In or out: Police anthropology and the risks of going public

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Once anthropologists have published their ethnography, their analysis often comes to a virtual standstill. Recently, Didier Fassin suggested to take the ‘public afterlife’ of ethnography as a genuine object of inquiry. Such an inquiry takes seriously how an ethnographic study is responded to by various publics and counterpublics once it has been given publicity. In my presentation, I will reflect upon the public afterlife of my own ethnographic study on police discrimination in the Netherlands (2008-2013). Drawing upon Howard Becker’s notion of the ‘hierarchy of credibility,’ I will argue that accusations of bias addressed to researchers are more likely to occur when they give credence to the perspective of subordinate groups in a hierarchical relationship and, as such, call into question the legitimacy of the existing rank system, which normally allocate to police the right to ‘define the situation.’ ‘Going public’ transformed me from an insider (who was employed by the Police Academy while doing a PhD study) into an outsider whose ethnography could be dismissed because he had only concentrated on incidents involving individuals. Interestingly, it was this kind of ‘psychologism’ (C. Wright Mills), relegating police discrimination to the domain of private troubles instead of public issues, that was part of the analysis in the first place.