

## WRITING WHAT IS TOLD – ON ETHNOGRAPHIC NARRATIVE AND TEXT

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of this paper is to depict difficulties in presenting ethnographically collected narratives - recorded and transcribed as written texts. Multifaceted fieldwork experience when translated into a form required in academic work is unavoidably reduced. It loses a variety of aspects impossible to express just by written language required by academic discourse. Simultaneously written language influences and shapes pre-textual fieldwork experience.

**Method.** The study is a theoretical afterthought based on the fieldwork experience gained during research concerning modes of constructing reminiscent narratives in one of the Lower-Silesian villages in the years 2013-2016.

**Results and Conclusions.** The analysis shows the indispensable impact of the medium of written language in the process of gaining and presenting ethnographical knowledge. It presents its influence and limitations in the process of building fieldwork experience.

**Key words.** ethnography, pretextual, text, knowledge, fieldwork, experience

*Figure 1.* Świetlica wiejska



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A group of men are gathering next to the only shop in the small village – one of many like this in Polish Lower-Silesia. The shop is set in the very centre of the village. From there they can have a view on the historical, partly devastated former German park and hardly visible ruins of the palace. Next to it one can see a small pond and comparatively big buildings which are a part of a former state collective farm. Men are sitting around a wooden, blue, painted table prepared specially for such occasions. Over their heads there's a sign saying: "światlica wiejska" (village club room). It's a common place for informal and semi-formal meetings in the village and it's a place where I intuitively started my fieldwork some time ago. That was a place of my first interviews and as I quickly realised some kind of meeting and information spot for inhabitants. It is impossible to visit a village and miss the site, as well as to be there and not to be noticed.

The men are drinking beer, talking loudly, laughing and japing out loud. I don't know them and I don't really want to talk to them at this very moment. I was finishing my fieldwork – I've been coming there for the last three years to collect interviews and now I'm trying to put in the order the gathered information. I don't really want new material – my ethnographic curiosity is in crisis now. I have a feeling that I did enough: I have made several interviews, collected material that seems to be redundant – stories and motives are repeatable and predictable. I have spent my last months away from here, listening to the recordings, making transcriptions, organizing gathered material. I don't really want new interviews because I don't expect to hear anything new. Especially from the group of giggly men.

They saw me – it's a small village and everybody knows each other. You can easily recognize a stranger. They're accosting me and I have got no choice – I reply with some little quip and come closer. Otherwise it would be discourteous, which I obviously do not want. We start to talk. Even though I do not recognise any of their faces after a while I start to recognise their voices. I talked to them before – I can remember a story about a wife of the elderly man on my right, I know that the other man knows a lot about local history, another one some time ago helped me a lot with interviews here. It took me a moment to realise that in fact I know all of them. However not their faces – as it usually is – were crucial for me to identify them but their voices. I spend much more time listening to the recorded interviews than actually talking to them. Not their faces but the sound of their voices became for me a means of recognition and identification.

I depicted the story above because that was the first time when I realised so plainly what importance tools used during ethnographical research have – not only for the form of collected material, which is obvious, but also for my – researchers memory and attention. I can remember that I was truly surprised about what happened. I treated recordings as a support for my memory and a guarantee that I would not miss any crucial information – not as a factor that might influence it. It was inevitable in my work because the main matter of my research there was reminiscent narratives and modes of structuring them in a

biographic oral story. The main method of my research, as mentioned, were recorded interviews – all of them had the form of unhampered conversations. I didn't have any list of questions I wanted to ask – just some main topics that interested me. Of course aside from recordings I was also making my field-notes including first observations, information about people I talked to, so that I would not confuse them after (as it obviously happened in the opening story), some recommendations, maps and drawings. But I never treated them – recordings and notes – as a substitute for my ethnographic experience. It was rather supposed to be a mark of it – some kind of product, epiphenomenon helping my memory when the fieldwork is over. But as the story above simply shows its role is much more important than being a support for my memory it also plays a significant role in building ethnographic experience. Thus, it not only recalls but also in some way creates it.

The opening story shows in fact indissoluble combination of two factors shaping an ethnographic experience: physical and textual. The first one in the broadest sense is connected with sensual perception and physical being of the researcher – her participating in the field as well as bodily-grounded ways of understanding surrounding her environment. The second one is related to writing, recognising fieldwork experience in text: organising and conceptualising it.

It seems that to identify and differentiate those two factors is a trivial task: being in the field during the research is physical, the result of it – writing – is textual. However, the story presented above is an apparent evidence that this matter is not so simple as it seems in the beginning. Physical – textual relation cannot be separated so easily, they seem to influence each other in every stage of research experience.

One of the main and frequently raised problems appears when it comes to translating multifaceted fieldwork data into text fulfilling requirements of academic discourse. Fieldwork experience, including that based on interviews, is much more than what can be written or recorded as well as a real conversation is more than just words. The foregoing story happened when I was about to finish the project. I had not visited the village for months and I was supposed to start the writing process of my thesis based on that research and I was facing the problem: how to capture multifaceted ethnographic experience in an academic written text? The problem might seem insignificant if construction of narratives is concerned. But even a narrative – especially an oral narrative – cannot be concerned without context of its origin.

If we consider the problem of an experience-text translation only as a matter of transforming non-textual experience into written form it is in fact trivialising the issue. In such approach materials collected during the research are something done, finished and given, whereas as such it is only the product of the whole experience – not experience itself, just the final part of it. The incomplete initial process that is commonly disregarded in the writing phase is crucial to understand the product because it is a constituent part of it.

Ethnographic interview, especially the one without prepared questionnaire – as every conversation – is a dynamic situation. It is not just asking the

questions by the researcher and replying by the interlocutor. It is the field of negotiation. The interlocutor is not simply replying to asked questions, and also the researcher is not just asking questions she prepared. They both keep in their minds a whole spectrum of possibilities and when telling a simple story or asking simple question they are simultaneously deciding what kind of code they should use. In fact in simple conversation – as well as in the interview – there are not only two actors. It is necessary to take into consideration also participants' conversational projections of themselves and of each other. In fact there is not only a researcher and interlocutor but also their expectations and assumptions: what the researcher thinks of herself (what she considers as truth about her) (1), how the researcher wants to present – how she wants to be perceived by her interlocutor (2), what is, according to her, the interlocutor's opinion about her (what does she think that he thinks about her) (3), what he really thinks about her (4). The same possibilities can be indicated in relation to the other side of conversation: what the interlocutor thinks of himself (5), how he wants to be perceived (6), how he thinks he is perceived (7), what the researcher thinks in fact about him (8).

Such possibilities multiply when more than two people participate in the conversation. On the other hand, in most cases some of them must be identical. Otherwise any communication would be possible. These 8 levels of communicational attitude is a set of possible roles that can be chosen to play created in account of mixture assumptions and expectations. Each of them can wield influence on the whole interaction and each of them is partly grounded beyond this particular conversational situation.

What is more none of them is attributed from the beginning to the end. Just like interlocutors are changing their roles giving replicas they also can change their attitude during the conversation. Configuration is changing dynamically – sometimes if it is possible to attach some of the foregoing attitudes, it is just for a second. It can be seen as some kind of game between interlocutors. Not every role (character) is accessible for everyone. For me it used to be problematic to sidestep the role of a 'nice student'. Because of that it happened that my serious questions were not taken seriously. That was the role that I was usually given, probably because of my young age and an informal appearance. But in the very beginning of every interview I had to choose the role I wanted to introduce as mine. There are many more possibilities than those presented in popular texts considering ethnographic methodology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2005). Sometimes my interlocutors were doing or saying things they expected I wanted to hear so that they could count on something from my side. This choosing, changing and adjusting roles and attitudes very often reminds us of the situation characterised in transactional theory (Berne, 1964).

Moreover, all these attitudes or roles cannot be expressed only by words, written or recorded. They manifest themselves in intonation, body posture, or other hardly visible signs. What is more, it is necessary to include also non-human actors like material things and surroundings taking part in the communication process (Latour, 2007). Non-human, or even non-person actors

manifest not only in material, tangible objects, but also in the some kind of reservoir of knowledge that is, or should be, accessible for all participants of the situation. It can be easily recognised as context, however it is much more than indirect conditions of conversation. Such context should include previous stories that could influence presented statements. What is a simple, but very important fact in here – any of the statement is isolated, in fact each of them is a part of a never ending communication chain, to remind one of the most famous of Bachtin's theories (Bachtin, 1986). Every statement is preceded by numerous previous statements having impact on its shape, simultaneously an actual statement can be the factor of setting the others. Each of the conversation participants is under the influence of his or her own communicational background.

Being a part of that chain means not only some themes or motives provided but also some modes of constructing the story and validating them. Harald Welzer argues that even biographical stories need a frame that is based on elements derived from stories heard or seen before (Welzer, 2009). In the researcher's case that communicational background is based also on her previous fieldwork experience – she learns to follow actors and events that can be found beyond visible material data by recognising "ethnographical events" in different fields (Rakowski, 2018, p.17).

Individual approach, knowledge and story of both: researcher and interlocutor, based on their generally taken experience, their interaction set in particular surrounding, human, non-human, non-material actors – all these factors taken together are a kind of a labyrinth which the researcher needs to move in skilfully to understand what is happening around her.

The interview itself seen as a sequence of statements that can be transcribed is just a product of such multifaceted actions taken by all participants – its effect. Recording or any other kind of documentation is a reflection of that product – some kind of semi-final state being the result of multiple simultaneous processes. Although such – transcribed – conversation cannot be properly understood without those various factors creating it. One of the most important researcher tasks is to evolve an ability to aim her attentiveness at that elements of her experience that are important and meaningful – evolve the ability to recognise and understand them (Rakowski, 2016). Such a process cannot be held in a different kind of way than being and participating in a field that is a matter of interest regardless of whether it is a place, event or community.

In such a perspective field of ethnographic research cannot be regarded as something given. It is a result of a co-action of different actors. "The ethnographic field cannot simply exist awaiting discovery" (Amit, 2000, p. 6). Creating a field requires presence of the researcher – she is not an observer but a participant, thus its co-author. The result of such a co-existence is some kind of collective knowledge – competence to understand some part of a shared world in a common way. It is the first and most important step of fieldwork. The next one is to translate this understanding for those who have not evolved such an ability – to capture it in the written, academic text.



The ability to recognise and understand phenomena perceived during the research does not have textual character. It gains its first para-textual shape in fragmentary fieldnotes that usually are some groups of impressions, unstructured observations, possible conclusions and operational hypothesis. Such fieldnotes – commonly having a form of headnotes – are not the text yet. They do not have coherent structure and do not have a form of logical, linear discourse. They are just a base to be used when the proper text is written.

Though their role is ambivalent already. On the one hand, they might be initial form of fieldwork experience conceptualisation. On the other hand, they are still part of that experience – they cannot be understood without the experience which gives them necessary context.

What is more, fieldnotes (as well as recordings or photographs) are not simple reflections of the fieldwork experience, as well as an academic essay is not a simple orderliness of a chaotic research material. They all are qualitatively different. That is why Geertz's thick description fails as a method of presenting fieldwork experience. According to Samudra's "thick participation" (Samudra, 2008), Tomasz Rakowski proposes treating ethnographic research as a specific form of activity that can be seen as some kind of piece (by analogy of written text). In that case, this piece is some unwritten story of understanding, which can be recognised as a way of shaping what will finally be written (Rakowski, 2018, p. 18).

Form of written text, especially the one fulfilling the conditions of an academic discourse cannot fit the whole variety of experience and founded on its competence described above. Such form is a frame – it cannot contain anything that cannot be expressed by written language. Which means that it extracts the possibility to linguistically express part of an experience but by the same token rejecting or receding the rest of it. Thus putting ethnographic knowledge into this form must be connected with both an act of rejection of crucial parts of it and re-establishing it in a way possible to intersubjectively articulate. Paradigma of *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) indicated creating written representations of cultural realities as a literary-like practice. What is crucial in the perspective of the matter of this articles' consideration is the fact that the researcher can never be excluded: as author in the stage of writing text, nor as a participant in the stage of creating the ethnographic field. She is never just an observer or collector and the field is never just waiting ready to tell.

Both researchers' positions characterised above: pretextual – ability of understanding based on ethnographical experience built on participation and textual – consisting of writing, setting experience in the discourse, are only ostensibly disjunctive. In fact they stay in a bidirectional relation. One of them is obvious: pretextual experience establishes content of written text. More interesting is the second direction of that relation. It is especially apparent if research related to a narrative is concerned.

As it was said before field is not given. It is not a reality to discover: to connect facts, observe events. It is being created in a process of participation. But participation of the researcher is specific of its kind. The researcher is aware of

her task from the very beginning – she knows that her aim is not only participate, recognise and understand, but also present it in a written form. Actually in an academic context only the former – as proof of the rest – is required. That means that the mode of attentiveness always assumes textual form. Even the term “pretextual ethnography” indicates primacy of written language over any other form of expression or communication.

In this perspective the field (in a way that it is supposed to be described in a text) is constituted in a process of the researcher’s cognition. Just like the Kantian aesthetic object (sensually perceived) it depends on the one who perceives it and her perceptive abilities (Kant, 2014). The researcher whose aim is to prepare a written report draws his attention in text-oriented manner.

Tomasz Rakowski when pointing out the researcher’s specific ability of discerning important issues among various elements of fieldwork experience presents it as a researcher’s acquisition of forming his attention as responsive to the field (Rakowski, 2016). Likewise Grzegorz Godlewski distinguishes two strategies in conducting a research: strategy of telescope and strategy of radar (Godlewski, 2016). The second one in contrary to the first doesn’t assume the theory – conditioning terms and methods – in the beginning of the work. It bases on posing general questions by the researcher and her attitude kept open for what might appear during her work.

The main point of both ideas described above is the researcher’s attention obeying fieldwork data – her ability to focus on what is important during the research. But it’s impossible to ignore the fact that there are also another aspects important for the researcher during the work – those connected with organising its results into a written text. The researcher must be able to recognize what is important from the perspective of the explored issue as well as she must be capable of understanding it and presenting it in an academic context.

Which of those two aspects influences researcher’s attention during the fieldwork? Undoubtedly the first one. However, not solely. The text – the medium chosen to conceptualise fieldwork experience and modes of understanding based on it cannot be neglected.

Researcher’s fieldwork participation is marked by awareness of the latter textualisation. Making recordings, taking photographs, notes collected not only for the researcher herself but also, or even mostly, as the basis for the written report. It means that observations are linguistically conceptualised and as such can be referred. Interviews are recorded so that they can be transcribed. Photos are taken to be explained. The role of such media is in fact paradoxical in this situation. The researcher uses it to make them textualised in the final form, but simultaneously to enable her to participate more freely without focusing on making notes and without being afraid of missing the most important facts. At the same time this free participation is overshadowed and somehow shaped by modes of attention by this medium.

Rakowski argues that “headnotes” emerge in the basis of some kind of “ethnographic double” – an inner, vivid process of memorization reaching beyond researcher’s direct awareness (Rakowski, 2018, p. 29). During the research it

is impossible to avoid such procedures like data selection and organisation, generalisation, creating models, formulating laws, predicting processes that distinguish science from other modes of cognition. Main source of these procedures is literacy, including textual approach (Godlewski, 2018, p. 67). However, my point is that the influence of textual approach begins much earlier – it influences also researcher’s sensual perception, her physical participation in the field and her ethnographical double.

This is something that happened to me, when I realised that what I remembered most from the interviews were mostly stories and voices, something used when transcribing experience into text – excluding other factors like appearances.

Two factors of fieldwork experience: physical and textual cannot be opposed to each other. Researcher’s physical participation and knowledge based on fieldwork experience is necessary for writing text – it reaches much further than her presence in the field as well as textual impact begins much earlier than during the writing phase. This bidirectional relation rather than opposition is in fact indissoluble combination of two factors, which are always both present, even if in unequal proportion.

Jack Goody conducting research in northern Ghana brings out what changed in his ethnographic practise when he started to use the portable audio recorder (Goody, 2010). The first consequence was latitude mentioned above – he did not have to take notes and could focus on things going on around him. The second consequence was much more interesting: it enabled him to compare recordings. This simple fact become crucial for reflexion on ethnographic experience and its interpretation because it shows the distance the researcher can have from her own work. There is nothing overwhelming if only collected material and written report is concerned. But it’s much more important when it is applied to the experience itself. Thanks to that distance the researcher can later take under consideration her own role and presence in collected material and interpret it using pretextual knowledge. In this way she actually can divide herself in two persons: participant and researcher. This division takes place only at some meta-level, because being a participant she never stops being a researcher and being a researcher writing text she cannot forget being a participant which gives her ability to understand and make a translation into linguistic form, which leads also to the ethical dimension of the whole process.

In such context the researcher plays a double role, is in some kind of partition. She is between those two: participating and conceptualising. She’s never entirely in one of them, but always combines both. Although those two roles can never be the same – they partly exclude each other. This contrary is noticeable in situations when one role limits the other, such as in a moment when participation, recognition and memorization is restricted by medium. In such condition researcher–participant is formed by researcher–writer. This is what actually happened to me in the opening story. I did not recognise my interlocutors but their stories and their voices – my participation became limited by the reason of awareness of later textualisation of my experience. At the same



time data collected merely in recordings and notes were insufficient to understand and explain my fieldwork-based knowledge, even though the main topic of that research was related to narratives – exclusively to what is told.

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