

Workshop in Methods

The Ethics of Naming and the Perils of Masking in Ethnography

Dr. Colin Jerolmack

New York University



Ethnographers routinely employ pseudonyms and even mask the sites (e.g., street corner, neighborhood, city) of their research. This is usually justified as an ethical necessity, to protect our participants. In this talk, drawing from a paper I am co-authoring with Alexandra Murphy (Michigan), I challenge this justification and spell out some of the ways that masking can potentially harm research participants and impede social science research. Regarding ethics, I show, on the one hand, how masking often fails to provide the guaranteed degree of identity protection and, on the other hand, how research participants may have a very different understanding of what the researcher owes them that has little to do with whether or not they are named (e.g., portraying them as a human, not just a social type). Regarding scientific integrity, I argue that masking reifies ethnographic authority, invokes a pseudo-generalizability that downplays the particularities of the case (e.g., “Middletown”), and inhibits replicability (or “revisits”), falsifiability, or comparison. I conclude by arguing that masking is a convention, not an ethical or IRB necessity, and while I concede that there are many cases in which masking is the ethical choice, I contend that we should no longer consider it the default option.

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Social Science Research Commons Grand Hall

Woodburn Hall 200