How Henrietta Schmerler Was Lost, Then Found

By Nell Gluckman | October 14, 2018

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The anthropologist couldn’t possibly know what her student had been doing, or thinking, right before she was killed. But now, in her office at Columbia University, an FBI agent was asking questions. Why, he wanted to know, had a respected institution dispatched a 22-year-old student with only a year’s worth of experience to an Apache reservation 2,000 miles away?

The student’s name was Henrietta Schmerler, and her murder had been brutal. She’d been found, in the summer of 1931, at the bottom of a ravine with a deep cut in her neck, her teeth missing, her dress torn and bunched up above her waist — a doctor concluded she had been sexually assaulted. A witness had told the FBI that she had last been seen riding on the back of a horse with an Apache man. That man had given a confession, and he was set to go on trial soon.

Now it was winter, and already Columbia was under the microscope. Members of the public were writing, wondering what a young woman was doing in Arizona by herself and how much the university was to blame for her death. The trial would only intensify the scrutiny, and the agent was asking questions to help the prosecution prepare: What were Henrietta’s instructions? How might she have conducted herself on the reservation?

The profession of anthropology was under the microscope too. On one hand, professors at Columbia worried about the public fallout. They believed their work was important — vital, even — and they couldn’t do it without sending students out into the field. On the other, they feared for the communities they studied: A sensational case could further damage public perception of the tribe and compromise anthropologists’ efforts to earn its members’ trust.
The anthropologist sitting across from the FBI agent wasn’t just any professor. Her name was redacted from a copy of the FBI report that Schmerler’s nephew obtained decades later, but she was identified as the person who “handled the details of the assignment for Henrietta Schmerler.” In all likelihood, it was Ruth Benedict, one of Schmerler’s professors. Benedict was a standard bearer of the discipline and the de facto leader of Columbia’s anthropology program. She had every incentive to let the FBI agent, and the public, believe that what happened to Schmerler was an anomaly, its tragic outcome uniquely the story of one unfortunate woman.

So Benedict blamed that woman.

“It is her opinion that after Miss Schmerler arrived in White River, Arizona she decided to make her own plans, which differed from the instructions given her in a number of ways,” the FBI agent wrote in his report.

“She may have resorted to a flapperish technique in order to abstract information from the Indians,” the agent went on, “and that perhaps she did not conduct herself as discreetly as she could.”

Perhaps she did not conduct herself as discreetly as she could. That language will sound painfully familiar not only to women who have faced sexual violence, but to anyone who has paid attention to our yearlong national reckoning over assault and harassment. Even after it’s become an axiom not to blame the victims, we still probe stories about sexual violence for explanations and moral lessons. There are many reasons for this; one of the subtler ones is so that we can tell ourselves that it won’t happen to us or the people we know — we wouldn’t make that mistake.

This logic has consequences. It follows that when someone is assaulted, it’s because of something he or she did wrong. Henrietta Schmerler was never able to tell her story. But from the moment others began telling it, one part of the narrative was always there: that she shared responsibility for what had happened to her.

That’s how Schmerler’s advisers at Columbia represented it, and because those advisers were giants in the field, that’s how anthropology as a discipline came to understand what had taken place on the reservation. “If she had been more experienced, and if she had followed our advice she would never have done this,” wrote Franz Boas, then the head of Columbia’s anthropology department, to the superintendent of the reservation. “In this respect, I see a certain amount of unmistakable guilt on her part.”

Unmistakable guilt. The knowledge that their stories will be parsed for evidence of their guilt discourages people from sharing their accounts of sexual violence. That’s an axiom now, too. Still, even as the narrative has grown and contorted over decades, our understanding of what happened to Henrietta Schmerler hasn’t fundamentally changed.

Perhaps it should. Ninety years later, that’s the case one anthropologist is making, and her argument begins with a simple discovery: Much of what was said about Henrietta Schmerler was wrong.

Megan A. Steffen studies how people explain unpredicted events. If someone is in a car crash, for example, do they blame the driver? The bad roads? The traffic laws? In Zhengzhou, China, where she conducted anthropological fieldwork, she asked people questions like, why do you think so-and-so’s business failed? Or, why did their marriage fail?

"Explanations have political consequences," she says. "They have moral consequences."

It wasn’t a passion for anthropology that had brought her to Princeton University for graduate school, but an interest in China. Her maternal grandparents are from the country and she spent time there. It was a place where she had come of age.
But somewhere along the way, she fell in love with the work anthropologists do. She wanted to ask the big questions about how people interact with each other and to explore the different ways people live. She liked being out on her own with an excuse to ask questions, immersed in a new world but also slightly removed from it — not her "real life," but one she was peering in on.

There was something else that drew her to China: She felt safe there. Steffen had been sexually assaulted as a teenager in the United States; in China, she believed, she could be free from the way women were objectified back home.

When she arrived in Zhengzhou, Steffen moved into an apartment and settled into a loose routine: In the morning she would write, then meet with people for lunch, coffee, or dinner. She looked for ways to repay people for their time, whether by cooking them a meal or tutoring their children. She peered in on their worlds, trying to see how things worked through their eyes.

Six months in, some of the contacts she had made honored her with a banquet. She accepted a ride home, as she often did, from a man she’d met through her university. He was a high-level official who knew she was writing a book — someone whose wife she knew, whose daughter she had tutored regularly. Not someone, in other words, who she thought would want to jeopardize their relationship. On the way home, he sexually assaulted her.

At the time of the attack, Steffen had six months to go until she’d return to Princeton. She wrote later that she spent that time "scrambling to build an entirely new network of interlocutors and trying, as best I could, to act in public as though nothing had happened." At the advice of the women she knew in Zhengzhou, Steffen didn’t report her assailant, even though she felt sure that he was keeping close tabs on her for the rest of her time there.

After she returned to Princeton, during a talk about her fieldwork, she mentioned the assault.

"A woman a couple years below me came up and said to me, 'I am really worried about this. What do you recommend?"' Steffen says. "I was like, 'I don’t know. I thought I did everything right.'"

When Steffen first reflected on the assault, she looked for her own missteps. Had she given the wrong impression at some point or missed a red flag? She couldn’t think of anything. Most of the people she spent time with in Zhengzhou were women; when she met with men, they were always people she had good reason to feel she could trust. As a foreign anthropologist, she had cultivated a persona that she thought of as almost gender-neutral.

Deciding that there was nothing she could do to truly protect herself had an unexpected effect: It freed her from a sense of guilt. "It’s kind of a weird gift," she says. If she could be assaulted in Zhengzhou, she — or anyone, really — could be assaulted anywhere.

Steffen had told some of her professors about the assault too. They told her something she hadn’t realized before: that she was far from the only anthropologist to be assaulted in the field. Now she began to believe she understood why she hadn’t heard about more of those assaults. Sharing a story like hers meant opening yourself up to scrutiny about where you went wrong.
Complying with that scrutiny meant potentially closing yourself off from places and people you might need for your work.

She decided to track down the stories that her professors had alluded to. The stories spanned continents and decades, but it was Schmerler’s that resonated. The echoes were striking: Both women were attacked by members of the community they were studying — men who’d offered to give them a ride. Steffen recognized in Schmerler another woman who had set out to answer big questions by paying careful attention to small interactions and intimate conversations — someone who was assaulted while pursuing the work that she loved.

Growing up, Gil Schmerler knew only vague details about his aunt Henrietta. His father didn’t like to talk about what had happened to his sister. So when Gil and his own sister, Evelyn Kamanitz, found a box filled with the things Henrietta had left on the reservation in another aunt’s apartment, they were fascinated. There was a buckskin dress that she had been wearing when she died, a flashlight that had been found near her body, beads she had borrowed, and a stack of letters addressed to family members.

Gil set out to uncover more. In conversations with family members, a portrait began to form of a New York City girl with a sense of adventure and an urge to travel. When Henrietta was 14, she took her 10-year-old brother Sam — Gil’s father — on a hike to the top of a mountain in the Adirondacks. After the sunset, Sam hiked back down, but Henrietta insisted on spending the night alone at the peak. She wanted to catch the sunrise.

When Henrietta was 19, her mother died. The following year, the Great Depression cost her father most of the wealth he’d acquired as a children’s clothing manufacturer. Henrietta looked after her younger siblings, and she gave her father the money she’d saved working as a researcher so he could pay rent.

Henrietta graduated from New York University; she stepped into graduate school at a time when anthropologists could be stars. At the American Museum of Natural History, not far from where she lived, Boas had helped filled the halls with objects he’d taken from the Pacific Northwest. Margaret Mead, another member of Columbia’s anthropology department, had published a book on women’s sexuality in Samoa; it became a best seller.

"Perhaps she did not conduct herself as discreetly as she could," wrote an FBI agent investigating her death.

The work of the celebrity anthropologists wasn’t just popular, it was pressing. The eugenics movement was influential in the United States on both philosophy and policy. With Boas at the helm, scholars were pushing back against that tide, trying to show the value in understanding the cultures being wiped out by colonialism and its aftermath. They vigorously recorded what they observed in ethnographies to, as they saw it, document cultures before they were lost forever.

The sense of mission wasn’t the only thing that made the discipline appealing to women like Henrietta Schmerler: The field offered them a kind of freedom that they did not have elsewhere. "A lot of fieldwork was done by male-female pairs," says Regna Darnell, an anthropology professor at the University of Western Ontario. "They shared the work, and he got the credit, often. But some of these women went on to have independently very fine careers of their own."

The key was that women could gain access to important parts of society — where, as Darnell puts it, "a man who tried to hang around women and children would be probably be murdered or kicked out." Meanwhile, they found ways to adopt gender-neutral personas that also allowed them access to male-only events. "You are not bound by the same kinds of rules that women in that society are," Darnell said. "That works, speaking from experience."
For all the discipline’s progressivism, in its early stages, it was light on standards. Anthropologists stole things from the people they studied and put their ancestors’ remains in museums. They measured skulls in a misguided attempt to determine intelligence. They received very little training on how to conduct ethnographic work. They simply showed up and started asking questions.

For Columbia’s graduate students, summer was fieldwork time, and a year into her studies, Schmerler applied to join a plum project: Benedict’s ethnographic expedition to the Mescalero Apache Reservation in New Mexico in the summer of 1931. She was rejected, but Boas stepped in with a consolation offer: a $500 stipend to conduct research in Arizona on the White Mountain Apache. She jumped at the opportunity. Instead of working in a group under the supervision of her adviser, she would go into the field on her own.

The student met with Benedict and Mead before setting off. They gave her some advice: Live with an Apache family in one of the settlements. Hire a female guide.

Schmerler boarded a train in June, leaving the East Coast for the first time in her life. She stopped in Chicago for a meeting her mentors had set up—a daylong language course—before continuing west.

The White Mountain Apache live on a reservation in a sparsely populated area in eastern Arizona. It’s a mountainous region that’s cut through with streams and canyons, more remote and expansive than anything Schmerler had encountered in the Adirondacks. Right away it became clear that her trip would not go exactly as planned. When she arrived, she was advised by people she met on the reservation against staying with a family: The Apache were nomadic, they told her, and she might “wake up one fine morning to find that because of my unwelcome intrusion the settlement had suddenly vanished,” as she wrote in a letter to Boas. As for the guide, she hired one, but, according to her letters, the woman never showed up.

Schmerler ended up in a three-room cabin in East Fork, a settlement on the reservation. "Last night I sat on my porch writing up a conversation I had had during the afternoon with a young Apache who had come to visit me," she wrote to a friend. "At the same time I watched the most glorious sunset and listened to the rain pouring down around me. Curious, wasn’t it?"

She was fascinated and omnivorous, determined to interview anyone who would talk to her about nearly any topic she could think of. Months after her death, Benedict wrote to Boas that she had told her student to avoid the topic of sex—"dangerous" on a first trip in the field, "because of the false impressions it gave rise to." Schmerler seems not to have gotten that message, though sex was far from the only thing she asked about. She filled her notebooks with meticulous notes on smoking, jewelry, inheritance, abortion, puberty, virginity, prostitution, and religion.

"All week long, at night and at sunrise, I have been watching performances of the girls’ puberty ceremony, evidently their chief ceremony," she wrote to Boas. "They have gotten so accustomed to the sight of me there with my notebook in hand that last night one of the older men even invited me to dance."

Fieldwork was—and remains, for many anthropologists—a lonely pursuit. The sense of remove that Megan Steffen had noticed was at times challenging for Henrietta Schmerler. She believed that to immerse herself with the Apache, she had to distance herself from the other white people on the reservation. She sensed that she was gaining the trust of some Apache, but she struggled to make female friends.

"I am told by those who know them best here that I’ve made remarkable progress with them, yet I’ve been so discouraged a good bit of the time that I’ve felt like quitting and flying back to New York," she wrote to two of her friends on July 18, almost four weeks into her trip. "The women are by far the worst and the most unfriendly of the lot."
Schmerler wrote that letter while waiting for an Apache man to take her in a car to another dance. She never sent it. The letter was found in her cabin after she went missing. Her body was found a week later.

Even before her body was found, newswires were covering her disappearance. FBI agents showed up at the reservation and worked to piece together the story of her final hours. They learned that the man Schmerler thought was going to take her to the dance hadn’t shown up. Apparently she’d accepted a ride on the horse of a neighbor named Golney Seymour. Three months into the investigation came the breakthrough: Seymour admitted to killing her.

At least, that’s what we think. None of the narrators of Schmerler’s story, including the FBI, were entirely reliable. The bureau wanted a conviction under its belt in a high-profile and salacious case, and its own investigators weren’t immune to a bit of hyperbole. One agent on the case wrote in a letter to the bureau’s director, J. Edgar Hoover, that his report contained "the facts, and a little other stuff," adding that he submitted the document "as is' for such censorship or embellishments as the Bureau may deem appropriate for publicity purposes."

As the case moved to trial, Golney Seymour’s lawyer needed to impugn Schmerler’s reputation. He told the judge that he intended to "prove Miss Schmerler was engaged in the study of abnormal sexual impulses of savages," according to newspaper clippings that Gil Schmerler found. In his court testimony, covered closely by newspapers in Arizona and broadcast nationwide by wire services, Seymour said through a translator that Schmerler had given him alcohol, kissed him, and tickled him. The two had sex, he went on, but they then physically fought, after which he rode away on his horse. He said he did not see her die. His lawyer emphasized that he was drunk during the encounter and argued that his original confession was coerced.

The details of the story — a young white woman raped and murdered by an Apache — resonated with an ugly side of the American conscience. They played into narratives of indigenous people as savage and simple. Dual portraits of Schmerler began to emerge: In one, she was a clueless academic who, in her earnestness, put herself in the way of obvious danger. In another, she was a temptress who used sexuality as a tool to extract information from suggestible Apache men.

The narrative of Schmerler as seductress wasn’t enough to save Seymour. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. By then the story took on a life of its own, and it stuck. In the decades that followed, articles inspired by the case appeared in pulp-fiction magazines. In those tales, Henrietta was routinely cast as "the agent of her own death," according to Gil Schmerler.

In a 1942 story in True Detective, "The College Girl Murder Mystery," Henrietta Schmerler is warned not to go to Arizona because it’s unsafe. She heads off anyway. "I’m not afraid of a little dirt," she says. "My work is more important than any consideration of personal comfort."
Deciding that there was nothing she could do to truly protect herself had an unexpected effect: It freed her from a sense of guilt.

From the moment they heard about Schmerler’s death, Benedict and Boas were horrified. But their concerns went beyond the tragedy of losing a student. They were rightly afraid that her murder would reinforce vicious stereotypes of indigenous people, the communities whose worth they were trying to convey to the public. They also worried about their continued ability to do the work they saw as essential.

"It is dreadful," Boas wrote to Benedict in August 1931. "How shall we now dare to send a young girl out after this? And still. Is it not necessary and right?"

They began to distance themselves from their student’s actions. Boas wrote to officials in Arizona and Washington, D.C., making the case that Henrietta Schmerler had disregarded her mentors’ instructions and deployed ethically reproachable methods in her work. Other anthropologists came to understand that Schmerler had been heedless, and even they believed some of the stories about her promiscuity.

Gladys A. Reichard, an anthropology professor at Barnard College, visited the reservation and spoke to its white superintendent not long after Schmerler’s death. In a letter to Benedict about their conversation, she wrote that "there were no lengths she did not go to — whiskey and all (I won’t write the ‘and all’)."

Ruth Underhill, a Columbia graduate student, had testified briefly at Seymour’s trial about Schmerler’s assignment, in place of Benedict, who wrote to Mead that she preferred not to attend. Underhill wrote later in her memoir that Schmerler was "an earnest, determined girl" who "sat at the feet of Margaret Mead, literally and figuratively." Schmerler, according to Underhill, did not mesh well with her more sophisticated classmates when they all gathered at Mead’s apartment in Greenwich Village to hear her talk about sexuality in Samoa.

"No one had done the like with American Indians, and why should not Henrietta?" Underhill wrote. "She asked sex questions of all us older women, and I think we answered brusquely, telling her to go to the books. Instead she went to the Apache."

Long before Megan Steffen had entered the field, anthropology had grown beyond its swashbuckling origins. No longer was this a field where students were sent out into the world with $500 and a day of language lessons. Now ethics and practice were more deeply embedded in the curriculum. Anthropologists had become more critical of the impact their research had on the people they studied and made a point of getting research participants’ consent. Many tried to account for their biases and make their methods clear by writing themselves into their books. They debated how and whether they could take safety precautions while conducting ethnographic work.

Henrietta Schmerler’s name had faded, but her story lingered. By the 1980s she was a cautionary tale. A discussion about safety in the field played out in a series of letters printed in the Anthropology Newsletter, a publication of the American Anthropology Association. By now the list of damning claims about Schmerler had grown. At worst, she completely ignored her professors’ instructions and became romantically involved with an Apache man. At best, she was ignorant of "the sexual significance of getting up behind a man on his horse." There were stories that she had gone against Benedict and Boas’s better judgment, funded the trip herself, and insisted on speaking with older Apache about sex.
Gil Schmerler and Evelyn Kamanitz caught wind of the discussion. By then they’d found their aunt’s letters, and while they didn’t have a complete picture, one thing was clear: Much of what anthropologists were saying about Schmerler was unsupported by evidence, if not completely wrong.

What do we really know about her four weeks on the reservation? Gil Schmerler and Kamanitz set about correcting the record.

No, she didn’t fund her trip. The money came from Columbia.

No, she didn’t have a relationship with an Apache man. At least, there was no evidence whatsoever to suggest that she had.

Had she ignored the sage counsel of Boas and Benedict? It certainly wasn’t that simple. She wrote to Boas during her trip, attempting to keep him updated on her progress. She pursued fieldwork strategies that came from Benedict — living with the Apache family, for example — only to find that they wouldn’t pan out.

Was she blundering into another culture, unaware of its mores? In the 1980s retelling, that seemed to be the line on Schmerler. But the truth isn’t clear there, either. That characterization rests chiefly on the notion that Schmerler had foolishly hopped on a horse with Golney Seymour. Back in the 1930s, several Apache reportedly told an FBI agent that it was looked down upon for an unmarried man and woman to ride on a horse together. But the only people who claim to have seen her on the horse were the man convicted of murdering her — and that man’s relative.

There were facts that remained unknowable, but Gil Schmerler saw in Henrietta a determined young scholar who had camped on mountaintops and sacrificed for her family — not the promiscuous or overly naïve character he read about. The discipline, he concluded, felt threatened by her story.

"I truly believe these folks — Mead, Benedict, and Boas — really did bring a lot of enlightenment to our culture in general, but as we watch them react to this human situation, they reacted in a very human way," Gil Schmerler said. "They were covering their asses."

He and his sister wanted to learn more. They put a message in the newsletter asking for anthropologists to get in touch if they knew anything about their aunt. Thirty years later, they heard from Megan Steffen.

Not long after she returned from China, Steffen got some news that would once have been exciting: She’d received a grant that would allow her to return to Zhengzhou for 10 months. This time, though, she didn’t want to go.

The assault was still fresh in her mind, as were her concerns that her attacker might be watching her in Zhengzhou. In the months leading up to her departure, digging deeper into Schmerler’s story became, in part, a way to cope with the uncertainty that lay ahead — to turn her unresolved thoughts about sexual assault into work of real value.

Her research led her to the debate in the Anthropology Newsletter. Reading those messages, she realized that she wasn’t just captivated by a Depression-era murder. This was a story about her discipline, and about how its collective reckoning with a deadly sexual assault had done damage.
In an effort to explain Schmerler’s story, Steffen felt sure, anthropologists had held her responsible. Blame had implicitly discouraged other victims of assault from coming forward, leaving people like Steffen herself to sift through their own stories in search of lessons or mistakes.

Was she guilty of using the story to fit the narrative that mattered to her, not unlike the anthropologists who came before her?

Gil had never stopped searching for information about his aunt. No anthropologists had ever responded to the note he and his sister published in the *Anthropology Newsletter*, but the two had kept at their own research. They’d visited the reservation where Henrietta died and read through the archives of the famous anthropologists who had taught her. Gil Schmerler, who had since become a member of the graduate faculty at Bank Street College of Education, even sued the FBI for records from its investigation, obtaining hundreds of documents. In 2017, he published a book of his findings, *Henrietta Schmerler and the Murder That Put Anthropology on Trial*.

Steffen had considered trying to get the FBI documents herself. When she saw that Henrietta Schmerler’s nephew had published a book, she decided, finally, to get in touch with him. He was thrilled that an anthropologist was interested in his aunt. Last year, in a personal essay for *American Ethnologist*, "Doing Fieldwork After Henrietta Schmerler," Steffen both exhumed the graduate student’s murder and described the impact of her own assault. She’s now working on a scholarly paper exploring how anthropologists respond to stories about sexual violence in the field, starting with Schmerler’s. There’s an element of risk in the work: She has heard from mentors that she should wait until later in her career to write about the topic, lest she become known only for writing about sexual assault. But Steffen hopes that anthropology — feeling the impact, like so many fields, of the #MeToo movement — is ready to see the story in a new light.

She and Gil Schmerler made the case earlier this year that the movement presents an opportunity to draw modern-day lessons from how Schmerler’s story was treated over the years. "While the #MeToo movement shows us what can happen when people feel empowered to share their own stories," they wrote in an article for *Anthropology News*, "the story of Schmerler’s story can help us understand what can happen when a discipline is threatened by other people’s narratives of sexual violence."

The work has helped Steffen tap into a small community of anthropologists who are writing, with an uncommon forthrightness, about their experiences with sexual assault in the field. They are trying to tease out the broader implications of sharing these stories — how it could affect how they are perceived in the profession, for example, and what impact it might have on participants in their research. Steffen helped compile these stories for a new website run by a group of anthropologists in Australia called metooanthro.org. The members say they want to "create a safer culture at our conferences, campuses, field sites."

In some corners of the discipline, people are listening. This year the American Anthropological Association created a new policy on sexual harassment and assault. The policy, which identifies "field settings" as "particularly potentially problematic spaces where sexual harassment or sexual assault may occur," cites among its sources Steffen’s essay on Schmerler, Gil Schmerler’s book, and several other personal accounts from women in the field.

For Steffen, research and advocacy now go hand in hand. "I’ve taken the fight back to my other community," Steffen says. "I don’t want to be replicating the community that Henrietta lived in."
The car crash wasn’t necessarily the driver’s fault. It could have been the bad roads, the traffic laws, or another driver. The business could have failed because of economic headwinds; the marriage might have broken down because of outside pressures no one saw coming. We tell ourselves stories to make sense of the world, not to describe the world as it is.

Steffen doesn’t think Henrietta Schmerler was murdered because she went to a place where there were dangerous people, as the pulp-fiction authors implied. Nor does she think, as some anthropologists did, that it was because she didn’t follow directions or used bad tactics. What happened in Arizona could have happened anywhere, to anyone.

It may seem obvious to say someone wasn’t to blame for their own assault. But somehow, in 2018, it still bears repeating. By looking into the past at how one woman’s story was told and retold, we see at a distance why she was blamed. Maybe then we will recognize the consequences of those stories, the way they frame our ability to understand narratives of sexual assault in the here and now.