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Reply to Sjaak van der Geest

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Abstract

In this short reply, I respond to some of Sjaak van der Geest's comments on my article.

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Reply to Sjaak van der Geest

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I would like to thank Sjaak van der Geest for his thoughtful comments and reflections on my article. The points he raises complexify the debate on anonymisation in important and interesting ways, and I would have had trouble, indeed, to adequately address his questions in a conventional peer review procedure.

Some of Sjaak's objections to my arguments once again show that the possibilities for, and outcomes of, anonymisation are highly context dependent. Take his points on the internet, for instance. In some research situations, the internet may indeed facilitate concealing people's identities, like Sjaak suggests. It can enable correspondence with an anonymised author without revealing the latter's identity. And it can certainly help uncover fraud or enable research participants to engage in debates about their lives and 'talk back' to the anthropologist, in ways that would have not been likely previously. However, the fact that it is now possible 'to say anything about anything or anybody without people knowing who the speaker is' can also be highly problematic and raises the question of what distinguishes scientific data from other discourse – particularly in the current era of alleged post-factual or post-truth politics (see Harsin 2018; Stein 2017). In contexts where research-based accounts are considered, by some, as no more authentic or truthful than any other statements, it may well be important to (re)establish academic and personal credibility, for instance by revealing one's institutional affiliation and details about one's professional background and previous research experiences – even if it comes at the cost of anonymisation.

Similarly, in some studies it might be viable and unproblematic to completely anonymise names of places or institutions. In others, this may be less of an option. For instance, when contributing to an ongoing debate on a current issue in which names of places and key actors are already being used by other researchers in the field or the media, using pseudonyms may not make a lot of sense. Complete anonymisation is particularly difficult when doing applied research, where one of the key aims is usually to influence policy debates or interventions (be they medical, technical, political, economic, etc.) which target 'real' people and places. In some forms of ethnographic writing, it may not matter whether I change particular characteristics like age, gender, or occupation of an interlocutor. In others, however, it is exactly these particular identity markers that position the speaker in ways that are relevant for the analysis. I am raising these examples not to object to what Sjaak

is arguing but to reiterate my previous point that anonymisation is rarely straightforward and that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach.

Like many anthropologists, I share Sjaak's scepticism towards formalised ethical review procedures, particularly in the form of a neoliberal 'ethics governance' (Pels et al. 2018) that is currently being imposed on researchers around the world. However, I do think that making it compulsory for researchers to reflect on ethical issues before commencing their fieldwork is, in principle, a good thing – and something that, to date, has not been common practice in German anthropology, at least not in any systematic way. I concur with Cordillera Castillo (2018: 406) who argues that

> *[t]he key is the ethical researcher, not the ethics governance regime. Thus, there should be greater attention to the cultivation of ethical consciousness and behavior among researchers through pedagogy and practice. The aim is to develop researchers' capacity to make ethical decisions and actions and make ethical thinking and acting a fundamental part of all stages of our research and engagements.*

Maybe, if I had been encouraged at the beginning of my projects to elaborate how I intended to manage my research data, I would have thought more proactively about anonymisation and could have avoided some of the problems I faced in the writing process and afterwards.

Lastly, as Sjaak notes, it is indeed remarkable and surprising that – despite my anxiety surrounding issues of anonymising and confidentiality – I failed, every time, to discuss the matter with my interlocutors. It is surprising, but I do not think uncommon – which is why I decided to write about it so openly. Throughout my academic career, I have met anthropologists, not only students but also more senior scholars, who have struggled with anonymisation. In fact, only last week I was contacted by a researcher who asked my advice on whether she should use a pseudonym for an interlocutor (someone we had both interviewed) with whom she had lost contact and whom she had forgotten to consult whilst still in the field. My hope is that, by talking more openly about our own failures as ethnographers, we can help others avoid making the same mistakes.

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