

Anonymity versus advocacy: Challenges and pitfalls of ethical island research

Abstract

The purpose of much island research is to advocate for island communities, to encourage island scholarship by islanders themselves, and where that is not possible, to promote the voices of islanders 'on their own terms' (Baldacchino, 2008). However, the very nature of small islands as socially and physically bounded communities, means that, whilst one voice cannot speak for the entire community, often the voice speaking is easily recognisable. This can result in the risk of local retribution, or more commonly truths going unspoken and power imbalances remaining unaddressed. To undertake island scholarship, it may be necessary in some cases, to anonymise the island, or at least aspects of it, in order to anonymise the speaker. In this paper, by drawing on examples from our own research on islands around the UK and other research in very small island communities, we consider the difficulty participants may face in speaking openly, and address the conflicts that confront researchers between supporting island stories whilst also offering a balanced reflection of island life. We suggest that while it is clearly important that island voices are heard, and that islanders speak on their own terms, there are instances where the off-island voice may be better placed to address island issues. The best route to do this may be via some form of anonymisation of subject and/or place of the research.

Key words

Small islands; anonymity; disclosure; ethnography; subaltern voices; ethics.

Introduction

Island research has gathered pace over the last decade, with much of it advocating for island communities, whilst also promoting and encouraging scholarship by islanders themselves and opening spaces in which islanders can speak 'on their own terms' (Baldacchino, 2008). Unfortunately, the nature of the islands we have studied as small and bounded communities can result in the voices speaking up being easily recognised both within and outside the community. The result is that research participants may face, or feel that they will face, reprisals from within the community, or that the island more generally may be impacted detrimentally by particular research findings. As such, truths may go unspoken or counter-narratives unexplored. Despite consideration across the social sciences, and a default to offer confidentiality, this is not always possible in an island context. In this paper, we consider the difficulty participants may face in speaking openly, and address the conflicts that confront researchers between supporting island stories, whilst also offering a balanced reflection of island life.

In the past, it has been customary to begin an island studies paper with a statement of one's own island credentials (Conkling, 2007), although this approach is felt now to be less important (Grydehøj, 2018). Nevertheless, let us be clear from the start, we are researchers of islands and of island people, wishing to learn from our island colleagues. We are also British, which in 2020 feels more of an island than ever, and although one of the authors was born and spent many years in an overseas island territory, we are not 'small(er) islanders', and nor do we purport to be. Although islands have fascinated mainlanders for millennia, the active pursuit of island studies is a more millennial consideration, with a growth in the field and the literature over the last two decades. Consequently, academic focus on islands and islanders has come to transcend the tropes of tropical, remote, and under populated islands as depicted in Robinson Crusoe or Treasure Island. Opinion is, inevitably, divided as to whether there is such a thing as

'islandness' – or even if the island is so easily defined (Jędrusik, 2011). Writing in *Area*, for example, Kelman (2018, p. 6) discusses four aspects of islandness: boundedness, smallness, isolation and littorality; but even these seemingly fundamental concepts are not without their detractors (Hay, 2013), and the growth of urban island studies (Grydehøj, 2015; Johnson, 2018; Larjosto, 2018) runs counter to narratives of islands as remote and removed from the mainland/mainstream. The voices of the island studies community have enabled, empowered and amplified island voices over the last decade. But, we argue that, in some instances, this imperils (or, at least, has the potential to compromise) the speaker, particularly in the very small island communities we have studied.

Island research that advocates for islands

Following in this tradition, there is much island research which actively advocates for islands and for islanders, albeit not always on their own terms. For example, Grydehøj and Hayward have written on the local politics, community and autonomy in the small English islands and archipelagos of Canvey Island, the Isle of Wight and Isles of Scilly (Grydehøj & Hayward, 2011; Grydehøj & Hayward, 2014; Hayward, 2018). Further, Kelman has written variously about resilience and vulnerability on islands predisposed through location or human-made influence to natural disasters, arguing that we ignore native and indigenous voices and technologies at our peril, especially when it comes to ensuring the sustainable development of island communities (Kelman, 2010; Kelman, 2018; Kelman & West, 2009). Baldacchino, as with Hayward, has written across the genre about different aspects of island experience, including on the vagaries of archi- and aqua-pelagos and, returning to Kelman, the impact of size and distance from land on island life (Baldacchino, 2006; Hayward, 2012; Baldacchino and Ferreira, 2013; Baldacchino, 2019). Alongside more traditional, ethnographic type work, such as papers on island materialities and creative economies (McHattie et al., 2018; Nolasco, 2018), these papers (and many others, too numerous to mention here) explicitly describe and discuss issues impacting on residents of particular islands. Although Conkling (2007) (as well as any number of lay islophiles) contends that there is an aspect of islandness that transcends the specificities of particular island life, the work of Baldacchino, Hayward and others describes and promotes the uniqueness of experience, environment, society and culture on their respective islands. Although these writers are not necessarily indigenous to the communities about which they write, they handle their subjects with sensitivity, advocating for them and on their behalf, whilst expanding the field of island studies and creating spaces into which island voices can speak. The growth of the discipline, even if often orchestrated by mainlanders or those from the global north, does at least facilitate the opportunity for other voices to be heard, so that increasingly islanders can tell their own stories in their own languages.

However, this growth also brings with it a number of problems. The combination experienced by small island residents of smallness and remoteness can, in some cases, lead to social conservatism and parochialism – not uncoincidentally described as insularity. Whilst island tropes may lead us to believe that each palm strewn tropical paradise is inhabited by friendly locals, coexisting in simple harmony, the reality may well be a case of 'managed intimacy' (Lowenthal, 1972), where relationships are handled carefully and a surface of consensus can mask long running antagonism and division (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018). For a number of islanders, this can mean that speaking up, or speaking out, about issues or problems on and off the island or within the community can lead to difficulties or consequences, real or imagined, in their personal lives. One high profile example of this was in the Turks and Caicos Islands. A decade ago, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee in the United Kingdom (UK) undertook an enquiry into the UK's Overseas Territories. Much of the focus was on

the Turks and Caicos Islands, and many of the residents who submitted evidence took the unusual step of asking for confidentiality. In response, the Committee criticised 'the climate of fear' in the territory, with people afraid of retribution if they reported their concerns about the high-level corruption that was becoming pervasive at that time (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2008, p. 7). Similarly, local voices that are opposed to, or at least concerned about, the impacts of a dominant offshore finance industry can also find themselves marginalised (See for example Hampton & Christensen, 1999). There is often a *cordon sanitaire* around the industry because of the fear that any criticism or reputational damage could have significant consequences for the viability of the industry and the economy more generally. For example, local legislation has been passed, notably in the British Virgin Islands, to increase the penalties against whistle-blowers (Tax Justice Network, 2020, p. 8).

The research project that we have been undertaking, and which gave rise to this paper, is concerned with the psychological impact of living on (very) small islands. When we carried out our initial fieldwork we found that, although residents were keen to speak to us, with one resident claiming 'everyone comes here to look at the wildlife, but I've always thought the most interesting thing was the people', they were also reluctant to speak out or openly about some of the problems on the island and within the resident community. One reason for this might be that many of the UK's small islands rely almost exclusively on tourism for employment and economic opportunities, and part of the allure of the island destination is the ability to leave conflict and strife on the mainland. Whilst islanders work hard to manage their relationships with one another, they also have to work to project the appearance of a harmonious community to tourists and visitors, as that is deemed implicitly to be part of the 'offer' (Grydehoj, 2011). Any dissent from this dominant view might be seen as detracting from the island's image, and essentially from their terms of employment, as discussed for example by Khamis in her description of working on Lundy (Khamis, 2011). As such, we found that residents were keen to talk to us, in some cases finding it quite cathartic, but were understandably concerned about the long-term implications of disclosure to themselves and their personal relationships, but also to the island's reputation and the security of their employment. In order to add extra voices to our discussion, we conducted subsequent fieldwork visits to other islands, enabling us to more effectively anonymise the islands and island communities we are studying.

Within a small population, as people speak they are often recognisable, both to other islanders. This may be through a particularity of turn of phrase, but also to visitors to the island who may be able to identify those in prominent roles such as police officers, hospitality managers, conservation workers, or harbour masters. The scale of island communities can make this particularly resonant, for example, where there may only be a few employers, where the island is particularly dependent on tourism, or where there is a patron/client relationship, which, as researchers, we should be aware of, and careful not to disrupt. And whilst participants may be recognisable in any organisational capacity, or small community environment, we felt that there were a number of compounding factors in small island communities. These included the lack of alternative employment, the care with which interpersonal relationships are managed, and the difficulties of other avenues of support which made island participants in our study particularly in need of additional levels of anonymity. By anonymising the participants and their locations, we hope that their voices can emerge without them needing to be concerned about their audience, and as such perhaps a more honest and open discourse of island life can be developed.

This also has the potential to protect the integrity of the researcher. Island researchers, especially those who, like us, are mainlanders, work hard to build up trust and access within island communities. Researchers who labour over the span of a career to build up acceptance and contacts on islands and with islanders may be reluctant to jeopardise that by disclosing less palatable truths about island life or conditions, or may perpetuate positive (but ultimately reductionist) tropes which fail to reveal that which islanders may seek to conceal. It is understandable that researchers wish to both protect their sources, and their own careers, but we ask at what cost this might come to the transparency of island studies as a discipline. If researchers are unnecessarily solicitous, and protect sources at the cost of wider truths in order to progress their research and their careers, are they really promoting islands and island studies? Might they risk compromising the academic utility of their work and, in the long run, perpetuating myths that are unhelpful, and potentially unethical? Negotiating access to any research participants can be fraught, and in island communities that can be particularly true, especially when access to the very site of research, and not just the participants, has to be negotiated through what can be quite powerful gatekeepers. The temptation for the researcher then to align themselves with these gatekeepers in order to strengthen the relationship is, to an extent, understandable. One can see this, for example, in research on the Pitcairn Islands (a UK Overseas Territory in the Pacific). Often researchers shy away from engaging fully in the territory's recent history of sexual abuse scandals, or if they do their position is compromised (Richardson, 2019).

Cultures of anonymity in research

We are not the only researchers discussing these issues. Across the social sciences, in personal narrative, in ethnography, in social and cultural geography, sociology and organisational studies, researchers and academics are asking what it means to anonymise or not, and whether, and how, we can truly offer confidentiality. As with islands, there is no one uniform approach to the question of anonymity, and different research traditions have different approaches to its pursuit. Within island studies, as discussed, different approaches have been taken, but anonymity is often proffered. So, for example, in his fieldwork on the Shetland Islands, Adam Grydehøj sometimes names, but also sometimes disguises his contributors, stating that with 'stances and opinions that might be considered inflammatory, I have not cited my contributor sources' (Grydehøj, 2008). However, this approach imbues the researcher with a lot of power in determining what is inflammatory and what is not. Elsewhere, Solene Prince uses secondary data from pre-published blogs in her research in the French sub-Antarctic islands. Although this data is already in the public domain, anonymity is clearly still a concern for some of those self-publishing as they do so anonymously (Prince, 2018). The compounding factors of boundedness and isolation, as well as a lack of alternative social groups or employment, in (very) small island environments do seem, to us, to present some particular challenges in relation to anonymisation, and, despite reviewing a considerable amount of island literature, this matter is rarely specifically addressed.

However, this is not necessarily the case for other fields, where anonymization has been given more consideration. And although the following examples do not take islands as their focus, they each give voice to different aspects of the debate around anonymisation and masking. For example, it is conventional in oral history and life narrative to use the given names of participants (Ní Laoire, 2007), and this is deemed to be appropriate for a number of reasons: it can give voice to those whose voices are seldom heard, imbues those voices with authority and places the agency of the narrative with the speaker and not with the researcher. However, as we do, Ní Laoire argues that this has the potential to impinge on the telling of counter narratives so that social and cultural norms prevail, girded by the promise of posterity. For her, there is a balance to be struck between the

idea that privacy might auger more openness, whilst also engendering the 'provision of a safe space to promote a counter narrative' and the tradition of naming and contextualising participants (2007, p. 275). Ní Laoire finds solace in the idea that 'oral history has traditionally prioritised the credibility and authenticity of the data, while social science on the other hand emphasizes the interpretation of data' (2007, pp. 276-77) – and in our context this is the difference between giving voice to islanders and interpreting the island experience. She also raises the impact not just on participants, but also on others who may be recognisable in their accounts, and whether they will have consented to participate.

This view of narrative research echoes, in many ways, writing about islands from an island studies perspective: participants/islands are named so as to give them voice and posterity, whilst also ensuring they maintain authorial integrity, even at the expense of privacy. However, where Ní Laoire's research takes the convention of naming participants and questions that from the perspective of personal narrative accounts, Tilley and Woodthorpe take the opposite view: in their paper, they question the norm of anonymising participants. They make a strong case for not conflating anonymity with confidentiality (2011, p. 198) and discuss the complexities of the two. As such 'a decision to anonymise data findings should not necessarily lead researchers to assume that they have fully addressed the various components of confidentiality' (2011, p. 199). There are additional issues about the level at which anonymity occurs, whether you can recognise yourself; your friends or community can recognise you; or outsiders might be able to identify you. This can happen as much to individuals as to islands, and is why it was necessary for us to visit a number of islands: so that voices could withstand a degree of external scrutiny and not be instantly recognisable as, for example, the island's dairy farmer. There are further issues with dissemination and the compromises in anonymity this can lead to, particularly in light of internet research repositories which allow searching and access by anyone, anywhere rather than confining research outputs to libraries (Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011). As such, Tilley and Woodthorpe begin to argue that the promises of anonymity are so elusive as to be almost impossible to attain. In this light, they ask whether researchers should be considering a different approach, further noting that, as we move to a culture of research transparency, disclosure would facilitate this.

These arguments are developed by other (non-island) researchers, including Taylor and Land, who researched an ethical clothing company. Despite using the promise of anonymity to gain access to the company, and removing defining characteristics, the amount of context they felt it necessary to provide immediately made their research site obvious (Taylor & Land, 2014) – as, perhaps does research on islands, for example Pitcairn, where location, environment, or circumstance might be unique. Taylor and Land suggest that the offer of anonymity became 'more complex in its implications than we anticipated' (2014, p. 102) when, for example, they found themselves wondering whether or not to cite publications that name the company in which they were working. Like Jerolmack and Murphy (2019), they also question the extent to which their anonymising works. For example, whether they should tell friends where they are going, or if it is appropriate even to name the location in funding bids. Taylor and Land propose that we move to a culture of 'naming without shame' (2014, p. 106) and that we need to resist the assumption of anonymity, both for the organisations being researched and the funders supporting it. They conclude that promising anonymity is a 'significant hindrance to engagement and impact' (2014, p. 108).

As with Taylor and Land, Jerolmack and Murphy (2019), consider the legacy of 'masking' as both an ethical obligation and scientifically neutral practice. They assert that even

anonymity cannot guarantee confidentiality, and also argue that researchers should move away from the default position of anonymity. Like Taylor and Land, they comment on the difficulty of keeping anonymity intact, when 'participants commonly unmask themselves and others' (p. 2). Benefits of disclosure can include the pleasure for (often unpublished) participants of seeing 'their names in print'; becoming part of posterity; the realisation of symbolic or actual rewards; and the 'neutralising of the researchers' gatekeeper role' so that participants are telling their stories in their own words (Taylor & Land, 2017, pp. 2-3; Ní Laoire, 2007). Disadvantages of anonymising include the erasure of important information and context, the creation of composite participants (where the comments of more than one participant are attributed to a single, pseudonymous, individual) and the enshrining of 'ethnographic authority'. Further, there are several accounts of the failure of anonymisation. Consider the study of 'Ballybran' in Ireland, which was so unsuccessfully anonymised that when the researcher returned to her fieldwork site, she was roundly told she was not welcome, and was chased from the village (Scheper-Hughes, 2000). More recently, Goffman's (2015) ethnography of young black men in Philadelphia became rather sensationalised when some of her participants were able to be tracked down by journalists.

Notwithstanding, some writers (Ní Laoire, 2007) argue that we are seeking to provide an interpretation rather than a reporting, and as such anonymity may be appropriate. As researchers, we need to be particularly attentive to how and who we mask so that by masking we might write entire genders, ethnicities, and religions out of our analysis, or conflate one location with another. Also, through disclosure, we allow for the potential to revisit and for other researchers to triangulate our data or to add a longitudinal dimension, or even just to compare against existing data or personal experience (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 14), which might also have the effect of revealing disjunctures in island tropes, where what we report is not the dominant narrative, and as such can unsettle a mistruth. This is less likely to be the case when we mask our participants. We also hold an obligation to our readers, not just participants and funders. As such, 'marking and disclosure need not be an all or none proposition' (Ní Laoire, 2007, p. 18), so that in the future, perhaps, we could mask individuals but not settings, or present a composite setting, but name its constituent parts.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, we have looked at the imperative in island studies to allow islanders to present themselves *on their own terms*, but have also discussed some of the perils inherent in this position. Where islands are named, research can certainly advocate for those communities, but this can sometimes allow counter narratives to remain hidden, and subaltern voices silent. Further, research may be solicitous to the point of being problematic in instances where researchers wish to preserve their access to the community, or – if they themselves are islanders – to maintain civil, and preferably good, relations with their fellow islanders or gatekeepers. As such, and following debates from narrative studies, we concluded that anonymising our own island populations' research was a sensible precaution to take in order to allow people to speak freely and not jeopardise their own relationships or those of their islands or employers, although we recognise that this approach may not work elsewhere.

The islands on which we conducted our research are (very) small islands off the coast of Britain. As discussed above, we decided to anonymise the islands so that we could protect the voices that spoke to us and to allow people to speak freely. We acknowledge that in itself, this presents several problems. Firstly, and not insignificantly, there is every possibility that within the Island Studies community (or amongst British islophiles) there will be those who recognise or can identify our populations, as has happened in

numerous studies, for example those outlined by Jerolmack and Murphy (2019). We hope that those who choose to do so appreciate the commitment we have made to protect our participants, and will behave in that spirit. Secondly, there is the ability (also described by Jerolmack and Murphy) for subsequent researchers to conduct research building on previous findings – an ability which is limited with the masking of locations. This is also an important consideration, but one which we feel is mitigated by the fact that the initial research would not exist were it not for the masking of the location, an argument which is, to an extent, circular. A third issue, and one that is not unique to island work, is that by masking the location we could be fabricating our data. Unless more than one researcher is in the field, there is no one person who knows whether a particular statement is issued or not, regardless of anonymity or confidentiality. Any research project, to an extent, relies on trust between researcher, researched and reader, and this is equally the case here. We acknowledge that, as non-islanders, we cannot truly speak as (and much less for) islanders; but we hope that, in the ways we have described, we can give voice to their voices and to contribute to the understanding of islands and islanders in a way that those more constrained by their island circumstances might not be able to do.

Nevertheless, whilst we have, in this case, opted to anonymise both participants and locations, we also explored a range of literatures which takes the alternative view, that the normalisation of anonymity is both unrealistic and counter-productive, as it is never really possible to offer confidentiality to participants whilst retaining the integrity of the data. The ongoing prerogative of funders and research ethics committees at universities to demand confidentiality is potentially dated, and runs counter to requirements for transparency and value for money in publicly funded research. If the prevailing mood across the social sciences is for greater transparency through disclosure, is moving to anonymise our island populations actually a retrograde step, or a forward looking one, enabling greater participation and a forum in which unheard voices can speak up?

This does not feel like a satisfactory conclusion or a settled matter, and it is not. However, we are content that in this instance we have anonymised our islands and protected our participants from their very real concerns. But we remain open to the questions of anonymity in our further research, and we should be guided by the fundamental principle of acknowledging the primacy of island voices, whether they speak pseudonymously or not.

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