features Normesian consultant Julius C. Shilling, who represents the 'voice of development', and Samuel A. Martonosi, another anthropologist, who embodies the position of the sceptics. Rottenburg himself only appears in the prologue and the fourth part of the book, in which he brings together the analytical threads of the story. His main interest lies in the elementary questions that play a role in all development projects, in particularly the processes of translation and inscription that take place in the interstices between different cultural contexts, knowledge traditions, and social settings (Rottenburg 2009: xvi). Therefore, fictionalising the people and places in this way does no harm to the analysis:

All of the characters in the present text have been given fictional names and are literally figures in a play. They do not depict any real, existing people but are constructed from the cumulative characteristics originally belonging to the various people I met during my tenure in the field of development cooperation. They wear the masks and play the roles prescribed by the script, and yet at the same time they perform with the manoeuvring room that I found typical of the development arena. At issue are not

4 For reasons I outline below, I refer to the English translation of the book.

their individual capabilities, honesty, or good intentions; rather, it is presumed that all figures possess the normal competency required for the roles they play. If their interactions do not bring about the desired results, this cannot be traced back to the failing of one or another of the actors. (Rottenburg 2009: xx)

In the English translation of the book, Rottenburg provides a much more detailed reflection on his reasons for fictionalising his account (Rottenburg 2009: xviii–xx) than in the German original. Most importantly he states that his main aim was to draw attention to the structural problems underlying *all* forms of development cooperation rather than questions of individual responsibility for failures in specific projects. This strategy proved quite successful: Rottenburg found that even people working in the field of development were open and interested in reading his book, and – rather than taking offence or considering the problems exposed as only concerning certain organisations and projects – complimented him for his accurate analysis of general principles, contingencies, and fundamental dilemmas that they all faced in their work. For Rottenburg, his choice of fictionalising the account rather than using pseudonyms (which would have been easy to decode by insiders) was also a ‘question of decency’: ‘[I]t seemed to me intrusive and offensive to publish a text in which human beings were so ruthlessly exposed, even if they had previously given their approval for the study’ (Rottenburg 2009: xix). Finally, Rottenburg was also interested in experimenting with alternative forms of ethnographic writing.

Rottenburg’s approach is one of the most thorough and creative forms of anonymisation that I have come across in the literature. However, whilst his strategy might be transferable to studies whose main aim is to provide theoretical reflections on general principles and structural dynamics in a given field, fictionalisation seems less suitable for analyses of very concrete people and places. As both his example and that of Van der Geest demonstrate, strategies for anonymisation are highly dependent on the particular context of the research – the topic, the kind of interlocutors, and the type of analysis. Every strategy comes with certain costs, and how one evaluates these costs may change over time – as the Van der Geest case clearly shows. Furthermore, a strategy that works well in one context may be problematic in another. In the end, there is no easy solution to the challenges of confidentiality posed by ethnography. However, being aware of and reflecting on these challenges from the outset is an important prerequisite for dealing with them – as I have learnt from my own struggles and mistakes.

Examples from my own fieldwork

In this final section of the article, I draw on examples from my MA thesis, my PhD, and my more recent postdoctoral research to discuss some of my own

struggles and ways of dealing with anonymisation in my ethnographic writing. Unfortunately, I must admit, in neither one of those projects did I spend much thought on how *exactly* I would anonymise the data before starting my fieldwork; I just assumed, like so many others, that I would simply use pseudonyms to conceal the identities of my interlocutors. Confidentiality was obviously an important concern for me – but it always remained somewhat abstract, until I came back from the field and sat down to write. Only then did I become aware of the full complexity of the issue. Over the years, I have tried out various strategies depending on topic and type of publication, and often allowed my gut feeling to guide me. It is for these experiences that my own writing provides helpful insights into the challenges of anonymisation. I now examine each of my three research and writing projects in turn.

In my master's thesis I did not use pseudonyms. The research was situated in the field of organisational ethnography, and I spent three months studying a faith-based organisation which was involved in various types of social work in inner-city Pretoria, South Africa. Fortunately for me, the organisation was committed to critical self-evaluation and, unlike many anthropologists conducting this type of ethnography, I did not have problems with access. In fact, when I approached the organisation and explained my research concept – I was interested in studying participatory development approaches – the HR manager openly invited me to join their volunteer programme which would enable me to carry out participant observation of their day-to-day work. Throughout the three months of intensive and sometimes challenging fieldwork, I became witness to very intimate, sometimes sad and discouraging, moments and situations: personal struggles and tragedies of staff members and beneficiaries, conflicts, ethical transgressions, work-related failures, mistakes, and inconsistencies. Obviously I also gained many positive insights and, overall, I was extremely impressed with the approach of the organisation and the dedication of everybody involved in the work.

When returning from the field and starting the writing process, I was confronted with the problem of internal confidentiality. The organisation had explicitly expressed interest in a critical analysis of its work, and I did not want to sugar-coat the shortcomings and problems I had observed. But I also did not want to expose the failures and vulnerabilities of individual staff members or beneficiaries. Simply using pseudonyms did not seem to provide a satisfactory solution: the organisation was small, the relationships between members were close, and everyone knew everyone. In the end I decided that many situations I witnessed or was told about in confidential conversations were simply too delicate to include, even if they would have provided great material for analysis, and I did not discuss them in the final text. I kept my analysis at a fairly high level of abstraction and used only concrete examples that allowed me to focus on general problems or principles underlying the work of the organisation. I referred to interviews by numbers, without men-

tioning names or providing personal details of the speakers – although even with these measures insiders would still have easily identified each other. To my great relief the organisation received my thesis positively and granted me permission to publish it as monograph – without requiring me to anonymise its name (Vorhölter 2009).

In my PhD, I was very sloppy with anonymising my data. This was not primarily because I was careless or ignorant; in fact, I spent a lot of time contemplating the issue. But, somehow, I ended up not using pseudonyms. The thesis was based on eleven months of fieldwork in Gulu, the biggest town in northern Uganda. It analysed the situation of youth and intergenerational relations in the aftermath of the twenty-year war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the Ugandan government. The main aim of the research was to understand how the young people who had grown up during this time of profound social turmoil imagined their future society, how they pictured their role in this society, and how they coped with the expectations directed at them by their elders, humanitarian actors, politicians, and society at large (Vorhölter 2014).

I cannot remember exactly when I decided to refer to my interlocutors by their real first names; maybe it happened gradually. I certainly had the intention of using pseudonyms when I started the writing process after returning from the field. I tried to come up with 'good' pseudonyms for the individuals I was dealing with and a strategy for keeping track of them. But I found that this inhibited my ability to write: not only did the pseudonyms make me feel strangely detached from the people I had lived with for almost a year, but they also made me feel disconnected from my writing. So I switched to the real names, thinking I would re-introduce pseudonyms at the final stages of the editing process. But I never did; something just did not feel right about it. After all, the first names of most of my interlocutors were so common in northern Uganda that no one would be able to identify them except for insiders familiar with my immediate research context – and these would have been able to do so even if I had used pseudonyms. Did it really matter then whether I called someone Acio rather than Akello, Daniel rather than David? Furthermore, with very few exceptions, the scenes and events I discussed were quite common or had taken place in public. Unlike for my master's thesis, I did not think that writing about my research participants could cause them or their community any obvious harm. But in the end, the main reason for sticking with people's first names was, simply, that I felt a need to properly acknowledge them. Most of my interlocutors were young people from fairly marginalised backgrounds whose voices were rarely heard or appreciated in public – although they were shrewd observers of what was happening in their society. Even though I did not think any of them would ever read my thesis, I simply wanted to show respect and accredit to them the perspectives they had shared with me. I was reasonably certain that they would have wanted to

be recognised by their real names – my big mistake was that I had failed to explicitly ask them about it during my fieldwork.

Although I still believe that my reasons for using real names were valid, I never felt completely comfortable with the approach and, in retrospect, wish I had not done so. A year after I published my PhD,⁵ I returned to northern Uganda and provided copies of the book to the library of the local university and to my colleagues at the institute with which I had been affiliated during my research. The book was also available open access online. One event in particular forced me to confront the ramifications of my approach. I was attending a graduate class on research methods when the professor, a close friend and mentor during my research, passed my book around and commented that there were many things they could learn from it when writing their own theses, except for one: my inadequate adherence to the ethical principles of the discipline. To my great shame and embarrassment, she not only publicly scolded me for not using pseudonyms but then read out a passage in which I mentioned the name of one of the students present in the room. It was a horribly awkward moment, and although no one else said anything and we went on to talk about other things, I still feel uncomfortable when I think about it today.

A few days after this event, I visited another close friend, who had also been an important interlocutor, at her family home. I had come to know her parents and siblings quite well during my fieldwork and had conducted a long interview with her father, a retired schoolteacher, towards the end of my stay. He was a keen social critic, and I knew he would have loved to read about my research findings. I really wanted to give him a copy of my book. However, I could not stop thinking about my failure to use pseudonyms. I referred to him and our interview in different parts of the book – all in very positive and respectful ways. But in one chapter I used a conflict between him and his daughter as a case study to discuss inter-generational conflict. I had reconstructed the conflict from two separate conversations in which each of them told me their understanding of the situation. Though the conflict was not particularly unusual, I was worried that he might be upset or angry – not so much at me for exposing it but at his daughter for the views she expressed. It could well be that it would not have been a big deal, and I am not sure using pseudonyms would have made any difference as he might still have recognised his family; but in the end I never gave him the copy I had reserved for him.

Given the moral dilemmas I faced with the usage of pseudonyms in my PhD, one would think that I would have had a clearer sense of how to go about anonymisation in subsequent work. But I still struggle with the issue. In

5 In Germany, it is compulsory to publish the PhD thesis within a year of completion. Because of this, PhD-based monographs are usually published with only minor revisions from the original text and often without thorough review by the publishers.

many ways, the research I have been conducting for my postdoctoral project is quite different from my PhD. It focuses on changing discourses on mental health and emerging forms of psychotherapy (for example, Vorhölter 2019). The work is again based in Uganda, but the main research site has shifted to the capital, Kampala, although I have continued to do some fieldwork in Gulu. I still draw on participant observation and the informal ‘hanging out’ with interlocutors – which were the main methods I used during my PhD fieldwork; but my most important data stems from expert interviews carried out with leading figures in the mental health sector: psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, counsellors, and researchers. Though growing quite rapidly, this sector is still small. At its core, it consists of a small group of Ugandan professionals and several expatriates who have been working together to expand mental health care services throughout the country. They have established university programmes for psychology and psychiatry, set up private practices, founded the National Counselling Association, and have been involved in various local, regional, national, and international initiatives to increase awareness and improve access to public mental health care. Most of them know each other in some form or other, which was a great advantage for me during the fieldwork. By using snowball sampling, I quickly developed a good overview of the ‘psy community’ and found the most relevant interview partners. However, this created particular challenges for anonymisation – which, once again, I only really started to think about after returning from the field and when starting to write.

Most of the people I had interviewed were reasonably well-known public figures, especially in their professional field. Most of them came from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds⁶ and had university degrees; some were involved in academic research and had published books and articles themselves. Was it useful, necessary, or even disrespectful to use pseudonyms for them? Furthermore, how would I anonymise the institutions they were working for given that the sector was so small? There is only one designated mental referral hospital in Uganda, for instance. I saw my research as a contribution to an ongoing, interdisciplinary, and arguably important debate on mental health in Uganda, so anonymising or even fictionalising the research situation did not seem reasonable strategies. And even though I was working on a highly sensitive topic – mental health – most of my data focused on broader discourses, practices, and developments, and not on individual patients or case histories. So not using pseudonyms did not seem to pose a risk to my interlocutors. Regardless of this, I decided in the end to use

6 Social class is an important factor that may affect how anonymisation is dealt with – albeit in complex ways. Whilst anonymisation is considered particularly crucial for vulnerable populations, including people from lower-class backgrounds with little or no formal education, it might be exactly those vulnerable and marginalised groups that anthropologists want to give a voice to – like I did in my PhD.

pseudonyms for interlocutors and for some of the institutions. After my previous experiences, I did not want to be found lacking again for not respecting one of the most fundamental anthropological principals. At the same time, I did not go out of my way to disguise the identities of my expert interviewees. In fact, in each publication I included a footnote alerting readers to the fact that those familiar with the field would probably recognise some of the people and places I discussed.

Once again, this proved to be insufficient. After publishing an article in *Current Anthropology* (Vorhölter 2019), I was contacted by the director of research at a prominent NGO. In his email, he noted that he had read my article with ‘some concern’ because I quoted extensively from an interview with one of his employees – a leading figure in mental health interventions in northern Uganda. Although I had used a pseudonym for the interviewee, I had used the real name of the organisation and the director of research had easily identified his employee. The director demanded that I should have requested written consent from the organisation to use the interview. I was shocked. Had I failed in my ethical responsibilities once again? I considered the email for a few days. Then I wrote a long response explaining the difficulties of anonymising well-known public figures. I outlined my research focus, methods, and ethical principles, and clarified that I had obtained verbal, though not written, consent from the employee in question after fully informing him about the focus and purpose of my research. I stated that I had not considered it necessary to notify the organisation because, apart from this one spontaneous interview, I had not done any research on the organisation. In fact, I had only mentioned it once in passing and not even critically. I actually have great respect for the work of the organisation and of the interviewee in particular. The more I thought about his complaint, the less I was convinced that it was justified, and told him so. I waited anxiously for his reply. Fortunately, this time his tone was much friendlier. Thanking me for my clarifications, he explained that he had to be concerned about the reputation of the organisation as my interviewee, even though expressing his personal opinions, was a representative of the NGO; his statements (for instance about other actors in the field) could therefore reflect back on the organisation. Finally, he expressed that he found my analysis of the situation quite accurate but would appreciate that I inform him when mentioning the NGO in future publications.

In my latest publication I finally found an approach to confidentiality that I feel less ambivalent about. This article (Vorhölter 2020) emerged out of an interview I conducted with a Ugandan psychiatric nurse who played an important part in the history of Ugandan psychiatry. I had been referred to her by the director of the mental hospital where she had worked for most of her life. Quite unlike other data I had collected, this interview turned out to be a biographical account of her fascinating career. I left the field soon after

but kept thinking about the nurse and her life story. It provided a rare and important perspective on the development of psychiatry in Uganda and, perhaps, Africa more broadly, and I felt it could be interesting and relevant to a broader audience. So I started writing it up – initially just for a conference paper, then for an article. Again I was struck by a series of questions: Should I anonymise her name? Would this make sense if I wanted to tell her personal life story? It was not really for me to decide. But how could I contact her and send her the draft? She was in her seventies and did not use email. Would she even remember me? What if she hated what I wrote? I contemplated these questions for a long time. First I submitted the article to a journal using a pseudonym, thinking that a rejection would solve the issue for me. In the end, I contacted the director of the mental hospital who had initially referred me to her, explaining my difficulties. Not only did he answer my email (I knew how busy he is), he also agreed to get in touch with the nurse and print out my draft for her to read. To cut the rest of the story short: she added a few comments and gave me permission to publish the text using her real name. Today, as I am writing this, I sent another email to the director, this time including a copy of the published article for the nurse. I still feel strangely anxious about it – but at least ethically I think I have done the right thing.

Conclusion

In anthropology today, just like in other social sciences, anonymisation of research data is considered standard practice. However, the issue is a lot more complex than it seems. In many ways, the particular challenges posed by confidentiality bring to the fore some of the most fundamental ethical and moral dilemmas inherent in the anthropological research approach. And there are no straightforward solutions to deal with these. If and how research data can and should be anonymised is highly context-dependent and cannot be governed by an a priori one-size-fits-all recommendation. Precisely for this reason it is important for researchers to consider how they intend to deal with anonymisation before setting out on their fieldwork – every time anew.

At least since the 1970s anthropologists have openly debated and struggled with the issue of confidentiality. Fifty years later, increased global mobility, new information and communication technologies, and recent calls for open science pose ever more challenges to the disguising of identities of research participants. Drawing on examples from the literature and my own fieldwork, I have discussed different ways anthropologists have approached the challenges of anonymisation in this article. Thereby my aim was to highlight some of the problems, ambivalences, and contradictions that come with different solutions.

Reflecting on my own approaches to anonymisation, I certainly feel that some of the strategies I chose in the past were problematic. And I would change

them if I could. However, my insights into the problems raised by my previous solutions have not meant the end of my doubts and struggles. Whilst I hope that I can learn from past mistakes, every research is different and lessons from one 'field' are not easily transferred to the next.

Nevertheless, and as a way of concluding, if based on my own experiences I had to give any advice on matters of anonymisation, it would be the following: where possible, one should consult with research participants at different stages during the research about what *they* think the right strategy for anonymisation is – although this does not mean their preferences can always be accommodated.⁷ Some projects may be more suitable for doing this than others. Thus, discussing the complexities of anonymisation before an interview, when interlocutors are often cautious and feel unsure of what they are letting themselves in for, may be less effective than raising the issue afterwards, when things have loosened up a bit. It is also likely that there will always be people one cannot ask, especially in research based on participant observation. Furthermore, interlocutors will almost certainly have different opinions on who, how, and what should be anonymised. Not everyone will be fully aware of all the implications of exposing their names or locations. In the end, it comes down to the sensitivity and potential harmfulness of the information collected. Maybe sometimes the only way to protect interlocutors is simply not to write anything particular about them at all.

References

- AAA (American Anthropological Association) (1971) Principles of Professional Responsibility. <https://www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1656> [accessed: 6 April 2020]
- Adler, Patricia A., Peter Adler and John M. Johnson (eds.) (1992) Special Issue: Street Corner Society Revisited. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 21 (1).
- Behar, Ruth (1993) *Translated Woman. Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Brettell, Caroline B. (ed.) (1993) *When They Read What We Write. The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Cassell, Joan and Sue-Ellen Jacobs (eds.) (1987) *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*. Washington: American Anthropological Association.

⁷ Some authors also let their interlocutors choose pseudonyms (see, for example, Behar 1993: xiv). For her book *Ambiguous Pleasures* (which, as the title suggests, discusses quite delicate and intimate issues), Rachel Spronk (2012) asked her research participants to read and approve the ethnographic portraits she had written of them, and to choose pseudonyms for themselves (personal communication).

- De Koning, Martijn, Birgit Meyer, Annelies Moors, and Peter Pels (2019) Guidelines for Anthropological Research: Data Management, Ethics and Integrity. *Ethnography* 20 (2): pp. 170-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138119843312>
- Hopkins, Marycarol (1993) Is Anonymity Possible? Writing about Refugees in the United States. In: Brettell, Caroline B. (ed.) *When They Read What We Write. The Politics of Ethnography*. London: Bergin and Garvey: pp. 121-130.
- Jacobs, Sue-Ellen (1987) Cases and Solutions. In: Cassell, Joan and Sue-Ellen Jacobs (eds.) *Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*. Washington: American Anthropological Association. <https://www.americananthro.org/LearnAndTeach/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=12912&RDtoken=38123&navItemNumber=731;userID=5089> [accessed: 9 April 2020]
- Nelson, Rebecca (2015) Pseudonyms 2.0: How Can We Hide Participants' Identities When They're on Pinterest? *Savage Minds*, 8 October. <https://savageminds.org/2015/10/08/pseudonyms-2-0-how-can-we-hide-participants-identities-when-theyre-on-pinterest/> [accessed: 11 July 2020]
- Pels, Peter, Igor Boog, J. Henrike Florusbosch, Zane Kripe, Tessa Minter, Metje Postma, Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner, Bob Simpson, Hansjörg Dilger, Anita von Poser, Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo, Rena Lederman, and Heather Richards-Rissetto (2018) Data Management in Anthropology: The Next Phase in Ethics Governance? *Social Anthropology* 26 (3): pp. 391-413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12526>
- Rössler, Martin and Birgit Röttger-Rössler (1991) The Anonymity of Persons and Places in Ethnography: A Comment. *Anthropos* 86 (1/3): pp. 204-207.
- Rottenburg, Richard (2002) *Weit hergeholte Fakten. Eine Parabel der Entwicklungshilfe*. Stuttgart: Lucius and Lucius.
- Rottenburg, Richard (2009) *Far-Fetched Facts. A Parable of Development Aid*. Translated by Allison Brown and Tom Lampert. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Spronk, Rachel (2012) *Ambiguous Pleasures. Sexuality and Middle-Class Self-Perceptions in Nairobi*. New York: Berghahn.
- Tolich, Martin (2004) Internal Confidentiality: When Confidentiality Assurances Fail Relational Informants. *Qualitative Sociology* 27 (1): pp. 101-106. <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:quas.0000015546.20441.4a>
- Van der Geest, Sjaak (2003) Confidentiality and Pseudonyms: A Fieldwork Dilemma from Ghana. *Anthropology Today* 19 (1): pp. 14-18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.00159>
- Vorhölter, Julia (2009) *Towards a Culture of Participation? The Influence of Organizational Culture on Participation and Empowerment of 'Beneficiaries' – A Case Study of a Social Organization in Pretoria*. Berlin: Lit Verlag.

- Vorhölder, Julia (2014) *Youth at the Crossroads – Discourses on Socio-Cultural Change in Post-War Northern Uganda*. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.
- Vorhölder, Julia (2019) Struggling to be a ‘Happy Self’ – Psychotherapy and the Medicalization of Unhappiness in Uganda. *Current Anthropology* 60 (2): pp. 194-223. <https://doi.org/10.1086/702337>
- Vorhölder, Julia (2020) A Pioneer of Psy: The First Ugandan Psychiatric Nurse and her (Different) Tale of Psychiatry in Uganda. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 26 February. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461520901642>
- Whyte, William Foote (1955) [1943] *Street Corner Society. The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Zenker, Olaf. 2014. *Writing Culture*. Oxford Bibliographies. <https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780199766567-0030>

Julia Vorhölder holds a PhD in anthropology from the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Germany) where she worked as lecturer and postdoctoral researcher for many years before starting her current position at the Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle (Saale). Her regional focus is sub-Saharan Africa, especially Uganda, where she has been carrying out fieldwork since 2009. In her PhD thesis, she analysed the situation of youth in northern Uganda in the aftermath of the war between the Lord’s Resistance Army and the Ugandan government. Her more recent work focuses on contemporary discourses on mental health/illness and emerging forms of psychotherapy in Uganda.

Max-Planck-Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle (Saale), Germany
Email: vorhoelter@eth.mpg.de