

The ethnographer as a storyteller

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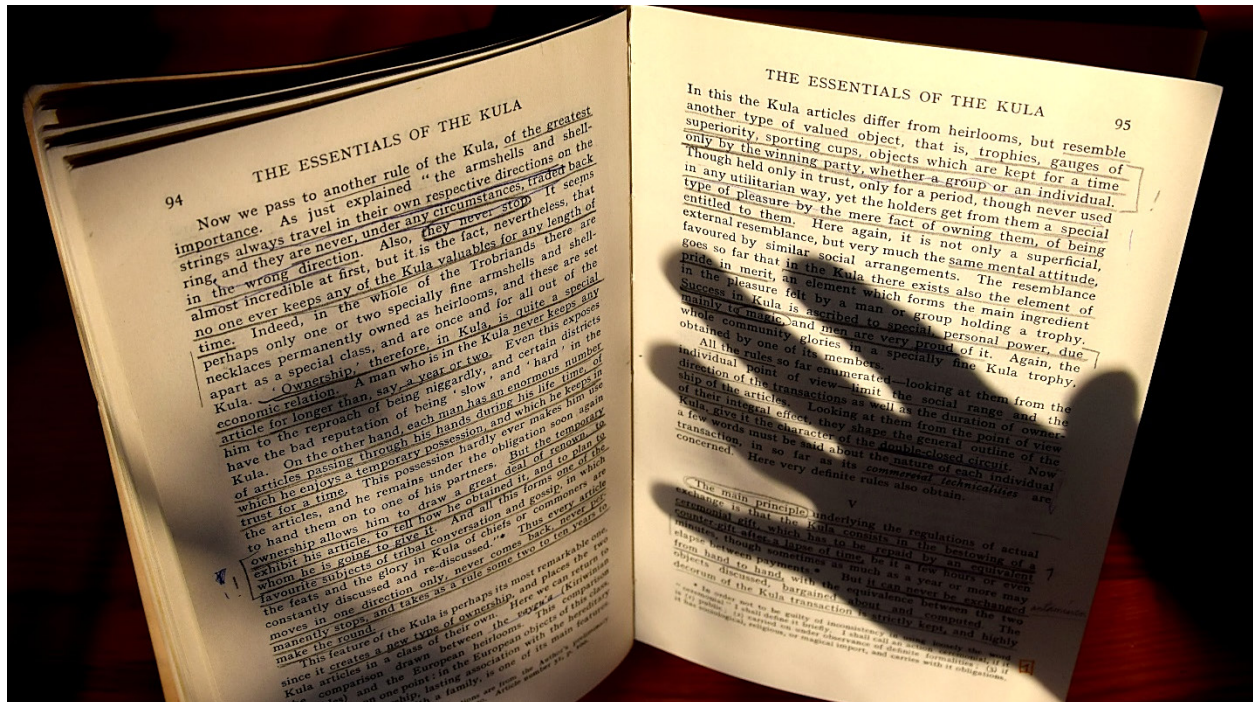


Figure 1: Ethnographic narratives are based on personal experiences [book in the photo: Malinowski, 1922] © Eino Heikkilä

Ethnography is not just a literary description of a social group or culture, it's also writing about the researcher him/herself. In this article an ethnographer as a storyteller refers to a point of view, where the researcher as the narrator of an ethnography tells an informative, evocative story of his/her fieldwork and the dialogue between him/her and research subjects. Analysing ethnography as a written narrative indicates that researcher's roles as the author and narrator of the text should be taken into account when evaluating ethnographic knowledge in our time.

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What is Ethnography?

Ethnography is a way of doing cultural research: a way of seeing, experiencing and interpreting what one experiences. Ethnographic research has spread from anthropology to many social and humanistic disciplines, united by an interest in man as a member of his/her culture. In ethnography, the researcher's gaze is usually focused on a group of people and its cultural specificities. The object of ethnographic research is located in a field that can be concretely understood as a place where research is carried out or, through the researcher's choices, as a modified relationship network, a limited piece of the social world. Ethnographic fieldwork is characterized by the researcher sharing everyday life with his or her subjects, being present "where nothing special happens" (Lappalainen, 2007: 9-11).

On the other hand, the separation of the field from the physical environment means that ethnographic research can be carried out even on the basis of mere written material, in an archive or library - in which case a diverse and historical analysis of the material becomes essential. All ways of doing ethnography have in common the role of the researcher as a questioner and an interpreter, and these features make each ethnography unique. This uniqueness is also a result from different ways of constructing ethnographic narrative (Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto, 2014: 9, 28).

In my research I'm analysing how a researcher has written him/herself into an ethnographic text. When I think of ethnography as literary output and literature, I approach the question of what is the relationship between the author of a research and the narrator who appears in the research text. How is narrative constructed in ethnography? In my research I apply the idea familiar from literary studies of the distinction between the author and the narrator of a written work. By using literary means I'm able to look past the basic assumption made about scientific texts as being either true or false. Also, by looking at the narrator of the text, I aim to build a better understanding of ethnographic knowledge and how it is produced. My research material consists of 17 ethnographic academic dissertations that have been published in Finnish universities during the 2010s.

Ethnography looking like its author

Ethnography is not only being in the field, but also a way of scientific writing, the resulting research text of which strongly looks like its author. The researcher's scientific starting points and stylistic choices shape the text in a certain way. Ethnography as a literary project has been emphasized by, for example, cultural scientist James Clifford in *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford, 1986). The volume has made a significant contribution to the debate on the current state of ethnography in the post-colonial and global world (Gould, 2016: 16).

Clifford also has the idea of the inevitable incompleteness and partiality of ethnographic knowledge. The multisensory, bodily experiences involved in ethnographic fieldwork do not bend directly into text, but require the researcher's interpretation and sense-making. Scientific writing guidelines and academic practices, in turn, limit the text in terms of number of pages. This means that the researcher must make choices about what he or she writes about his or her research. Indeed, writing down and making visible the researcher's choices has been seen as a touchstone of ethnographic research in terms of both evaluation and ethics. An ethnographer should be aware of his or her thinking, and be able to justify his or her research and writing choices to the reader.

In practice, the researcher's reflexivity is that the research text shows how the researcher has come to the decisions he or she has made during the research. In addition, reflexivity means that the researcher is aware of the importance of his or her own position to the course of the research. How may the researcher's personality, gender, age, or other social "locator" have affected encounters with subjects and the research results thus obtained? (Hämeenaho & Koskinen-Koivisto, 2014: 9; Gould, 2016: 32-33).

Contemporary ethnographic research cannot be properly understood without considering the impact of the so-called reflexive turn in anthropology and other cultural sciences since the 1980s (Gould, 2016: 16). The understanding of the importance of the researcher for the course of the research took a considerable leap forward as more and more attention began to be paid to how and by what means ethnography is written. From the field and interview notes straight to the end notes, ethnography is precisely written research work (Van Maanen, 1988: 4).

Researcher as a storyteller

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz has said that the place-bound nature of ethnographic description - the fact that it is this researcher at this time and place, with these subjects - makes the researcher's work necessarily storytelling and creative, but not dishonest. Geertz emphasizes the importance of writing in ethnography and sees clear connections between ethnographic and fictional texts (Geertz 1988: 5, 140).

It can be argued that the ethnographer utilizes some of the same means as the novelist: he not only records what he sees and experiences, but edits and delimits his material, tells stories, and creates snapshots based on his experiences. Even more freedom is now being taken in the writing style. In some situations, creative expression can convey the experiences of fieldwork better than traditional academic language. For example, a lyrical description of an emotional event on the ground certainly appeals to the reader more than a reporting statement (Van Maanen, 1988: 5).

Thought ethnography has been developed as a kind of narrative by, among others, the already mentioned Clifford Geertz and James Clifford. Comparing ethnographic studies to narratives is, of course, based on the observation of the similarities between them. In ethnographies, fictional means can be applied, for example, by building narrative arches and using different genres to enliven narration and evoke emotions in readers. In this sense, an ethnographer is not only a researcher, but also a storyteller.

There has been an interest in the cultural sciences in various narratives through which people give meaning to their actions and experiences. Often, storytelling is approached from the outside in ethnographies as well: the researcher wants to hear the life stories and narratives of his or her subjects. But if the setting was to be turned upside down, the attention turns to the ethnographer him/herself as a storyteller and the narrator inside the story.

In literary studies, a narrator is one who tells or is supposed to tell a story and at the same time takes responsibility for telling the story. There can also be more narrators in a story. The narrator's perceptibility ranges from absence to intrusiveness, and the narrator's reliability ranges from unreliable to plausible. The narrator does not mean the same thing as the main character of the story, but sometimes the narrator is one of the characters in the story (Birke & Köppe, 2015: 8-9). In my research I define the narrator as the internal structure of the text. The narrator conceptually comes close to what is usually called the researcher's voice in the research text.

The researcher's (own) voice in the research text has been written, for example, in connection with reflexivity. Voice is a manifestation of the researcher's will, purpose, and emotion that determines the tone and nature of the text. It is not actually the content of the report, but refers to how the researcher presents himself or herself as part of the report / research. Researchers have previously been seen guilty of hiding themselves from the research text. Silencing and distancing one's own voice are ways in which a researcher has been able to increase the sense of objectivity and neutrality of his or her research in the eyes of the scientific community and the public. The scholar's invisibility in the text has created a misconception about 'neutral' science, which deals only with facts and objectively verifiable facts. With the reflexive turn in the social sciences, a re-evaluation of the researcher's central role in the production of knowledge has begun (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997: 193-195).

The researcher's voice and the reference group it represents have been highlighted and criticized. For example, feminist research has drawn attention to the fact that scholars profitably represent Caucasian men in hegemony status, and that the experiences of women and minority groups have often been ignored in research as irrelevant or less important. One of the hallmarks of ethnographic research today is reflexivity. It means that the researcher is aware of the importance of his or her own voice in the research text. In my research, the voice of the researcher is part of what I understand by the narrator of the research. However, it is not the same thing, but the narrator is ultimately something more than a researcher's voice heard in word choices and text style. In my research, the narrator is a structure that

supports an ethnographic text. Where a researcher can mute his or her own voice to those who are almost out of place, for example by using a passive form and avoiding direct references to himself, research must always have a narrator, someone who speaks in the text and takes the plot forward.

Multi-level dialogue

Ethnography is not just a literary description of a social group or culture, it's also, to the greatest extent, about writing about the researcher himself. A researcher working in the field with people is not only observing and interviewing other people and actors, but is also the object of observations and discussion from the research subjects themselves. With reflection, the researcher still places himself and his own activities as the object of research. Since the anthropological studies of Bronisław Malinowski, ethnographic literature has drawn attention to the (own) biography of the ethnographic project (Malinowski, 1922). As a researcher, an ethnographer is interested in people's stories and biographies, but in addition to this, one of the lines of ethnography is the researcher's own story of growth and learning. Amanda Coffey has suggested that an ethnographer does a kind of identity work in the field: while she learns about the culture and the people around her, she learns about herself as an individual and a researcher. When writing about cultural phenomena and their experiences in the field, the ethnographer also writes about himself as part of the whole he is studying. In this regard, ethnographers have developed their own personal writing style. The ethnographic presentation has been characterized as confessional, as it emphasizes the researcher's personal perspective (Coffey, 1999: 115-117).

According to social scientist Pertti Alasuutari, ethnographic research is a distinctive comparison of two worldviews. Starting from the individual observations of the subjects' lifestyle and behaviour, the researcher begins to reflect on the basics of their own way of thinking. With it, the researcher begins to form questions and an 'eye' on what to pay attention to in the field. As a result of discussions and observation with the subjects, as well as negotiations on meanings, there is a two-way deepening of understanding: first, the researcher becomes more aware and understands the presuppositions of his or her own worldview and, second, the subjects' different lifestyles. During the study, subjects also take an analytical distance from their everyday thinking in an attempt to explain their culture and ways of thinking to a (usually) unknown researcher. Alasuutari compares the situation to the fact that the researcher and the subjects are at the top on different continents, until gradually, as a result of the interaction, a strain is built between the continents, along which you can walk on dry feet (Alasuutari, 1993: 69-70). Even if an ethnographer studies representatives or phenomena of his or her own culture, the challenge can still be to find a 'common language', as many social subgroups with a different lifestyle from the mainstream live in big cities, for example. This also raises the question of whether culture is approached from the perspective of unity or diversity, and who are ultimately the ones we identify with in the global world. On the other hand, the researcher may also aim to highlight the 'self-evident' of everyday life and the 'tacit

knowledge' of people, in which case it is good for the researcher to be aware of the norms and everyday routines of the research community.

According to theologian Päivikki Suojanen, a researcher of the phenomena of contemporary culture has to wrestle with a perspective problem due to the proximity of the phenomenon field. A researcher of his or her own culture, whether an anthropologist, ethnologist, folklorist, or theologian, should consciously consider how his or her life experiences affect the presuppositions, goals, and interpretation of research. In Suojanen's opinion, the study of a nearby cultural phenomenon requires the acquisition of an outside perspective, at least for a moment: distancing and questioning the known (Suojanen, 1997: 155). The problem of perspective is related to how research in ethnography is understood. The personality of the researcher, who is related to e.g. to an individual's life experience and psychological factors, is seen in ethnography as a special tool through which research is conducted and information obtained. The subject of the researcher is thus never an empty vessel or a neutral actor in the field (or in the text), but it is something peculiar, personal and subjective that guides the course of research and the formation of information. Ethnographic knowledge arises in a multi-level dialogue between previous research, fieldwork, and the researcher's own thought process. The examination of the researcher's subject should take into account the intersections of these dialogues, where parts of the research text are combined into new information. In my research, the subject of the researcher is found to be organically linked to the formation of ethnographic knowledge and the view of the nature of this knowledge.

Clifford Geertz, who was instrumental in changing the anthropological paradigm, emphasizes the importance of the author or author of a research text in ethnographic research and sees clear connections between ethnographic and fictional texts. The starting point for my research was an understanding that as a scientist, an ethnographer utilizes some of the same means as a fiction writer - he not only records what he sees and experiences, but edits and delimits his material, tells stories, describes what he experiences and makes interpretations of his observations (Geertz, 1973; 1988).

The ethnographer wants to do justice not only to his subjects but also to his field experiences - the observations he makes about the community under study. Much has been written in research on the different roles or degrees of participation of a researcher during ethnographic fieldwork. For example, the observation made by the researcher may be varying in degree from side to side or participatory depending on the situation (Davies, 2002: 72-73). There is a lot of reflection on the ethnographer's work in the field in the research literature. Less attention has been paid to the analysis of the ethnographic research text, and the appearance of the researcher as part of the text and its narrative.

Ethnography in a literary context

Those who have done ethnographic research may regard the talk of ethnography as a narrative, albeit a scientific narrative, somehow belittling. The word ‘narrative’ is still easily linked to fictional texts and fiction. But the idea of ethnography as a narrative is by no means new, but has been sidelined by many postmodern theorists and anthropologists since the 1980s. The book *Writing Culture* and the debate surrounding it made a significant contribution to the formation of a “new ethnography,” an ethnography that is culturally sensitive and mindful of marginalized groups. It signified a clear detachment and separation from the old way of doing ethnography with a colonialist legacy (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Gould 2016: 16). Comparing ethnography with other narratives is based on the observation of the similarities between them. Ethnographies utilize fictional means, for example, by building storytelling arches and using various genres such as poetry and snapshots to enliven narration and evoke emotions in readers. In this sense, an ethnographer is not only a researcher but also very much a storyteller. Geertz has addressed the subject, pointing out that the author of the text has persecuted ethnography early on, but covertly because it has been treated primarily as an epistemological question (how to avoid the trap of subjectivity) and not as a narratological question on how to tell an honest story in the best way (Geertz, 1988).

The comparison of ethnography and fiction, on the other hand, is not without problems, because although they use the same tools (text on some platform), their relationship to what is said is different. In the research text, the initial assumption is that the text reflects what happened and what the researcher experienced. This is assumed to correspond at least to some extent to events outside the text. And when the I-form is used in a research text, it is assumed that the author refers to it by itself (unless the sentence context states otherwise). In the case of fiction, the relationship to what is said is more multidimensional. According to literary critic Liisa Saariluoma, literature from antiquity to the mid-18th century was understood as common. The themes, subjects, and forms of expression remained the same from one work to another. The written work was not, in principle, anyone’s private property, but the works belonged to a congruent tradition using the same means of expression. The subjects were often derived from ancient myths or the Bible (Saariluoma, 1998: 7).

The revolution in Western literature took place in the second half of the 18th century, when the classical paradigm was abandoned. The new, modern paradigm finds its expression in romance, according to which art is born not of tradition but of life, of the experiences of the individual. The origin of the work is thus not in the literary tradition, but in the personality of the artist. Originality becomes a measure of the greatness of art, a real artist creates by himself. The realistic trend in 19th-century literature does not abandon the idea of romance in terms of artist genius, but transforms him into a kind of scientist whose aim is to describe the society and people of his time as truthfully as possible. According to empirical information theory, what is observable here and now is real. A realistic writer explores reality

independently, ignoring traditions. In realism, the goal is an intact illusion effect: the description must be so truthful that the reader seems to feel the presence of reality (Saariluoma, 1998: 8-10).

20th century modernism questioned the existence of a common reality and instead focused on subjective experience. At the same time, the transparency of language as a tool of description was questioned. However, it was not until postmodern literature from the 1950s onwards that the author's authenticity as a source of text was problematized; the text was no longer seen as self-expression by the author but as movement in textual space. The texts were basically thought to be based on other texts. With poststructuralism, in fact, the non-literary reality was called into question; it was thought that reality would be understood only through language and it is somewhat naive to speak of reality itself, without language. At its extremes, however, this thinking leads to a "prison of language," where discourses, i.e. ways of using language become independent realities, the validity of which cannot be judged, for there is no independent point of reference outside them (Saariluoma, 1998: 8-10).

In the current (partly) post-structural situation, which is determined by e.g. Foucault's analysis of discursive power and feminist critique, the literary text is again allowed to be judged in relation to non-literary reality. At the same time, the author has regained his status as a subject; although he is a cultural actor under the influence of various discourses, he can also contribute to working against discursive models and changing perceptions of reality. The literary perspective provides the background to evaluate ethnographic research literature in relation to fiction, although a systematic comparison is not the goal of my research. I suggest that contemporary ethnography shows traces of different conceptions of literature, but especially of realism and, on the other hand, of the latest state, post-structuralism. The realistic undertone of ethnography is self-evident: the researcher strives to describe the field he is studying as truthfully as possible, faithfully to the reality according to empirical information theory. At the same time, post-structuralist ideas about the cultural localization of the researcher and the negotiations between discourses sound very ethnographic. On the other hand, it is good to note that there is also variation within style trends, and in relation to tradition, for example, ethnography is by no means 'realistic' - on the contrary, ethnography is a very traditional way of doing research.

Roland Barthes's thesis on the "death of the author" is a post-structuralist view of how the author of a book no longer has an exclusive right to his own text. The intention of the author does not matter in itself, but the interpretation of the text belongs to the reader: "the reader is precisely the space into which all the quotations from which the writing is made are logged". With Barthes' theory, the author loses the authority to say what the text means - the text itself becomes historyless, and the reader reads and interprets it as he or she sees fit (Barthes, 1993: 115-117).

Barthesian criticism is above all about fiction, but it also gives food for thought when reading ethnography. To whom does the interpretation of the ethnographic text ultimately belong? In principle, it is clear the meaning of the text is ultimately given by the recipient, but the author, i.e. the researcher, has not

disappeared anywhere from ethnography. Quite the contrary: with reflexivity, the researcher's presence in the text is prominently displayed. The death of the author does not seem to have extended to research texts, although ethnographies are constructed, like other written texts, on the basis of what has been said and written before. Instead of the reader, the key to interpretation in ethnography is still with the researcher.

Telling stories

Storytelling is seen as a fundamental phenomenon for human thinking and the functioning of the mind. Human existence can thus be understood as being narrative in nature. Neuroscientist Mark Turner calls a story or narrative a human mental tool that we constantly use in our daily lives. When we use stories to understand the events of our lives, they also help us understand ourselves; narratives are thus key tools for identity building (Turner, 1996: 7). Not surprisingly, then, there is a great interest in the humanities in the various narratives through which people make experiences meaningful. Identity as well as cultural understanding of who we are is built through shared stories. (e.g. the Winter War as a determinant for being a Finn). The scholar's relationship to storytelling is usually approached from the outside: the humanist scholar is interested in other people's life stories and narratives. But the requirement of reflexivity that defines ethnography turns attention from the phenomenon under study to the researcher and the ways stories and identities are constructed through the text.

Social scientist Ainslie Yardley has taken advantage of the narrative method by placing herself into the true story of the death of a close colleague. The story is true in the sense that there is a thing behind it, a coworker's suicide, but it is at the same time a memorized story, a fiction in which the researcher himself is involved as the person of the story. Yardley addresses the ethical question of ownership of a story: who owns the ownership of the story, to him or her co-worker, and whether he or she has the right to tell another's story, even when dressed in a fictional form. Despite the truthfulness of the story, it contains fictional material in terms of description and characters, as Yardley describes in the article: "My musings are how she felt and what she did on her final day are, of course, purely fictions. I wasn't there to observe her last hours, but in my mind's eye I can see her walking." An essential observation for my research is that just as the author imagined what was moving in the mind of a co-worker, he also imagined or actually created a self-narrator resembling himself (Yardley, 2006).

In my research ethnographic stories appear as multi-layered, drawing material from different sources such as personal experience, scientific writings, interviews and observations. They work on different time levels, in the past, the present and the future and contain various actors and surroundings. They do not formulate a linear narrative, but a rather circular one, constituting fieldwork descriptions and an interpretative voice of the narrator. The research subjects are described not so much as independent actors but voices from the field. The 'fiction' in these stories can be seen in the ways that the narratives

are constructed; this means that fictional in ethnography does not imply that things didn't happen the way they are described but that the story as a whole is constructed by using literary devices. In this perspective, ethnographic knowledge is fundamentally connected to the ways that the story is being told.

Identity work?

Postmodernism has been characterized as a time with the need to do identity work and especially to acknowledge, to tell about oneself. According to sociologist Arthur W. Frank in the pre-modern period storytelling had communal functions such as passing on knowledge to posterity, teaching through myths, and maintaining community unity. In post-modern times, on the other hand, emphasis has been placed on storytelling as an individual project through which the individual uses his or her voice and brings out his or her personal story (Frank, 1997: 4-7).

According to Miia-Leena Tiili, ethnographic knowledge formation is a learning process in which the researcher and the subjects share the same opportunities and limitations (Tiili, 2016: 33-34). The sharing of everyday life creates a common experience base between individuals, which the researcher utilizes in his or her analysis. It is through his involvement and learning that the researcher can better understand cultural processes. Anne Puuronen, who conducted an ethnographic study of the structuring of experiential knowledge related to anorexia, applied the idea of co-research in her research, in which the subjects were allowed to comment on Puuronen's interpretations of anorexia writings. Participants in the study thus presented their own interpretation of the meaning of the texts (Puuronen, 2004: 57). James Spradley, for his part, has said of the ethnographic interview that while the interviewer learns something about the interviewee's culture, the interviewee also learns something from the situation, namely, to "teach" the interviewer about the topic in question (Spradley, 1979: 59). Based on these observations, I suggest that alongside ethnographic knowledge, one could also talk about ethnographic learning, which emphasizes the aspects of learning together and co-research.

The ethnographer as a storyteller refers to point of view, where the researcher as narrator of ethnography tells an informative, evocative story of his/her fieldwork and the dialogue between him/her and research subjects. It emphasizes the narrative construction of ethnographic knowledge in every step of the writing process. Although the narrator's voice may seem absent in some places the researcher is the one representing the field and its actors. It's also important to note that the ethnographer him/herself is one of the actors in the narrative, which places him in a kind of double role between text and reality. The researcher's identity or role(s), then, is to be found in the constant interpreting and re-interpreting of the ethnographic story. This highlights the need for multidisciplinary understanding of identity constructions as they are seen equally personal, interpersonal and textual.

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