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CONFERENCES

Ethnography with a Twist

Conference at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland,

12–14 February 2019

Tytti Lehtovaara

Ethnography is applied in different disciplines, as the conference Ethnography with a Twist also showed. The conference was held at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, from 12 to 14 February 2019. The conference gathered over 160 participants, who came from nearly 20 different countries. At the conference, there were many different fields of research present, for example, virtual world, urban, and family research. The program of the conference also showed how widely and multidisciplinary ethnography was dealt with and how ethnography can also be part of the art field. As the program may also suggest, twisting can mean very many things, and the participants also understood “ethnography with a twist” in many different ways. At the conference, an often heard question was, “what is twisting in ethnography?” At this conference, twisting ethnography meant differing from previous research, looking from a new perspective, blending methods, modifying the target of using collected data or results, going beyond the boundaries of science and art, focusing on body knowledge, and using ethnography in business.

Ongoing collaborative ethnography and the gentle touch of twisting

The first keynote speaker was Marie Sandberg, Associate Professor at the Ethnology Section, Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen. She introduced an ongoing collaborative research project where the data has been produced and collected collectively. Sandberg explores different informal modes of volunteer work in support of refugees who came to Europe in 2015. Sandberg’s research focuses on the experiences of volunteers at train stations and reception centers in three different European countries. However, Sandberg pointed out that the refugee crisis was also a crisis of reception. Sandberg also mentioned that the refugee situation has not been studied from the point of view of volunteer helpers, and therefore her research focuses on them. Sandberg uses ongoing collaborative methods, including workshops and discussing, walking, and doing together. Often these methods involve many researchers, and they have their own roles, such as debater, observer, or recorder.

In her presentation, Sandberg's moved on to how the refugee crisis has been documented in museums, and how they have illustrated refugee experiences through objects. The ethnographic twist in Sandberg's lecture consisted of the ongoing collaborative research, multiple methods of collecting data, new study group (volunteers) and documentation, as well as the export of knowledge to museums.

However, Sandberg urged us to be gentle when twisting ethnography. With twisting, it is meant pushing when a part changes or moves. In this case, ethnography can change too much and lose its important qualities, such as the ability to reach hard-to-see discourses, and as a result it can go in a negative direction. At the end of the first key note lecture, Sandberg pointed out that, as ethnographers, we are part of a field where subjectivity and reflectivity are also strongly present.

A new field in the internet, but still back to basic ethnography

Another keynote lecture was given by Professor Tom Boellstorff from the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Irvine. Boellstorff has carried out an interesting research on disability and virtual worlds. He has explored the question of how ethnographic knowledge production beyond the written text can act as data collection and concept building. Already at the beginning of the presentation, he took the view that anyone who uses ethnography should at all times keep a clear mind about what "basic" ethnography is. It would be advisable to go back to the "roots" and explore where they started off. You could then twist ethnography, but you should look at what it would mean in terms of data, analysis, and research results. However, in order to find something new, we have to twist a little. Boellstorff also emphasized the importance of methods and theories and that they should guide action. One should avoid selecting the method first and the subject and perspective of the study only after that. Boellstorff noted that many of the session topics were related to autoethnography and emphasized that all ethnography is partly autoethnographic. This is because the research shows in the collection of data in different ways and thus affects what kind of material is created.

Boellstorff also mentioned that he misses something that is more than talking and writing, because what we talk about is not the same as what we do. Boellstorff also talked about how we produce information and present it. In his opinion, we should use visual opportunities, such as videos, more to bring research presentation to the 21st century. A documentary by Bernhard Drax, entitled *Our Digital Selves: My Avatar Is Me*, was shown at the conference. This film chronicles Boellstorff's research on disability and virtual worlds. The filmmaker Drax had the creative control; Boellstorff collaborated, appeared in the

film, and helped to formulate its themes. The film helped to perceive what the virtual world is and what it means for those who are there. The film showed that the virtual world can be used to model someone else's experiences and expand our understanding. There one can build the kind of physical self that one wants to be, which shows that the external self is an important and not a detached part of the mental self. In the film, it was pointed out that we do a lot in our thoughts, so why would the idea of a virtual world be worse and not as genuine as the actual one? The virtual world is human, created by us, and a different social space and context. The virtual world is not a substitute for the physical or actual world, but rather parallel to it.

Boellstorff's twist was that he took ethnography to a new field and also discovered new information through his research and understanding of the Second Life community, the people using it, and their avatars. He also introduced a new way of presenting research alongside research written on film, and how that could be creative through collaborative methods.

Ethnography will be moving forward, and we should influence the way it goes

Ethnography was discussed widely at the conference; the topics of the sessions included, for example, "Ethnography as a practice of surprise," "When walking and writing merge," and "Ethnography in an educational context." In the sessions, it was discussed how ethnography is understood and how it should be defined in each research. Subjectivity and reflectivity also came into focus in the debate, and many listeners would have liked to hear more about them and how they, for example, affect research. If subjectivity and reflectivity are inadequately dealt with in research, the end result may be weak. Researchers must think about how their own experiences, characteristics, and background affect the qualitative data, analysis, and results of their research. Making the position of the researcher clear and writing it out is an important part of the whole research project.

At the conference, participants could attend experimental workshops on many days, which was a positive addition to the key notes and sessions. These workshops included focusing on the senses, concepts, and theories; walking, art, and writing. In the workshops, participants practiced or produced something concrete together or alone. The essence of ethnography involves doing, so it was good to do, not only talk and think – as Tom Boellstorff said, what we talk and write is not same as what we do.

The conference ended with an intense panel discussion. The panel summarized the theme of the conference and frequently asked questions. I only wish the panel had had more listeners from different disciplines, because the dia-

logue between different disciplines should continue in the future. The panel emphasized connection, working together, and multi-professionalism. New methods, opportunities for collaboration, and perspectives are needed, but not forgetting what the core of ethnography is.

The panel also highlighted the fact that, in the business world, ethnography is at times considered sexy. The combination of ethnography and the business world is challenging, and one must be careful with it. For in the fast-paced and dynamic business world, it is sometimes challenging to understand the broad picture of phenomena, and some small but essential things may be left without enough attention or without understanding. There, it should be emphasized that ethnography is a process that covers all fields of research, not only one part of it. As ethnographers, we must have the courage to transform, recognize our own expertise, and design our scientific activities, so that we can become a more important part of business life, too.

The conference and the panel discussion can be summarized in five important points: 1) twist carefully, look back at the roots of ethnography for a moment, and think about what ethnography is 2) always tell others what ethnography is to you, because openness to writing one's thoughts, experiences, and choices is an important part of ethnography 3) remember that ethnography is always subjective and the author(s) are visible in it 4) collaborate, and 5) create new ways of presenting the research process and results, and ask yourself or the team: "Can you present something more than just writing?" The conclusion of the panel discussion emphasized that we, ethnographers, should talk more, continue dialogue, and develop our ethnographic field, but at the same time be critical.

AUTHOR

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