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Lying in defence of privacy: anthropological and methodological observations

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with three topics: lying, privacy and anthropological research. Their complex intertwinement is analysed using fieldwork notes and through engagement with relevant literature from various disciplines. Experiences of privacy, among researchers as well as among respondents, is underexposed in the literature on social research methodology. Furthermore, lying is sometimes the only effective way to protect one's privacy. Starting from a research experience with lying respondents in Ghana, I discuss the various circumstances and reasons that lead to lying in defence of privacy, and in particular, concerns about respect in the context of research. Next, I return to the concept of privacy and explicate cultural variations in the experience of privacy. I then look at the consequences for research ethics. The paradoxical conclusion is that lying, a discredited tool of deception, is often applied in order to uphold a widely accepted basic human necessity of life – privacy. Qualitative social researchers should take these concerns about privacy and respect into account and engage in conversations that do not threaten the security of their interlocutors.

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Introduction

Privacy and lying in anthropological fieldwork are underexposed topics in the extensive literature on qualitative research methodology. 'Privacy' is indeed a slippery concept, which seems to have quite different meanings and forms in different social and cultural contexts. Some friends in my international network even claim that there is no equivalent term in their language and that the concern about what we call 'privacy' does not exist in their culture (something that I refuse to believe). This claim is echoed in some of the literature on Japan (Doi, 2001; Orito & Murata, 2005) and Arabic societies (El Guindi, 1999). 'Lying', on the other hand, is mainly viewed as a problem that affects the reliability of the data and as an indicator of sensitive issues during research.

The concept of privacy defies a precise definition because it refers to experiences that are too close to look at objectively. Altman (1975) circumscribes privacy as a 'selective control of access to the self', using physical as well as social boundary regulators. Altman (1977) further sees privacy as a cultural universal which however differs among cultures with regard to the specific mechanisms used to achieve it. For some cultures, the privacy system may not be apparent from merely observing the physical environment. Social and cultural 'compensation' techniques make up for the lack of physical boundaries.

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The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (DeCew, 2013) lists a number of attempts to capture the meaning of privacy: ‘control over information about oneself’, ‘required for human dignity’, ‘crucial for intimacy’, ‘necessary for the development of varied and meaningful interpersonal relationships’, ‘the value that accords us the ability to control the access others have to us’, ‘a set of norms necessary not only to control access but also to enhance personal expression and choice’ or ‘some combination of these’. I will add my attempt to grasp what privacy is, or rather does.

Privacy is the condition of life in which a person feels comfortable, safe and secure. The metaphor of a house presents itself: a place where one can live, protected against unwanted elements from outside such as cold and heat, wind and rain, against spies, authorities, thieves and other unwelcome visitors. A house offers the possibility to allow some people and elements in while keeping others out. It accommodates love and intimacy and is a base from which we engage with others in meaningful relationships. It provides freedom and creates room for self-control, self-reflection and self-expression, according to Smith (2004, p. 11,250). Monitoring one’s privacy can be compared to keeping one’s house open to some and closed to others. Privacy is the realisation of security in life, a condition that forms the grounds for living the type of life one wants to live, a comfortable balance between intimacy and publicity. Of course, a house (my metaphor) is not always a haven of security; it may well be the opposite: a crowded place where security is in constant danger, as maybe the case in Ghana (see further below).

Lying is not deviant behaviour (Barnes, 1994); it is normal human behaviour, one of the few proofs of human freedom. Conversation analysts have been particularly helpful in pointing this out.

In his classic paper, ‘Everyone has to lie,’ Harvey Sacks (1975) identified a general context (in our society) in which is it socially necessary to lie. Briefly, his argument goes as follows: In response to the greeting ‘How are you’ from someone who is not the right person to receive the information that would explain the true answer (which may, after all, be ‘lousy,’ entailing further sequential diagnosis-‘why? what’s wrong?’), *people are routinely forced to lie*. In other words, everyone in that kind of situation (a situation that everyone might encounter) is forced to lie in anticipation that, unless you lie, you’ll get into undesirable sequential binds. This is one kind of necessary social lie (Brown, 2002, p. 242; italics added).

Barnes (1994, p. 2) refers to several ethnographies to support his view that lying is a widely spread normal practice, for example, Gilseman (1976) about Lebanon and Friedl (1962) about rural Greece. He lards his argument with enticing as well as provocative quotes such as Lacan’s quip that ‘the characterising feature of intersubjectivity is that the subject can lie to us’.

Lying is expected in many contexts, according to Brown (2002, p. 267): people lie about ‘private affairs, money, comings and goings, and not having things that people are asking to borrow’. Many lies are known to be lies by those who are lied to. In that case, there is a tacit mutual understanding not to pursue the untrue statement. Lying, in other words, smooths social life. ‘Learning to lie properly is an important feature of the process of human socialization’ (Barnes, 1994, p. 8).

In this essayistic article, I attempt to connect privacy and lying in the context of anthropological research and qualitative social research more generally. The purpose is not so much to formulate clear-cut methodological suggestions or guidelines but to raise more awareness of the complexity of the research setting, in which actors with different expectations, biographies, moral codes and personal ‘philosophies’ engage in communication that should lead to data that enhances our understanding of ‘others’. The most likely challenge of the research setting is its social complexity. An interview is not merely a data collecting activity but a social encounter with various layers of emotion that come into play in any human interaction. It is also a meeting that requires mutual respect between researcher and interlocutor. It seems – or rather *is* – common sense to realise this and to deal with it, but fieldwork accounts show that common sense itself is a tricky compass as there maybe a variety of ‘common senses’. Privacy (in its various appearances) and lying contribute to this complexity in a crucial – and by definition hidden – way.

I will first approach the local concerns about privacy in a rural Ghanaian community via the detour of lying. I will then discuss what the people in this community try the hardest to keep private. Finally,

I will explicate cultural variations in the experience of privacy more widely and will briefly look at their consequences for research ethics.

Privacy and anthropological research

Anthropologists, especially those working outside their own cultural setting, frequently discuss privacy, but mainly regarding their own. Lack of privacy (in combination – paradoxically – with loneliness) is a common complaint of ethnographers who practise participant observation and try to live closely with the people among whom they carry out research. Malinowski, widely crowned as the pioneer of anthropological fieldwork, preferred to live in a tent at a safe distance from Trobriand families. This enabled him to write and read (and sleep) without being disturbed by the villagers. Briggs (1970) spent almost two years with an Inuit family, including two Arctic winters where she stayed with the family in an igloo. She wrote a candid reflection on that long period in which she describes her moments of loneliness and longing for more privacy. But she realised that her longing clashed with local obligations of hospitality and sociability towards her. The yearning for privacy, and the related homesickness while in a community with little space to hide, is a well-known experience among ethnographic researchers; not only in the past, the pre-internet era, but also today with its numerous options for communication with people at home (see for example, the list of fieldwork frustrations in Pollard, 2009).

When anthropologists write about the privacy of their respondents during fieldwork, it is usually in the context of ethical debates sparked off by the relatively recent appearance of codes of conduct for anthropologists and sociologists (e.g. Whiteford & Trotter, 2008; Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008; Zaman & Nahar, 2011). I am also among them (Van der Geest, 2003). Ethical guidelines point out that researchers should respect the privacy of their respondents and not cause any harm to them, for example, by revealing their identity. In qualitative research – as is the case in anthropology – individual respondents usually play a prominent role (through case histories, narratives, life histories and anecdotes). Anonymising respondents may pose difficult dilemmas for the writer. A common practice in anthropology is to conceal the identity of respondents without impoverishing the richness of the data by giving respondents fictitious names and changing some other insignificant details of their identity.

In all of this, however, ‘privacy’ remains a rather vague and non-reflective blanket term for the respondents’ personal lives, mostly derived from the researcher’s own experience. The meaning and appreciation of ‘privacy’ in the culture or specific setting where the research takes place is rarely given attention,¹ although some ‘armchair’ theoreticians have tried to deduce the cultural variations of ‘privacy’ from ethnographic accounts that do not directly discuss the topic (e.g. Moore, 1984).² This negligence regarding local concepts of privacy is the more remarkable since one would expect that anthropologists, who claim to be best equipped to explore the more hidden dimensions of life, would take a special interest in cultural variations in the experience of privacy.

A research experience in Ghana

In 1973, I had a perfect moment of serendipity, a key element of anthropological research. I was doing fieldwork in a small rural town in Kwahu, Ghana about sexual relationships and birth control. A sensitive and hidden topic, but anthropologists have a preference for hidden thoughts and practices,³ believing that through their approach of participant observation they are able to delve more deeply into the private desires and activities of people than other social and behavioural scientists. The research, which eventually led to my doctoral dissertation, focused on the experiences of young people, mainly for two reasons.

The first reason was because birth control – or rather pregnancy prevention – was mostly a preoccupation of the young who were still in school and/or not yet ready for a child. A pregnancy leading to the birth of a child was likely to disturb their future ambitions. For young women, they would probably have to leave school out of shame and would end up becoming a mother in their rural home, just like their own mother – something that was considered an unattractive prospect. Self-induced

abortions were common in such situations. For the young male generation, the prospect of having to quit school and becoming 'stuck' in their hometown was less likely, but they too ran the risk of becoming entwined in the problems of their girlfriend. For the older generation, contraceptives and other birth-preventing measures were hardly relevant. Being in a marital or semi-marital (consensual and socially accepted) relationship was usually the result of their wish to have children. Marriage, in other words, was meant to produce children. Practising birth control in marriage would often therefore be considered contradictory.

A second reason for focusing on the younger generation was that they were my age and therefore easier to talk to. As a young male European visitor, I became an empathic listener to their stories about love affairs and the dramatic events surrounding unwanted pregnancies. They knew I was collecting data for my dissertation, but they trusted me when I promised them that I would not reveal their secrets in a recognisable form to others. Some enjoyed telling me about their amorous adventures; understandably, because there is pleasure and catharsis in sharing secrets with a 'safe' person.

The research was at first limited to one extended family of 76 living adult members, 60 of whom were between 17 and 65 years of age. I was able to speak to only 42 of the adult relatives since the majority were living elsewhere and visited their hometown only occasionally. Living in a room in the house of the family head for one year, I became a quasi-member of the family, but I also remained a permanent outsider. In my conversations with those 42 relatives, I felt that I managed to tease out much confidential information on sex and birth prevention, though the conversations with the younger family members were, as explained above, 'thicker' than those with the older ones.

My 'style' of obtaining information from older middle-aged people can best be described as a mixture of gossip and joking 'interrogation'. They were reluctant to speak on the issue of birth control, in particular abortion, but knowing that I already knew a lot (through gossip with others, for example) they usually 'admitted' things that they had initially tried to conceal. Some – half jokingly – called me a 'dangerous person' because I 'knew too much'. At the same time, however, they did not seem overly worried about the danger I presented; an outsider is often a safer person to disclose your secrets to than a relative. They believed that I would keep my promise and not reveal their intimate information to others.⁴

I am writing these lines more than 40 years later, though not because I am proud of my research strategy. In fact, I feel rather ambivalent and uneasy about the fanaticism with which I haunted these family members. I am aware that along with their secrets they also surrendered themselves to me and placed their vulnerable privacy in my hands, without absolute certainty that it was a safe thing to do. Apart from 'confessing' here some of my own private anthropological activities, my description of this research that I conducted long ago is necessary in order to introduce what I have called 'my moment of serendipity'.

Some teachers at the university insisted that a sample of merely 42 people (19 women, 23 men) from one family would not convince critical readers interested in numbers and statistics, and certainly not policy-makers and professionals involved in 'family planning'. Although my intention was to produce a qualitative in-depth study of sensitive ideas and practices, I – somewhat grudgingly – accepted their suggestion and designed a questionnaire on sexual relationships and birth control. One-hundred men and 179 women from the entire town were interviewed. For the women's questionnaire, I hired and trained six young nurses from a nearby hospital. The nurses – in uniform – interviewed the women during their visit to the local child welfare clinic. The assumption was that questions about sex and birth control could best be asked in a professional medical context. During the interviews, I remained as much as possible out of sight. I now recognise – and humbly admit – that this methodology was a clear case of non-informed consent and in some instances of complete non-consent. The women assumed that the questions served a medical purpose and did not know that they were part of my anthropological research. Today, my doctoral thesis might have been rejected on ethical grounds.

After the interviews, I evaluated the proceedings with the nurses. They told me that some women had given nonchalant and inconsistent answers, others had been far from cooperative, and yet others had reacted indignantly and aggressively to certain questions, especially those referring to abortion

(which was a criminal act). Some women had asked the nurses whether they were working for the police. Although the nurses sensed that many women were simply lying in response to some of the questions, they had no means of checking this because they did not know the respondents. Equally problematic, in my eyes, was the fact that the respondents did not know the interviewers at all. Many of the women were shocked to hear strangers asking them such intimate questions and felt that they had no choice but to lie (Bleek, 1987, p. 318).

Going through the completed questionnaires, I discovered that six women from ‘my’ family had taken part in the survey. They had been interviewed without realising that their responses would eventually come under my eyes. When I compared their answers with what I knew about them, I was taken aback. They had lied profusely, presenting themselves in terms that they expected would make the nurses respect them. Some of their answers were so far removed from the facts as I knew them that I was dumbfounded. These six women filled me with a lifelong distrust of questionnaire research (Bleek, 1987, p. 319).

Impression management

When I originally wrote up the story of this research event (Bleek, 1987), my intention was not so much to prove that a questionnaire may not be a useful tool with which to explore intimate and delicate data. That would have been a rather truistic conclusion. My point was that lies in a research context are not only false information but are also a clue about relevant information that is kept hidden (cf. Salamone, 1977). The fact that it is hidden is a sign that it is important. If a researcher perceives his task as a detective type of investigation into people’s hidden personal lives, lies show the way to discovering secrets. The problem, however, is how to determine *when* people are lying. Research through a questionnaire produces little insight into the truthfulness of people’s responses.⁵ Body language, facial expressions, the manner of speaking and inconsistent information may raise suspicions, but one never knows for sure. Inconsistency is ‘normal’ and does not need to result from lying. Moreover, people may be experts in lying when they defend their private affairs from inquisitive and impertinent questions. In contrast, participant observation, including informal conversations, can produce near certainty about people’s lies and offer the opportunity to carefully take up the matter of untruthfulness during the same conversation.

For this article, however, I want to look at so-called lying from the liars’ point of view: the lies of those six women during that survey seemed the most polite and tactful way in which they could protect their privacy, thus preventing further questions and difficult explanations. As the well-known one-liner of the British writer H. H. Munro (‘Saki’) goes, ‘A little inaccuracy sometimes saves tons of explanation.’

Goffman’s (1969) well-known concept of ‘impression management’ is helpful to comprehend the lies of research respondents as a natural and logical tool of self-presentation. Doing research is not simply about data gathering; it is also a social event involving mutual performances by both the researcher and the respondent. A research encounter is not very different from other encounters in daily life. People fashion situations and play ‘roles’ in order to make a particular impression on others during such encounters. By carefully monitoring bodily appearance and information giving, actors try to create the particular impression that they want to give to the other. What to reveal about one’s personal life and what to conceal constitutes a crucial part of this performance.

Respect

But what was the deeper drive behind this concern for privacy among the ‘lying’ women? The impression that these women were trying to manage vis-à-vis the nurses was first of all one of being respectable. When I call lying a tool in defence of *privacy*, we must think of private matters that would threaten the status of a person who desires the respect of others to whom they become known. Throughout the many years of research that I conducted in this Ghanaian community, I reached the conclusion that

respect (*obuo*) was the central concept designating the good and bad in life, whether this was about family life, sexual relationships, ageing, greeting practices, life after dark or HIV/AIDS.

Together with two friends – Ghanaian men and members of the community – who helped me in the research, I composed a riddle to delve deeper into the meaning of respect. Patrick (P), one of these friends, posed the riddle to an elderly man Opoku (O), who was well known for his eloquence and wisdom.

O: How respectful some people are can easily be detected, even from the way they walk. In others, walking can show how proud they are. *Obi wo ho a, nam a na ne honan redidi aтем. Wohu se nye ahantan* (Lit. Someone is there, if he walks, his skin is insulting people. You see that he is proud). There are many ways of judging how respectful a person is.

...

P: There is a riddle we would like to solve. An *ɔpanyin* [elder] who was sitting with his friends called one of his children, Kofi, and commanded him to go to the farm to perform a job, but Kofi told the father that he wouldn't go. The *ɔpanyin* then invited the second son, Kwadwo, and gave the same instruction to him. Kwadwo told the father he would go but did not go either. So in this case, which of the two children was more disrespectful?

O: The one who was more disrespectful is Kofi who said he would not go because he disgraced his father in the presence of others, which is very bad. The second one, Kwadwo, was respectful because he showed respect and honour to the father in the presence of other people.

We presented the same riddle to others and most agreed with the old man Opoku. Respect is based on what is seen and heard, not on what remains hidden. Respect is a master key that can be applied to anything. As I mentioned before, it is a multi-faceted qualification that fits any imaginable act, word or thought because it is connected to everything in daily life. If something (or someone) is good, this can be expressed by the term 'respect' or 'respectful'. If something (or someone) is bad, it is said that it (he/she) lacks respect. 'Respect' designates the moral dimension of life. Saying that lying is a way of defending one's privacy is the same as saying that it defends one's (and other people's) respectability. It prevents shame, which is a perceived and internalised loss of respectability.

Respect (or disrespect) is attached to any type of human behaviour. I cannot think of any act or gesture that is excluded from the domain of respect. A few examples will do. Respect is foremost shown in greeting, in bodily position and gesture, in manners of looking and walking. One's dress is respectful if it is clean, ironed, decent and worn in the right way. Shabby or dirty clothes are offensive, especially in the presence of older people. There is respect in the way people eat, behave towards their children and partner, converse, visit relatives, clean the house, listen to advice, etc. Children show respect by obeying those who are 'above' them and behaving submissively. In his conversation with Patrick, Opoku succinctly summarised his opinion about the optical imperative of respect: 'Respect, which is hiding in a person, is useless.'

In this light, privacy can be regarded as a domain that stands apart from the public arena where respect rules. It is – to use another Goffman term – the 'backstage' where people can withdraw from the eyes of others and from the public performance of respectability. Asking questions about that domain, as researchers tend to do, is asking for the disclosure of disrespect and inviting shame. In such a situation, lying and dissimulation are the most respectful answer.

Lying

In her treatise on the moral dimensions of lying, Bok (1979, p. 16) defines a lie as 'an intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement'. She explores how lying is done in public and private life and how various types of lies are justified, rightly or wrongly. She concludes her book with the following caveat: 'Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain. They can thrive only on a foundation of respect for veracity' (p. 263).

In one chapter, Bok discusses the moral acceptability of lying by professionals such as lawyers, physicians and priests, who are bound not to disclose their clients' confidential information. In another,

she looks at the lies said to sick and dying people about their condition, a hot and controversial issue in my own (Dutch yet multicultural) health system (cf. de Graaff, Francke, van den Muijsenbergh, & van der Geest, 2012). And in yet another chapter, she examines deception by social science researchers who pose as ‘pseudo patients’ or ‘mystery clients’ in order to gather true-to-life reactions of doctors and others in everyday practices (cf. Van den Borne, 2005; Wolffers, 1987).

As in most ethical discourses, Bok bases her argument on ‘Western’ cultures and societies, apparently assuming that Western ethical norms and rules apply universally. But this is not the point I want to raise here. What I want to comment on is the fact that Bok only looks at lying in order to protect privacy when individuals disclose or do not disclose private information *about others*: doctors about patients, lawyers about clients, etc. The example from my fieldwork directs our attention to the lies that people apply in order to protect their *own privacy* when they are questioned by doctors, lawyers, police, relatives, peers and – in this case – anthropologists. One could argue that someone in such a situation should simply decline to answer questions that he considers too invasive and personal, but in actual practice, a refusal to answer is likely to be interpreted as an implicit confession. So an explicit lie becomes the only effective option in order to keep the intruder at bay. In a context of social inequality, the resort to lying seems particularly necessary.⁶ The paradox of such a solution is that one is pressed to use a strategy that is generally considered morally wrong (lying) in order to defend a good that is widely recognised as legitimate and indispensable (privacy).⁷ As Nachman (1984, p. 538) remarked in a reflection on lying informants, ‘... in general lying is reprehensible, but in particular instances, it is justifiable’.

Discussion: lying in defence of privacy

The threat to privacy mainly comes from two sources: from concrete human persons (usually those who are close to the individual) and from advanced technology (behind which distant human beings hide). The technological threat is warded off by counter-technology; the more direct human threat is countered by age-old ‘social techniques’ of concealment. As will be clear by now, this article discusses the latter, the ambiguity of secrecy and lying in defence of privacy.

To find and maintain the right balance of comfort in terms of privacy, it is sometimes necessary to lie to people who threaten to disturb the balance and invade one’s ‘home’ against one’s wishes. For this reason, patients may lie to doctors (Fainzang, 2002, 2015), children to teachers, parents or peers, respondents to researchers, and people with HIV/AIDS to everyone (Kwansa, 2013). Participants (respondents) in anthropological research are said to lie for strategic reasons (to acquire some sort of benefit) or to make a good impression (usually called ‘social desirability’).⁸ The possibility that they might be defending their private intimate life sphere is rarely taken into account or reflected upon. Some anthropologists also argue that ‘privacy’ is a Western concept that reflects an individualistic lifestyle and should not be projected onto other cultures (see e.g. El Guindi, 1999 about Arabic society).

Almost all authors in this discussion believe that a longing for some kind of privacy is universal (e.g. Altman, 1975; Moore, 1984; Westin, 1967), also when the physical and social conditions that make privacy possible (or nearly impossible) vary widely. This position is not based on a worldwide statistically tested investigation but on the few anthropological observations in widely varying cultural settings that I could find. Where living conditions hardly provide physical privacy, rules of proper behaviour and keeping social distance create an imaginary wall that protects mutual privacy. Patterson and Chiswick (1981) describe such a situation for people in Kalimantan, Indonesia, who lived in a ‘longhouse’ that was shared by 150 individuals, comprising 22 families. The families had social mechanisms that provided the privacy they wanted, such as rules about who could enter the house, restricted movements in the night and working patterns that excluded other families. Hirschauer (2005) presents the example of people in a North American elevator, ‘a place where strangers come together’ in a small cabin for only a few seconds. Standing order and techniques of avoiding eye contact prevent this unusual proximity of unknown bodies from being experienced as an intrusion of privacy. These

are techniques of ‘civil inattention’, again a term coined by Goffman (1963, p. 84); they are a display of disinterest without disregard (Hirschauser, 2005, p. 41).

Van Hekken, a Dutch anthropologist, carried out fieldwork in a rural community in Tanzania, where neighbours can hear almost everything that happens next door. The rule of safeguarding privacy is buttressed by the belief that ‘making noise’ can cause a sickness called *ikigune* (curse) or *mbe sya bandu* (people’s breath). When the neighbours hear a father and son shout at one another in the house next door, they start talking about it and may ask the father what happened. This talking and thinking about what happens in the neighbours’ house can eventually lead to the sickness of a person in the house where the quarrel has taken place (Van Hekken, 1986, p. 70).

In the extremely poor Malawian village where Janneke Verheijen did her research, people knew almost everything about each other. They tried to hide food and small luxuries such as soap or batteries from their neighbours to prevent jealousy and evade the social obligation of sharing. In a footnote, the author refers to a remark by Vaughan (1987, p. 34) about the survival strategies of rural Malawians during the severe famine of 1949. She writes that ‘the food that could be found was brought to the household at night so that neighbours would not see it, and eating was done indoors instead of outside as usual’ (Verheijen, 2013, p. 211).

My late colleague and friend Klaas van der Veen, who did his fieldwork in India, repeatedly emphasised that people who had hardly any access to privacy were in fact desperate for it. Its scarcity, he argued, increased their desire (personal conversation). A PowerPoint presentation by my former student Priya Satalkar about the ‘geography of love’ in crowded Indian cities showed pictures of couples hiding in the most diverse places to escape the constant presence of relatives at home (Satalkar, 2012). Imposing the concept of privacy on cultures that are characterised by the apparent absence of individualism maybe considered ethnocentric, but denying these cultures the sense of privacy is equally ethnocentric.

The urgent need for privacy is nowhere more obvious than in the way in which people in Ghana – where I conducted most of my fieldwork – manage their lives when they are infected with HIV. Let me quote a few lines from a paper I wrote with two Ghanaian colleagues:

Considering the possible consequences of revealing their sickness, it is hardly surprising that few HIV positive persons willingly disclose their HIV status. Though the people living with HIV in the study were more likely to trust people in their own household than others with their private affairs, it was found that they were nevertheless not inclined to inform them if they were receiving treatment for the disease. They kept all medical records in their possession – hospital cards, prescription forms, and even their medicines – away from prying eyes. One woman explained that she hid her medicines in her suitcase, under a number lock; one man hid his pills under the family sofa. After a hospital visit, some patients disposed of the ARV packages and leaflets even before they got out of the hospital. Another strategy was to scratch off the writing on the containers or put the medicines into a different box altogether. One woman explained: ‘They [her family] know that I take medicines every day, but what exactly I take no one knows.’ (Van der Geest, Kwansa, & Dapaah, n.d.)

My point is that people with HIV/AIDS feel relatively safe if they are able to manage their problems without the interference of others. If their HIV status is exposed to others, (they fear that) the stigma of the disease will lead them to lose control over their lives and that they will be barred from their normal daily routines and the respect they enjoy in their environment. Gossip and social exclusion may destroy their social life. People with HIV/AIDS in Ghana – and in many other societies – are uncertain as to what the safer choice is: disclosure or secrecy. Who can be trusted? Disclosure is once and forever and cannot be undone. As long as one is uncertain about the trustworthiness of the other person, it is prudent to lie, since a lie can always be undone.

The Ghanaian researchers won the trust of people with HIV/AIDS partly because they were outsiders in the community. Contrary to what one may expect, insiders such as close relatives maybe more dangerous than outsiders. Insecurity in the company of relatives may, for instance, present itself in the form of witchcraft gossip. Suspicions of witchcraft typically circulate among relatives. During my first research in Kwahu (Bleek, 1975), I focused on conflicts within families. One – most hidden and fearful – conflict consisted of witchcraft suspicions and accusations between family members. Out of 27 members of 2 generations, only 2 (one dead, one alive) were not in any way involved in a case of

witchcraft, either as accuser, accused or assumed victim. The most pernicious aspect of these witchcraft accusations was, however, not their high frequency, but the fact that they tended to occur between relatives living closely together, as has been repeatedly observed in the witchcraft literature. Strangely enough, witchcraft accusations did not necessarily originate from conflicts. Their occurrence was more obscure and whimsical. Actual conflicts could pass without any allusion to witchcraft, and outwardly peaceful relationships could be riddled with witchcraft suspicions.

Drivers and owners of taxis and other public transport vehicles in Ghana love to write short texts and slogans on their vehicles to express their hopes and anxieties in life. Quite a few of these texts make references to witchcraft and warn against the jealousy and evil intentions of those who are near, for example: *Suro nea oben wo* ('Fear the one near you'). Other texts are less direct: *Efiefio* ... ('People in the house' ...) or *Ofie mmosia* ... ('House pebbles' ...) are the elliptic beginnings of sentences that end in '... hate you' or '... cause your downfall'. The enemy may hide within the family. In Kwahu, privacy as a secure and safe condition of life, as I defined it metaphorically earlier in this article (like a 'home'), is a precarious and ambiguous concept. Dangers lurk everywhere. Respectability may not be secured even in the privacy of one's home.

Conclusion

A popular quote from the Irish playwright and novelist Oliver Goldsmith reads: 'Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies.' This succinctly summarises my argument. Lies are artefacts produced by questions that intrude without invitation into people's private worlds. The literature on lying in defence of privacy is overwhelmingly focused on morality. Notorious cases of lying, such as in the Clinton–Lewinsky affair, have incited heated debates about whether someone may lie in order to hide his or her sexual life from the public eye. I am not concerned so much with the moral correctness of such acts of lying, but I have tried to understand a person's decision to lie as a normal and logical reaction to certain questions and situations. Lying in order to preserve one's privacy commonly occurs in research settings, as described in this text, but also in general when personal information that people do not want to share is requested by others.⁹ As mentioned before, the irony of this logical reaction is that a widely discredited tool of deception is needed to uphold an even more widely accepted basic human necessity of life – privacy.

Qualitative social researchers should take these concerns about privacy and loss of respectability, and the need for lying in defence of privacy, into account and engage in conversations that do not threaten the security of their interlocutors. This essay on the social complexity of qualitative research does not intend to produce clear methodological suggestions across disciplinary boundaries, but it will hopefully raise awareness of the hidden pitfalls that mar the quality and the pleasure of doing qualitative research. It should inspire researchers to draw their own conclusions for their own specific style and field of research.

Notes

1. Some exceptions are Murphy (1964), Gregor (1974), Patterson and Chiswick (1981), Applegate and Morse (1994); El Guindi (1999).
2. Moore (1984, p. 3) optimistically emphasises the advantage of searching for issues with which an author was not explicitly concerned: 'Unintentionally revealed evidence is less likely to be contaminated with what an author hopes to prove'. One may wonder, however, if Moore's own findings between the lines of other's ethnography are not 'contaminated' by what *he* hopes to prove.
3. To cite one classical – and notorious – example of this predilection for things that informants do not wish to disclose, see Chagnon (1968), who (in vain) urged Yanomamo people to name the dead, something they regarded as strictly taboo. Wisely, they lied to him.
4. To keep this promise without leaving out any pertinent ethnographic details, I gave fictitious names to all members of the family, to the town and to myself ('W. Bleek'). For a more elaborate explanation of my protection of the respondents' private information, see Van der Geest (2003).

5. I am aware that questionnaires can be designed in such a way that inconsistencies in responses reveal to some extent lying or other ways of giving incorrect information, but how these inconsistencies should be interpreted remains a big question.
6. ‘The more power that an individual has ... the greater their ability to meet their own needs for privacy and personal space’ (O’Toole & Were, 2008, p. 620). See also Robertson (1997) in his review of Barnes (1994) *A pack of lies*.
7. During a discussion after a presentation of an earlier version of this paper, someone asked if I could imagine a situation or group of people that would not require any lies in order to maintain the sense of comfort and security that is found or sought in privacy. I can imagine the desirability of such a condition, for example in a new love relationship or friendship in which the partners swear to keep no secrets from one another, but I cannot imagine such a situation lasting forever. We need lies in order to be kind to each other, and there will always be thoughts and emotions that we do not want our loved ones to know. Robertson (1997) made the following remark:

We do not know whether people are less likely to lie in relationships of trust, such as marriage, than in relationships where we generally lack trust, such as with car salespersons. The trader may never expect to see the customer again, and therefore feel that lying involves little cost whilst, on the other hand, the fact that a relationship needs to be sustained may mean the partners have great incentives to lie despite the risk of discovery.

The film ‘The Invention of Lying’ by Ricky Gervais and Matthew Robison in 2009 portrays in a humorous way the cruelty and bluntness of a society without lies and how the invention of lying makes society more humane and friendly. Interestingly, when the kindness of lying increases, the humour of the film wanes.

8. We should not overlook the fact that ethnographers also lie for comparable reasons, but that may be a topic for another essay. Abu-Lughod (1986, p. 18) had a reason to lie to the Arab women she studied: ‘... I was unwilling to reveal much about myself ... I felt compelled to lie about many aspects of my life in the United States simply because they could not have helped judging it and me in their own terms, by which my reputation would have suffered’. For more on the lying anthropologist, see Fine, 1993.
9. This frequently happens on the Internet (Hodder, Churchill, & Cobb, 2013; Horst, 2012; Hood, 2015), where people are pushed to lie profusely when they are requested to provide personal data.

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