

WEAPONISED POSITIONALITY? COERCIVE DISCLOSURE IN THE “PUBLISH OR PERISH” ACADEMY

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Abstract

This paper brings anthropological scholarship on reflexivity and positionality in conversation with debates around issues of self-exploitation in the neoliberal university, to argue that the publication pressures early career anthropologists face, can cause them to feel that they must violate their own emotional and ethical boundaries to get their manuscript through peer review. Drawing on my own experience of being forced to disclose my past of traumatic violence to a journal, I show that reviewers' and editors' demands that anthropologists critically reflect on their positionality and on the power relations in their field site, can sometimes become weaponised against them. This can make academic publishing a site for new forms of violence, as well as for renewed trauma for young anthropological writers.

Keywords: *positionality, vulnerability, peer review, ethnographic authority, coercion, neoliberalism*

On a gloomy afternoon, an email pinged into my inbox. Reading the subject line, my heart skipped a beat: it was a decision from a prestigious anthropology journal, to which I had submitted an article some months prior. As a freshly minted PhD graduate, I had repeatedly been told that in the academic job market, you had to “publish or perish”. And so, I opened the email with shaky hands. The decision itself was somewhat anticlimactic. The editors asked me to revise and resubmit the article for a second round of review. However, one reviewer's feedback caused my chest to tighten. “The author works with women from a marginalised community that she does not belong to. These women have experienced physical and sexual violence,” the reviewer wrote, “I want to know what qualifies the author to write about these experiences. Do they have any first-hand knowledge of such violence that allows them to relate to these women on a personal level?”. The journal editor had emphasised this comment in their letter. To make the paper of “publishable quality” the editor asked me to explain, which aspects of my own “positionality” allowed me to empathise with interlocutors, who had lived through sexual violence.

In one way, the invitation to reflect more deeply on the complex power dynamics at work in my fieldwork hardly came as a surprise. Operating at the intersection of anthropology and socio-legal studies, my PhD research had explored how Dalit (communities who were formerly considered ‘untouchable’ within the Indian caste hierarchy) survivors of caste-based violence—and especially Dalit women—sought justice through India's only hate crime law:

the 1989 SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (PoA). I had conducted almost two years of fieldwork with Dalit communities, police, and lawyers in the North Indian state of Rajasthan. In the article that I had submitted to the journal, I explained that even though I was a woman of European heritage, I had grown up in a remote North Indian village and spoke Hindi fluently. I had further related that the caste and gender-based power dynamics, which I had observed during childhood led me to work with a Delhi-based research institute that studied caste discrimination after university, and later to conceptualise my own research project on caste biases within the legal system. However, I knew that in this context my European background necessarily invoked difficult considerations around representation, privilege, and ethnographic authority.

Questions about the extent to which ethnographers from economically and socially privileged backgrounds can, or should be able to, write about the lives or legal experiences (Masoud 2022) of those who belong to marginalised groups, have been heatedly debated in anthropology (Robertson 2002; DeLuca and Maddox 2016). Such discussions have been especially complex and nuanced within the literature on caste. Thinkers from lower caste backgrounds have elucidated how upper caste intellectuals, many of whom have historically had intimate historical entanglements with the project of empire (Ayyathurai 2024), have monopolised Indian educational institutions and (re-)created lower-castes as essentialised and seemingly voiceless canvases of victimhood (Ingole 2020). Hence, some writers who identify as Dalit have warned of the potential pitfalls of higher caste and Western writers, claiming to represent the experiences of low caste communities (Guru 2012). Others have invited multi-directional and multi-scalar reflections on the forms of knowledge that fieldwork within, and across, caste and ethnic boundaries can produce (Raj 2022).

Therefore, the journal editor's request that I establish the scope of my ethnographic authority—or, in other words, that I discuss how my epistemological assumptions (Wellman 2006) moulded the narratives of caste and law, gender and marginality in my paper—, could be considered a sensitive response to these debates. However, what startled me was that the journal's feedback seemed to conflate positional reflection with a demand to prove and disclose my intimate history of injury. The reviewer's question whether I had "first-hand" experience of identity-based or sexual violence indicated two problematic assumptions: first, that to establish authority as an ethnographic writer, I had to have experienced the same modality of violence, as my interlocutors. Second, if I wanted the journal to publish my paper, I had to divulge personal, lived harms to substantiate said authority. Getting published—and, by extension, not perishing—was bound to having and sharing an injurious past. However, the request left me feeling profoundly vulnerable.

In this paper, I reflect on the ethical boundaries of encouraging positional disclosure in anthropological publishing. I do so by interrogating the modes of self-reflection, which are productive of critical ethnographic knowledge that decentres (historical) elite voices (Castaneda 2022), while considering the frontier between positional transparency and forced revelation. I inquire when the quest for positional reflexivity in anthropological publishing turns into, what I call, *coercive disclosure*: a process whereby authors feel compelled to expose parts of their lives that they might prefer to keep private to secure ethnographic credibility and academic currency.

I propose that when ethnographic credibility is singularly interpreted as experiential and epistemic equivalence (Pereira 2024)—the idea that ethnographers must be part of the same lifeworlds as their interlocutors to write alongside them—reviewers' quests to establish the authority of the writer can turn into an attempt to "fix the author more than what was written" (Arif 2021, 259). As the paper shows, this is not only the case when the ethnographer is considered a privileged outsider but also when they are perceived as an insider or "native" anthropologist (Arif 2021, 259). Hence, the pursuit of ethnographic authority through epistemic equivalence sometimes (un-)intentionally exacerbates a different power dynamic: that between the anthropological author, whose career relies on having their research featured in high-impact academic outlets, and the academic publishers, who act as gatekeepers to this goal. In the context of "publish or perish" culture, simplistic demands for epistemic equivalence can push especially junior anthropologists to conceal complex personal realities, or to engage in acts of intimate revelation that cross their ethical boundaries.

The journal's insistence that I speak about my "first-hand experience" to make the paper "publishable", combined with the anxieties of the post-PhD career stage, ultimately led me to share the fact that I, too, had once experienced sexual violence: I disclosed this fact to calm the reviewers concerns that I could not possibly understand my interlocutors' marginalised lives and hurts. However, as a result, the experience of revising and resubmitting the paper left me feeling exposed. I felt like I had exploited my vulnerabilities (Brienza 2016) and treated my own hurts as a transactional ethnographic resource (Collins and Gallinat 2010).

Here, I return to these feelings for three reasons. First, to reclaim the moment of coercive disclosure on my terms by writing *not* about the event of violence itself, but about the ways, in which I navigated my own framework of disclosure in the aftermath. Second, to highlight the harm careless peer review practices can do in a neoliberal university, which has told scholars that academic careers necessarily involve self-sacrifice. Third, to draw attention to the ethical concerns that can arise during peer review in an age when it is often easy for reviewers to deduce the identity of authors through internet searches (Ha 2021).

By exploring the implications of coercive disclosure in academic publishing, this paper brings together three theoretical strands of scholarship. First, methodological debates on reflexive anthropology (Asad 1994; Vanner 2015; Davis and Walsh 2020) that emphasise the relationship between epistemology and power (Mohanty 1988; Lazar 2005). Here I draw special attention to epistemological discussions within anti-caste scholarship (Guru 2012; Ingole 2020; Raj 2022; Ayyathurai 2024). Second, literature in social psychology, which has emphasised the counter-productive effects of forced, traumatic disclosure (Emmerik 2002; Kimbley et al. 2023), and third an emerging body of work, which highlights how the neo-liberalisation of academic institutions and values can engender processes of self-exploitation among scholars (Brienza 2016; Falcón and Philipose 2017).

In doing so, I, ultimately, propose that the current peer review process produces a form of *unilateral vulnerability*, which stands in direct opposition to the *reciprocal vulnerabilities* that often shape the fieldwork experience. Other authors in this issue sensitively showcase how the ethical entanglements and shared hurts, to which deeply immersive fieldwork gives rise, can engender relatedness between ethnographers and their interlocutors. This relatedness enables anthropologists and their research partners to build solidarities across differences in back-

ground and privilege. In contrast, peer review practice in an oversaturated, neo-liberalised academic marketplace is defined by a unilateral flow of authority. Journals can leverage their influence to push young authors to divulge their innermost lives to anonymous reviewers, whose own positionality and knowledge remain hidden and un-interrogated. Extending Chris Shore and Susan Wright's analysis of coercive accountability in university audit culture, I argue that such coercive disclosure aims to transform unruly ethnographic identities into tradable, global research commodities that boost impact factors (2000). While the reciprocal vulnerability of fieldwork is a source of connection, the unilateral vulnerability of coercive disclosure leaves the writer isolated.

Pitfalls of Positionality?

Ethnographic Authority in Anti-Caste Studies

The insight that there are no neutral ethnographic claims (Mohanty 1988) has become somewhat of a truism in anthropological knowledge production. Ethnographers have increasingly acknowledged that they cannot assert epistemic authority by simply referencing their immersion in a particular context (Clifford 1983). Instead, contemporary anthropological thinkers actively acknowledge that ethnographic insight is rooted in subjective visions (Asad 1994), which are shaped by complex power relations (Gonçalves and Fagundes 2013) that are often rooted in the legacy of colonialism (Vanner 2015). To avoid the (re-)production of colonial or neo-colonial power structures in anthropological research—especially when working with vulnerable communities³⁴ contemporary ethnographic writers openly discuss how their own experiences and identities shape their fieldwork and analyses. Such positional transparency is now considered the mark of an ethical and credible ethnographic narrator, whose work won't do (interpretive) violence to their interlocutors (Anderson 2021).

Calls for ethnographers to openly reflect on the “vantage point” (Raj 2022, 132), from which their analysis emerged, have become especially pronounced in the arena of caste studies. Intellectuals from lower caste—and especially Dalit—backgrounds have pointed out that voices from their own communities have been conspicuously absent in most studies of caste (Guru 2012). They argued that in the Indian context higher-castes—and members of the Brahmin caste specifically—have historically held a monopoly on knowledge claims writ-large and actively circulated socially harmful narratives about lower caste communities (Ingole 2020). Gajendran Ayyathurai further argues that upper-caste knowledge projects did not stand on their own, but were deeply intertwined with, and reinforced by, Western missionary activity and the project of the British Empire. He proposes that theoretical work on the Indian social context has, thus, been heavily shaped by upper-caste and Western perspectives, which have produced knowledge about lower castes with the explicit interest of reinforcing Brahmin hegemony (Ayyathurai 2024).

As a reaction to, what some call, the Brahminical knowledge-power complex (Padmanabhan 2017), anti-caste scholars have sought to resist the top-down essentialisation of lower-caste experience by higher-caste and Western writers and have reclaimed their own land-

scape of fractured memory (Nagraj 2010). Social theorists from Dalit backgrounds like Gopal Guru have questioned whether experiences of Dalit exclusion should ever be narrated by writers who don't belong to Dalit communities (2012).

Within anthropology, one of the most nuanced, recent reflections on the relationship between ethnographic authority, caste, and the epistemology of caste oppression is presented by Jayaseelan Raj in his study of South Indian tea plantations (2022). Reflecting on his positionality as a "plantation boy" (xii) from a Dalit background, who conducted fieldwork in the very community in which he grew up, Raj carefully outlines how his positionality governed the interactions he traced on the plantation. He proposes that on the one hand, being trusted by the marginalised castes, turned him into "a person who holds the secrets of plantation life" (xiii). On the other hand, he also details how his identity as a Dalit engendered fraught interaction with plantation management, who reduced him to his caste status and treated him with "condescension" (xvi). Raj concludes that reflexive anthropology must go beyond perfunctory reflections on the privilege of the typical Western anthropological researcher. Highlighting that his fieldwork made him ever more aware of his vantage point as a "plantation boy" he encourages anthropologists to engage more deeply with the ways their personal stories shape the conditions of their subjectivity as ethnographers, and how this subjectivity influences the ethnographic text (xvi).

Similarly, ethnographic researchers from higher caste backgrounds who have tried to sensitively engage with Dalit lifeworlds, have encouraged anthropologists to consider the reciprocal relationship between the systemic conditions of ethnographic knowledge production, and their positionality. In her book *Semiotics of Rape: Sexual Subjectivity and Violation in Rural India* Rupal Oza (2022) highlights how her identity as a dominant-caste woman, as well as deep-seated structures of caste oppression in her field site, determined which cases of rape were revealed to her during fieldwork. While incidents of rape within upper-caste circles were systematically hidden from her, stories of lower-caste families were considered "available" for study (31).

Together, these examples expose the centrality of positional considerations within the context of anthropological knowledge production on caste, gender, and law. Caste identity or perceived caste and ethnic identities govern what and who ethnographers can find, think, and write about. Hence, the question of who can speak about caste, and how, must be continuously negotiated.

Essentialised Positionalities?

However, not all requests for positional reflection within the anthropological marketplace have been as nuanced or ethically productive. Sometimes, simplistic professional requests for positional disclosure have also created new pitfalls (Robertson 2002). Chief among them has been a tendency to essentialise identity categories in the name of reflexivity and require that fieldworkers portray themselves as fitting neatly into a globally tradable set of positional classifications.

Anthropologist Jennifer Robertson recalls the confusion and shame she felt when a reviewer for her book, which focused on questions of sexuality and politics among Japanese women,

aggressively criticised her for not positioning herself as an “academic, white, Westerner woman” (2002, 789). Robertson struggled with this categorisation because the description the reviewer demanded effaced the complex ways, in which her own life, as well as her family’s past, was bound to Japan. She felt that the ways, in which she was similar, or relationally bound to, her interlocutors were entirely obscured by the reviewer’s comment.

Drawing on her experience Robertson warns that in academic publishing, the pursuit of positional reflexivity has often been largely reduced to a simplified disclaimer at the start of ethnographic accounts. The authors must announce that they are “writing as [name, category]” (Robertson 2002, 788) to satisfy readers and reviewers, who equate positionality with essentialised, and often visible, markers of race, gender, or age. Yet, these categories can sometimes obscure the nuances that define an ethnographer’s unique vantage point and can cause intellectual and personal harm. First, the attempt to reduce the complexities of power involved in fieldwork, as well as ethnographers’ own multifaceted life stories, to a simple exercise of “writing as [name, category]”, runs directly counter to what anthropology claims as its central contribution to the social sciences: namely to highlight the fluidity of cultural, political, and social categories (Vanner 2015). Second it creates a new mode of violent categorisation by demanding self-essentialisation on the part of the anthropologist: every ethnographer must declare themselves a particular “[name, category]”, a process that, ironically, renders ethnographers’ unique relationalities in the field illegible.

As Yasmeen Arif argues, requests that anthropologists essentialise themselves by mobilising what she calls “root-identities”—for example, ethnicity or religious heritage—to frame their work and prove themselves credible narrators, can promote new modes of epistemic inequality. In an article entitled “The reluctant native” Arif recounts how in response to her fieldwork in Beirut, journal reviewers seemed overly focused on fixing her role as a “postcolonial *qua* native anthropologist” (2021, 260). While one reviewer consistently mentioned her identity as an “Indian female”, another seemed to advocate that as a Muslim writer she should pay more attention to Islamic histories (259). Arif proposes that careless demands to “fix” an author’s identity can create novel forms of epistemic violence that entirely contradict the goal of letting “native” anthropologists speak.

Arif’s account crucially highlights that the essentialised positional reflection that is often promoted in the peer review process, scholastically and personally harms ethnographers from all vantage points. Asking an ethnographer to self-essentialise their identity as a “native” anthropologist can be as injurious as demands for an “outsider-ethnographer” to prove a simplistic form of experiential and epistemic sameness.

Concealment

Such essentialising requests can push anthropologists towards practices of involuntary concealment or exposure. To render the nuances of their background legible in their writing, and to prove that their research critically navigated differentials of vulnerability and privilege, anthropologists can feel like they are reduced to two options: either, they must hide aspects of their identity, which fail to conform to positional categories that have scholarly currency, or

they feel compelled to explicitly detail intimate aspects of their life to show that their perspective is more layered than their belonging in “identity category x” suggests.

Anthropologist Katarina Daily Thompson analyses the first one of these processes—the positional quest for concealment. She recounts that as an ethnographer of Zanzibar and the wife of a Swahili, Zanzibari man, she was expected to “become” a Swahili woman after marriage (2019, 674). Occupying both insider and outsider status, Thompson reports how she underwent a process of progressive self-essentialisation, in which she grew increasingly uncomfortable with the so-called Western aspects of her identity and tried to fully turn herself into a normative, imagined version of a Swahili woman (2019, 681). While this was partially inspired by the demands placed on her by her martial family, her desire to turn herself “deep-[ly]” Swahili (2019, 681) was also the result of positional anxiety: the broader culture of, what Robertson calls, “writing as [name, category]”, caused Thompson to feel that her ethnographic research was more valuable and ethical the more completely she fit an essentialist category of the Swahili woman.

This conviction led her to accept and hide the physical violence she was subjected to by her husband. She felt that exposing the fact that he broke her fingers or threw things at her would reinforce Western biases against men from the African continent and reinscribe a colonial practice of cultural judgement.

By engaging in strategic concealment, Thompson exposed herself to physical injury to perform a positionality that would make her a good wife and a convincing ethnographic narrator. In the process, she took an ethnographically extractive approach to her own “self” (Collins and Gallinat 2010).

Coercive Disclosure

Silence as Acceptance

At this juncture, I want to return to my own story, which I teased at the start of this paper. If Thomson talks about the violence of concealment, my own experience tells the opposite tale. To be regarded as an ethical and authoritative ethnographic writer by the community of professional anthropologists who acted as reviewers and editors for my article, I ended up disclosing aspects of my past that I had, thus far, only shared with my closest confidantes: my own experience of sexual violence.

From a career standpoint, this decision was a good one. It led reviewers to view me as a credible narrator of brutality, who had in some ways “experienced similar forms of power as [my] interlocutors” (Reviewer, anonymous journal, second round of reviews). However, from an intimate and personal standpoint, this decision left me feeling profoundly disempowered and ashamed.

Some anthropologists have unlocked both personal empowerment and new avenues of knowledge production by analysing their own experience of violence in anthropological publications (Schneider 2023). Such work powerfully speaks to the cathartic power of expression and the emergence of a new voice after injury (Das 2007).

However, my relationship with my past had always been characterised by the opposite dynamic. After being assaulted at the age of 21, speaking about the event never really helped. For the longest time, and in part till this day, any urge I have ever felt to tell someone about the details of that evening was rooted in a sense of lack. I saw myself as a person, whose fatal flaw lay hidden under an exterior of joy and stability. Hence, talking about the attack always felt like an apology for my defects.

When I met the man, who is now my husband, I told him exactly what had happened because I thought that not divulging all the details would be like keeping a dark secret. But he did not see it that way. He always made it clear that I did not owe him a story I did not feel like telling. And so, as I grew more confident in myself and our relationship, the desire to disclose waned. I felt a sense of calm in knowing the explanation or apology I thought I had to provide, didn't need to be given. If I wanted to be silent I could. I did not owe anyone disclosure.

To avoid any confusion, I want to emphasise that I do not think that events and experiences of sexual violence—or any mode of violence—should be kept quiet if their owners want to share them. Finding words to communicate a difficult past to others is a good and necessary step. Personally, I occasionally confided in friends and family. When the stories of violence against women that I encountered during fieldwork brought back intrusive thoughts, I went into therapy. In the hands of a capable trauma therapist, I unpacked my feelings of self-blame and learned a new vocabulary of experience, which allowed me to reframe the past. These acts of expression were incredibly valuable. However, their positive impact was inextricably linked to the fact that they were acts of *voluntary* disclosure. Speaking and sharing was a choice.

Toxic Equivalence

This changed on that gloomy day in 2022 when the journal's email popped into my inbox. One of the cases I discussed in the paper concerned a young Dalit woman who had been raped by five upper-caste boys in her village. I had tried to carefully delineate how I had formed a relationship with the girl, from which vantage point my analysis of the case had emerged, and focused the article primarily on the ways, in which legal institutions and actors transformed and mobilised her story.

I reflected that at the time of fieldwork, I had been a young woman in her twenties whose appearance easily betrayed her Western heritage. Yet, the fact that I had spent my childhood in rural areas of North India also meant I was intimately familiar with the way kinship, gender, and caste systems operated on the ground. I spoke Hindi, to quote a Dalit women's activist in Rajasthan, "like one of our village girls". This somewhat bizarre combination of identities meant that legal actors from higher caste backgrounds were often very open with me about their own caste biases. At the same time, it also allowed me to live with a Dalit family in one of Rajasthan's villages for over a year and to see how caste oppression operated on the ground.

I thus proposed that my contribution to the field of caste studies lay in my ability to trace how caste prejudice is reproduced at different institutional levels within the Indian legal system. The aim of my work was not to represent caste violence as a category of experience, but

to leverage my ambiguous positionality to show how caste and patriarchal injuries are often intentionally obscured in Indian law.

Concerning the particular story of sexual violence that the paper discussed, I mentioned that I came to know the young survivor over many months. I also mentioned that I had told the girl personal details about my own life to create a more equal playing field of intimate exchange. However, I did not share with the journal what these intimate details were.

Yet, what I had considered an attempt at careful positional framing, did not satisfy one reviewer. To remind the reader of what I recounted at the start, the reviewer pointed out that I did not belong to the marginalised community with which I was working. Supported by the editor, they argued that I needed to prove that I had the right to write about the type of violence I was describing by disclosing whether I had ever lived through violence:

The author works with women from a marginalised community (...) who have experienced physical and sexual violence. I want to know what qualifies the author to write about these experiences. Do they have any first-hand knowledge of such violence that allows them to relate to these women on a personal level? (Anonymous peer reviewer)

Here, I wish to reiterate that I don't believe that the reviewer's insistence that I engage even more deeply with the dynamics of power involved in my research was itself problematic. As ethnographers an unwillingness to continuously interrogate power differentials can make us deeply complicit in structural (Davis and Walsh 2020) and gendered violence (Mulla 2014).

Yet, the reviewer didn't ask me to provide more nuanced reflections on the implications of a non-Dalit woman speaking about Dalit women's lives. Instead, they demanded to know about my own "first-hand knowledge" of sexual violence. Though I never got an explanation for the logic behind this request, I can only fathom that it was rooted in the assumption that identifying me as a survivor of violence would accomplish two things. First, it would highlight the psychological kinship between me and my interlocutors, which would render my project inherently "ethical": if I were a victim too then the power dynamics rooted in other aspects of my identity would be neutralised. Second, the similarities of my own lived experience would lend credence to my ethnographic interpretations.

As I set out to revise the article, I was tense. I avoided addressing the question about my "personal" experience till the very end. I knew exactly what information I could provide to satisfy the journal. I could tell them that I had indeed lived through sexual violence and that I had read every book on trauma I could get my hands on. But I was reluctant to reveal this information and, frankly, resentful that the question had been asked in the first place. I disagreed with the journal's premise that the *only* way to be ethnographically sensitive was to be experientially like the people I worked with. I also didn't think that my deepest hurts were theirs to extract.

When I could no longer avoid it, I spoke to a friend, who was also an early career scholar. She was understanding, but her approach was also pragmatic. "It's your story to tell", she said:

but this is a big journal and we all still really need to publish at this point in our careers. Just tell them the minimum and resubmit. You will kick yourself later if you mess up this publication and it hinders your career.

The Violence of Coercive Disclosure

Eventually, I followed suit. In my letter to the reviewers, I stated what events, and what subsequent feelings of trauma experientially qualified me to “speak about violence and traumatic injury”. The editor and reviewers rejoiced: they congratulated me for my “deep level of reflexivity” (anonymous peer reviewer). They praised my candour and called it a “brave” act of positional analysis, which helped “situate” the ethnographic material (journal editor).

But the decision didn’t feel empowering at all. It brought anxious thoughts and new shame. As much as previous silences had felt like acceptance, as much as sharing with my husband, friends, and family on my terms had been a step, which quieted voices of self-blame, this act of disclosure felt utterly different: it felt coercive. It felt like I had lost sight of the safe boundaries that I had drawn for myself over the past nine years in the pursuit of an academic career.

Later, I realised that these feelings were themselves indicative of a common psychological response. Research has shown that the pressure to disclose traumatic events can undo the supposed benefits of sharing stories of injury (Kimbly et al. 2023). Kimbly et al. argue that while

trauma disclosure has been associated with improved posttraumatic outcomes (...), external forces that impede trauma survivors’ sense of control and empowerment over their trauma-related experiences—such as pressure from others to disclose—can lead to attenuated recovery. (Kimbly et al. 2023, 567)

These findings resonate with earlier studies, which propose that practices like post-traumatic debriefing—“a formal type of post-traumatic care” (Emmerik 2002, 766) —, in which survivors are instructed to share their feelings in a supervised setting within a certain time frame, often have detrimental effects. Bypassing the voluntary and natural sharing progressions that allow survivors to come to terms with what has happened in their own time, leads to a renewed loss of agency for survivors, which can be re-traumatising (Emmerik 2002, 769–70). In my case, this perceived loss of agency also produced more self-blame for giving in to demands, which I should have resisted. I grappled with the sense that I had lost my integrity.

Publish or Perish

Early Career Anxieties

However, thus far the analysis still begs the question: Why did I feel coerced to disclose? Unlike survivors who were guided through sessions of posttraumatic debriefing, I could have refused to provide the information the journal had asked for. I could have argued vehemently with the editors that “first-hand-knowledge” of violence did not automatically make a credible ethnographic narrator, and at the most extreme end I could have simply decided not to publish the paper.

Yet, I did feel like I had little choice. I could not escape the acute anxiety that at this stage of my career, this one publication could make all the difference. My friend too had implied

that—until I became more established—the reviewers and journal editors had all the power to either open or close the gates to my academic future.

This fear did not come out of nowhere. It was the direct result of a phrase I had heard repeatedly throughout my PhD and postdoctoral journey: “publish or perish”. When I attended my first workshop on academic publishing, the instructor started out by writing the phrase on the blackboard behind him. For the remaining two hours, I stared at the board, where the words loomed large in capital letters. “Publish or Perish”, a senior professor told me at a conference: “At this stage in your career, publish in journals as much as possible, otherwise you will struggle in the job market.”

These incidents were no aberration. “Publish or perish” was the phrase every well-meaning senior colleague shared when advising me on my future. These were often wonderful mentors with deeply honest intentions. But the words stuck somewhere in my brain, not as a motivational slogan, but as a glaring warning.

There were cautionary tales everywhere about early career scholars, who had gotten caught up in teaching and administration and forgotten to publish. These tales were coupled with a constant emphasis on the importance of publishing in the “right”, high-ranking, journals. “Your PhD fieldwork is the best research you will ever produce”; another senior academic advised, “don’t waste it, get it into the best, high-impact journals”.

When I got reviews back on the very first manuscript I had ever submitted to a journal and disagreed with some of the theoretical claims of one of the reviewers, a mentor told me to be careful. “If you want the article accepted, you have to take on most of the criticism, especially at your stage,” they warned. “You need to make reviewers feel that they have been heard.” Moreover, they argued, I had to reassure the editors that the revised article fit their vision for the journal.

What I took away from this advice was that if I wanted to have a future in my desired profession, I should not argue with the anonymous experts who evaluated my work. Until I became established, I had to play the journal’s game. When I brought up to senior scholars that this seemed like a somewhat unhealthy atmosphere, the answer was often a little dismissive. They too had to play the game at some point, so I had to play it now. Later I would reap the shiny reward of a permanent academic post. Then I would have freedom. But until then I had to deliver what was asked.

I don’t share these details to make the scholars, who have kindly given their advice look bad. I have been extremely fortunate with my mentors. They have been encouraging, patient, and kind, and certainly not all of them adhered to the “publish or perish” mantra. Rather, I share this to elucidate the mental framework, within which I operated, when I agreed to disclose my own story: a framework, which treated the self as a resource of professional progress and normalised academic self-exploitation.

Neoliberal Self-Exploitation

The neo-liberalisation of the academy has resulted in new forms of “injury, stress, and hurt” (Falcón and Philipose 2017, 188) for scholars, and especially for people of colour, women, and

queer communities in universities. Falcón and Philipose define academic neo-liberalisation as the development of a corporate university culture, which systematically produces harm for faculty through “attacks on academic freedom, inhumane conditions for university employees, (...) *high pressure to frequently publish*, (...), [and] dismissals of faculty whose work challenges prevailing relations of power” (2017, 186, emphasis mine). They argue that these dynamics isolate academics from one another and perpetuate a culture where scholars are forced to view themselves as “hyper-producers of knowledge, who publish as much as possible even when they cannot afford to do so” (2017, 189).

Even though many have argued that the peer review process itself is deeply flawed and often fails to ensure that the most methodologically or theoretically sound papers are accepted (Smith 2006), the pressure to publish in peer-reviewed journals gives rise to practices of violent self-censorship among academics. Scholars learn to police their actions and to make choices that don’t align with their desires and values. This is often detrimental to scholars’ physical and mental health (Falcón and Philipose 2017, 189).

However, such academic violence is not merely a top-down endeavour. Instead, succeeding in the neoliberal university is contingent on scholars’ willingness to “acquiescence to exploitation and further [their own] willingness to self-exploit” (Brienza 2016, 93). Chris Shore and Fiona Wright highlight this through their discussion of coercive accountability within university audit culture. They propose that academics are systematically trained to discipline and manage themselves into a product that promotes the university’s ideas of efficiency (2000, 62). Researchers learn to shape themselves into carriers of institutional goals through acts of self-exploitation in the service of the labour, and the publications, that the academic marketplace demands.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my agency to disclose had been fundamentally shaped by the neoliberal value system I had been taught to believe in. I had internalised the notion that an academic career was bought through blood, sweat, tears, and a little of your own sanity. I had accepted that getting ahead in academia necessarily relied on preparedness to cross one’s own psychological boundaries in exchange for publications and job prospects. Hence, the act of disclosure I engaged in was neither authentic nor voluntary, it was the result of a gradual process that made me compliant with self-extraction and almost completely accepting of publishers’ discourses and demands around my work.

In a discipline like anthropology, which is inextricably linked to its colonial past, reflexive engagement with ethnographic positionality is a crucial tool to minimise (interpretive) violence towards interlocutors. However, my own experience suggests that, when identity categories and understandings of power are essentialised and wielded uncritically by gatekeeper publications in a pressure-packed academic market, demands for positional reflection can engender new modes of vulnerability.

One potentially harmful positional approach focuses *exclusively* on epistemic equivalence. The assumption that establishing ethnographic authority is only ever possible if ethnographers are experientially like their interlocutors can bring harm to “outsider” or “insider” ethnogra-

phers alike (Arif 2021): While the former are reduced to essentialised difference, the latter become over-determined by their “native” identity. In an era where journal publishing has become the *sine qua non* of academic advancement, demands by prestigious academic publications to prove sameness can make authors feel coerced to divulge deeply intimate experiences.¹

These coercive disclosures ultimately produce a form of unilateral vulnerability for the anthropologist, which stands in stark contrast to the reciprocal vulnerabilities that mark the fieldwork experience. While the latter can be a source of solidarity between researcher and research partner, the latter deepens conditions of intellectual self-extraction and transgresses ethical boundaries of professional conduct.

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¹ I will not share whether the article I discuss here was eventually published.

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