

Where Does a Lie Start? Untruths, Half-Truths and Strategic Self-Presentation in Ethnographic Fieldwork

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Abstract

We are said to be living in a 'post-truth' era, where the line between fact and fiction has become blurred, an era in which 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' have become part of a political discourse underscoring emotions, to the detriment of evidence. This proclivity towards muddying the waters of truth is not exclusive to populist politicians and internet trolls. In 2018, an international scandal erupted when it was revealed that German journalist Claas Relotius had embellished and even fabricated his field pieces. In anthropology, a debate erupted in 1983 when Derek Freeman critiqued Margaret Mead's work in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Where blame was cast on the author in the Relotius case, Mead was accused of naivety and misinterpretation of ethnographic material. But what happens when interlocutors themselves embellish, hide, or misrepresent reality? Where does a lie start and where does truth end? How does this affect the ethnographic account? And most importantly: can or should ethnographers try to verify the veracity of the things they are told? The premise of this paper stems from the author's own attempt to bridge the gap between anthropology and narrative journalism by pitching a story encountered in the field to a journalism magazine. The main character was later revealed to have told a lie and the aftermath of this discovery serves as the starting point for this reflection on truth and ethnography.

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Where Does a Lie Start? Untruths, Half-Truths, and Strategic Self-Presentation in Ethnographic Fieldwork

Dumitrița Luncă

Introduction

Whilst conducting fieldwork for my PhD on migration and intimacy amongst Romanian migrants in Rome, Italy, between February 2017 and March 2018, I came across an intriguing story: in a parking lot on the outskirts of the city, a community of Romanians was congregating in a small, tarp-covered wooden church, led by a lone, self-described ‘missionary’ priest.

Improvised places of worship were not uncommon some thirty years ago, at the very beginning of the mass immigration of Romanians into Italy, but since then the Romanian Orthodox Church has established an extensive network of parishes throughout the country, with Rome counting at least ten. I was, therefore, immediately intrigued by this place, which seemed to be an outlier amongst the Orthodox churches in Rome and a far cry from what Romanians might have been used to back home, where the insides of even the more modest churches are covered in murals and heavily adorned with gold leaf. I wanted to investigate more deeply the reasons that made people attend mass in a parking lot when other, more church-like spaces were available.

Realising I would not find a place for this story within my thesis, I proposed the idea of an anthropological contribution to a narrative journalism magazine in Romania. For years I had admired the in-depth articles and strong focus on social issues that this publication was known for, in a vein reminiscent of ethnographic writing. I thought a cross between anthropology and journalism could benefit both sides: I could write something with less academic jargon for a non-academic public whilst maintaining a thick ethnographic description and attention to detail. At the same time, the magazine could benefit from my long-term fieldwork, allowing a deeper understanding of the social and cultural dynamics surrounding the church in the parking lot, a luxury that journalists do not usually have. I had long dreamt that I would one day be able to publish something in this magazine and was elated by the editor’s enthusiastic response to my proposal. But after more than a year of working on the article, just days before its planned publication, a lie told by the main interlocutor – the priest heading the church – came to the surface, calling the veracity of everything else he had said into question and completely derailing the story, along with my credibility.

This experience has enabled me to reflect on the topic of truth in ethnography, which I had previously contemplated solely in relation to the deontological responsibility an author holds towards both interlocutors and a potential readership. For example, the code of ethics of the largest professional organisation in the field, the American Anthropological Association (2012), stipulates that the researcher is obliged to be truthful and transparent in the research process and when presenting gathered data. Whilst advocating for a more contextualised review of ethical standards on a case-by-case basis, the German Anthropological Association similarly raises the question of ‘transparency’ (Hahn et al. 2008).¹ However, for all the discussions of researcher conduct, there are surprisingly few sources discussing the truthfulness, or lack thereof, of the data itself. This article, based on my personal experience in the field, reflects on this through a series of questions: What happens when interlocutors lie to ethnographers? How do lies told by interlocutors change what is observed in the field? And where does a lie start, anyway? To address these questions, I first examine in greater detail the lie my interlocutor told me and its ramifications. I then consider accounts by a few other ethnographers who have explicitly discussed being lied to in the field and finally open up the discussion to a wider debate on truth, lies, and anthropology.

The lie my interlocutor told me²

Shortly after my arrival in Rome, one of my interlocutors asked me to accompany her to the Sunday mass organised at one of the many orthodox churches that Romanians have established across the city. She warned me that this one was somewhat out of the ordinary, but I was yet to understand why. The following day I took the metro and travelled to the outskirts of the city. Outside the station was a large cement lot, filled with cars and busses, and with *ban-carelle* – improvised market stalls selling everything from used clothing to cheap electronics. This bustling area is so popular with Romanian migrants that the South-Asian men selling phone chargers, MP3 players, and speakers usually play popular Romanian party songs to attract business. I did not see the church at first, so I had to ask around until someone pointed out a fenced-up parking lot on a side street. There, to my surprise, stood a small improvised wooden church, partially covered with tarp and topped with a wrought-iron cross.

During the following months, I went back regularly. I was fascinated by the community that had formed around the short and affable priest, who wore modest clothing and scuffed shoes under his ceremonial Orthodox vestments. There were many other places of worship in Rome for Romanians,

1 For a critical review of ethical standards in anthropology, see Dilger et al. (2015).

2 This and the following subtitle reference Nachman’s article *Lies My Informants Told Me* (1984).

where the decor and atmosphere were more reminiscent of the churches back home. However, many of the people devoted to the priest in the parking lot, most of them working in construction, cleaning, and care, preferred their spiritual guide to be a hard-working simple man like themselves, not someone 'with a master's degree' who chides and looks down on them. Until recently, the priest had himself been working in construction, distributing leaflets in mailboxes, and cleaning offices. When I met him, the congregation had grown enough that he could support himself from the small donations he received from his parishioners.

There was something else that differentiated this priest and his church from all the others in Rome. He was rumoured not to have been ordained. Every now and then an accusation would be posted on Facebook, but his followers were quick to take his side, as was he to defend himself in the comments section. He never shied away from bringing up these accusations with me, along with proof to refute them. The confusion, he explained, came from the fact that he belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and not the Romanian Orthodox Church. Both are amongst the nine existing autocephalous Orthodox churches. The former historically has jurisdiction over some countries in the Mediterranean Basin where Orthodox Christians represent small minorities, such as Italy and Turkey. The latter governs over Romania, where the vast majority of the population declares itself Orthodox, but has in recent years extended its presence in countries with strong Romanian immigrant communities, such as Italy, Spain, and Germany. This resulted in some overlap, with priests from both institutions present in some areas. It was all a big misunderstanding, I presumed, as some Romanian people simply did not understand that both churches were equally legitimate and powerful. The walls of his little church were plastered with certificates of attendance from a Romanian theological university and a letter from an Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople priest in Rome attesting that he was affiliated there. The priest in the parking lot often talked of this priest from the Patriarchate, calling him his boss. On his Facebook page, where he is very active, posting prayers, live sermons, and icons, he even had photographs of a visit that he and some of his parishioners paid to his boss' church in central Rome.

Shortly before the end of my fieldwork in Rome, I was joined by a professional photographer sent by the magazine to take pictures of the priest and the congregation. We spent an intensive week following him around whilst he performed his daily pastoral tasks. Over the next year, I worked on multiple drafts of the article, which was meant as a sympathetic portrayal of this improvised but devoted parish. Shortly before publication and as a legal formality, one of the magazine editors contacted the press office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople for confirmation of the priest's membership. The reply was shocking: the church had, in fact, never heard of him.

This discovery shook me. I had visited the church many times during my thirteen months in the field and had had countless conversations with the priest so that I could not believe he would be so dishonest with me. I felt disappointed and personally offended, even though I had to admit that he had not told me an outright lie but had simply stuck to his story. I could not believe he would so boldly lie to his congregation and to me, knowing how easy it would be to verify the information. I also felt foolish for believing all his explanations and for not having verified the information earlier. At the same time, however, I was convinced that the discovery would not really damage his reputation since his parishioners already liked him specifically because he was not part of a church system they criticised; his outsider status gave him a messianic aura. But then why lie to them? Aside from a few who might have worried that their baptisms and weddings were not 'real', since he was not a 'real' priest, most people incessantly talked about how down to earth he was, how good they felt talking to him, and how they liked attending his mass. Even though it turned out that he had never graduated, he had indeed studied theology and had worked in various capacities in churches, both in Romania and in Italy. He had a pleasant enough voice for singing and reading from the Bible, which he freely referenced in his conversations with his congregants, always bringing up just the right parable for the right problem. Many of the people I had spoken to in his church mentioned negative experiences with other Romanian priests in Rome, who were too dogmatic, and emphasised how different this priest was. On one occasion, when the accusations of his illegitimacy came up in a conversation with one of his parishioners, when I still believed that the rumours were all due to a confusion, she told me: 'What do I care? By whom must he be recognised, by God?'

An atheist myself, I empathised with people's need for rituals, spiritual guidance, and a sense of community, especially considering the difficulties of being a migrant, the social isolation, the distance from loved ones, and the hard work. Believing the priest's explanation of the two overlapping church jurisdictions, the possibility that he had not been ordained at all, in any church, had not crossed my mind.

For the journalists at the magazine, however, this one blatant lie meant there might be others waiting to be discovered and that the article might be putting the publication's reputation at risk. Indeed, in 2018, a journalistic fraud scandal that erupted when award-winning German journalist Claas Relotius was proven to have embellished and even fabricated his field pieces (Fichtner 2018) demonstrated how one person's lies can cast doubt over an entire profession and even discredit an entire political cause (Jones 2019). The editorial board of the magazine in Romania decided to put the story on ice and we all agreed to send an experienced investigative journalist to Rome to confront the priest and verify some of his other claims. In the following months, this journalist and a new editor reworked my text extensively and

added some new information, although no other lies had come to surface. The final article, which mentioned the lie in a matter of fact way, still focused on the priest and his parish, as well as the larger Romanian immigrant community in Rome, but lost the direction and depth that I had intended. I almost lost authorship and was given little space to shape the end result.

Journalistically speaking, the lie that the priest told me and his parishioners made him a less than sympathetic subject and an untrustworthy source. Anthropologically speaking, however, the fact that he was a rogue, non-ordained priest who built his own church in a parking lot and nevertheless had so many people flocking to him and swear by his advice was not only fascinating but also revealed to me something deeper regarding the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and its believers, especially those who are migrants.

To many, the Church is disconnected from their real lives, as it holds up impossibly high canonical standards. For example, migrants working in households and living with their employers are often not allowed to cook their own food and thus cannot follow the extensive fasting schedule stipulated by the Orthodox Church. Required to work long hours and only having time off on fixed days, they cannot attend midnight mass at Easter or other ceremonies that do not coincide with their free time. The dissident priest, on the other hand, not burdened by higher-ups and strict church dogmas, adapted the schedule of his church services to the working hours of his parishioners, gave blessings over the phone, and performed engagement rituals without asking couples whether they had already had sex, even when it was obvious to him that they had. Whilst other priests barred parishioners from communion for seven years if they had attended mass in a Catholic church, the parking-lot priest was understanding and easily offered divine forgiveness.

For me, the priest's lie mattered on an interpersonal level: I struggled to understand how someone could persistently and convincingly lie every day to everyone's faces about something that was so fundamental to their person. But this did not change the fact that hundreds of people were looking to him for spiritual guidance and divine salvation and in this view, the lie made the case of the church in the parking lot even more interesting. My conclusion, I realised, made me a bad journalist, but a good anthropologist. It also prompted me to think more about the role of truth and lies in ethnography. What happens when interlocutors lie? And how far should ethnographers go to uncover the truth?

The lies interlocutors tell other ethnographers

Any discussion about lying in the field should start with the lies that ethnographers themselves tell (Fine 1993; Fine and Shulman 2009). They range from omitting details about one's life or beliefs in order to fit in better or

misrepresenting their research scope, all the way to failing to obtain informed consent or even doing research without the interlocutors' knowledge (Allen 1997). Researchers may also consciously or unconsciously manipulate a desired outcome by how they select their interlocutors, how they process their data, or when they fail to acknowledge 'inconvenient phenomena' (Duneier 2011: 9).

Even when it comes to lying interlocutors, researchers might also have a responsibility to carry. Bleek (1987: 320) proposes that fieldworkers are 'themselves liars when they do not tell the whole truth about the way in which they collected the lies from their interlocutors, thus obscuring the likelihood that it was their interrogating technique which produced the lies in the first place'. Indeed, lies, like truths, are always socially produced between certain actors and in particular social and cultural contexts and situations. Even though ethnographers, like me, might feel betrayed or confused when they spot inconsistencies in their interlocutors' accounts, trying to understand the mechanisms behind the lies can reveal important insights, perhaps even more so than direct information (Passin 1942: 236). After all, as Salamone (1977: 120) says, 'lying is a form of communication, not its negation'. Nachman, who worked on Nissan Atoll, Papua New Guinea, also contends:

Despite the problems that fieldworkers will encounter in such research, lying is so much a part of human social behavior that in order to comprehend with any certainty the life of a community, they must come to terms with this issue, for both ethnographic and methodological reasons. (1984: 540)

There are many reasons why interlocutors might lie, just as there are many degrees of (not) telling the truth. In fact, Berckmoes (2012: 136) proposes, 'lying is desirable in some situations; it is not inherently 'bad''. In conflict zones, such as in Burundi where she did her research, lying, adjusting the facts, or withholding information can oftentimes be a measure of protection. Lying can also be a form of agency, especially if the interlocutors are part of a population that has historically lacked political power (Nachman 1984: 538). Passin identifies various types of lies, based on his fieldwork amongst the Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua, Mexico, and he calls this latter type of lies 'of cultural vested interest'. Another type of lies he observes is 'prestige lies', where an interlocutor might want to distort information in order to appear to have a higher social position than that currently held. Some lies are told to ethnographers specifically because of their position as outsiders or because of their perceived or real connection with certain authorities, whilst others are deeply rooted in cultural and social practices (1942: 242).

Moreover, lying, or rather truthlessness, can be ingrained in the cultural fabric of societies and is ritually and habitually employed, as Blum observes in her ethnographic work:

In Japan, as in China, some of the roles of language might be considered non-truth, rather than falsehood. For example, politeness requires humbling and elevation of the interlocutor. Whether the speaker genuinely feels abased or not, the language must be spoken thus. Politeness obliges a range of utterances, including not only compliments but even invitations. (2005: 303)³

Ethnographers who realised that the information they received might be flawed have chosen varying strategies for how to proceed. Some try to avoid the lying interlocutor (Allina-Pisano 2009; Berckmoes 2012), whereas others investigate further whilst maintaining vigilance (Fujii 2010; Kroeker 2020; Passin 1942; Saleh 2017). In regard to how to establish truth in ethnographic accounts, extended participant observation (Berckmoes 2012) and the situational analysis and extended case-study methods developed by the Manchester school (Evens and Handelman 2006) seem useful approaches. Some ethnographers attempt to cross-examine their data by asking different people about the same event, in an attempt to find out the truth. As Kroeker (2020) shows, however, even these attempts might prove futile: if the accounts of an event all differ from each other, then how does the ethnographer decide whom to believe and how to understand the reasons each person has for adjusting the facts? Fujii (2010) proposes that we should focus on the metadata – spoken and unspoken thoughts and feelings, such as rumours, inventions, denials, evasions, and even silences – in order to establish the truth and to understand the reasons behind the lies.

Truth, anthropology, and society

This is an essay about lies: white lies and ones black as night, evasions, exaggerations, delusions, half-truths, and credible denials. Consequently, it is about art and literature, and specifically the art and literature of anthropology, as ambiguously manifested in our unique genre, the ethnography. It is a response from one discipline to the pervasive epistemological skepticism of our times. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is swimming against the intellectual tide to discuss the truths that ethnographies may contain, so let us instead see what profit there is in examining the kinds of lies in which they traffic. (Metcalf 2002: 1)

These are the opening lines of Metcalf's (2002) *They Lie, We Lie: Getting on with Anthropology*, a volume which is in equal parts an ethnography of a Berawan Longhouse in Borneo, an auto-ethnography of the author's experience in the field, and a reflection of the constant renegotiations and

3 For extensive cross-cultural studies of lying, see Barnes (1994) and Bok (1978).

power struggles between anthropologist and interlocutor in their individual attempts to reveal and obscure the truth. Such methodological and analytical considerations, like the ones I have exemplified above, are part of greater debates regarding the nature of anthropology (is it a science or an art form? [Carrithers et al. 1990; van Maanen 2011: 34]) and the nature of truth in the society at large.

There are many nuances of truth and untruth when it comes to human action and interaction. Lying is ubiquitous and, indeed, quite often seen as necessary. In everyday life, so-called '*Lebenslügen*' (life-lies – in German –) (Simmel 1950: 310) or 'vital lies' (Goleman 1985), as well as personal and family myths (Hochschild and Machung 1989), are unconscious blind spots which help people make sense of their lives and come to terms with painful, unbearable truths. In politics, as Hannah Arendt (1972: 4) writes, secrecy, deception, deliberate falsehood, and the outright lie have always been seen as 'legitimate means to achieve political ends [. . .] since the beginning of recorded history'. Another common occurrence is not occulting the truth but simply withholding it, as is the case with the secrets and lies that doctors employ with their patients 'for their own good' (Fainzang 2006).⁴

Discussing anthropology, Wilson (2004: 14) delivers a scathing critique of what he calls the discipline's 'epistemological hypochondria' and its 'inability to move beyond a weak, relativist theory of knowledge', arguing that 'ethnography is inseparable from the pursuit of truthfulness'. Others contend that ethnography, anthropology's main methodological and theoretical tool, is rather a quest for meaning rather than truth (Wall 2018). Fainzang, for example, writes:

The anthropological approach is not intended to express an opinion on the duty of people or on the merits of their practices. It simply aims to analyse what motivates the choices of individuals vis-à-vis the fact of saying or not saying [the truth], even if we can infer a reflection on the freedom that this gives them, and on the power they draw from it in the relation to the Other. (2006: 28) (my translation)

Few anthropologists have openly discussed lying interlocutors, which is not a sign that it is uncommon but rather that it is uncomfortable and messy. This absence is particularly glaring seeing that one of the most resounding scandals within anthropology, Derek Freeman's (1983) public challenge of Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), was based on accusations of falsehood. He claimed that her work lacked academic rigor, that her interpretation was naïve, and that her interlocutors had been deceitful. Freeman argued that Mead's conclusions were deeply flawed because her adolescent

4 For more on secrets, see Bok (1983).

interlocutors ‘intentionally misled her out of combined notions of Samoan courtesy and simple girlish mischievousness’ (Young and Juan 1985: 67).

The main reason for the silence on this topic could be the fact that discussing, and therefore calling into question, the very foundations of our field might open up questions of legitimacy. But perhaps there is no better time than now to bring up such a discussion. First of all, we live in what has been called a ‘post-truth’ society (Mair 2017), one in which the line between fact and fiction often becomes blurred (as illustrated by the monikers ‘fake news’, ‘alternative facts’, or ‘truthful hyperbole’ [McGranahan 2017: 244]) despite people’s unprecedented level of access to information. Second, there is an increasing cross-pollination between disciplines using ethnographic methods, including across the academic/public divide, such as between anthropology and journalism. Third, anthropologists are increasingly addressing subjects from the news cycle, as we have observed during the so-called 2015 European migrant crisis and the global Coronavirus pandemic, a fact which has made their work more and more relevant to the general public. All in all, the work of anthropologists in particular and ethnographers in general is more pertinent and accessible than ever to the general public and this creates an increased need for transparency, critical analysis, and, consequently, a more honest discussion of lies from the field.

Between lies and strategic self-presentation

To conclude this short discussion of lying and ethnography, I return to the story which prompted this reflection: the priest in the parking lot, non-ordained yet beloved by his congregation. I have come to see his lie as a combination of a ‘prestige lie’ (Passin 1942: 242) and a ‘noble lie’, which ‘may not be justified by an immediate crisis nor by complete triviality nor by duty to any one person’ but which the liar considers ‘right and unavoidable because of the altruism that motivates them’ (Bok 1978: 75). This is also related to Jones and Pittman’s (1982) ‘strategic self-representation’, an idea based on Erving Goffman’s (1959) presentation of self as a kind of dramatic performance. Whilst it can be argued that we all, to a certain degree, enact our gender, class, or professional status in front of an audience, Goffman (1959: 18) distinguishes a type of ‘cynical performer’ who deludes their audience for self-interest or for what they consider to be the audience’s ‘own good, or for the good of the community’. Much like a performer on stage, so did the priest enact his priesthood, not only by providing (false or misleading) documents purporting to prove his legitimacy but also by using priest-like mannerisms, costumes (his vestments), and scenography (the home-made church itself) in front of his audience (the congregation).

These theatrical elements, along with the fact that officiating mass in many Christian denominations is usually a highly choreographed perfor-

mance following a preordained script, make it even easier for impersonators to take on the role in a convincing manner. This is illustrated by the Polish film *Corpus Christi* (Komasa 2019), about a reformed juvenile delinquent who is mistaken for a priest, a role which he then performs with gusto and charisma. The story is inspired by both a particular case and the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of fake priests in Poland (Ellwood 2020). Even more common around the world, albeit with more serious consequences, seems to be the appearance of numerous fake doctors, often confidently wearing the garments of medical personnel and reciting medical jargon for years before getting caught (Martyr 2018). In recent times, several cases of people who used deceit to build their careers have become public, ranging from those who faked their ethnicity to others who faked diplomas or plagiarised other people's work. In 2018, for example, Wolfgang Seibert, leader of a Jewish community in Germany for fifteen years, was exposed to having faked his Jewishness (Doerry and Gerlach 2018). The same year in the United States, long-time civil rights activist Rachel Dolezal was revealed not to be ethnically African American but to merely 'identify as Black' (Haag 2018). In Germany, perhaps the most high-profile case of this sort took place in 2011, when Karl-Theodor zu Guttenberg, a rising star in the Christian Democratic Union, was stripped of his doctor title and forced to resign as defence minister after being found to have plagiarised his doctoral thesis (Pidd 2011).

In the case of the priest in the parking lot, the consequences were not of a similar magnitude, partly because he wielded little power in the grand scheme of things and his fall, if there was to be one, was not from a much elevated level. After the journalist sent to Rome concluded his investigation into the priest and completed the article, it was finally published (Odobescu and Luncă 2019). The parishioner who invited me to the church the very first time wrote to congratulate me on the publication. The priest, she explained, was 'a little upset', but the truth had to come out. People continued to attend his services in the parking lot. He posted the link to the article on his own Facebook page and gathered many 'likes' and congratulations. It seemed to me that people either did not read the entire article, did not care or think it important, or simply concentrated on its positive effect, the 'publicity' it brought.

This experience made me reassess my relationship with my interlocutors and the role of truth in my own ethnographic writing. Whilst conducting my doctoral fieldwork in Rome on the intimate lives of Romanian migrants, my experience was one of interlocutors gladly sharing their secrets rather than trying to deceive me. Often I had the feeling that, as much as they were helping me in my research project, they were also happy to be heard and to have someone genuinely interested in their lives. I recognise that when I tried to expand towards journalism, I should have been more vigilant. Despite feeling duped in this one instance, I nevertheless continue to believe that inter-

locutors more often than not tell the truth, or at least what they believe to be accurate. After all, perceptions are true in their consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). In fact, anthropology as a discipline, along with ethnography as a method, hinges not only on the skills of observation and interviewing but also on trust between researcher and researched. At times this may be seen as its weakness, but it is also one of its greatest strengths.

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