

Introduction: Creative Ethnographic Methodologies

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One could argue that creativity is an inevitable part of all research; if you define creativity as making something or as the ability to perceive the world in new ways, it is indeed true. Every research project is in some sense unique and even if you use methods and theories used by many researchers before you, you need to put them together in your own way. For that, you need to be creative. Ever since the *reflexive turn* in anthropology and ethnology, creativity can be understood as an inevitable part of ethnographic epistemology. As discussed by James Clifford and George Marcus in the influential book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), ethnographers do not merely collect the ethnographic material, we write it or create it as well. Conceptions such as ‘thick descriptions’ and ‘faction’ suggest that creative approaches are part of a longer tradition that problematize the division between facts and fiction, reason and affect, as well as objectivity and subjectivity in ethnographic practice. Ethnographic research does not strive to be replicable – not many ethnographers would even believe that it would be possible for someone else to carry out an ethnographic study in the exact same way as a predecessor. Creativity is therefore an integral part of ethnographic practice.

In this theme issue, however, we will discuss and show examples of research that is creative in a way that pushes the boundaries of traditional research a bit further. Research that not only recognizes how the researcher is a co-producer of all ethnography but also actively seeks out collaborations with artistic research practices or creative writing for example. The articles in this issue all describe and analyze how creativity can take place in ethnographic research and how that influences the ethnographic work. This editorial is to be read as an introduction to the collected articles and here we will also contextualize ethnographic creativity by giving some examples on how ethnography and creativity can go hand in hand.

Ethnography as a Creative Process

Ethnography is understood here as something that permeates the whole research process. It is thus not only a research data collection method, but a more holistic approach of doing research that can be incorporated to the whole research process from project planning to research output including fieldwork, analysis, and writing. Thus, creativity can be part of all or some of the parts of the ethnographic research process.

Creativity might mean to use methods and concepts such as ethnographic fiction (Silow Kallenberg 2017), dirty ethnography (Jauregui 2013; Silow Kallenberg 2015), ethnographic film making (Vannini 2020), the using of drawings and art in ethnographic work (Siim 2020), as well as the inspiration one can get from reading fiction (Ingridsdotter 2017), listening to music or in other ways being creative in the ethnographic research processes (cf. Ingridsdotter and Silow Kallenberg 2018). Further, creative methods can also include collaborative, experimental and embodied ways of doing fieldwork.

Other scholars have also suggested that creativity is an important part of ethnographic research. For example, in the introduction of the edited volume *Creative Practice Ethnographies* the editors argue that creativity can be used in three ways in the ethnographic process, namely: “techniques, translation and transmission” (Hjorth et al. 2021). *Techniques* refers to the actual methods and concepts, *translation* is about movement of ideas from one form to another and finally, *transmission* is about making and communicating research. These parts are not however understood to happen in linear processes separate from each other, but are rather viewed as dynamic, generative, and intertwined.

Furthermore, in a recent edited volume *Challenges and Solutions in Ethnographic Research. Ethnography with a twist* the editors argue for a “twist” that emphasizes creativity as one of the ways to conduct ethnographic research with novel and innovative approaches. Creativity is here understood as something that can be utilized when approaching fields as co-produced and co-created (Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). In addition to new ways of doing ethnography and producing research material with others, this means for example collaborations with other professionals, such as artists, filmmakers, programmers, and game designers (2020, xxi). Creative approaches that utilize collaborations with participants and professionals can also dismantle or address power issues of ethnography by problematizing who the producer of knowledge is. Creative methods and genres can be a means to highlight social complexities that are excluded or simplified in more traditional scholarly texts and research processes (cf. Ingridsdotter and Silow Kallenberg 2018). However, in this issue the articles focus on the researchers or artist/researchers’ creativity when doing ethnography.

Finally, in a volume called *A Different Kind of Ethnography* (2016), one of the editors claims that our everyday lives are composed by creative practices and use of imagination that in turn shape and are shaped by our social relations, politics, and cultural formations (Culhane 2016, 3). Thus, creative methods to this kind of everydayness are needed. The ethnography is then understood as “entangled relationships” among different actors such as humans, non-humans, natural, social, and virtual environments. This kind of methodology questions the epistemological starting point in what ethnographic knowledge emerges from detached observations. But instead, the knowledge emerges from conversations, co-practices, and conversation among people active in different kinds of entanglements (Culhane 2016).

Creative Academic Writing

Following discussions on self-reflexivity and “writing culture” (Clifford and Marcus 1986), ethnographic writing has been widely discussed and experimented with. It seems as if the creativity of ethnographers is often expressed in writing. And that makes sense, because writing is what most researchers have in common however different fields of research we are engaged in. “What does the ethnographer do? - He writes,” as Clifford Geertz writes in his influential book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973, 19). Writing is often also the common denominator even when other creative approaches are explored.

Creative academic writing need not necessarily culminate in published texts, instead it can be used as a method for processing and exploring one’s material (cf. e.g., Petö 2014, 89). Sociologist Laurel Richardson has defined writing as just such a “method of inquiry” (Richardson 2000b); to her, writing is as much a matter of knowing as it is of telling (Richardson 2000b; cf. Koobak 2014, 96; cf. Rosaldo 2014). Gender studies researcher Nina Lykke has also emphasized that writing is indivisible from the research process and that writing should be considered part of the analytical process (Lykke 2014). The argument is that we do not simply think first and then write down our thoughts, our scientific ideas are stimulated by the act of writing in different styles (Lykke 2014, 2; cf. Richardson 2000a).

Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo also thinks in similar terms when he reflects on his own method for using ethnographic poetry to achieve insight into a subject (Rosaldo 2014, 106). Rosaldo argues that his mission as a poet “is to render intelligible what is complex and to bring home to the reader the uneven and contradictory shape of that moment” (Rosaldo 2014, 107). In her texts about “poetic inquiry,” Sandra L. Faulkner suggests that writing poems can work as a method to connect body and mind – intellect and emotion, and as a means to remain embodied and reflexive in one’s research (Faulkner 2020, 2). To write poetry in the realm of research is to play with the form of writing to “meld the scientific and the emotive” (Faulkner 2020, 14).

Many scholars have also recognized that other genres are needed to depict certain aspects of life. For example, Mary Louise Pratt discussed how the emotional aspects that are a part of human interactions—and that are accentuated in contexts characterized by social vulnerability and human hardship—are often difficult to combine with the expectations for academic writing (Pratt 1986, 32). Other authors have also recognized the creative potential and practices of autoethnography—another strand of research that allows to bend the form of academic writing a bit (e.g., Ellis 1999; Custer 2014). One could argue that creative research demands creative forms of writing. Anthropologist Tami Spry (2001) has described how autoethnographic writing often comes to her in a more poetic form than the forms normally associated with traditional scholarly prose (Spry 2001, 721).

Several researchers emphasize the creative potential and practices of autoethnography (e.g., Ellis 1999; Custer 2014). As with the genre known as ethnographic fiction, it is also the interpretive aspects that are highlighted when the inherent creativity of autoethnography is discussed.

Visual and Sensory Ethnography

Visual ethnography was long associated mainly with ethnographic film making (Banks and Howard 1997), which has a long history on its own starting from the birth of the observational documentary film called *Cinema vérité*, which was developed by anthropologist Jean Rouch. Visual ethnography then referred mainly to the representation of ethnographic knowledge and research outcomes.

It has also been common to understand visual ethnography as visual research material. It might mean many things, such as pictures, drawings and audiovisual recordings of the researched phenomenon and cultural products in visual forms. This kind of material has then been analyzed as cultural texts that represent ethnographic knowledge and as sites of cultural productions, social interaction and individual experiences constituted in the fieldwork (Pink 2007, 1).

In the recent 10–15 years visual ethnography has had a new context. That is to combine ethnography and art practices that can be about co-operations or researchers own artistic practice. One such co-operation can be found in *Inequalities in Motion*—a research project in what a cartoonist was involved to document and tell the story of Estonian translocal families. In the same project the children's experiences of translocal every day was studied with the help of the children's drawings (Siim 2020). Thus, artistic practice does not necessarily mean deploying an artist in the project, but ethnographers can also be the one who uses art-based methods (see e.g., Willim in this volume).

The artistic practices and visual ethnography are also understood to address the sensory end embodied part of culture and cultural understandings which is oftentimes perceived as difficult to access through interview talk for instance (Pink 2005, 20; Culhane 2017; Alexandra 2017). Images and video can then address the knowledge that is hard to put into words. Nowadays video and photography are part of everyday life through digital devices such as smartphones. This has increased the possibilities of the researcher to relate to our sensory environments with creativity and imagination through recording and editing visual and other sensory material (Boudreault-Fournier 2017, 70). Furthermore, digital storytelling is a method in which computer based audio-visual videos are used to construct narratives that can be used to study sensory and embodied experiences and cultural phenomenon and meanings (Nuñez-Janes et al. 2017).

In this issue we understand the epistemological starting points of visual ethnography connected to 1980's understanding about ethnography as fiction that questioned the positivists arguments of the ethnographic knowledge and emphasized the subjective nature of it. Because of this, visuals became as acceptable as being no less subjective than written text in ethnographic inquiry (Pink 2007, 2). The following reflexive turn that introduced new ideas of knowledge and postmodern theoretical approaches to experience, subjectivity and representation combined with the developments in visual technology raised the interests to the possibilities of visual ethnography.

This Issue: Creative Ethnographic Methodologies

Alternative methodologies as well as mixed genres and other creative approaches, helps us to multiply our views on the world, ourselves as researchers, as well as on our research subjects. In this issue we have collected papers that use imaginative and creative methods to ethnographic inquiries as well as to ethnographic writing. This includes using creative writing such as poetry, visual arts such as watercolor painting and audiovisual arts to convey research outcomes.

Represented in this volume are researchers that were a part of a session at the SIEF 2019 congress in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. We, the guest editors, together with our colleague Jenny Ingridsson convened the panel “Tracking changes through creative research methodologies,” where several aspects of creativity in relation to ethnography were addressed. The articles in this issue are further developments of a few of the papers presented in our panel at the SIEF congress.

Ann-Charlotte Palmgren discusses poetic inquiry as a creative method and as an instrument of knowledge production. In the article Palmgren writes poems to access embodied experience and intertwines them with more traditional academic prose. For Palmgren, poetic inquiry opens for a more multilayered writing.

Robert Willim writes about his work in the intersection of research and art – what he refers to as “more-than-academic practice.” This is something that challenges the idea of academic work as following a linear path, where the outcome is predicted beforehand, and instead introduces a more playful approach where imaginative creativity is embraced.

In the article written by Willim creativity is also present in the way the author create new concepts to understand their material and to open for further thoughts. This shows that research creativity is not just an issue of methods but of theory as well.

Cecilia Fredriksson is working with visual methods and artistic practice in her contribution. She uses urban sketching in watercolors to explore public places from an autoethnographic starting point. She reflects over the knowledge produced through water coloring and her own position in that practice as both an artist and an ethnographer.

We suggest that these articles in different ways address and show that creativity is essential both for gaining knowledge about a field of research and for communicating research results, both in- and outside of academia. We also hope that this collection of articles can invoke interest and curiosity in other researchers to try out more creative approaches to ethnography and to think about in what ways ethnography is intertwined with creative practices.

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