

Case 5: Anonymity Declined

Mira Walton spent two years in Melanesia conducting a broadly defined community study in a rural village with a population of about 1,500 people. She returned to the United States and wrote a 500-page descriptive monograph in which she included specific instances of conflicts of interest and dispute settlement in a variety of contexts: broken marriage contracts; instances of alleged encroachment of farming on neighbors' lands; a case of theft; a charge of mismanagement of community resources which was made against the village headman; family feuds; and blood feuds. Following the conventions of the AAA, Walton decided that the village and its location should be disguised and that pseudonyms should be used for all individuals mentioned in the published ethnography.

A year after publication of Walton's ethnography, which was three years following her departure from the field, she returned to the community of study, taking along copies of the book. These copies were distributed to the people who had been most helpful during her original research project. Most of these individuals were literate and readily understood the contents of the book. Walton asked and received permission to conduct further study in the village. She settled into her task.

Six months later, a meeting was called by one of the elders in order that the community members might discuss the book about them with Walton. Walton was surprised by the first remarks concerning the book; namely that, although she had done an accurate job of characterizing the situations of dispute settlement and the overall political structure of the village, they were surprised that she had (1) gotten the name of the village wrong, and (2) not given accurate names of the individuals involved in the disputes. More than 60 people were at the meeting, and these individuals represented a majority of the families in the village. The murmurings indicated strong agreement that she should have given the actual name of both the village and individuals. Furthermore, she was explicitly told that in the next book she should be more careful to use the correct village name and use the correct names of villagers who asked her to do so or who gave permission for her to do so.

Ironically, Walton had debated the issue of anonymity with colleagues in the United States. She had argued that in order for further studies to be done accurately by other researchers, it was necessary to specify the precise location and name of the village. And, in order to judge credibility of information obtained from the villagers, she had wanted to provide the names of the individuals who worked most closely with her. They had argued that it was her responsibility to protect "her informants and her community" from outside interference or other possible negative consequences, and cited examples of villages and villagers who had come to harm because the anthropologists in question had used real names.

Faced now with the villagers' criticisms, Walton was in a quandary.

Walton's Dilemma: Given that she had a contract for a new book about the community and that the community expected her to publish this new book, should she (1) defer to the villagers' insistence that she publish the correct name of the village and the correct names of villagers who had asked or given permission for her to do so? Or, (2) should she rely on anthropological conventions and cautions (as stated in the Principles of Professional Responsibility of the American Anthropological Association) and use pseudonyms in the new book?