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# Introducing ‘Ethnography and Self-Exploration’

Sjaak van der Geest, Trudie Gerrits & Flore Singer Aaslid

*This introduction presents three broad themes in this special issue about subjectivity and ethnography: 1. How subjectivity affects anthropological research and analysis; 2. How – conversely – ethnographic fieldwork affects the researcher’s personal life; and 3. How ethnography feeds self-exploration. The authors discuss the essays in this special issue and position them in the growing literature on subjectivity and anthropological research.*

*[ethnography, subjectivity, reflexive anthropology, anthropological fieldwork, ‘selfing’, auto-ethnography, self-exploration]*

In recent years, reflexivity has become an important consideration for many researchers, especially in the social sciences, and anthropology in particular, where there is an increasing awareness that any written text is produced through the medium of an embodied author. In assuming the posture of indwelling, every piece of ethnographic research and writing produced thereby will inevitably reflect, to some extent, the personality, background and views of the author. This in itself need not be a drawback, as long as it is acknowledged and accompanied by a critical vigilance which can carefully monitor the momentum of one’s work and is able to distinguish between different voices, include and perhaps even transcend them. In many respects, incorporating this form of reflexivity can be both liberating and enlightening when compared to the straitjacket imposed by living up to the unrealistic standards of a ‘value-free’ scientism.

This recognition of subjectivity is not unchallenged, however. Discussions about the intertwining of subjectivity and anthropological research started long ago. On the one hand we read about the need to address the unavoidable subjectivity in fieldwork and ethnographic analysis. On the other hand we encounter strong caution that we should not get lost in subjectivity but remain focused on our ultimate goal – ethnographic understanding of the other or, as some preferred to call it, the production of science. In his description of sexual life among Trobrianders, Malinowski (1932: xxv) noted:

... the facts of anthropology attract me mainly as the best means of knowing myself. But scientifically I have to claim that unless we use the comparative method from the func-

tional point of view, and through this obtain the laws of correlation, of cultural process, and of the relationship between various aspects of human civilization, we shall inevitably be building all our vast edifices of reconstructive hypothesis or philosophical reflection on sand.

Building on sand... That concern has never gone away. In 2008, Charlotte Davis (2008: 216) reflecting on 'reflective ethnography', observed:

Even among those committed to the reflexive perspective, some disquiet has been expressed regarding the danger that social enquiry about others could disappear altogether, with ethnography becoming a literary activity mainly concerned with explorations of selves.

Getting lost in subjectivity has received many pejorative names such as 'navel-gazing', 'narcissism', 'self-absorption', 'exhibitionism' and 'self-voyeurism'. Subjectivity becomes an obstacle to understanding the other if it does not reach the next step, which is intersubjectivity: a convincing analysis of how knowledge and insight can be shared between individuals. Clearly, focus on subjectivity should lead to better ethnography instead of becoming an impediment and annoying distraction.

The authors in this special issue delve more deeply into the why's and how's of subjectivity in fieldwork, 'the shadow side', as McLean and Leibing (2007) called it. By doing so, we hope to arrive at more credible and respectful intersubjectivity leading to better ethnographic work. During a small-scale and 'intimate' two-day symposium at the University of Amsterdam in December 2011, 35 participants discussed 22 papers. Some of the papers were very personal, which created an ambience of trust and togetherness but also raised the question how personal one could be in anthropological reflection. The participants were from Bosnia, Canada, Chile, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, India, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey, Uganda, the UK and the USA. The papers were based on research in most of these countries. All papers had been submitted and read before the symposium, so there was no need for formal presentation; all available time and synergy could be devoted to discussion. Twelve of the 22 papers have been selected for this special issue.

In an article that served as a 'teaser' for the Symposium Athena Mclean and Annette Leibing (2011) had called for papers that studied the various ways in which personal experience, subjectivity and intersubjectivity shaped and were shaped by ethnographic work. Three themes were suggested as particularly relevant: (1) exploring the influence of personal life on ethnographic research; (2) conversely, the influence of anthropology and ethnographic research on personal life; and (3) the use of ethnography as self-exploration. Self-exploration was an undercurrent of all three approaches, and the explicit focus of the symposium. The call for papers remarked: "Reflecting on ethnography could free us from using it exclusively within the strictures of academic work. It could turn ethnography toward ourselves, as a way of gaining personal knowledge and understanding ourselves via the roundabout way of the other. This applies particularly

to ethnography in the tradition of medical anthropology, focusing on sickness and health, on well-being, pain, suffering, care and recovery.”

Anyone who has ever been in the field knows that the ‘self’ is always involved in anthropological research to some extent, although this is not always made explicit in the final text. Ethnography is never just about ‘the Other’, it involves ‘othering’ as well as ‘selfing’. As this issue shows, our background and personal life often has a decisive effect in terms of the subject matter that we choose to investigate, as well as how our investigations progress through time. The questions we ask, the people whom we seek out, those who become our key informants and the nature of the relationships that we form with them, not to mention the analytical insights that are developed in the final text, all are influenced and framed by who we are, our life-experiences, class, gender and cultural baggage. Additionally, ethnography itself often has a lasting impact on our life since it involves our ‘whole being’ and demands that we are present for extended periods of time and become deeply engaged in the lives of our respondents. The situations, relationships and impressions that arise in the field often force us to reflect critically on our own taken-for-granted assumptions, identity and being in the world, which, when embraced rather than rejected, may greatly enrich and deepen our investigations and lives.

The three themes, mentioned above, guided the discussions during the symposium, but were usually intricately mingled. We will here ‘take them apart’ for analytic purposes.

## **How personal life affects ethnographic research**

*In ‘good’ translations, the translator is self-effacing.  
In ‘good’ ethnography, by contrast, the presence of the  
ethnographer must not be allowed to disappear from view.*

Herzfeld 1983: 163

How does the personal life of anthropologists – and of the anthropologists contributing to this special issue in particular – affect their academic work? There are various phases in the research process that might be influenced by the ethnographer’s subjectivity. The two most common ones are the choice of the topic for research and the fieldwork itself, the researcher’s ability to establish rapport and reach deeper levels of understanding. A third critical phase, which tends to be much less reflected on, is the interpretation and analysis of the data (but see Kristvik’s contribution to this special issue).

### ***Choice of study topic***

It is widely recognized that (medical) anthropologists often choose a topic for their research that is closely related to their personal experience. This is true for newcomers in the field – many a time we see that our students in medical anthropology choose a

topic for their thesis because they have recently lived through a particular experience (parents suffering from cancer; grandparents dementing; involvement as activists) – but it also pertains to more established researchers. Trudie Gerrits, in this issue, refers to several well-known social scientists who studied ‘failed reproduction’ and whose interest in this topic was raised by experiences such as miscarriage, infertility, use of amniocentesis, the birth of a premature child or of a child with Down Syndrome. She also lists a number of reasons why these researchers were so eager to examine these topics, including “the realization that hardly anything had been published about the topic when they wanted to learn more about it; their disagreement with the way the topic was represented in the literature or with the fact that literature did not provide insights from the perspective of the people involved; the wish to make a contribution to the political or public debate about the issue, or to provide health professionals with the patients’ perspective.”

For most of the authors in this special issue the initial interest in their study topic also derived from a personal experience, condition or situation. Some of them are very explicit in indicating why they decided to enter this field of research. Ina Hesebeck, for example, did a study among adolescents with a congenital heart disease, a disease she was born with herself. She speaks about a kind of moral obligation she felt to use her academic training to generate more understanding about the disease. In particular she wanted to give insight in the ‘fluid nature’ of the disease, referring to the sudden and substantial change in bodily capacities that these heart patients experience and which outsiders often react to with misapprehension. In addition, Hesebeck’s focus on adolescents with heart problems resulted from her own struggle in that particular period of her life, when “responsibilities for the disease are shifting from parents to children.” Her shared condition thus not only defined the domain of study, broadly speaking, but her own lived experiences strongly informed the exact focus of her study and the way she framed her research questions.

We also see this in other contributions. Margreet Peutz, for example, investigated self-help groups of psychiatric patients. She asserts that her initial interest in this topic goes back to her own childhood, when she had been sick and felt that her ‘experiential knowledge’ was completely neglected. Having become a psychiatrist herself, she felt the urge to better understand the value and meaning of such knowledge among psychiatric patients, which made her decide to focus on self-help groups, a site in which sharing and valuing each other’s experiences is considered of core importance.

Trudie Gerrits indicates that her own experiences with infertility treatments made her question the position taken by radical feminists regarding the coercive role of the medical system and medical staff in the use of advanced reproductive technologies. Subsequently, she focused her study on getting insight into the complexity of the dynamics in clinical encounters, where staff, patients and technology meet.

Finally, for Ellen Kristvik, who has experienced the immense impact of both ‘being absent’ or ‘being present’ in the last life stage of beloved ones with terminal cancer, the notion of ‘presence’ became a central theme of her research work: “From my personal experience I knew something about the risk of losing precious time together with a loved one, because of a futile rescue attempt.” These and other examples in this

volume suggest that the awareness of the impact of personal concerns on the research 'agenda' can be a step to the involvement of target groups in setting research priorities. That idea is now widely advocated by patient groups/forums (see the special issue of *Medische Antropologie* on 'The patient as co-researcher' in 2004).

In most articles in this volume the linkage between the ethnographer's biography and the research interest was apparent before the study was initiated. Some other articles, though, show that this connectedness emerged while the ethnographer was in the field. In a few cases, this connectedness was the result of events/things happening while being in the field, as we have also seen in widely quoted examples in the literature: Anja Krumeich (1994), who became a single mother during her fieldwork, and Renato Rosaldo (1984), who lost his wife during fieldwork. In both cases the ethnographer turned into someone who was more similar to his/her study participants, which changed their relationship and mutual understanding. In this volume Magreet Peutz describes how she – after her partner's stroke – turned from an outsider into a relative insider in her research topic. She asserts that this not only changed her relationship with the participants of the self-help group she studied, but also increased her understanding of recurrent concerns in the stories of the psychiatric patients, such as feelings of "loss, marginalization and isolation" and of the way professionals approach their clients.

The occurrence of events – tragic events in this case – in one's personal life during field work may thus affect the anthropologist's linkage with his/her research topic. In other contributions to this volume, however, we find this linkage becoming apparent during fieldwork in a completely different way. Studying heroin addicts, Flore Aaslid realized that she had much more in common with the 'natives' than she had previously expected. This was not because she shared the experience of being a drug addict. Rather, as she describes it herself: "... what we had in common was based primarily on perspectives, not what flows in and out of our blood streams. It revolved around a similar way of viewing the world, relating to it, and expressing ourselves in it." She reveals how, growing up displaced and stigmatized in a 'new religious movement', she often felt like a 'misplaced alien'. This allowed her to empathize, identify with and deeply relate to the plight of the heroin addicts undergoing treatment. This awareness was a source of insight not only academically but also regarding her own childhood as it helped her gain a greater understanding of the manner in which she was forced to reconcile and mediate between multiple, conflicting models of reality already as a very young child.

In one of the other contributions Tanja Ahlin talks about her feeling of connectedness with her (single) research participant. Their connection had nothing to do with the core theme of her study, namely eating disorders. In her case, it was the recognition of a similar attitude towards life and comparable personal struggles that made her decide to ask a young woman of her own age, suffering from an eating disorder, to become her central study informant. In fact it was through getting to know this person that Ahlin defined her research topic.

## *Conducting fieldwork*

Recurrent questions in the debate on the impact of the anthropologist's personal biography on his/her fieldwork and the relationships established in the field are: whether and to what extent researchers should share their own experiences and values with their informants, and – if they do so – how this affects the gathering of data (McLean & Leibing 2011). Some anthropologists have argued that getting personal with informants, including sharing experiences, is crucial to building mutually respectful relationships with them (Lovell, quoted in McLean & Leibing 2011: 184). Others even claim/suggest that mutual sharing opens the door to an experience-near anthropology, as it fosters an intersubjectivity, which – despite its limitation as a research tool – is the “best we have” (cf. Van der Geest 2007: 13; McLean & Leibing 2011).

The contributions in this volume in which anthropologists reveal bits and pieces of their fieldwork practices and reflect upon them, show that they handle aspects of their personal biography in the field – including sharing or not sharing their own experiences – in divergent ways. They also diverge in their speculations about the implications of sharing. Some of the authors explicitly mention that they shared having a similar condition – a disease – before meeting with their informants, in the phase of recruiting their informants (e.g. Hoppe and Hesebeck). They felt that this facilitated finding study participants. Throughout their fieldwork they shared experiences about their condition with their informants and they considered this conducive to rapport building. Others for whom the personal connectedness to the study topic was not (immediately) visible – for example in the study of infertility (Gerrits) or love relationships (Satalkar) – had the choice of whether or not to share that part of their identity and when to do so (when first approaching informants, after having established a relationship, or only when the informants asked questions about it). They both followed the last option, implying that they spoke more about their own experiences with some than with others. Gerrits assumes that this did not have a major effect on what her informants shared with her in the interviews; her informants had been very open and communicative from the beginning. In Satalkar's case, her unmarried status at the age of 29 prompted the older women to raise questions about her marriage plans and offer marital advice.

Still other anthropologists contributing to this volume, like Peutz and Ahlin, were not really insiders regarding the core theme of their study, but actively invested in their personal relationship with their informants, by sharing important life experiences and by explaining in what way they felt connected to them. In hindsight both authors were pleased about the way they could relate with their informants; they saw it as a way “to gather a large amount of significant information in a very short time ... and avoid feelings of fieldwork as an exploitative endeavour” (Ahlin, this issue) and to evade “objectification of the members of the group” (Peutz, this issue). In the case of Aaslid, as she describes it herself, the boundaries between her and her informants (the heroin addicts in the methadone clinic) dissolved when “the clients quickly picked up on my mounting anxiety and insecurity, and before long, sensing that we had something in common, took me under their wings.”

One of the advantages of anthropologists being or becoming partial insiders is that they speak 'the same language' as their informants, which facilitates communication. Language may mean different things for the different authors, including for example knowing the biomedical jargon but also internalised knowledge about the condition that can be hard to verbalise (Hesebeck) or the organization of the health care and services surrounding the disease (Hoppe). Aaslid also underlines how she could easily relate with her informants, stating that: "Since my circle of friends at the time included many outcasts and several addicts, I also knew the lingo, general codes of conduct, and had for some reason also developed the same kind of twisted sense of humour."

Another positive aspect of the anthropologist being or becoming an insider that is repeatedly mentioned in the contributions to this special issue is that these anthropologists seem to be well-prepared to understand the meaning of certain remarks, stories or practices. Hesebeck, for examples, states that her own "embodied knowledge" enabled her to phrase some experiences of her participants and her interpretations with confidence; she felt that she really understood what her informants shared with her. Likewise, some of the authors indicate that they are well aware of potential sensitive issues and subsequently know when it is appropriate to probe or not to probe. Others, such as Deiana and Russell, confront private/public boundaries less at the informant level but in addressing what of themselves it may be appropriate to share with a wider public in the writing up and review process.

At the same time, while sharing similar conditions and exchanging personal experiences are seen as conducive to rapport in the field and the production of richer ethnographies, several authors caution against over-optimistic expectations. Hoppe reminds herself "... to be careful not to make generalizations based on one's own experiences" and Hesebeck writes: "...the notion that the similarities in our stories entail an inherent 'sameness' is an illusion." Kristvik too remains critical about the advantage of sharing experiences: "Was this awareness [of sharing experiences] helpful for the project, or was it rather an obstacle? Did it sensitise me to what might be important for those I met? Or did it dispose me to impose myself as researcher on the data, with an inclination to write about my own preoccupations, instead of my informants' own concerns?" Any equation that a researcher may make between his/her and people's experiences, she concludes, "risks ignoring what may be vast internal differences." Moreover, "It is not necessary to have gone through 'the same' experience as another person to sympathise with him or her." Finally Gerrits, quoting Van der Geest (2007: 9), reminds us never to assume that "the same experience produces the same experience."



## How anthropology and ethnographic research affect personal life

*Es wandelt niemand ungestraft unter Palmen.*

Goethe

Goethe never set foot on tropical soil but his famous line that “No-one wanders unpunished under palm trees” summarises in all its romantic orientalism the core of the second theme of this special issue; nobody can do anthropological research and not get affected by it. Generally, people develop their personality through experiences and events in their lives: relations with parents and other kin, with friends, lovers, teachers, others..., books, films, travels, etc. Doing anthropological fieldwork is such an event, but one that is likely to be more incisive and to have a more lasting influence on one’s further life than any other. Evans-Pritchard reflected on his fieldwork experiences in Africa when an abridged version of his Azande study was published:

I wonder whether anthropologists always realize that in the course of their fieldwork they can be, and sometimes are, transformed by the people they are making a study of, that in a subtle kind of way and possibly unknown to themselves they have what used to be called ‘gone native’. If an anthropologist is a sensitive person it could hardly be otherwise. This is a highly personal matter and I will only say that I learnt from African ‘primitives’ much more than they learnt from me, much that I was never taught at school, something more of courage, endurance, patience, resignation, and forbearance that I had no great understanding of before. Just to give one example: I would say that I learnt more about the nature of God and our human predicament from the Nuer than I ever learnt at home (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 245).

Fieldwork is nearly always a deep immersion into a (sub)culture and a community that is very different from one’s own; there will be a radical confrontation with ideas and practices that are in stark contrast with the researcher’s own life and the dominant ideas and practices in which he/she grew up. That idea was beautifully phrased by the Indian anthropologist Srinivas (paraphrased by Victor Turner 1978: xiii) who spoke of three ‘births’ occurring in the life of an anthropologist:

The first birth is our natal origin in a particular culture. The second is our move from this familiar to a far place to do fieldwork there... what had seemed bizarre at first becomes in time part of the daily round. The third birth occurs when we have become comfortable within the other culture – and found the clue to grasping many like it – and turn our gaze again toward our native land. We find that the familiar has become exoticized; we see it with new eyes. The common place has become the marvellous. What we took for granted now has power to stir our scientific imaginations.

Nearly all authors in this volume confirm that their research changed their life in some way, in particular their perspective on things they used to take for granted. To mention some examples: Tanja Ahlin found a friend, Federica Deiana concluded that her expe-

riences as a researcher in a clinic for eating disorders improved her understanding of the complexity of human experience, Silke Hoppe learned to accept dependence and Ellen Kristvik writes that her encounters with terminal patients changed her perspective on priorities in the last stage of life.

Reversing the positions of the all-knowing researcher and the ignorant research object is perhaps the most wholesome and inspiring achievement of anthropology. To quote Spradley (1979: 3), “Rather than *studying people*, ethnography means *learning from people*.” (italics in the original). He then provides a beautiful example from Elizabeth Marshall Thomas’s fieldwork among the Kalahari ‘Bushmen’.

Then after a moment, Tsetchwe began to teach me a few words, the names of a few objects around us, grass, rock, bean shell...

“Tsetchwe began to teach me...” This is the essence of ethnography. Instead of collecting ‘data’ about people, the ethnographer seeks to learn from people, to be taught by them...

Ethnography starts with a conscious attitude of almost complete ignorance (Spradley 1979: 4).

Thomas’ description of that decisive first meeting reminds us of what happened to Anja Krumeich (1994) during her research among Dominican young women about pregnancy, delivery and infant care. When she became pregnant herself and decided to stay for her fieldwork, the Dominican young mothers took over and told her what to do to protect her pregnancy, have a safe delivery and how to take care of her baby. She had literally become the ignorant person fully depending on the help of her ‘informants’. To quote that popular qualification, she had turned into a truly ‘innocent anthropologist’ (Barley 1983).

A step further is the implicit or explicit intention of the researcher to ‘find’ answers or solutions to his/her own questions by asking and observing how ‘others’ deal with these questions/problems. By ‘implicit’, we mean that the fact that most anthropological research has an autobiographical component often implies that the researcher is somewhat subconsciously exploring ‘other ways’ of looking at and dealing with issues that he/she regards important in life. By ‘explicit’ we think of examples where research was consciously planned and intended to find answers to personal questions or concerns. One of us, for example, carried out research on the art of growing old, when he himself was growing older, hoping, as it were, to learn from older people in Africa how to age gracefully and successfully in the Netherlands (Van der Geest 1998).

In this issue, Priya Satalkar provides a striking case of this conscious looking for answers in her own life via research into the experiences of others. She had long conversations with nine elderly women in her hometown Mumbai about their marriage. The aim of the study was to understand the meaning of love and intimacy within long-term Indian marriages. But there was a second aim: the researcher was herself involved in the questions that she posed to her informant. She writes: “I was struggling a great deal to understand how my life would look like in marriage.” That

struggle had become urgent as she was herself expected to marry shortly in spite of her scepticism and fear regarding marriage. She hoped to find answers to her own insecurity from these women. The women told her about the lack of intimacy in their marriage and 'reassured' her that love is not that romantic thing that Western society claims, but continuous sacrifice, endurance and compromise. The experienced women took her indeed as a young and helpless young woman and 'taught' her how to become a good wife. The life stories of her informants increased her anxiety. In her diary she wrote:

Their stories had immense impact on me emotionally to the extent that in the middle of my fieldwork, I contemplated to put my marriage on hold for some time. I felt that I did not have the qualities required for successful marriage as enlisted by my respondents. I became bitter and tense about my research and also felt angry at myself for choosing a research topic which was so closely linked with my personal life. My interpretation of their life stories convinced me that I was heading towards a doom's day by getting married.

For some time she tried to personally ignore the conclusions that had to be drawn from the women's life stories, but eventually she could not; she called off her marriage. Her reflection published in this issue leads to the conclusion: "I made peace with myself as a single Indian woman and accepted that I could still lead a happy and successful life."

Priya Satalkar's dilemma raises the question to what extent the lessons learnt in the field will in fact be transformed into action. That is, however, a question that we will not deal with in this introduction. But the question deserves to be raised. Human beings, including anthropological researchers, have lots of excuses for not doing what they believe they should do.

## **Ethnography as self-exploration**

*Our geographical and intellectual pilgrimages to meet the 'other'  
deepen our knowledge of ourselves.*

Sangren 2007: 13

This special issue may be regarded as a form of auto-anthropology or auto-ethnography to the extent that it attempts to adopt an inward, reflexive gaze and openness towards those "analytical givens, concepts and techniques, historical and proximate, socio-cultural and personal, which the anthropologist inevitably brings to the work of engaging with others" (Rapport & Overing 2000: 19).

In terms of exploring some of the more subjective elements of personal trajectories as well as situating them within a larger context, an auto-anthropological, reflexive methodology seems particularly suitable. This is principally due to the fact that this approach is based on the conviction that anthropology has to acknowledge both the political and epistemological forces within which it takes place, as well as the anthro-

pologist's conscious and in some cases subconscious self in order to explore that of the informants (Rapport & Overing 2000: 19, 28).

If the tension between self and other, individual and society presents us with a continual dilemma, the anthropologist certainly embodies this dilemma and in so doing has a powerful incentive for incorporating it reflectively into the ethnographic text. The consciousness of the anthropologist is inextricably implicated in those of his or her subjects since it is only in terms of the former that the latter come to be known. In this respect, consciousness can be seen as not only a central feature of anthropological enquiry but also as a method which necessarily undergirds that enquiry as such. Fortunately, there is a growing recognition among social scientists and anthropologists in particular that approaching social and cultural processes means approaching other conscious minds; albeit through the medium of our own (Rapport & Overing 2000).

Wall (2006: 146) defines auto-ethnography as "an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon." Several authors in this issue reverse this, however: drawing on their ethnographic experience to extend understanding about themselves.

Flore Singer Aaslid explores this connection by examining how her own rootless and marginalized background growing up in a religious cult came back to her during fieldwork at a methadone clinic and provided an experiential basis for both knowledge production and self-exploration. As a 'sociocultural misfit' she strongly identified with the liminal status of the clients and had few problems creating rapport, or relating to their experiences. While this allowed her to reflect on the process of othering based on embodied, tacit knowledge, it became exceedingly unpleasant and problematic to find a voice and space for these insights since they conflicted so fundamentally with mainstream drug discourse and the model of reality upon which this discourse is based. This contribution demonstrates that anthropology is indeed in a unique position to provide a deeply needed critical analysis of the dominant climate within which drug research is conducted and to reach a deeper insight in the researcher's own biography.

Alexandra Halkias' article positions itself at the junction of ethnography and autobiography. She weaves an autobiographical narrative about her father at the verge of Alzheimer's into her research on the debt crisis in Greece and its impact on gendered and nationalized subjectivities. A central idea that has evolved from this reflexive experiment is that an important part of the effects of the crisis on subjectivities is linked to a crisis in hegemonic masculinities. She perceives the debt crisis as "a process of Alzheimerization of core social institutions, in the sense of an eradication of the past and of any semblance of continuity that is the necessary ground for trustworthiness," which results in a "fragmentation of subjectivities that is also similar to the symptoms of Alzheimer's; the sense of an erosion, and often loss, of aspects of identity that are core." Her self-exploration in the context of her father's and her country's disintegration leads her to the conclusion that both for the survival of individuals, and for the sharpening of a transformative politics, it is possible that "'preservation' of a former sense of self is not necessarily beneficial."

Ina Hesebeck, during her research among youths with congenital heart diseases, realises that her way of coping with the same disease has been very different. The teenagers told her about their ways, showing their bodies to others and interacting with doctors and medical apparatuses. This affected her deeply because she could recognize in their tales her younger self enduring discomfort and fear during routine examinations. Reflecting on the youths' life stories, making sense of them and putting them into writing also resulted in a new understanding of her own *Herzfehler* biography: "...I had gained words to put to my own experiences that had remained unarticulated before."

Silke Hoppe finds herself in a similar situation as Hesebeck in her contribution to this issue. Her research about the dark side of independence develops as a result of questions she is asking to herself. She is comparing and contrasting her own experiences with Spinal Muscular Atrophy with those of the people she spoke to during research.

The experiences that I had during fieldwork in turn shaped my personal life. I have used anthropological insights to gain a deeper understanding of my own situation. I realized that my own feelings and experiences were common among others who suffered from a similar illness and I could place them in a broader context...

Shuttling between her own experiences and those of her informants gave her deeper insight in the way she dealt with her physical impairments and advanced her understanding of dependence, independence, and interdependence, which brought her a new perspective on reciprocity.

Katayoun Medhat explores the marginality and divided loyalty of both the observed 'other' in her anthropological research through the prism of her own mixed Iranian and Central European heritage. Reflection on the theme of self-exploration leads her to question 'self' as an essentialist, over-concretised concept. She prefers the term 'self-inquiry' which includes questioning the self itself: "Self-inquiry implies the exploration of motivation beyond the scholarly impetus – the investigation of those personal interests and motives that the milieu often discourages from being shared. So it is not just 'How do we know what we know?' but also 'Why do we want to know what we want to know?'"

In her article, Margreet Peutz explores the issue of whether or not personal experiences of vulnerability, despair and loss can provide the foundation for interpersonal understanding, even when these experiences are quite different or seemingly unrelated. A narrative approach is employed to illustrate the interconnections between her doctoral research of a self-help group for people with experiences of psychosis, and her own life experiences over a ten year period during which time her husband suffered a severe and debilitating stroke. She makes a strong and convincing case for the fact that extreme life-changing circumstances and personal experience can indeed create an increased sensitivity and resonance with one's respondents and in return profoundly affect her understanding of her own life squeezed between work and care-giving.

Another – very different – example of linking anthropology to self-exploration is Andrew Russell’s ‘autopathographical’ account of the circumstances surrounding his appendicitis. Building on the work of Jung’s theory of synchronicity and symbolic density he challenges dogmatic assumptions that this illness is merely an organic pathology with little basis in psychology or social context. With humour, candour and wit, Russell shows how metaphorical thinking, applied to the onset of his own disease and surgery which coincided with the departure of his son, could be closely connected to narratives of migration and loss and become a “ritual of excision” providing both physical and psychological healing.

Cohen (1994), Rapport and Overing (2000) and Wall (2006) suggest that ethnography is in fact an ethnographer-focused art and that instead of this being perceived as a weakness or source of shame to be muted and concealed, “anthropology should now seriously begin to exploit the intrusive self as an ethnographic resource” (Rapport & Overing 2000: 27). The challenge, in many respects, will then be to include this subjective self, consciously, as an active tool through which one can access and connect with other conscious selves and mutually decode those patterns of meaning which give texture and substance to this enigma called life. The theme of this special issue, ethnography and self-exploration, is an attempt to do just that. Within the field of medical anthropology in particular, our training may therefore be useful not only as an academic initiative but also as a way to gain knowledge about ourselves, particularly when we are faced with challenges like illness, disability, infertility, loss and trauma. Ethnography may then become both a valuable tool and gift “for coming to terms with our own decline and losses within the human condition” (McLean & Leibing 2011: 193-194).

## **The essays**

This issue contains twelve essays which deal with a wide variety of aspects of the intertwinement of subjectivity and ethnography. None of the essays fits exclusively in one of the three themes we described above. We have, therefore, organized the essays in the alphabetical order of the authors. Below follow brief summaries.

Flore Singer Aaslid explores the connection between personal life and research by examining her own background growing up in a religious cult and the manner in which this has contributed to analytical insights regarding methadone assisted rehabilitation and the politics of consciousness in contemporary society based on ethnographic fieldwork in Trondheim, Norway.

Tanja Ahlin describes how friendship served as a valuable method for her research on eating disorder in rural north India. She presents an account of how that friendship developed. In contrast to seeing her informant as ‘Other’ she found her friend strikingly similar in both personal characteristics and life circumstances. The basis of their relationship was not the research; it was a sincere friendship grounded in common experience. It was only possible for her to realize this after profound self-exploration.

She argues that self-exploration is not a mere end in itself, but has significant methodological and analytical relevance.

Federica Deiana describes her contradictory sensations and frustrations during research in a clinic for eating disorders in Spain. She felt that she was failing as a researcher, “not knowing how to handle my personal problems and clearly make my fieldwork a priority.” Eventually she let her personal life infiltrate her fieldwork, abandoning herself to a course of ‘reflex therapy’. The account of her struggle with the challenges of fieldwork is at the same time a story of personal growth.

Trudie Gerrits reflects on how her personal problem of not getting pregnant and overcoming this problem by means of IVF have affected her research among Mozambican women and Dutch couples seeking IVF treatment. She concludes that a disclosure of researchers’ relevant biographical experiences helps to increase both the credibility and the value of the ethnographic texts that anthropologists produce.

The essay by Alexandra Halkias playfully uses different ‘voices’ to demonstrate how self-exploration and the production of scientific knowledge connect and interweave. Here she draws on an autobiographical narrative describing the trauma of being faced with the first unsettling stages of her father’s Alzheimer’s and associates this with her on-going, seemingly unrelated, fieldwork focusing on the sovereign debt crisis in Athens, Greece. Since this research is also carried out ‘at home’ there is still another personal thread present in terms of how she herself experiences the current national crises and struggles to adjust to the many levels of ‘falling apart’. The result is a penetrating auto-ethnographic, yet also sociological, account of the larger social forces and realities at play when a nation goes bankrupt and nationalized hegemonic masculinities seem to be damaged beyond repair.

Ina Hesebeck calls herself an ‘expatriate native’ to the land of *Herzkinder*. She did her research among youths with similar congenital heart diseases as her own, but she realised that her background, her age and her education differentiated her experience from theirs. Focusing on key moments during research and writing, she considers advantages and disadvantages of being able to draw upon personal experiences in the interpretation of the experiences of others. She ends by exploring how – conversely – the insights gained from her informants changed her own experiences.

Silke Hoppe’s contribution is an example of autoethnography, where shifting between the individual and the cultural leads to deeper insights. Reflecting on her own life with Multiple Sclerosis she realises that rejecting help not only restricted her, but also offended others. Avoiding help and striving for independence is a phenomenon she recognizes not only in herself, but also among other people who suffer from a chronic illness. Based on her own experiences and on those of thirty people with Spinal Muscle Atrophy whom she interviewed, she suggests how approaching dependency as part of reciprocity can be fruitful, both theoretically and practically.

Katayoun Medhat’s multicultural background and training as both anthropologist and psychoanalytical therapist allowed her to offer a particularly pertinent and striking account of how these perspectives shaped both her fieldwork and research of public and tribal health services on a reservation in the United States. In so doing she argues compellingly for the advantages of relating psychoanalytical practices of

self-enquiry and counter-transference to anthropological notions of reflexivity and intersubjectivity.

Ellen Kristvik explores the relevance of personal biography during her research among cancer patients at an incurable stage and how her own experiences as a close relative of seriously ill cancer patients affected the research process. Encounters with three patients with inoperable lung cancer are discussed against the background of the memories of her own experience of the cancer-related deaths of her parents and husband. The discussion shows how personal experience and involvement with the issues at stake directed her attention as a researcher, sharpened her perception and promoted communication on shared concerns.

Margreet Peutz links a number of dramatic personal experiences, such as illness in the family and care for a severely sick partner, to her research among members of a self-help group of people who have suffered psychosis. She is not claiming that 'overlapping' experiences are necessary for this type of research but she does point out the importance of 'resonance' both for the quality of the research and her own life.

Andrew Russell calls his essay 'autopathography' and reflects on the ways anthropology can help people to 'make sense' of their own illnesses. He links the removal of his infected appendix – usually regarded as a purely medical/biological phenomenon, not asking for 'meaning' – to the loss of his teenage son who moves to Australia. The symbolism and metaphor of this illness "gave meaning and offered the potential for healing in a situation that could easily be regarded as nothing but the random and cruel concatenation of adverse life events."

Priya Satalkar's contribution, finally, is a highly personal account in which personal and research questions almost merge. Using the life stories of elderly women in long-term marriages in suburban Mumbai, she explores her own future as a possibly married Indian woman. She describes her motivation to study marriage and love in the lives of elderly Indian women and analyses the contents of her own reflectional notes in her personal diary and her master's thesis to understand the impact the research had on her self.

## **Concluding**

Ethnography as a road to self-exploration is not only a reflexive tool for the improvement of fieldwork and analysis. It also sheds new light on the entire ethnographic undertaking. Why should people be interested in reading about other people if those 'others' have no connection whatsoever with themselves? For ethnographies count what counts for literature in general. We do not read a novel about people and events which do not touch us in any way. If there is nothing we can share with the characters of the story, and we do not relate to their desires or anxieties, we will take little interest in them and fail to understand them. We will never finish the book. The implicit comparison between 'my' and 'their' experience is a prerequisite for understanding 'them', not only for the researcher but also for the reader. If we do not recognize anything from ourselves in them – however 'strange' and different they may seem –



the information will remain stale and meaningless. ‘Othering’ inescapably leads to ‘selfing’.

The authors who revealed their self-explorations in the course of their ethnographic endeavour, sometimes on the verge of ‘confession’ and ‘navel-gazing’, explicated and illustrated what goes on in the minds of every reader of ethnographies. By doing so they invited the readers to become more aware of the personal enrichment that anthropological stories about others – far away or nearby – have in stock for them. They have thus contributed to making anthropology more relevant to today’s world.

## Notes

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