WS 36
(Re-) negotiating anonymity in ethnographic research
(Roundtable)

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Organisiert von / *organized by*:
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Did we stop to negotiate the grounds of anonymization in ethnographic research, and take for granted the practices of anonymity, as well as the analytical concepts tied to it – for example, identity and the person, owning and sharing, property and collective, accountability and reciprocity? We argue: yes indeed, we did. The need to anonymize 'informants' has become institutionalized as an ethical principle. There was no doubt about the technical, infrastructural and practical ways of producing and maintaining anonymity. More recently, some of our colleagues and students might have complained about anonymization becoming more difficult, but we probably did not pay much attention.

We should have known better. Not only because in present-day hybrid online-offline worlds, these certainties are called into question by an unprecedented spread of surveillance, identification and information technologies linked to a moral imperative towards transparency. But also because in not questioning the conceptual basis of anonymity (for an exception, see Konrad 2005) and its Western provincialism, we have betrayed Marilyn Strathern's (1992) notion of what it means to be an expert in anthropology: "(…) to demonstrate simultaneously the cultural origins of one's analytic constructs and their cross-cultural applicability" (1992:119).

This roundtable aims at tracing the effects of current transformations of anonymity-regimes at the intersection of social practices, infrastructures and regulations for ethnographic knowledge production (see VolkswagenStiftung-funded project 'Reconfiguring Anonymity' and Bachmann et al. 2017). We invite ethnographers to renegotiate how central concepts tied to anonymity are changed by new ways of doing and undoing anonymity, and address questions such as: How are practices of anonymization changed by new forms of networked data? How does non-anonymous ethnography affect notions of confidentiality? How can archiving practices react to these transformations?

Vortragende / *Speakers*:

Anna Henke (Universität Hamburg)
Ethnography and anonymity: how get they along in a digital research setting?
During the research on the concept and understanding of anonymity, the question of anonymizing the data set is twice as explosive as it has been in ethnographic research already. The release of anonymity in ethnographic research can have specific implications for both the anthropologist and the participants. If the ethnographer is not methodically prepared, the disclosure of names can make the participant and the scholar vulnerable. The will to protect the informant and identify him/her with his/her name can lead to a weaker argument and limit the scope of a study. Accordingly, a constant balance between individual and program-based anonymity before and during the research process should be found. In this article, the research insights gained in the FinTech and eHealth sector are used to highlight the possibilities that can be found for anonymization and dealing with anonymity in today's digital world.

Anna Henke is a cultural anthropologist and doctoral student at the Institute of European Ethnology/Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg. She is part of the research group "Reconfiguring Anonymity" and belongs to the subproject "Identity, Health Insurance and Customer Cards". Her current research focuses on digital cultures, anonymity and identity practices, and digitization from a science and technology studies perspective.

Tamara Gupper (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt/Main, EHESS Paris)
Anonymization in the university curriculum: Are future anthropologists being prepared for the ethical and methodological aspects of anonymization?
My insecurities concerning my ability to anonymize potential informants have shaped the choice of research field for my Master's thesis decisively. My original research would have been conducted with activists living in exile because of political prosecution. In this very tense field there were two main problems I could not resolve: First, should political actors who do not want to be anonymized still be anonymized, considering that they might face sanctions? Secondly: In a world full of data connecting me to the people I work with, would I ever even have the capability to ensure their anonymity?
Due the fact that I did not feel capable of resolving these questions, I have chosen to study in a different field. This outcome can be based on my insecurities around the topic of anonymization, which stem at least partially from the fact that they were not discussed in my university curriculum. I would argue that this needs to change in order to ensure that future generations of anthropologists gain both an awareness of the topic, as well as strategies which help them to anonymize informants.

Tamara Gupper studies Social and Cultural Anthropology in a French-German Master program at the Goethe University Frankfurt and the EHESS in Paris. The ethical and methodological implications of anonymization in politically tense fields were an important factor in the choice of the topic of her master research. These implications remain relevant for her work on the use of smartphones in political work in Senegal.

Amelie Baumann (Universität Bremen)
Fighting against anonymity with publicity
Whereas donor conception has long been dominated by anonymity and secrecy, there has been a move towards openness and transparency in recent years. The 'right to know' is increasingly being promoted in legislation, as well as in counselling and policy activities. During my research on the knowledge practices and politics of people conceived with gametes from anonymised sources in the UK and Germany, I have specifically looked at how the donor-conceived themselves have become agents of change. As part of their fight for information and against anonymity, some have decided to go public with their stories. It was especially the constant medialisation of donor conception that was mirrored amongst and promoted by many of my donor-conceived interlocutors: Half of them had already told their story to a journalist at least once. Although such media reports allowed for a unique perspective on the fight for the 'right to know' that I did not want to ignore, they also brought about challenges with regards to anonymisation. I therefore argue that ethnographers need to negotiate reactions to the decision of interlocutors to make themselves visible.

Amelie Baumann is a PhD-student in Cultural Anthropology at the University of Bremen, and part of the "Reconfiguring Anonymity"-research group. Her dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of the transformation of anonymity-regimes in gamete donation in the UK and Germany. Many of

her interlocutors chose to make themselves visible in the media or elsewhere as part of their knowledge politics, thereby challenging practices of anonymization.

Tijo Salverda (University of Vienna)
Trading anonymity: studying the powerful in times of Google
Anthropology has long offered people anonymity, especially to (vulnerable) actors who may face repercussions from involvement in critical research. But do the same concerns and standards regarding anonymity apply when studying the powerful – in the 'online era'? Based on my research on elites and corporations, I aim to provide some answers.

I will first address how concerns about anonymity in times of Google may influence accessing the powerful. In previous research (e.g. Salverda 2015), negotiating anonymity with powerful actors was relatively straightforward. Yet in my current project, my main case study, a European agribusiness operating in Zambia, appeared especially concerned about the potential impact of (global) online exposure. In negotiating access, they not only requested their name but also other identifiers to be anonymised – I agreed upon some, but not all. Following from these negotiations, I will next examine whether I granted too much anonymity and to what extent we (should) apply the same standards in the case of studying the powerful – colleagues, for example, have told me that in anthropology's struggle against injustices, the powerful do not 'deserve' anonymity.

Tijo Salverda is a professor of social and cultural anthropology at the University of Vienna, Austria. His research focuses on elites and corporate actors and how they perceive and respond to counter-power. Salverda's publications include *The Franco-Mauritian Elite: Power and Anxiety in the Face of Change* (Berghahn Books, 2015), *The Anthropology of Elites* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; co-edited with Jon Abbink), and *Facing criticism: An analysis of (land-based) corporate responses to the large-scale land acquisition countermovement* (Journal of Peasant Studies, 2018).