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RESEARCH

Conflict Over Sociologist's Narrative Puts Spotlight on Ethnography



Narayan Mahon for The Chronicle

Alice Goffman's account of a Philadelphia neighborhood has set off a debate among sociologists about how she went about her research.

By Marc Parry | JUNE 12, 2015

Late last month, what began as a book review in an obscure publication blew up into a major controversy that tarnished sociology's most-buzzed-about young star. At issue: whether the sociologist, Alice Goffman, had participated in a felony while researching her ethnographic study of young black men caught up in the criminal-justice system.

That claim brought Ms. Goffman back into the news, but the backlash against her had been building for months. Journalists and scholars had acclaimed her 2014 book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, as an ethnographic masterwork, transforming a press-shy junior scholar into a TED-talking celebrity. But discussion of Ms. Goffman's book soon took on a more cutting tone, as reviewers questioned the accuracy of her portrayal of black life, the soundness of her methods, and the possibility that her book might harm its subjects.

The dust-up reveals anxieties that go beyond the censure of Ms. Goffman, opening a fresh debate over longstanding dilemmas of ethnographic research: the ethical boundaries of fieldwork, the tension between data transparency and subjects' privacy, and the reliability of one ethnographer's subjective account of a social world. Some sociologists worry that the controversy may put a chill on sensitive fieldwork. Others fear that it could damage the credibility of ethnography at a time when sociologists are being exhorted to get more involved in public debates.

"This is more than a discussion of this book and what the particular issues may or may not be with it," says Andrea Voyer, an assistant professor of sociology at Pace University who has blogged about the Goffman case. "It really is a discussion of, How do we do our work in the best possible way? How do we within the discipline evaluate and promote the work that's going to have the biggest impact?"

A Compelling Tale

A mix of personal and external factors combined to help Ms. Goffman make an unusually big splash. Her biography was catnip to profile writers: The 33-year-old ethnographer, now an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, is the daughter of a legendary sociologist, the late Erving Goffman. Beginning as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, she spent six years immersed in fieldwork with wanted young men in Philadelphia, dodging the police with them, discussing shootings, attending funerals. The book she came away with documented how the criminal-justice system pervaded their everyday lives. It appeared months before the unrest in Ferguson, Mo., touched off a national conversation about police practices in black communities.

Ms. Goffman also hit the scene at a time of revived interest in ethnography. Roughly 40 years ago, many sociologists dismissed this genre of observational research as "highfalutin' journalism," says Gary Alan Fine, a Northwestern

University professor and longtime practitioner of the craft. Ethnographers rarely influenced public policy, he says, and were not represented on the faculties of many top sociology departments. But the method has flourished in recent decades, and Ms. Goffman's research shows one reason. *On the Run* teems with ground-level stories that can touch a broad audience in a way that other sociology research, be it statistical analysis or field experiments, cannot.

But it's that same vivid storytelling that has now gotten Ms. Goffman into trouble. The controversy concerns a disturbing scene she recounts in her book's methodological appendix. One of her research subjects, a friend she identifies with the pseudonym "Chuck," is fatally shot. She describes driving around with one of Chuck's friends, who is armed with a gun, to hunt down the shooter. "I got into the car," she writes, because "I had wanted Chuck's killer to die."

In a review published in *The New Rambler* and then excerpted in *The New Republic*, Steven Lubet, a law professor at Northwestern, argues that Ms. Goffman's actions constituted conspiracy to commit murder. Mr. Lubet says he contacted four current or former prosecutors, who agreed that she had committed a felony. What's more, he quotes one former prosecutor as saying that Ms. Goffman "could be charged and convicted based on this account right now."

Ms. Goffman countered that she had not conspired to commit a crime. In the passages from which Mr. Lubet quotes, she omitted several points germane to his claim, she wrote in a statement posted last week on her faculty website. "Most important," she wrote, "I had good reason to believe that this night would not end in violence or injury."

But that only amplified Mr. Lubet's doubts. Ms. Goffman is effectively telling two different stories about the event, the law professor shot back. "I am even less certain how much of the book is true," he wrote in a second *New Republic* article.

"Goffman essentially admits that she embellished and exaggerated her account of a crucial episode, which should leave even the most sympathetic readers doubting her word."

Rich Case Study

Whatever you make of that back-and-forth — both sides' statements have been seen as disturbing, depending on who's judging — the fight leaves the field with a rich case study for arguing about the problems of researching, writing, and verifying ethnographies.

Scholars who do immersive studies that involve crime and policing often find themselves in ethically fraught situations, says Jack Katz, a professor of sociology at the University of California at Los Angeles who co-edited Ms. Goffman's book. "Most of the time, people doing research on drugs and crime and the police don't report the incidents that potentially compromise them," says Mr. Katz. "The ethical line she crossed, in a way, was honesty."

But one dilemma raised by the Goffman case is how to evaluate the honesty of her research, as well as other work like it.

In a profile published last year in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Ms. Goffman revealed that, to pre-empt the threat of being subpoenaed, she had destroyed her field notes. That decision has now come under scrutiny amid the mounting questions about her work. Beyond the issue of whether she had committed a crime, Mr. Lubet and other reviewers have cast doubt on the plausibility of various anecdotes and practices reported in *On the Run*, such as its account of police officers' running the names of men on hospital-visitor lists so they could take into custody those with outstanding warrants. Mr. Lubet's review took Ms. Goffman to task for destroying notes that might have helped corroborate such claims.

For ethnographers, though, the dispute underscores a vexing question: How should researchers balance the competing demands of privacy and transparency? Ethnographers doing sensitive research must protect their subjects. One tactic, used by Ms. Goffman, is to disguise the identities of people and places. Some institutional review boards have asked ethnographers to safeguard or destroy field notes, says Eric Klinenberg, a professor of sociology at New York University. Historically, he says, that "has not been a very controversial request."

"But now we live in a moment of data transparency," he says. "And there's been a movement throughout various scientific fields to make data more publicly available, so that it can be reanalyzed and verified. This obviously poses special challenges for all ethnographers. And particularly for ethnographers studying criminal activity."

Weighing in on Twitter, another sociologist, Shamus Khan, pointed out a further complication. Ethnographic data isn't just raw information, the Columbia University professor wrote. It's a thought process. Notes can contain weird ideas, personal experiences, private matters. "I'm not totally convinced that sharing field notes is the answer," he wrote. "But we need creative ideas."

There's also no simple answer to the question of how common or advisable it is to destroy notes. There aren't firm rules, Northwestern's Mr. Fine says. It used to be that IRBs told researchers to destroy notes after the research was completed, he says, but policies may be changing. Reaction to Ms. Goffman's pre-emptive shredding ranges from incredulity to understanding.

Even if you could reanalyze Ms. Goffman's notes, though, the nature of her research precludes the kind of replication you might attempt with a controlled experiment. By her own account, she spent years cultivating the relationships that

gave her access to the social world she chronicled in her book. The neighborhood where she did her research has changed since she began studying it, over a decade ago.

The idea that an ethnographer is a precise capturer of a set of facts — and that there is only a certain set of those facts out there — is misleading, Mr. Fine says. "We are telling not *the* story, but *a* story," he says. "And that's why I think it is important that for any major topic we have multiple ethnographic sources. One of the problems with Alice Goffman as celebrity is that it takes attention away from the other really excellent ethnographers who are doing similar kinds of research."

Another sociologist sees Ms. Goffman's work as indicative of a different ethnographic problem: poor research design. Ethnographers frequently will pick a field site, see what they find, and then make an argument about it, says Patrick Sharkey, an associate professor of sociology at NYU. This can work well, he says in an email. But it often leads to situations like that of Ms. Goffman, whose book, though a major contribution, is undermined by what he considers a weak relationship between her data and her argument.

"She wants to talk about the expansive and unjust reach of the criminal-justice system," he says, "but she's making the argument by using the stories of people who probably should be 'on the run' given their extensive criminal activity and willingness to take part in gun violence."

Standing By Her Claims

Ms. Goffman, for her part, defends both the specific decision to destroy her field notes and the broader integrity of her work. "In keeping with IRB requirements, I kept the field notes and the research materials for three years," she says in a statement emailed to *The Chronicle*. "After that time had passed, I disposed of them. I did this in an effort to protect the subjects of the study from legal action, public scrutiny, or any other undesirable result of the book's publication."

She adds, "How one community responds to intense surveillance and the threat of capture was the subject of my book. I stand by its specific claims concerning police and court practice and by its larger argument about the harm these policies are inflicting on everyday people."

Ms. Goffman's graduate-school adviser at Princeton, Mitchell Duneier, also defends her work — mostly. She crossed an ethical line in the episode that Mr. Lubet argues was a crime, Mr. Duneier says, and she left herself open to criticism with her thin discussion of it in her text. But he vouches for the credibility of her book. One reason is that he has met some of her subjects himself.

While Ms. Goffman was working on the dissertation that she would ultimately develop into *On the Run*, Mr. Duneier conducted independent interviews with some of her subjects. Ethnographers, in his view, should identify the people and places in their studies when possible. The sensitivity of Ms. Goffman's research made that standard of transparency impossible, Mr. Duneier says. So, while he trusted Ms. Goffman, he also took steps to ensure his own comfort with her story. "I feel confident in the research that I supervised as an adviser and that our committee approved at Princeton," he says.

Sociologists are wondering what all of this may mean for the future of ethnography. In *The Washington Post*, Mr. Katz warned that the controversy could "quash the whole field of participant observation research in areas of social life that the government considers rife with criminality." Ms. Voyer, of Pace University, worries that this kind of case "fuels the flames a little bit about the value of ethnography and also makes everyone a little bit suspect."

So how can ethnographers do better? By facing up to the method's "cult of personality culture," Ms. Voyer says. Ethnography, like art, tends to be seen as individual work, its practitioners sometimes evaluated on the basis of their

bravery. Another approach is team ethnography, with multiple researchers going out into the field. Collaboration has two advantages, Ms. Voyer says. The first is richer data. The second is a built-in check on people's findings.

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