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Utriainen, Terhi

Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters
2010

Utriainen , T 2010 , Ethics and Embodiment in Ethnographic Interactions . in R Hämäläinen , H Pesonen , M Rahkala & T Sakaranaho (eds) , Pilgrimage of life : Studies in honour of professor René Gothoni . Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters , pp. 120-132 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/352628

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Ethics and Embodiment in Ethnographic Interactions

Terhi Utriainen

Ethnography produces a special kind of knowledge that combines observations and categories from various spheres of life and from various discourses. The result of construction of ethnographic knowledge is observation and analysis that are often far from the ideals of positive science. This knowledge often takes the form of written narratives, which, at their best, seduce the reader and plunge one into plausible adventures in unknown cultures and metaphysics or, alternatively, show one's well-known and familiar world in a new guise. At their worst, ethnographic narratives make the reader sceptical and disgusted with their ego-centricity whenever the ethnographic "other" is used merely as a resource to paint the ethnographer's self-portrait. Sometimes ethnographic knowledge frustrates all the parties involved: the academic audience because it is not objective and strictly analytical enough; the more general public because it is not popular, descriptive or journalistic enough; and, finally, the research participants and their society because it does not describe reality according to their categories of self-understanding.

Ethnographic knowledge has many enthusiasts and sympathisers, but probably at least as many opponents. But what is meant by this knowledge, which makes people take sides? How is it distinguished from other kinds of scientific knowledge and why do we need it? Here I will briefly discuss the *composite nature of ethnographic knowledge* and how this knowledge relates to the ethnographic endeavour both in its *ethical* and *embodied* aspects. My essay may be read as one possible response from the positions and perspectives of today to René Gothóni's article "Field-work and ethics in the study of religion" written in 1977.

Ethnographic presence

Qualitative research material varies in many ways between data that exist irrespective of the researcher and data that exist only because a researcher has

accumulated it herself.[1] One example of the first category is, of course, published literature or other primary source documents or artworks. Researchers seek out these things, and the process of research will not have a direct impact on them, even if the acts of interpretation and explanation can make the objects better known or understood. As a teacher and supervisor, I have encountered many students who prefer to base their research on material that exists independently of them so that they will not have to worry too much about how their influence as inexperienced interviewers, for instance, might distort or bias the material to start with, or even harm other people.

Ethnographic material is on the other end of the scale, even if ethnographic research processes often involve many kinds of pre-existing materials. Even if the social processes and practices, or life histories and other thought patterns in people's minds, take place irrespective of the research process, they will not take the form of documents except for those the researcher produces. The material to be analysed and conceptualised depends on the ethnographer's *presence*, on being there in an *interactive situation*; or, as Gothóni writes, in the "dialogue relationship". This presence, in its very physical concreteness (two or more people occupying the same space) as well as in its quality motivated by the epistemic curiosity of the researcher, is the condition of the whole endeavour from the outset. It determines not only collecting of material, but also its *construction* or, as the critics might say, the *creation* of the material. What, for the ethnographer herself, may constitute the proof of the validity of her material and of the research based on it, i.e., having been there herself (and often for a rather long time or many times) for outsiders may become a token of partiality, and even a hindrance to anything approaching objective explanation. Yet the fact remains that even if the ethnographic presence is not without problems, it is an integral part of the research endeavour.

Data thus collected emerge in interactions between the researcher and the researched. Even the rawest data – interviews and observations – are composite in nature in the sense that such data combine at least two perspectives. (Sometimes, as Gothóni remarks in his article, there may be multiple, mutually contradicting parties and perspectives in an ethnographic situation, such as lay people and religious specialists.) Particularly in interviews, there is often no clear demarcation between what the interviewer says and how the interviewees respond and elaborate on the material, and the leading role may change quickly in the course of questions

or topics discussed. An example of the latter took place in a fieldwork project in the Russian part of Karelia, when our group of three ethnographers spent several nights with a key informant who was a childless widow. We had not succeeded in sparking an open conversation about the meanings of children and childlessness during our interviews. However, late one evening when we were lying in bed and chatting about everyday matters, the widow began to talk about her childless life in a society in which a child is every woman's priority.[2]

Such surprises may occur even in a structured interview situation, and the researcher should be prepared to seize the opportunity. Moreover, important topics and themes are often the joint work of two parties. Conversation analysts have studied many kinds of verbal interactions, private as well as more official types, and demonstrated how the parties to a conversation work together in different ways to construct the topic or the ethos of their interaction.[3] This finding in conversation analysis is relevant to a better understanding of the conditions of ethnographic knowledge and could perhaps be studied in ethnography courses.

Ethnographic interaction may involve the researcher in many kinds of social practices. As Sherry Ortner writes, the ethnographer uses herself as the instrument of her research process in as many ways as possible.[4] Many ethnographers describe their fieldwork as a long process of learning new skills, embodied practices and thought patterns. This means that the research participants are our teachers who tutor and guide us into a new cultural world and its practices. The Australian anthropologist Michel Jackson writes about how the collection of material and gaining insights often takes place in such concrete and material processes as learning to cook or making rugs. Jackson calls his way of engaging in the collection and construction of ethnographic knowledge "radical empiricism", by which he means learning by observing and analysing his own embodied contacts and actions in the world of those he studies.[5]

My second experience with ethnographic fieldwork took place in a hospice where I endeavoured to learn the elementary skills and routines of nursing and care for terminally ill patients, including washing, dressing, conversing and sitting nearby.[6] Such learning processes can be successful only to certain degree (even if we never know in the beginning just successful they will be), and they entail numerous possibilities for failure and distortion both in collecting the right kinds of information, or knowledge, or in connection with ethical issues. These are facts and conditions related to the ethnographic epistemology that one must learn to

live with; moreover, learning from shameful or even painful failures and mistakes is an integral part of the process.

Ethical dilemmas of composite knowledge

If we admit that exploration of some specific areas of human and social life, especially of experiences and practices that leave no written, material or visual records can be explored only by ethnographic means (i.e. by going and staying in a place and taking notes), then we must take an openly critical stance instead of a normative stance towards the possibilities as well as the shortcomings of ethnographic knowledge. In many ways such knowledge is weak and subjective. But, at its best, ethnographic knowledge is positioned knowledge conscious of its own boundaries, limitations and conditions as feminist ethnography has taught us, for instance. It is relative, but it is also open and unlocked, knowledge in the making. It is impure, but also composite political knowledge that brings together, by means of Geertzian "thick description", the viewpoints of the researcher and the researched and puts both in hermeneutic and critical encounters where they are given the chance to affect each other. Such knowledge is political precisely because it has been germinated in complex interactions between the researcher and the researched. These interactive situations are fleeting and often non-repeatable, pregnant with either visible or invisible anticipation of power, and thus they are ethically often extremely delicate and complex situations.[7]

The principles taken up in ethical guidelines for ethnography as well as for other human and social science research give, for instance, the following four main principles to be followed. 1) The *principle of non-maleficence* states that research must not cause harm to the participants in particular or to people in general. 2) The *principle of benevolence* states that research should make a positive contribution to human welfare. 3) According to the *principle of autonomy*, research must respect and protect the rights and dignity of the participants. 4) Finally, the *principle of justice* says that the benefits and risks of research should be distributed fairly.[8] All these principles and perhaps especially those of benevolence and autonomy (which are more precarious, ambiguous and complex than the other two) are relevant to ethnography. Moreover, if there are conflicts of interest in the research design as a whole, which often involves many partners such as sponsors and so on, the interest of those studied will always have to come first:

In research, anthropologists' paramount responsibility is to those they study. When there is a conflict of interest, these individuals must come first. Anthropologists must do everything in their power to protect the physical, social, and psychological welfare and to honour the dignity and privacy of those studied.[9]

Ethical guidelines, like scientific activity in general, are social constructs and as such they are open to change.[10] Moreover, they are not always easy to follow as meticulously as one would like due to quickly evolving and quite unanticipated situations in real life settings, which often become ethnographic situations. These settings and situations sometimes evolve so rapidly that the researcher has to make choices without being able to slow down and give full consideration to a situation. For instance, I passed around informed consent forms in the hospice among the personnel. I also informed every patient, their relatives and volunteer workers about my research on modern ways of caring for the dying. When conversing with patients or taking part in caring actions, or simply when sitting by deathbeds witnessing agonies because somebody was needed there, I was of course hoping that my research would bring about more good than harm (the principle called that of *beneficence*). However, I was often acutely aware that sometimes there was no clear ethical justification for my presence. Moreover, up to the point of writing the research report, and even ten years later, I sometimes hesitated over the intimate experiences I included in the published text and my very subjective, even if hopefully somehow enlightened, interpretations of these experiences. Gothóni states that instead of personal details, the ethnographer should write about *constellations*.[11] I agree in principle with this guideline. However, it is often through detailed analysis of particular and often quite personal field notes that more general constellations become visible and can be justified.

Precarious bodies and fragility of confidence

Amanda Coffey writes: "The fact that fieldwork involves physical co-location of bodies means that ethical aspects surrounding the body are also ethical aspects of fieldwork".[12] My ethnographic experience in the hospice forced me to work with the issue of embodiment in many ways. In the field I witnessed aspects of embodiment that are often kept out of sight in contemporary western culture and society. These were old, ailing, suffering and even decaying, dying and dead bodies. Our medicalised culture has delegated the care of the dying to a group

of professionals, and it is not always easy even for family members or friends to participate in this care. Because I wanted to learn how the dying are dealt with in our western culture, I expressed a wish to be put in all kinds of situations where I could learn more.

I thus dealt with *private bodies* and, by writing and publishing my writing, made them *public*.[13] Even though, of course, I made sure I gave no real names or any other personal details, I used extremely intimate aspects of others' lives – bodies, pieces of narrative, sighs of pain – as important elements of my own text. This caused real ethical tensions, but without making this choice, justifying it and living with it, I could not have attained the kind of composite knowledge I wanted to construct. Thus, my research interest made me weave together aspects of embodied knowledge that were not only common and publicly shared, but were also private, intimate and nearly secret. (The demarcation line between private and public bodies is not the same in all cultures and situations, and it may be very different in the culture of the researcher from that of the researched. These specifications do not, of course, make the issue any easier or less important.)

I am not at all sure that the patients or their families always fully understood that one of the caregivers was, first and foremost, a researcher rather than an assistant nurse or a voluntary aide, who made notes about how the dying and dead were cared for. And even if they did, how could they really have known what kind of knowledge I was acquiring, especially as the questions of my research project kept changing and evolving in my own mind? Gothóni remarks: "The shift of emphasis is thus not a result of unethical procedure, but the consequence of a planned use of methods in field-work."[14] I would elaborate on this by saying that methods can, of course, never justify ethically problematic acts, but there are also situations in the field that may prompt innovative methods in unforeseen ways, especially when the time allowed for ethical consideration is very limited.

One delicate ethical dilemma revolves around the theme of *confidence*. Building confidential relations is what every ethnographer wants to learn, and sometimes descriptions of how this is accomplished or striven for make a relatively long passage in the report or narrative. We often like to believe that the more confidential the reciprocal relations we succeed in building with our research participants, the better and more reliable our data will accordingly be. In many cases this may be true, but this equation is not a magic formula that automatically

produces the desired effect. Moreover, this concept carries with it normative ideas about the "good ethnographer". Let us briefly consider this idea.

Especially if we are interested in life stories or other relatively intimate pieces of information, it is, of course, unlikely that we get where we want during our first encounter. Nor do we succeed if we do not somehow learn patience in building and maintaining an image of ourselves as trustworthy and genuinely interested in the people we study. More often than not we measure our success against how much "they wanted to tell about themselves". We may even flatter ourselves that we are mastering the art of ethnographic presence by how much people open up and let us into their private lives. We thus make our ability to evoke trust an important instrument of ethnographic knowledge.

Yet the temptation in ethnographic interactions to use the willingness of the subjects to impart confidences is great. Perhaps instead we should sometimes put a limit on confidentiality. As a balance or reminder of this limit, it should be kept in mind that confidence is usually understood (as one important condition of social life) not as a one-way practice but as being reciprocal. This means that the participants may either expect us to confide in them in return (to give something in exchange, about which I will write more below) or at least to keep their confidence in ways that we are not ready to do because that might distort or interfere with our research interest. When the most intimate or precarious accounts (or practices) begin to emerge, the ethnographer does not always switch off the recorder or close the notebook. Should she? Of course, it is possible not to publish extracts of private details (as Gothóni suggests), or even not to transcribe them, but the data will nevertheless often remain stored in an archive, often in the form of an oral recording, and may be used in subsequent studies.

What about the following guideline? How can we manage to make it clear to both parties in the research that the peculiar interaction in which intimate things are being sometimes dealt with is not, in the end, a therapeutic situation, but one of knowledge -acquisition:

The peoples we study must be made aware of the likely limits of confidentiality and must not be promised a greater degree of confidentiality than can be realistically expected under current legal circumstances in our respective nations.[15]

Should we remind both ourselves and our informants every now and then that we are, first and foremost, driven by curiosity and passion for knowledge, and not only by empathy? And even if empathy, tact and consideration should be the

ethical guardian angels of our epistemological endeavours, we also act as cold-minded agents of the devil of science. Perhaps we do not deserve more confidence than what we can reasonably give back.

Gifts and return presents

Wolff-Michael Roth uses the metaphor of the gift when considering the non-symmetric interaction of ethnographic research.[16] I would like to elaborate on this idea a little further. Many kinds of social transactions and interactions can, in fact, be analysed as a gift exchange, i.e., as gifts given and returned – in the spirit of Mauss' classic theory.[17] One can presume that if the exchange is in balance, i.e. if giving and receiving of all parties are approximately even and equal in the long run, then interaction or the whole society works pretty much as well as it can. How can this model be transposed to the practice and interaction of ethnography, and what does the model of gift reveal about its ethics?

The ethnographer, if she does not act in secret, depends on the benevolence of her research participants. Thus, the information she obtains from them may be regarded as gifts. Likewise, the time given by the participants can also be seen as a gift as well as the fact that she often lets the researcher come into her home or workplace, thereby sharing aspects of her private or professional life. The ethnographer is very much on the receiving end of the interaction of the gift exchange, since she suffers from lack of knowledge, and her knowledge-construction can properly begin only if and when she begins to receive gifts from her participants. But what might be the presents that the ethnographer should or could give in return?

In the big picture scientists and researchers give gifts to science by contributing new knowledge. Often they also give gifts to humanity or society in the form of innovations or structured and justified accounts about important matters. This idea is probably rather fully internalised by many people, since science and scientific knowledge enjoy general appreciation and support. The fact that science is a public institution and not a secret society means that in principle all scientific products are more or less directly for the good of all. Thus, in principle and in a broad context, scientists do their part in the gift exchange pattern. Sometimes science can also directly benefit people who have participated in a research project. A pharmaceutical product may be of direct help to someone's medical condition, or an environmental

research project may help to clean up a lake.[18] And what about ethnography; could the participants benefit from investigation of their lives by ethnographers?

The answer is sometimes. As we have claimed here, ethnographers often learn to be good listeners by pursuing their own interests. It is thus possible to make the interview or the observation a rewarding experience for both parties, as often happens when the subjects of the study are people who think they have important things to say about the matter being researched. Many people like to be asked about their experiences and opinions, and at times the ethnographer may replace a significant other as a welcome recipient of an informant's knowledge. The ethnographic interaction can become something of a therapeutic encounter in which the ethnographer takes on the role of an untrained psychologist. Or, somewhat more politically, the ethnographer may help the research participants have their voices heard in society. These may be regarded as gifts from the ethnographer to the participants, even if, strictly speaking, the ethnographer should not step over the line from fieldwork into therapy.

Often the participants value the time the ethnographer spends with them. They may value the chance to have a copy of the interview-tape for their families to listen to, as happened with one of my students, Helena Kupari. Marja Tiilikainen's ethnographic study of Somali women in Finland is a beautiful example of the concrete gifts an ethnographer can give. Since the Somali women were immigrants who, at the time of the research, did not know much about the system of the Finnish welfare state, the researcher helped them with many official as well as unofficial matters and errands. She also initiated a project in which the women published their poems in an anthology.[19] In this case the gifts of the ethnographer helped those being researched to find their way in their new homeland and thus become more autonomous and accomplished in conducting their lives.

Some ethnographers have also offered their research participants the opportunity to read and comment on the written analyses, and thus to take a more active and ambitious role in the construction of knowledge. One Finnish ethnographer, Anne Puuronen, gave her subjects (young women recovering from anorexia) the opportunity to take part in analysing the material. In this case of co-authorship the mutual gift-exchange became an integral part of the production of composite knowledge.[20] Puuronen's research was an open, if also very labourious and time-consuming process, in which the cooperative writing and analysis continued throughout nearly the whole research project.[21]

There may be several conditions the ethnographer must be prepared to meet before she will be given the gifts she wants. The participants may, in some cases, ask that the researcher deposit a token in order to become the recipient of their gifts. This is understandable: why should they be naively generous donors? The required deposit may be a piece of a life story of the ethnographer similar to what the participant is giving. Or it may be some proof of loyalty.

Making embodiment into text

Among other things, ethnography involves production of knowledge from complex social and embodied life-world contexts and then representing that knowledge as text. There are many issues involved in this production, none of them simple, but to close this essay I will take up only one, which has a very concrete bearing on textualisation. A lot happens when a voice or an action is put into transcribed form. Every ethnographer knows this, and the criticism of textualisation is well known in ethnographic tradition and theory. Often, however, in the process of writing, we take as the object of analysis the written representations of our material and leave the embodied material aside. We do this even though we know that in some ways the written representation does not always equal the uttered voice or embodied action.

There are some scholarly reflections on this issue. In her latest book the medical anthropologist Marja-Liisa Honkasalo writes about how she goes back to the tapes whenever there is something in the transcribed material that starts to make her uneasy. Since her research is on the experience of suffering and how people act with suffering, such things as tones of voice, sighs, laughs and pauses are important components of knowledge about her subject. Honkasalo therefore tries to include these oral gestures in her analysis, a little like conversation analysts do, but she bases her analysis not only on the detailed transcription but also on the audio-material as well as on the reflective field notes. Interpretation of these non-textual yet meaningful units does not make the construction of ethnographic knowledge any easier, but it poses extra challenges. Intertwining them in the analysis, and writing about and with them, also requires skills that are not only analytical but also artistic and/or philosophical.[22]

Moreover, the embodied and emotional nature of some interactions also involves the embodiment and emotions of the ethnographer herself. After a long

process of fieldwork she becomes impressed, touched or irritated, and her body gets tired, ecstatic or starts to produce gestures and movements meaningful in the culture she studies.[23] How can these experiential components be integrated into the epistemic enterprise and made to enrich the knowledge being constructed? Here we approach the misty zones of ethnographic writing where it is extremely difficult to give simple instructions as to what to do and what not to do. While waiting for someone to come up with such instructions I try to navigate and help my students navigate by remembering this rough guideline: within the context of discovery everything in the ethnographic experience may be used, whereas in the context of justification we are better off trying to stay close to the accounts of those whom our research is first and foremost about.

Notes

1 See e.g. Peräkylä 2005.

2 Utriainen 1998.

3 See, e.g. Peräkylä 2005.

4 Ortner 1995: 173.

5 Jackson 1989: 9.

6 Utriainen 1999; 2002a; 2002b.

7 See also Gothóni 1977: 72–74.

8 Whiteford & Trotter 2008: 9–10.

9 Whiteford & Trotter 2008: 6.

10 Roth 2005.

11 Gothóni 1977: 80.

12 Coffey 1999: 75.

13 Coffey 1999: 74–75.

14 Gothóni 1977: 73.

15 Society for Applied Anthropology, see Whiteford & Trotter 2008: 8.

16 Roth 2005; see also Kuula 2006: 160–161.

17 Mauss 1980.

18 See Kuula 2006: 115–116.

19 Tiilikainen 2003.

[20] See also Roth 2005, where he reports on how making the researched into co-researchers challenges the writing process.

[21] Puuronen 2004.

[22] Honkasalo 2008.

[23] See, e.g. Kondo 1986.

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