

All,

I want to share my thoughts with you regarding the work of Alice Goffman and the controversy that her research has caused in recent years. I do so as a means of reemphasizing your ethical duty, as a writer and researcher, to be careful about how you depict the people you have the privilege of working with during the ISP period. There is a great deal of power in the written word, for once placed on paper, it awaits a long life. As a former professor of mine used to remind us in class, “When you write, write as if the whole world were reading your every word because long after you’re gone, the whole world will have access to what you write.” Nothing is eternal, but in the digital age, the written word might be as close to eternal as you get.

Qualitative research is a meaningful way to analyze the world views of people in their natural environments. As a society we stand to learn a great deal about why we do the things we do by studying humans and their everyday habits. At the end of the day, qualitative work has a great deal of *internal validity* in the sense that, when done well, the ethnographer helps the reader peer into the inner-workings of social spaces we might not otherwise have the privilege of seeing up close. However, in spending so much time and energy in one specific place, ethnographic work, regardless of how well it is done, will always lack *external validity*. This is why it is absolutely crucial for the ethnographer to relate their work to previous research. Providing the reader with a clear understanding of what we know about existing or extant research helps them understand where the work that they are reading fits into the larger picture. Quite simply, a good literature review gives the reader a better understanding of the degree to which they can generalize from the author’s findings to the outside world. In other words, the researcher can improve the external validity of their work by triangulating between existing sources and their findings from the field.

In other words, evidence from the field provides the reader with a means through which to access the internal validity of the research at hand, and a citation trail to previous research provides a point of comparison, through which the reader can access the external validity of the work. Still, frequently the sensitive nature of qualitative research requires the author to mask certain elements of their work. Qualitative researchers, for example, often use pseudonyms to protect their sources. Naturally, this type of precaution complicates the transparency of qualitative research. With this in mind, I want to share my thoughts with your regarding the Alice Goffman controversy.

Alice Goffman is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology at Wisconsin. And although her work has been well-published, it has also been tied up in a serious debate regarding her values as a researcher and the ethics of methodology. Her first article, titled, “On the Run: Wanted Men in a Philadelphia Ghetto,” was published in 2009 while she was a graduate student at Princeton. The article was well-received but didn’t spur any controversy. In fact, it wasn’t until her book, *On the Run: Fugitive Life in an American City*, came out in 2014 that the controversy began. Her advocates, like Elijah Anderson and Cornel West, argue that her work captures the barriers facing minority males growing up in resource-strapped neighborhoods in the US at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to them, Goffman’s work forces the general public to come to terms with the injustices facing minorities across the country. West wrote, for example, “Goffman's *On the Run* is the best treatment I know of the wretched underside of neo-liberal capitalist America. Despite the social misery and fragmented relations, she gives us a subtle analysis and poignant portrait of our fellow citizens who struggle to preserve their sanity and

dignity." Her critics, on the other hand, see her work in a very different light. Shortly after Goffman's book came out, Christina Sharpe, wrote, "This work raises profound ethical questions. And by ethical questions, I mean questions of power." She goes on to write, "I am concerned, but not surprised, that critics have overwhelmingly embraced this book as it abets fantasies of black pathology."

To be honest, I don't think there is much doubt that Goffman's work reflects what she saw. Her depiction of the quasi police state that many minorities face each morning when they leave their homes is very much like the social environments that other authors have described when analyzing similar issues in the past. In fact, Goffman joins a long line of social scientists who have painstakingly revealed the pernicious effects of the War on Drugs and the subsequent mass incarceration of minorities across the US. Where her work differs is in its ability to bridge academics with the outside world. That her book was controversial has more to do with the fact that a lot of people actually read it, which is uncommon in academia. Typically, academics like Goffman spend years carefully studying very specific issues. Then, they write-up their work for academic articles, which are rarely read outside the Ivory Tower. Occasionally, an article will make a buzz in academic circles but more often than not, scholarly articles are filed away on shelves and digital archives. This was certainly the fate of Goffman's 2009 article, which was published in the top journal in the field of Sociology, *American Sociological Review*. The article was well received, and has been very well cited, but it created relatively few negative ripples in the academic world. For a short period of time, Goffman was an academic rock star. In 2011 the American Sociological Association awarded her "the best PhD dissertation for a calendar year" and in 2012 she began teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which is largely revered as one of the best sociology departments in the country if not the world.

The controversy surrounding Goffman's work begins in 2014, after Goffman's book comes out. Her book doesn't tell the reader anything new about the plight of minorities in urban settings in the US but it does reveal a great deal more about her research methods, and perhaps most importantly, it bridges the empirical work of the academic with the outside world. A well-timed TED talk, which has been seen 1.4 million times, helped give her work visibility. Here's the link:

[https://www.ted.com/talks/alice\\_goffman\\_college\\_or\\_prison\\_two\\_destinies\\_one\\_blatant\\_injustice](https://www.ted.com/talks/alice_goffman_college_or_prison_two_destinies_one_blatant_injustice)

Suddenly, the questions began flooding in. Why doesn't she reveal her sources? Why does she change her informants' names? Why doesn't she reveal the actual name of the places she lived? What is this whole Internal Review Board gibberish about? Why don't we know more about the characters she describes? What's there to fear in revealing her sources? Why is a White women from Princeton telling this story?

Here are a few examples of critical articles that came out after her book was published:

The New Inquiry:

<https://thenewinquiry.com/black-life-annotated/>

The New York Times:

[https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/books/review/alice-goffmans-on-the-run.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/29/books/review/alice-goffmans-on-the-run.html?_r=0)

Slate:

[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/crime/2015/06/alice\\_goffman\\_s\\_on\\_the\\_run\\_is\\_the\\_sociologist\\_to\\_blame\\_for\\_the\\_inconsistencies.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/06/alice_goffman_s_on_the_run_is_the_sociologist_to_blame_for_the_inconsistencies.html)

And of course, as this last example reveals, regardless of how hard you try to protect your subjects, fact checkers will always do their thing:

<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/06/i-fact-checked-alice-goffman-with-her-subjects.html>

As the article from NYmag shows, it's nearly impossible to fully protect the anonymity of your informants. As a result, in my mind, authors should be careful not to share anything in their work that they wouldn't want the outside world to be able to trace back to the actual source. In this sense, ethically-sound research, especially when working with at risk subjects, requires you to balance between telling the full story and protecting those who have told it to you. Goffman's biggest error, as it turns out, was likely fully revealing the truth. I often wonder if she would do it again. If given the chance, what details might she have left out? And yet, as I think about this, I hope that her answer would be none because it's the details she reveals that make her work so damn compelling. The fact that she writes exactly what she saw, felt, and experienced is what makes the readers' heart bleed, and in time, that might make all the difference in the world when it comes to shifting society away from a security state and toward a society that emphasizes restorative justice.

I don't share Goffman's controversy with you to scare you to death. Rather, I simply want you to think very carefully about the work that you do. Academic work doesn't always see the light of day but occasionally it does, and when it does, you need to be comfortable with the choices you made in conducting your research. In the last piece I shared with you, New York Magazine author Jesse Singal writes,

“If Goffman had been a bit more explicit about her methodology and her inability to track down every little claim, maybe these controversies wouldn't have popped up. Instead, she seems not to have anticipated so many close and critical-minded readers and, unfortunately, there are parts of *On the Run* that any fair-minded observer will agree lack sufficient context or explanation.”

In short, producing knowledge comes with great responsibility. So, as you begin to conduct your own research, make sure you give your project everything you've got. You owe it to your sources to do so, and in the end, you never know who might happen across your words in the future.

En solidaridad,

Benjamin