



Moments of Dislocation: Why the Body Matters in Ethnographic Research

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Abstract:

Ethnographies originate in everyday interaction with others, but anthropologists' analysis and interpretation of people's social world is often restricted to their words and identifiable actions. Like in every social setting, much of the knowledge we acquire during fieldwork remains unarticulated and habitual. We often lack the tools to even become aware of it, let alone to bring it into the predicated realm. Still, its existence is the only basis we have for recognizing unarticulated experiences of others. Anthropologists have become very interested in bodily experiences, but have tended either to cognitively interpret the experience of others or to privilege their own experiences as a basis for ethnography. I argue that we should instead use our own bodily experiences to intersubjectively recognize those of others, and I propose avenues for doing so.

Keywords: the body, ethnography, participation, methodology, intersubjectivity, victimhood

Introduction

Researching the body has become enormously popular in the social sciences, and the body occupies a central place in many newer writings about society. One would assume that this preoccupation with the body would also lead the social sciences to a thorough methodological reflexion on the processes of knowledge generation *through one's own being* (*der Leib*, the living body, following Husserl's use), but surprisingly, only a few scholars have engaged with such reflections in print. We have still little understanding of how we as researchers actually conduct research on other people's experiences, which are, by virtue of our being, lived through the body. Although this is very much a phenomenological question, my concern here is with its methodological dimension. How can we access the bodily experience of others? Or, asked in more general terms: how do we actually generate anthropological knowledge? This paper asks how we can become attentive to the part of our knowledge generated during our research experiences that usually remains, for various reasons, unarticulated both in our field

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notes and in our publications: knowledge that has not yet undergone predication, neither in academia nor in the societal environments we are working in. It is such knowledge, however, which helps us to recognize what is important in our informants' life worlds and that shapes the conclusions we draw on the formation of the social.

The paper offers several methodological avenues to unearth this kind of knowledge. It argues that habituation, a necessary part of the fieldwork experience is the condition of the possibility for moments of dislocation¹: moments that are based on intersubjectivity and give us insights into the experiences of the other. I draw on Agar (1985), Fabian (1995) and Zigon (2007) and their enquiries into what can be called 'stumbling' as an important moment for insight in the ethnographic endeavor. I depart, however, from their rather cognitive approach that relies on making mistakes and noting differences between 'the other' and the researcher (see also Throop 2010b and below); instead, I am more interested in non-predicated habitual knowledge and habituation as a condition for the possibility for moments of dislocation to occur. I use the (somewhat unsatisfying term) 'non-predicated' for things not yet, or not anymore, discursively apprehended. In Husserl's phenomenology, the term pre-predicative is usually used. I use 'non-predicated' because I do not want to suggest a chronological order (a point I will come back to at the end of the paper), and to accredit it with a momentary state (-ed) rather than an inherent attribute (-tive).

Methodological literature in anthropology gives us many tools to unearth information, but it tells us little about how precisely we generate knowledge in our everyday lives as researchers. Scholars who have reflected on this question often explore it as a consequence of their interest in the body and its role in relating one's being to the world and participating in the formation of the social (Featherstone, Hepworth and Turner 1991; Förster 2001, 2011; Jackson 1989; Hastrup and Hervik 1994; Okely 1994, 2012; Stoller 1989; Wacquant 2004; Wikan 1991). As I argue elsewhere though 2012, in the course of the formalization of an anthropology of the body in the past three decades (Lock and Farquhar 2007; Mascia-Lees 2011), instead of moving closer to a social scientific understanding of the bodily dimension making up our agency and shaping our lived experience (see Csordas 1990, 1993; Ingold 2000), we have adopted too distanced a gaze on the body (*der Körper*, following Husserl's use).²

One reason for this failure, I believe, is that methodological explorations are inseparable from theoretical concepts. Research on bodily knowledge is often conducted from the assumption, typically informed by Foucault, that discourses invariably and forcefully shape individual and social experience. It is assumed that people represent or that experiences are inscribed. This assumption, however, is based on a cognitive act of distanciation on the researcher's part, an act that eliminates the actual experience by concentrating on its residuals. Identifying representation and inscription is already an act of abstraction on the researcher's part – and is only one of the myriad possible outcomes of lived subjectivity. If we concentrate on them from the outset, we run the danger of not

- 1 I use the term 'dislocation' not the way post-structuralists like Ernesto Laclau use it (see also Norval 2009). It should merely indicate an inter-rupture of something that has been habitual, see below.
- 2 My own approach to the anthropology of the body and the anthropology of experience closely follows the work of Csordas (1990, 1993) and Ingold (2000) who adopt a phenomenological approach to the subject matter. They, however, leave me unsatisfied when it comes to the methodological question of how we can access other people's bodily knowledge (see below). More generally, there is a renewed interest in 'the ordinary' and on ordinary practice such as dwelling, building and walking (Ingold 2000; Musharbash 2009) in relation to the environment. This scholarship often explores bodily experience in its cosmological dimension, though (see, for instance, Stang 2009). I am concerned about this because it leaves out the political and discursive dimension. This scholarship, in my view, marks a shift back to looking at 'structures'. The consequence of this seems to be (but does not have to be) that people are taken out of the ethnography and the ethnographer abandons a critical analysis of their agency – vis-à-vis real structures.

properly understanding bodily experiences, jumping instead to conclusions that fit our theories. Furthermore, this way of looking at the body concentrates on how discourses shape individual narratives (Jackson 2002) and concludes from these discursively shaped ways of narrating on the realm of experience. It is of course indisputable that the public discourse makes available codes for articulating one's own experiences. This does not, however, mean that one's very experiences are necessarily subjected to these codes.

Hannah Arendt problematizes this relationship between the public and the private. She argues that what is possibly articulated in the public realm, and what fails to be heard or seen, is predetermined by what is socially considered relevant in a certain context (Arendt 1958:51ff.). However, she insists that the impossibility of articulating one's experiences in the public realm due to dominant discourses does not mean that such experiences do not exist or matter. They may undergo ideological shifts due to their interplay with the public sphere, but they do not have to. Things left unsaid continue to matter. If they matter – and anthropology certainly is sensitized to things left unsaid and to experiences that resist predication – how do we find methods that do not exclusively study the discursive dimension of society? How can we take the bodily and non-predicated dimension of experience seriously and access individual and social experience grounded in the body? In what follows, I propose practical avenues of how to access the experiences of the other, and tentatively suggest what this entails for anthropological research in general.

Noting Ethnographic Experience

I start with a small vignette from my research with apartheid-era victims in today's South Africa.³ The vignette describes a key moment, far into the second period of my field research in 2010, which made me better understand how I had been conducting research all along. This key moment progressively changed my perspective on what is important in victims' lives.

I had met Ms Nolasti Twala, an elderly member of the victims' support group Khulumani who lives in Philippi Township, Cape Town, frequently during the time of my research. I never saw her alone, but always visited her together with other women. She would welcome us in her house. Her English was very poor and my isiXhosa negligible, so that we could only exchange warm greetings and give each other the comfort of being happy to seeing one another. Ms Twala has a very strong and warm manner to her and her presence always had a good impact on my well being during our visits. The fact that we could not communicate verbally did not discourage her to speak to me in a flow of words now and then; and without understanding the words I believed I grasped how she was and a crucial part of what she wanted to communicate. This specific type of interaction characterized many other situations during my research, as well (Kesselring 2012). Often I just listened and sat there, absent-minded or attentive to catch some words; just generally keen to be around the women, but not so alert as to understand everything that was going on. In order not to overwhelm and be overwhelmed by a quest for complete cognitive understanding, I actually often preferred just to be present.

Similarly, people mostly did not seem to mind my being around them and gently allowed me to partake in whatever they were doing. What they were doing was limited.

3 This paper is based on 19 months of field research among apartheid victims in South Africa between 2009 and 2013.

Ms Nolasti Twala in front of her house, Philippi, Western Cape, May 2009.
Photo: R. Kesselring



Anthropological methodology insists on participating, but there was little real activity in which I could directly participate.⁴ The women's everyday life was not structured like life in a village. They did not work the field or go about daily income generating activities. These elderly women did not pursue a regular task that I could have shared; they were unemployed or beyond working age. Their activities mainly evolved around their children and grandchildren with whom many shared a small house or a shack, and around trying to survive on precarious means dripping in through social grants and their children's occasional jobs. Their active days were over; sometimes too early compared to the age on their identity cards. Whether a day was good or bad depended on how their sugar level was and how their arthritis or wounds from torture or bullets felt, for instance. Hence, the activities I shared with the women were often limited to sitting together and to the occasional attendance of meetings of the support group *Khulumani*.

4 On friendship and shared activity during field research, see Ridler (1996). See Wacquant (2004) for a prime example of how social scientists try out methodologies to access other people's experiences by way of shared activities, in his case, he learnt himself how to box among boxers in an American ghetto.

It was not always clear what kind of data this research environment could generate. Both conversation and shared activities were limited, and there was no easy access to my research questions: how discourses of law and the body shaped people's subjectivities. I was shy, and cautious not to ask my informants to put their experiences of victimhood into words. On the one hand, I did not want to cause any harm to them, on the other hand, I wanted to understand which discursive forms they themselves chose for their victimhood.

In a revealing moment, however, Ms Twala told me something that changed my perspective, or rather, sharpened my attention for something I had practiced but not been capable of understanding cognitively. When I was about to leave for a longer research journey into the country, I said good-bye to Ms Twala and the others. At the moment of leaving her house and hugging her, she spoke, and someone translated: 'She says that her body always felt much better whenever she sees you, Rita.' In that moment, I was just very moved; it was only over the following days and weeks that Ms Twala's words made me think about the bodily dimension of social interaction. I slowly started to realize that there is a most important bodily dimension of victim subjectivity, one that goes beyond tangible signs of injury. In the months that followed, parts of which I still spent in the field, I realized that my informants' bodies had importance beyond being the site of strength or fragility, and that, methodologically, the body was more to me than just the venue of inscription of a discourse or one part of a (material) argument for victimhood.

Here I was, twenty years after Paul Stoller's "The Taste of Ethnographic Things" (1989). His work epitomizes how doing research changes the researcher. Stoller conducted research among the Songhay in Niger from the mid-1970s onwards, and later wrote about his conversion from a hard-core linguistic anthropologist (equipped with 'a language attitude survey, a census, and tape-recorded linguistic data' [1989:4]) to a practitioner of experiential anthropology ('Slowly, I uncovered an important rule: one cannot separate thought from feeling and action; they are inextricably linked' [1989:5]). The anthropology of the body has since been explored; but as briefly elaborated above, it generated limited insight into how to understand the sensory dimension of research, let alone the experiencing dimension of being injured.

The "Writing Culture" project had also been initiated more than twenty-five years ago (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It had primarily been concerned with the notation of ethnographic material (see also Sanjek 1990). The authors' concern was textual theory and textual form. They focused on power relations and the extraction of readable knowledge, but its protagonists also enquired into the conditions under which 'data' is being 'collected'. Although the contributors to "Writing Culture" were concerned with the production of ethnography, they scarcely reflected upon the bodily dimension of generating knowledge.

The two questions which the early writings in the anthropology of the body and the "Writing Culture" project raised seem to persist up to today: how to take note (through cognition and the senses) of what is beyond the verbal, or non-predicated; and how to note down what is neither verbal nor a clearly distinctive action. Fieldnotes, the basis for ethnography, are often void of such sensory experiences (see also Ottenberg 1990).

The almost mythological status of fieldnotes as recorded observations has obscured the pertinence of the highly emotionally loaded 'headnotes', the unwritten recollections. This has fostered a view of intentionality as located in a disembodied mind, and a view of agency as the outcome of cognitive rationality alone. (Hastrup 1994: 174)

After the experiences with Ms Twala, I searched for notions of the body in my fieldnotes, and found indeed little direct indications to it apart from references to the

Cemetery, Aliwal
North, Eastern Cape,
December 2010.
Photo: R. Kesselring



injured body – to wounds, experiences of torture, chronic illness etc. Had I just not jotted down my ‘headnotes’? How could I then retrieve them? Or had I not noted such experiences at all, as the body had not been the focus of my research questions? – Only after several re-readings of my fieldnotes, I realized they did hold information about the body, after all, although jotted down in an untrained and unsystematic manner.⁵

The question of what precedes notification of ethnographic experiences thus deserves a more systematic reflection: How do we even come to note certain ethnographic experiences we make?⁶ In other words, how do we come to ‘attend’ to something? Phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty ponders the notion of attention and suggests that paying attention turns something which has been there as ‘horizon’ into a new object.

To pay attention is not merely further to elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation of them by taking them as figures. They are performed only as horizons, they constitute in reality new regions in the total world. [...] Thus attention [...] is the active constitution of a new object which makes explicit and articulates what was until then presented as no more than an indeterminate horizon. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 35)

Merleau-Ponty does not indicate through what kinds of processes such a ‘new object’ is constituted. Thomas Csordas (1993) draws on Merleau-Ponty’s (and others’) work and attempts to look at the operationality of what he calls ‘somatic modes of attention’, which are, according to him, ‘culturally elaborated ways of attending to and

5 I certainly believe that observational data can and should include a record of bodily interaction (and that anthropologists can learn a lot from body culture, theatre or sports studies to start describing body practice). There is a danger, however, that this kind of data is interpreted in a behavioristic manner only. Analyzing the bodily movements of people needs to be complemented with a phenomenological approach in order to understand what these kinds of bodily interaction may mean, otherwise one easily slips into primatology and projects it onto persons (e.g. Sugawara 2005).

6 I do not want to suggest a chronological or hierarchical order between notification and noting. How to write about the body and bodily experiences (both in fieldnotes and in publications) is at least as pertinent as the question of how to adopt a sensory and intersubjective approach in our research practices.

with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others' (1993: 138). Attention implies both 'sensory engagement' and an 'object', and he therefore suggests including in a definition of attention both attending *with* and attending *to* the body. In other words, it is prominently one's own body which is the means to connect to others' experiences (see also Widlok 2009). This is similar to Kirsten Hastrup (1994), who understands the body as a medium which gives access to what may still be non-predicated.

The feel for ethnographic relevance to a large extent is mediated by the bodily and sensory experience that may precede linguistic competence. (Hastrup 1994: 227)

Although readily comprehensible and indeed revolutionary for anthropological scholarly literature as a whole, notions of scholars like Hastrup and Csordas are also slightly tautological: It is through our own bodily experiences that we can come closer to experiencing the experiences of others. But how do we then decrypt our own bodily experiences? How precisely do we attend with our bodies and attend to bodies?

Field Research as a Maussian Experience

The question of how we attend relates to the ways in which we grow accustomed to a new research field. In the literature on anthropological methodology, the habitual dimension of the researcher's knowledge is a major concern. Knowledge acquired in (our first) socialization has to be revised in anthropology's rite of passage: the second socialization. Here, habituation can be seen as an obstacle to truly access foreign forms of sociality (cf. Girtler 2001: 65ff.). How can a researcher take on his or her informants' perspectives if the environment in which s/he has grown up and has lived for most of her/his life has shaped him or her culturally and socially? Förster (2001) suggests that 'seeing' (sensory activity) instead of 'observing' (cognitive activity) is a way to acquire (habitual and non-predicated) knowledge that avoids 'looking for' cognition as pre-defined by our own categories of knowledge. In order to 'observe', we need to direct our cognitive attention to a predicated subject. Seeing, in contrast, does not condition the predicated or the normative. Hence, Förster pleads for a rehabilitation of the everyday act of seeing. He attributes a habitual dimension to seeing and participating, but nonetheless grants the possibility that we resume attention. What we with hindsight try to understand in a predicated manner is, he argues, closer to lived experience than had we started with predicated intentionality at the first place (2001: 22).

My argument closely follows Förster's line of thinking but my concern is a slightly different one. I suggest that there is a distinct quality about what is experienced through the body. Embodiment of experience means that subject and object have merged into a way of being in a world. Embodied experiences do not easily have a referent in the world. It is thus difficult to refer to them in a social exchange.⁷ 'Being embodied'

7 To take but one example of bodily experience, pain: Elaine Scarry (1985) is often quoted for the inexpressibility of pain. According to her, pain has no referential content – contrary to most other interior states of consciousness which refer to an object in the external world. We feel for somebody, we fear of something. This, Scarry calls the human being's capacity to move out beyond the boundaries of one's own body into an external world we share (1985: 5).

necessarily refers to something internal that first needs to be externalized or: predicated. This entails a shift in consciousness, though, that is probably larger than making something visible into an object.

General literature on fieldwork practice not only argues that (first) habituation shapes our outlook, but that we need to go through (second) habituation as quickly as possible. A quick ‘immersion’ into the new environment is typically aspired to. The sooner one learns the daily in and outs of a place and a particular community, the sooner one can start focusing on the ‘real’ issues. During the first months in the field, anthropologists need and want to become streetwise and an active and somewhat self-sufficient agent in a new environment (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). As a consequence, we are anxious to as quickly as possible overcome newness and relegate it to the habitual space of our being. Necessarily, there is a degree of habituation in this process. We cannot constantly reflect on everything and disallow everything from becoming part of what is normal.

In short: familiarization with the field and the sedimentation of certain routines are necessary (but not sufficient) preconditions for research. This process of habituation is precisely what makes the anthropological approach unique (see also Herzfeld 2009). This is our prime technique and gives us unique access to the lifeworlds of others. Now, as necessary as this may be (for knowledge production and, sometimes literally, survival), this also has its downside for a thorough generation of anthropological knowledge. Habituation may turn against us: on the way of becoming habituated to a new environment, we lose attention.

To understand this (normative and technical) problem better, let us apply Marcel Mauss’ notion of techniques of the body (1934) not to the object of anthropological inquiry, but to the researcher him/herself. Mauss wrote that, once a technique is mastered, attention recedes into the horizon. This is a problem for anthropology. It means that as soon as we have acquired a technique (anything from movements to wordings etc.), attention to it dwindles. By gaining habituation, we lose attention. So how can what has been habitual or non-predicated knowledge re-enter the realm of cognition? How precisely can we resume attention? Mauss does not say that we lose the ability to access newly acquired knowledge upon habituation. But we need something that triggers our attention. In his lecture, he uses the example of the difference between the French and the English way of marching during World War I, something the Englishmen realized when a regiment set out to march along French buglers and drums. Marching and music could not possibly be aligned. The ‘wrong’ combination was the trigger to recognize the difference in trained and habituated gait. Heidegger (1996 [1953]), in turn, uses the example of a hammer (‘ready-to-hand’, *zuhanden*) which becomes ‘present-at-hand’ (*vorhanden*) in a moment of ‘breakdown’, that is when the hammerhead becomes loose from the handle (see also Zigon 2007: 134–138).

Moments of Dislocation: How We Come to Attend

I suggest we can distinguish two processes through which we come to attend to something. First, the way from ignorance to (cognitive) knowledge: We notice something which we did not note cognitively before; we learn something new because we are exposed to something new. It is what phenomenologists Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckman call ‘a new theme’ (1974: 187ff.; see also Waldenfels 2004). We then place this new experience into a relation to relevant structure and content that we have previously acquired.

We can state generally that the less familiar a total situation is the greater the attentiveness will be with which one turns to it, so to speak, ‘on one’s own’. [...] In other words, if one cannot be routinely oriented in a situation, one must explicate it. And if one knows that in advance, then he also in advance turns to it ‘voluntarily’. (Schütz and Luckmann 1974: 191)

But themes do not necessarily have to intrude, there is also what the phenomenologists call ‘motivated thematic relevance’: Both ‘imposed’ and ‘motivated’ attentiveness are triggered by a ‘theme change’. All of this happens in the cognitive reflective realm. In other words, the kind of knowledge which we acquire through this first process, from ignorance to knowledge, is cognitive.

There is a second process through which we come to attend to something: from (cognitive, habitual or non-predicated) knowledge to recognition. In these cases, we attend to something to which we have grown accustomed. That means that something has been present in our experience habitually or not predicated (but possibly also cognitively). Due to a specific (yet to be defined) incidence, the habitual or routinized dimension gets unmasked, so to say, and we recognize something ‘anew’. Knowledge from which we move to recognition can be non-predicated, cognitive and habitual. The latter, habitual knowledge, is particularly interesting for my analysis here. It has not become a ‘theme’ yet, yet it is knowledge. In order to disentangle this seeming contradiction, I draw on Schütz and Luckmann for their definition of ‘habitual knowledge’:

Habitual knowledge is on hands in situations, not simply at hand from case to case. [...] It is not necessarily cogiven in the horizon of every situation, [...] rather it is only continually “ready to grasp”. [...] It is not thematized and it is rather automatically included in situations and acts. Habitual knowledge presents “definitive” solutions to problems, which are organized in the flow of



Ethel Khali in her mother's house in Tsolo, Eastern Cape, August 2009.
Photo: R. Kesselring

In Swaziland with
Amanda Mabilisa,
June 2009.
Photo: R. Kesselring



lived experience without one having to give them attention. (Schütz and Luckmann, 1974: 108)

Habitual knowledge is thus knowledge which has gone through a process of sedimentation (see also Ostrow 1990). It ‘flows’ precisely because it is not a theme. Marcel Mauss, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Paul Connerton (1989) confirm that the acquisition of habitual knowledge requires sensory experience. It is only through a process that addresses the senses that something can recede to the background of our attention and assume a habitual dimension in our perception of the world. Recognition of knowledge that has turned habitual or that resides in the non-predicated realm can happen in different ways. The first way, and one that is immediately apparent in a scientific tradition that privileges recognition as a largely cognitive act, is recognition based on new cognitive knowledge which helps me to recognize a new element of my (non-predicated) knowledge about the world. An activity such as reading and reflection directs our attention to something that thereby enters the realm of the predicated. This is indeed crucial for anthropological interpretation. Very often, for example, reading what other scholars have written gives us a completely new understanding of things we know from the field without ever having thought about them.

But given our bias toward the textual, verbal and visual, we tend to forget another form of recognizing: through sensory and bodily information (cf. Förster 2014). A sensory or bodily experience is one important possibility of accessing habitual knowledge. It can give us access to what has resided in the non-predicated realm. Examples are tastes, a touch, smells and sounds (see also Leder 1990; Howes 2005). Even the environment shapes our perception of the world and is therefore a source of recognition. Drawing on theories of place, scholars suggest that we are not only embodied but also ‘emplaced’ (Casey 1996; Ingold 2007); there is thus a ‘sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment’ (Casey 1996: 7). On a more methodological note, Pink (2008) draws our attention to the fact that we the researchers, too, are ‘emplaced’ in ethnographic contexts and engage in place-making practices.

A sudden recollection through one of these sensory channels, and our attention is drawn to something we have never thought of consciously. This kind of recognition enters our corpus of predicated knowledge about the world upon sensory stimulation. Not only new pieces of knowledge help us to recognize previously made experiences as such, but also new experiences can help us to recognize what we have known in a non-predicated manner. Mauss' example of the English military gait that is not compatible to French military music is one such incidence. The resulting confusion may be the beginning of a cognitive reflection on the respective gaits. In any case, both sensory and cognitive stimulus, if successful, result in a moment of dislocation. We halt, we stop; and something in what we understand about the world changes.

In anthropological field research, creating the condition for the possibility of recognition or: moments of dislocation is particularly important. In other words, we have to acquire a new stock of (habitual, non-predicated and cognitive) knowledge from which we can then potentially learn something new about our informants' lifeworlds and the world in general. Typically, we enter a new field with our ready-made knowledge about it. We have research questions in our mind, we have read literature and come with our theories and concepts, and many other ideas of how the world (is supposed to) function(s). This kind of cognitive knowledge is often very stubborn, as much as we would like to be open for its overthrow by new experiences. But we sometimes do make new experiences which contradict our taken-for-granted notions about the world.

My contribution thus follows a small number of scholars who, more or less systematically, have tried to systematize stumbling as a moment that leads to insights. Fabian (1995) writes on making mistakes and ethnographic misunderstanding as a source of insight. Agar (1985) examines the researcher's own taken-for-granted ways of acquiring knowledge. Similar to what Zigon (2007) calls 'moral breakdown, Agar identifies 'mandated breakdowns', hence the failure to understand, as the source of knowledge. These scholars have primarily looked at the cognitive and sought to understand the predicated. My own enquiry is complementary to theirs in that it focuses on moments where the researcher's habituated being confronts non-predicated knowledge. I thus not only shift focus onto the non-predicated but also approach the theme from a 'positive' angle: we begin to understand because we have been acquiring non-predicated knowledge that we have not even been aware of. Certainly, the predicated and the non-predicated always interact and condition one another.

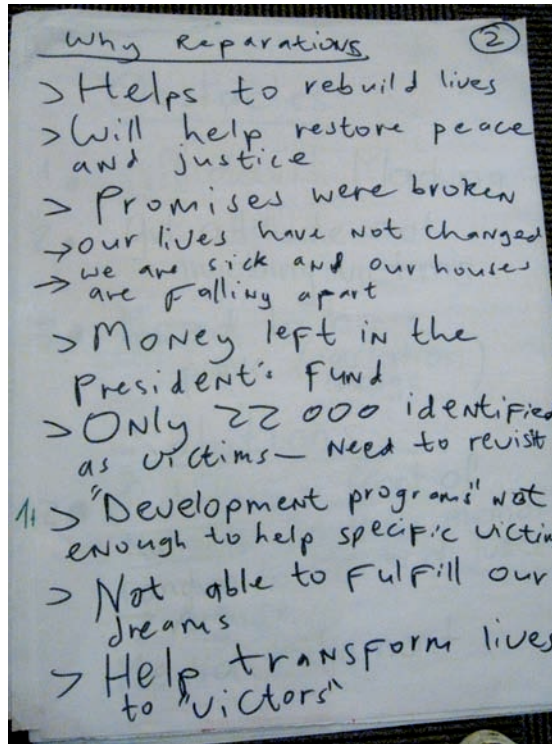
In what follows, I lay out two ways how non-predicated knowledge that we generate as part of our research experience can be recognized by us as information about our informants' experience of the world. Of course, we cannot assume that the researcher and the informants – or any two persons sharing a social situation – can ever make an identical experience. Or in Husserl's words: 'Each person has, from the same place in space and with the same lighting, the same view of, for example, a landscape. But never can the other, at exactly the same time as me (in the originary content of lived experience attributed to him) have the exact same appearance as I have. My appearances belong to me, his to him' (Husserl 1989:177). Habitual knowledge shapes our perception of the world. People have a different stock of knowledge when they encounter one another. If we share an experience even as banal as walking together (see also Gilbert 1990), we do not experience it in the very same way.⁸ Hence, we can thus only look for ways through

8 Kusenbach (2003) elaborates on what she calls the 'go-along method' where she, more or less systematically and informant-driven, accompanies people on their daily errands and other practical everyday activities (in urban settings). 'Go-along' as method oscillates between interviewing and observing people. It remains unclear to me how exactly the researcher can access the informants' spatial, social and emotional experiences that emerge as part of these joint activities (see also Gilbert 1990). One important advantage of 'going along' is, of course, that the researcher understands better how knowledge relates to immediate action more so than in interviews or by way of observation.

which we can recognize other people's experience without having experienced the world in an identical manner.

Poster produced by apartheid victims at workshop with UK and US lawyers, Johannesburg, July 2009.

Photo: R. Kesselring



Imagination: What We Can Share

Most would agree that the participatory dimension of the anthropological method produces some kind of shared experiences. This is not to say that observing, or seeing for that matter, cannot result in shared experiences; but as many argued before, mere observation potentially produces distance. Doing something together is by default a sensory and bodily activity that leaves impressions on the researcher (see also Spittler 2001). These impressions often are and remain non-predicated. For that very reason, not everyone subscribes to sharing experiences as a valuable ethnographic method. Geertz (1986), for instance, rejects any possibility of knowledge production as a result of shared experiences.

We cannot live other people's lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We can but listen to what, in words, in images, in actions they say about their lives. As Victor Turner [...] argued, it is with expressions – representations, objectifications, discourses, performances, whatever – that we traffic. [...] Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone's inner life, we gain it through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. (Geertz 1986:373)

Judith Okely (1994) is one of the few scholars who have tried to clarify what Geertz discards as 'magic'. She conducted research on elderly people and elderly people's

homes in rural Normandy, France. Just like I was confronted with elderly and sick people who had lost much of their mobility and agility due to their age and the bodily manifestations of their suffering under apartheid, Okely was faced with inactive informants with whom she had to find creative ways to connect her own and their lifeworlds. As a consequence, her fieldwork partly consisted of working in the fields – something her informants had done all their lives before they were transferred to the institutions. Okely suggests to substitute what Geertz calls ‘magic’ with sensory knowledge and ‘one which is gained through experience of the everyday rather than confined to distilled external representations’ (1994: 48). She criticizes that the authors of “The Anthropology of Experience” (Turner and Brunner 1986) understood experience as events and expressions. As a way of accessing the everyday experience of others, she suggests to work through what she calls vicariousness: “The anthropologist cannot replicate others’ experience, but she can use her own [experience] for a vicarious understanding to surmise others’ experience’ (Okely 1994: 47). As such, the ‘having been there’ assumes a quite different meaning from anthropologists’ typical assertions of authority as regards their interpretation of happenings in a particular locality.

My cumulative experience in the field and a familiarity with aspects of the subjects’ past or present through participant observation were conveyed back to them, not just through words but through their recognition that I had ‘been there’ and had experienced something similar through bodily presence, action and sight, sound, taste, touch or smell. I had engaged in agricultural labour of the kind they had once known. Here a distinction can be made between subjective experience which is individual, and creative understanding which is an approximation to empathy but never complete. (Okely 1994: 49)

If we include the possibility of sharing experiences vicariously both ways between researcher and researched, the grounds to potentially access informants’ experiences must be rethought. Sharing experiences then does not mean that something is experienced together, but time and place of a shared experience may be different for each of the persons. Whether directly experienced together or not, it becomes much more clearly tangible as a joint experience in the act of sharing it than in the act of experiencing it. Shared experience may result in *shared imagining*.⁹ Shared imagining may include to experience something vicariously, as in Okely’s research where she physically experienced what her informants had been doing their whole lives before they had met in a retirement home. Imagining, then, refers to an idea of how something is done or is supposed to be done (which may result in a shared intention, see Gilbert 1992, 2009). It is normative for the persons who share an imagination, but it is not necessarily in compliance with dominant discourses. Imagining is mostly non-predicated (Förster 2013), but it may also emerge in an articulated form when it seems conducive or necessary.¹⁰ For it to enter the predicated, it needs a (verbal or sensory) trigger to be *recognized*.

My argument that shared experiencing is possible even if removed in time and space may sound counterintuitive especially when considering the criticism against

9 Strictly analytical, one has to distinguish between the process of the formation of something shared and the product coming out of that. The latter entails a shared intentionality and includes everything from an idea to an action. Here, I lump it together because my main interest is the process of how we establish a shared reference of a part of the world. I am thus interested in intersubjectivity as the basis for recognizing the other rather than the product itself. One could of course argue that intersubjectivity is already a product.

10 According to Emirbayer and Mische (1998), imagination is one element of agency. Förster understands imagination as a practice. I cannot claim to contribute to this debate here and refer to Förster’s writings (2013).

non-ethnographic methods and its assumptions of what is being shared (e.g. bridging intercultural differences). However, by making this point, I want to precisely emphasize the fact that there has to be something to mutually refer to indeed for shared experiencing to work.¹¹ Engaging in agricultural practice per se does not, of course, suffice to recognize every other farmer's personhood.¹² Gaps in time and space need to be bridged through a direct exchange, for instance, about the ways the respective hands are equally marked by the work with soil, and 'thick knowledge' to contextualize the exchange. We do not only have to be contemporaries but also share a face-to-face (ideally 'thick') encounter. Duranti (2010) makes a similar point when outlining Husserl's idea of intersubjectivity not as 'reading the mind of the other' but as 'trading places': '[Husserl's] idea [of intersubjectivity] is not that we simultaneously come to the same understanding of any given situation (although this can happen), but that we have, to start, the possibility of exchanging places, of seeing the world from the point of view of the Other' (Duranti 2010:21).

My research entailed numerous instances of shared imagining. Just like in Okely's research, my research with elderly or injured people meant that I often lived 'aspects of [their] former lives' (Okely 1994:53). In the course of my research, I witnessed how members became too ill to attend Khulumani meetings, for instance. When I went to

Eunice Mgweba and granddaughter in her stall along Ingulube Road, Philippi, Western Cape, August 2009.

Photo: R. Kesselring



11 Borneman (2011) may call the something the 'third intersubjective'.

12 For Husserl (1989:91), 'nature is an intersubjective reality and a reality for me and my companions of the moment but for us and all those who must enter into an interaction with us and can come to an understanding with us about things and people' (translation by Duranti 2010:22). This reminds us that, while there is always the possibility that intersubjectivity leads to an understanding, it can easily fail.

the township subsequently, they inquired about what had been debated at the meeting. As time passed, I grew into someone who went to the meetings for them; to report, but also in my own right as someone who did what they could not do themselves anymore, but of which they had a clear idea what it had meant to them. With many of the more active members, I shared the experience of trying to make Khulumani's work and members' concerns and needs legible to the state. Without romanticizing this (our ideas of social justice and social equity most likely differed widely): we jointly experienced our respective daily attempts of working towards them. With one executive member in particular, I had a very close relationship. Our shared concern was national and regional governance in the organization. This meant that we regularly talked for hours about what the problems were and how they could be addressed. By doing so, we learnt a lot about the other's imagination, which, in turn, helped us to clarify our respective understanding of what was and what needed to be done. Another dimension of experiencing vicariously cuts across time. My travels to different branches of Khulumani, which is present nation-wide, took me to places where people had been in the 1970s or 1980s as a domestic worker or for a visit. My visit to Soweto, to Mthatha in the former homeland of Transkei or to Zwelethemba in the rural Western Cape, as an instance, came to mean a visit to what they remember of and associate with the place (activism, work, family, imprisonment etc.).

Intersubjectivity: How We Come to Recognize

So far, I have shown that shared imagining can be the basis for something else: a shared *r e f e r e n c e* to an experience. But how does this shared reference turn into a shared perception, and the possibility for recognition? Ms Twala, by telling me how my presence influenced her being, made me aware of the intersubjective dimension of conducting research. Intersubjectivity means that two or more people share a judgment of aspects of the world they inhabit and that they understand this as a given in their interaction, but also as part of their world. In the case of Ms Twala and myself, we could not share much content with words. Even if this may be why we came to share much sociability through non-verbal means, I am of course not suggesting that lack of linguistic mastery is generally beneficial for intersubjectivity to emerge (cf. Förster 2014, Duranti 2010 and Throop 2012).¹³ The best possible field situation is probably one where mastery of linguistic as well as non-linguistic registers can be combined.¹⁴

Surely, as Förster (2011:11) shows, the emergence of intersubjectivity entails a sensory and bodily dimension. When Ms Twala commented on her well-being and attributed me a role in the fluctuations of her health, she also commented on how she saw me. By doing so, she expressed and reinforced an intersubjective relation and commented on it through the expression of a bodily experience which directly resulted

13 In a similar vein, Throop (2012:87–88) interprets a key moment in Malinowski's research on the Trobriand with his inability to fully understand casual talk. On intersubjectivity seen from a linguistically oriented anthropology, see Duranti (1993). Duranti also provides a detailed analysis of Husserl's use of intersubjectivity, which, according to him, includes acts where language is not involved (2010: 17).

14 Within the constraints of this paper, I cannot reflect sufficiently on the relationship between the two registers, and I would be very reluctant to turn it into a methodological maxim. Jackson, in contrast, writing on rituals among the Kuranko in Northeastern Sierra Leone, suggests an 'ethical preference' for embodied communication over speech: 'While words and concepts distinguish and divide, bodiliness unites and forms the grounds of an emphatic, even a universal, understanding' (1989: 135).

from our interaction. This is very close to Michael Jackson's (1989) understanding of intersubjectivity:

To recognize the embodiedness of our being-in-the-world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one, for by using one's body in the same way as others in the same environment one finds oneself informed by an understanding which may then be interpreted according to one's own custom or bent, yet which remains grounded in a field of practical activity and thereby remains consonant with the experience of those among whom one has lived. (Jackson 1989: 135)

I would certainly not go as far as Jackson to say that the self and other become one in a research situation (or ever). Geertz clearly reminds us of the limits to our ability of accessing one another's experiences. But where exactly do we perceive these limits? Do we stop at the possibility of sharing experience through actions? Or do we acknowledge the possibility of the overlapping or even merging of each others' 'horizons' similar to what Lévinas (2003) suggests (see also Throop 2010a, 2012: 87)?

Without having a ready answer to these questions, we can nonetheless say that it was only as a result of intersubjectivity – which Ms Twala so plainly called to my attention – that I came to attend to what I finally thought as relevant in terms of apartheid-era victim subjectivity. For victims, the legacy of apartheid-era violence is difficult to articulate, partly because strong discourses determine which experiences are publicly relevant and which are not. At the same time, most experiences of violence are embodied to the extent that victims need more or less radical social and bodily changes in order to emancipate from them (Kesselring 2012). Ms Twala's comment fell in the horizon of my subjective and sensory experiences in the field. That horizon had prepared me to attend to the embodied dimension of victimhood, but only her remark made a shift from *k n o w l e d g e* to *r e c o g n i t i o n* possible. I had known that my informants have been harmed in various ways. I had known it cognitively before even starting my research. I had known it habitually as my informants' state of being had greatly influenced my research experience and had regularly left me tired, worn out and deeply sad in the evenings. I had partly learnt to deal with these experiences in what I describe above as the researcher's habituation: trying to adjust to the research environment in order to focus on the 'relevant topics'. And I had known all this in non-predicated way, I believe, because I had somehow known I had been missing much, without being able to put my finger on it. I had tried to grasp victims' subjectivity by employing a discursive approach that relied on signs of injury and utterances of harm. Ms Twala finally gave me the chance to look at the injured body in its lived experience, beyond inadequate notions of discourse and inscription.

One is never exempt from all predicated notions, and I am not suggesting that, in my research environment, victims are not conscious of their victimhood.¹⁵ But victimhood is much more than its public performance or the predications we give to it, and our ethnographic methodology should be able to guide us towards this 'more'. In every social environment, certain experiences are not 'a discursive object or a subject of articulation' (Förster 2011: 12). In my case, the embodied nature of experiences of violence had let me sense people's victimhood, but had also hindered me from accessing

15 In fact, my study analyzed what happens when victims try to articulate their sentient victimhood in the context of discourses of victimhood; whether and why they succeed to make their victimhood politically effective, and why they often fail to be heard in broader society. In order to do so, they objectify their own bodily experience and thus transform it. If we only look at these objectifications, however, we fail to understand even them, let alone the underlying experience. I believe that, in our ethnographic endeavor, we should combine a discursive analysis with a focus of non-predicated experiences. This paper explicitly focuses on the latter.

it in a predicated way. Ms Twala's utterance was the trigger for me to recognize it (cf. Jackson 2011 and Stoller 2008).¹⁶ It was a verbal action – as outlined above, a preferred trigger momentum. Nonetheless, her words would have fallen on (my) deaf ears had I not acquired a habitual and non-predicated understanding of her and other people's victimhood over many months. It was only by way of our shared experiences (of their daily activities, the being-together, the public and private meetings etc.) that I was able to grasp the relevance of what she had told me. The object of recognition was thus not her wellbeing and my presence alone; it was an element of my previously habitual and non-predicated knowledge about victims' subjectivities that turned into cognitive knowledge. Cognition – partial and forever limited – again only came later once I started engaging with my fieldnotes, read literature about the body and injured personhood and look at photographs and other ethnographic material (see also Pink 2009: 190ff.).

Intersubjectivity is the basis for attendance to what is relevant in informants' life-worlds – for recognizing an element of our stock of knowledge that we have acquired as part of our engagement with the world and with our informants' lives. Intersubjectivity is based on experiences we make jointly. It goes beyond empathy because it allows for mutual recognition and a re-definition of what has been.¹⁷ It will always remain difficult, as Geertz reminds us, to prove the similarity of shared experiences. However, we should leave the door ajar for the possibility of sharing. Shared experiences can be the basis for something else: a shared reference to an experience that, in turn, is manifest in a shared perception of the world. The fact that it is possible to intersubjectively recognize an overlapping of perception is a step toward proving that a non-predicated access to the experiences of others is indeed possible. If we deny this possibility, we reject the possibility of socialization more general; unless one argues that socialization is based on words only.

Conclusion: Compensating the Unequal

With regard to the ethnographic method, Roger Sanjek notes that 'anthropologists have done a better job of using than articulating it' (1991: 617). In this paper, I tried to articulate what largely remains in the non-predicated realm in reflections on the ethnographic method and in ethnographies themselves.

Participation, if taken seriously, results in a degree of habituation to a new environment. We engage bodily with new forms of doing things, speaking, and relating to new people, objects (cf. Napier 2014), landscapes etc. However, as we grow accustomed, we lose attention to the 'new'. I suggested that there are ways through which

16 Both Jackson (2011) and Stoller (2008) have explored the 'power of the between', i.e. intersubjectivity, in their recent reflections of their earlier research experience, which dealt with human suffering, want and – creativity. For both, storytelling as a path to explore how we learn from one-another helps them to come to theoretical insights.

17 Here, I refer to the colloquial understanding of what 'empathy' is. Hollan (2008) corrects this use of 'empathy' by arguing that it not only involves the experience of understanding the other (as it is typically explained) but also the experience of being understood; it is hence an intersubjective process. For cutting edge research on empathy (not so much as methodology but as a human condition), see Hollan and Throop (2008). I agree with Hollan and Throop (2011) and Giesser (2008) who include a bodily dimension in their understanding of empathy (see also Halpern 2001 who writes on empathy in a clinical context but it is, unfortunately, conceptually very vague). While my concern here is what can possibly be shared, a focus on empathy maintains a 'first person-like perspective' (Hollan and Throop 2010: 390) by asking how we can share it, though.

we can recognize an element of the knowledge we have acquired bodily which, in turn, gives us clues about what is relevant to our informants. These moments of dislocation trigger a process that helps us to cognitively access knowledge that was previously in the realm of the habitual or non-predicated. The moment of dislocation through which non-predicated and habitual knowledge enters our cognitive realm can happen in different forms. We tend to privilege the visual and the verbal, but it can as well be a sensory experience that dislocates us.

For moments of dislocation to occur, habituation is a necessary if not a sufficient condition. It is important to point out that what shifts from the non-predicated into the cognitive realm may recede into non-predicated realm again, namely by way of renewed habituation. This is why I used the term non-predicated as opposed to Husserl's pre-predicative. The latter could be misleading in that it suggests that the formation of predication is linear rather than circular. Even if his notion of 'moral breakdown' differs from my own argument, Zigon makes a similar point.¹⁸ He sees the possibilities for transformation of the everydayness in the aftermath of a 'moral breakdown', that is when 'persons or groups of persons are forced to step-away from their unreflective everydayness and think-through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems' (2007: 140). It is a return to a new state of familiarity, so to say, that is different from what it was before.

This paper is a search for a form of knowledge that helps us to understand other people's experience without having experienced the world in an identical manner (which of course is impossible, or at least improvable). I lack the experience of living under apartheid rule and can never share these experiences, which still shape my informants' lives.¹⁹ But with the help of intersubjective research experiences, I could still start recognizing the particularity of the apartheid's legacy. For intersubjectivity to emerge, we need two things. Firstly, what Schütz and Luckmann call 'we-relations': The 'immediate experience of the other' conditions that the other 'appear[s] to me in his [sic] live corporeality: his body is for me a perceivable and explicable field of expression which makes his conscious life accessible to me' (1974: 62). Secondly, we need the shared knowledge that we share parts of the social worlds. By imagining together, we create a shared reference to how we see the world. Such a perception often emerges from doing something together without putting into words what we are working towards. This overlapping perception is a form of non-predicated access to the experience of others. Hence, if we cannot experience something identically, we can at least come to a shared perception of the world, which gives us clues as to what is relevant in our informants' lifeworlds.

The ground for such knowledge and moments of dislocation is intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity guides the researcher's interest toward the important questions and sometimes enables recognition, because it sediments experiences and directs our attention towards them. Formulated differently, if we take ethnographic experiences seriously, the intersubjective nature of research implies that our informants often lead us to what is relevant for them. This can be a conscious and even strategic decision on their part; but it has a more subtle side, in which non-predicated intersubjectivity draws us to experiences close to their own, and later draws our attention to 'themes'. Spending sufficient time with our informants for processes of habituation, intersubjectivity, recognition and imagination to happen is central to accessing this knowledge.

18 Zigon (2007) is critical of an anthropology of moralities, which diffuses the social and the moral, and suggests limiting it to what he calls a moral breakdown.

19 Rosaldo (1993: 1–21) movingly shows what can be foreclosed to the researcher if she has not first experienced something similar to her informants' experiences in the context of her own life. Consider, however, Throop (2010a) for an account of how similar experiences may in fact conceal aspects of another person's lived reality.

Tsolo, Eastern Cape,
August 2009.
Photo: R. Kesselring



Throop is interested in a similar process through which we come to understand. According to him, the ‘ethnographic epoché’ (a state of suspended judgment) is an ‘unwilled’ shift in attention that is enacted in the context of the ethnographic encounter, an encounter that is often defined by the recurrent frustration of our attempts at achieving an intersubjective attunement with our interlocutors’ (2010b:281; emphasis in original). In other words, ‘experiences of estrangement’ and ‘confrontations with alterity’ are the source for a moment ‘where we feel some form of empathy with our interlocutors’ (2010b:281). The point of entry is an interplay of inaccessibility and vulnerability through which we are compelled to view the other ‘as a subject and not an object of experience’ (2010b:279).²⁰ I contrarily argued in this paper that the basis for recognition can also be what we share by way of doing things together and developing a shared perspective onto parts of the world. Dislocation does not occur in ‘the between’ but *wit h i n m y s e l f*. We enter into a state where moments of dislocation become possible by participating bodily in the lifeworlds of others, and not by willingly or unwillingly suspending our judgment. Recognition emerges from the shared experience of being-in-the-world, not from ontological difference.

It is only upon a sensory engagement with others’ lifeworlds and lived realities that we have a chance to understand what it means to be (in a body). Encounters between the researcher and the researched have an impact on the respective subjectivities; we both emerge changed. How these shifts can be shared – and whether they should be shared (in a field work context, see Borneman 2011), is another question. Analytically (and hopefully politically, cf. Herzfeld 2009), the researcher and the researched come to be on the same level. This sensory and bodily ethnographic experience should then also be reflected in the ethnography and the ways in which we write about the subject and forms of subjectivity. In this sense, this paper is also an attempt to renegotiate the relation between the researcher and the informants, taking forth the project the “Writing Culture” authors have started. If we acknowledge that any generation of anthropological knowledge happens intersubjectively, the exclusive authority of the researcher is bound to dissolve.

20 For more on ethics grounded in ethnographic sensibilities, see Jackson (2005) and Kleinman (1999).

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