

# THE RESEARCHER'S ROLE IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS. REFLECTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF AN ETHNOLOGIST

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**Abstract:** In this paper I present my reflections and experiences from decades of ethnological research until now. Auto-ethnography means that researchers use their personal experiences in a self-reflexive way in the ethnographic research process both regarding data collection and analysis. The aim is that researchers in this way may better understand and interpret other people and cultures which they study in the field. The personal background plays a role, both in what you choose to study and what you deliberately avoid to investigate. You can also problematize the researcher's gender. The ethical aspects of research become important so that the scholars will not harm the people being studied. There are restrictions of the researcher's subjectivity.

**Keywords:** auto-ethnography, cultural encounters, ethical considerations, ethnography of the return, memorial websites on the Internet, reflexivity, subjectivity

Within international anthropology and ethnology the term auto-ethnography has recently emerged in several contexts. This means that researchers use their personal experiences in a self-reflexive way in the ethnographic research process both regarding data collection and analysis. Researchers document and analyze their subjective thoughts, feelings and experiences as a qualitative research method (CHANG 2008; ELLINGSON – ELLIS 2008; ELLIS – ADAMS – BOCHNER 2011). The aim is that researchers in this way may better understand and interpret other people and cultures which they study in the field. The ethical aspects of research become important in this context. Such self-reflexive aspects of research have existed in the Anglo-Saxon area since the late 1900s. Leading scholars have been Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (ELLIS 2004; BOCHNER 2006; ELLIS – ADAMS – BOCHNER 2011). During the 2010s, these concepts of the researcher's role have also begun to appear in German ethnological research (BÖNISCH-BREDNICH 2012<sup>1</sup>). Also in Sweden

<sup>1</sup> The ethnologist Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich presents a comprehensive bibliography on current international literature regarding auto-ethnography in her research survey of 2012.

such a perspective is now manifest. At the Swedish Anthropological Association's conference in 2013 in Uppsala, there was a panel discussion on the theme "Auto-ethnography as ethnological / anthropological engagement". At this conference I had the opportunity to present my reflections and experiences from decades of ethnological research until now, and that will be presented in this paper.

When I wrote my doctoral thesis in ethnology in the early 1970s in Lund in Sweden (GUSTAVSSON 1972), only objective research ideals were existing. The personal experience of the researcher was of no importance. She or he would stand on the sidelines, watching and analyzing the studied reality in a neutral way. True and objective knowledge was the goal. It was then completely natural for me to keep research free of my personal experiences and opinions.

In the 1980s subjective research ideals became increasingly relevant within Swedish ethnological research. Truth and reality as research ideals were replaced more and more by discussions on the researcher's interpretations of her or his material. Then it became more legitimate to observe that the researcher was a part of the research process. It began to be acknowledged that researchers in the humanities and social sciences cannot stand beside and focus on the culture and society. Instead, they are part of a cultural and social context. The influence of anthropology was felt when ethnology realized the scientists' subjective impact on research. Objectivity was no longer considered a desirable goal.

An early manifestation of this awakened interest in Sweden was the interviews which the Stockholm ethnologist Billy Ehn performed with some Swedish ethnologists in the mid-1980s. I myself was the subject of such an interview. These interviews were not published, which was the intention from the beginning. The time might not have been ripe for such a publication. The new trend continued into the 1990s when the Stockholm ethnologist Lena Gerholm edited and published the anthology "Etnologiska visioner" (*Ethnological Visions*, GERHOLM 1993). Fifteen Swedish ethnologists got the opportunity to reflect personally on their topics. Then ethnological discussions increasingly began to realize the importance of the scientists' personal attitudes towards the research material, named reflexivity. This led to the researcher's becoming aware of how his personal role was involved in the research process itself (DAVIES 2008). As the Swedish ethnologists Billy Ehn and Barbro Klein wrote in their book published in 1994 with the sub-title "Concerning cultural-scientific reflexivity", the basic conception in the methodological discussion associated with the concept of reflexivity is that "the anthropologist and the ethnologist are a part of that which is being studied, and not merely a disassociated spectator" (EHN - KLEIN 1994: 10).

Interest in the ethical dimensions of research did not exist within Swedish ethnology at that time. Instead folklorists in Bergen, Norway, with Bente Gullveig Alver in the lead, were the first ones to consider this issue (*Research Ethics*, ALVER - FJELL - ØYEN 2007). Through my contacts with Bergen in the 1980s, I was aware of the importance of taking into consideration ethical dimensions during field work.

In recent years, a historical interest has arisen for the deceased research personalities in Swedish ethnology and folkloristics. The book "Svenska etnologer och folklorister" (*Swedish Ethnologists and Folklorists*, HELLSPONG - SKOTT) was edited in 2010, and in 2013 an anthology of deceased Norwegian ethnologists and folklorists titled "Etnologi

og folkloristikk” (*Ethnology and Folkloristics*, ROGAN – ERIKSEN) published. Equally important would it be that also living scientists reflect on how their personal preferences influence the research processes. That is one of the goals of the subjective book titled “Bondekultur i möte med akademiskultur i Sverige och Norge” (*Farming Culture in Contact with Academic Cultures in Sweden and Norway*), which I published in 2013 (GUSTAVSSON 2013a).

## 1. TO SELECT AND DISCARD RESEARCH TOPICS

First, I want to illustrate how the personal background comes into play on subject choices, both in what you choose to study and what you deliberately avoid to investigate. For a long time cultural aspects of agriculture abstained from my research interests, even though I was recommended such studies by my supervisor professor Nils-Arvid Bringéus in Lund. He proposed during my initial research time in the late 1960s that I should carry out a study on haymaking, which was a research topic within the contemporary ethnology in Lund. He felt that my experiences from youth and working on a farm was a good starting point for such a study. The reason why I rejected this proposal was that I had traumatic experiences from my childhood. I was forced against my will to work on my father's farm while my interest was to study. Haymaking was a very hard work in earlier times before the mechanical development of agriculture. It is not possible to conduct a proper analysis if one has a traumatic attitude to the topic under consideration. This became an unexpressed prerequisite for my research.

Much later in my academic career, when my experience of the trauma of the forced agricultural labour had reached a sufficient time interval and the emotional barriers had faded away for me, I chose completely voluntarily and with joy to write a book entitled “Bondeliv på 1800-talet” (*A Peasant's Life in the Nineteenth Century*, GUSTAVSSON 2009). This study was based primarily on diaries and letters. Then I could take advantage of my former practical experiences of an archaic agriculture before the tractors became more common. I recognized practices and dialectal expressions appearing in the written sources. The familiar things were mixed with the unfamiliar as I explored another time, the 1800s, which differed from my experiences.

My experience is that it is easy for a researcher also to avoid research fields you are too familiar with in the cultural background that you are descended from. The personal experience may then be that there should be nothing new and exciting to discover. The curiosity and joy of discovery is a key motive for researchers to become engaged in their tasks. The importance of the curiosity about the unknown I noticed in the 1980s working on my project studies on popular religiosity in the Nordic countries. The intra-church revival movement, known as schartauanism, which I encountered at confirmation lessons on the western Swedish island of Orust in the 1950s, was too well-known to me to be worth studying. It was otherwise with the Free Church revivalist movements, which have largely been lacking on Orust. However, they have been widely practised on the neighbouring island of Tjörn. I had hardly met any Free Church people when I started studying Pentecostals on the island of Åstol on southern Tjörn in the 1980s (GUSTAVSSON 2012:

106ff). In connection with the field work together with students, I was curious about the people who belonged to this for me unknown type of revivalism.

Another Nordic project which I initiated in the 1990s concerned the issues of alcohol and sobriety, and especially temperance movements. I wanted to find out how people got involved in these movements and how it affected their lives. Was it possible to build an entire social movement only in a negative behaviour, to abstain from alcohol? Does it not also apply something socially positive so that people would be attracted? In my home district on Orust there hardly existed any temperance activities. The principle of moderation in relation to alcohol, which made it felt in the 1800s, was prevalent. The men in my youth could have a drink and women a glass of liqueur in formal contexts, but they would not drink alone in everyday life. This moderation concept was religiously anchored in schartauanism. Contrary to Orust there were temperance lodges on the neighbouring island of Tjörn since the early 1900s. Temperance people were just as unfamiliar to me as the Free Church people when I began to study them in the early 1990s. My curiosity was a good starting point when I documented the protocols of a lodge called "Nya Stjärnan" (*The New Star*) in the parish of Valla. I followed up these archival studies with in-depth interviews among members of the lodge. The goal was to get a picture of the thoughts, feelings and experiences of the members. The satisfaction for me was to discover and analyze something new, and I could present it in the book "Nykterhetsrörelsens människor i Valla" (*The People of the Temperance Movement in Valla*, GUSTAVSSON 1992). An additional source of inspiration for me when I began the project work on alcohol was the fact that my wife, Kristina, had begun to work as a trained nurse at the Alcohol Clinic run by the Ulleråker Psychiatric Hospital in Uppsala. This led to my becoming interested in the addicts' conditions of life, something that previously had been unfamiliar to me.

## 2. THE RESEARCHER'S GENDER

I also want to problematize the researcher's gender, given that I during the 1970s carried out historical studies of women with an emphasis on childbearing. Then I met resistance within academic circles. At the research seminar in Lund, some women expressed that a man could not successfully analyze women and childbearing. I was told that "you cannot understand that" or "you cannot access that when you're interviewing". I particularly remember a research seminar where some women expressed that "you will not be able to perform such a study". After such an irrelevant criticism, as I experienced it, I was even more excited to continue and complete the study which ended with my doctoral thesis in 1972 "Kyrktagningsseden i Sverige" (*Churching of Women in Sweden*, GUSTAVSSON 1972). What fascinated me was that I was able to get glimpses of women's own views and experiences, even though during my PhD research time it was not common in ethnological research to be interested in what people thought but instead in what they were doing.

The resistance I met because of my gender leads to a fundamental reflection. What interpretations can a man do, despite the fact that he cannot have the experience of child-

birth? Do you have to give birth to successfully analyse other people's experiences of childbirth? How is it with female scientists who have not given birth? Are they also disqualified?

### 3. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As a cultural researcher you have often to do with living people. This is true whether you examine the present day or earlier conditions. This leads to the question concerning ethical considerations that researchers must regard so that they will not harm the people being studied. Instead, it is important to show sensitivity, empathy and engagement when they are talking. This becomes especially relevant in studies of sensitive topics that can be filled with traumatic memories for the interviewees. How should the interviewer behave when informants give the impression that they feel psychologically pressed to talk about the topics they are asked about?

In 1985, when I was a visiting professor of ethnology in Bergen, Norway, Norwegians were marking the forty-year anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Norway. I took part in the field collection of memories in western Norway regarding the occupation period. Even after forty years these hard times were still a sensitive issue to talk about. Informants could cry, stating that they had not told about their traumatic memories of the war years until this interview. Field workers then had to be careful listening and empathizing. It was important not only to be engaged in collecting information for the investigation, but also to act as a human being with feelings that could provide psychological support to the traumatized informants.

Another emotionally charged research area with which I have been involved concerns research on death. This field of research has experienced extensive advancement in Scandinavia in recent years. The "Nordic Network of Thanatology", abbreviated NNT, was established at a conference in Ålborg in Denmark in 2010. The most recent publication issued by this network is the anthology *Deconstructing Death* (JACOBSEN 2013). I have conducted fieldwork including interviews in cemeteries while I have been engaged in studying contemporary symbols on gravestones in Norway and Sweden, such as those that have appeared starting in the 1990s. Exceptional ethical considerations characterized by special attention and compassion are necessary when conducting interviews with persons who have recently been struck with grief. Nor can the researcher completely avoid becoming emotionally affected. This is something I have often ascertained. Nonetheless, it is necessary that the conversation be maintained, not only for the sake of the researcher but also for the sake of the other person. The empathy that the researcher demonstrates can be of importance to the informant, who can thus experience finding a third party who takes the time to listen (GUSTAVSSON 2011: 93ff).

As a cultural scholar one cannot escape being affected psychologically when reading all the extremely sorrowful and emotional messages published on open memorial websites on the Internet. Such messages concerning both deceased persons and pets are among those that have been published recently. The scholar's power of insight and feelings of empathy are vital to the ability for familiarizing oneself with and interpreting the experi-

ences of those persons who write about their often despairing emotions. I have been most unpleasantly affected by the appalling photographs of stillborn children that have been spread on the net. These photographs may be thought shocking by outsiders, but they have an undoubted therapeutic function for the parents. They will prove that they had a child that is loved even if it was stillborn. I could never imagine reproducing such photographs in a scientific paper, not only due to consideration for my own state of mind, but also out of consideration for the readers and the parents. For research-ethical reasons, I chose not to show any such pictures (GUSTAVSSON 2011: 156f).

Whenever I have done fieldwork in animal cemeteries, I have preferred to concentrate on memorials to deceased cats. This is a consequence of my great interest in and affectionate relationships with the cats that have lived in my home ever since my childhood. The same is true of my studies of memorial sites for deceased pets on the Internet where I have had the same reasons for choosing that which has been written about cats (GUSTAVSSON 2011: 181ff). Cats have recurrently sat alongside me while I write on typewriters or computers for my studies and research. I have myself experienced considerable grief over the years at the loss of beloved cats through accidents or illness. Therefore I cannot fail to be moved emotionally when reading all the sorrow-filled and emotionally charged contributions. The scholar's capacity for sympathy and feelings of empathy with the grief-stricken should be seen as being important for his or her ability to understand and interpret the experiences of the people who express their very genuine despair (GUSTAVSSON 2011: 181ff). At the same time, it is vital that the researcher maintains a certain distance to the distressing source material that has been collected in order to remain mentally capable of completing the research project both in the field and during later analysis.

In some instances one's personal mentality can make it imperative to refuse to participate in a research project. This took place with me in December 2011 when inquiries were made as to whether I would participate in the production of an anthology concerning the rituals of mourning carried out in Norway after the massacre in which 77 people were murdered in Oslo and on the island of Utøya on 22 July 2011. I had observed the enormous memorial observances at close quarters. This meant that I would find it impossible to keep these terrible experiences at a distance sufficient to my being able to carry out a research project about this, at least so soon after the event. The book was published in 2013 under the title "Den offentlige sorgen" (*The Official Mourning*, AAGEDAL – BOTVAR – HØEG 2013).

Ethically it is important to bear in mind that interviews should take place on the informant's and not the field worker's premises. The right to privacy must be respected. The informant should not experience coercion or risk of getting upset during the interview. Sometimes I was contacted afterwards during the field work in western Norway in 1985. Then the informants told more about their difficult experiences that had been concealed in their consciousness for so many years. I had an experience of interview situations actually contributing to the informants' work on negative emotions and experiences when they told about them to an interested and engaged listener.

It is also important to respect people and the culture being studied. This is particularly true in studies of folklore and folk religion. Cultural researchers have no right to

comment on the veracity of the informants' beliefs concerning the supernatural. One has to listen to the stories about beliefs and analyze what they have meant to the informants. It is improper to directly contradict informants even if the researchers themselves have different beliefs. It is disrespectful if the researcher takes a condescending, dismissive or bantering attitude towards people, groups, or ideas being studied. Such superior performance, which could sometimes occur in earlier folkloristics, damages the researcher's reputation and future job opportunities. A successful research must be based on the informants' confidence. Then you have the opportunity to gather the most relevant material as informants will not become reticent and feel psychologically pressed.

#### 4. THE RESTRICTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER'S SUBJECTIVITY

Another question worth discussing is: how should the researcher behave when studying *cultural encounters marked by conflicts* between opposing parties? The researcher can then easily be more loyal to one party than to the other. How can this be combined with an overall aim of a scientific study that opposing parties involved should be studied on as equal terms as possible?

In studies of cultural encounters, to which I have devoted much attention, the researcher cannot expect that more than one of the parties involved have the background, experience and belief similar to the researcher's. Should the researcher show neutrality at field work? Also, the scientist is a person with subjective experiences and preferences. These may be visible to outsiders, even if the researcher is trying to hide them. Some summer visitors who have read my book on the cultural encounters between summer visitors and resident population along the Bohuslän coast in a historical perspective (GUSTAVSSON 2013b) have expressed an opinion that I sympathize with the residents. This may be so, as the residents happened to be the victims having been displaced from their own native environment. This occurred when the summer guests bought the older houses for high prices which the residents could not afford to pay. It is characteristic of some of my research that I have been interested in highlighting the situation of people in a less secure economic and social position. I learned this policy from my mentor in ethnology, Sven B. Ek, in Lund and later through contacts with German ethnologists. At the same time it is important that ethnologists strive to reach ideas and experiences of all informants under as similar conditions as possible. Researcher's subjectivity must have its limitations.

#### 5. RESEARCHERS AND POLITICAL POSITIONS

Ethnologists studying our own time can easily focus on topics that have a political dimension or loading. Even then there are limits for subjectivity. If researchers outwardly show their political agenda in a tension-charged situation, it may definitely be negative for conducting the study. My experience is that ethnologists can provide important information for politicians when they present ideas, forms of life, cultural heritage and cultural imprinting in people affected by political decisions. A historical perspective presented by ethnolo-

gists can provide decision makers with the insight into how contemporary problems and conflicts have emerged through processes that spanned over several decades. Such historical knowledge should in turn be used to give guidance on the decisions which may be made and how conflicts can be mitigated. When politicians and planners want to tear down the buildings of a part of a city to build an industry, a car park, a new residential area or building a power station, which I met in Norway, they also destroy the old life environments. These forms can be filled with memories and feelings of the local population. Thanks to their field work ethnologists can convey such memories and experiences to decision makers.

A major social problem in the western Swedish coastal areas in the 1970s and 1980s was due to the fact that the summer visitors, as mentioned above, in a progressive scale had bought many of the older buildings in the coastal villages and paid high prices. Young residents who wanted to establish themselves in their community could not compete with the economic superiority of the summer visitors. This resulted in the emergence of a protest movement, named “The Archipelagic Council of Bohuslän”, among the younger resident population in the late 1970s. The goal was that coastal villages would be given new opportunities to function as permanent communities all the year and not only during the summer time (GUSTAVSSON 2013b).

An interdisciplinary collaboration was established at that time between ethnologists and the architecture section at Chalmers Technological University in Gothenburg who worked in the project “Coastal communities in the West”. In this project it was planned to support the coastal resorts so that they could also exist in the future as communities with a resident population all year round. The Chalmers scientists took a stand for the local population in the conflict situation that had arisen. Here you have the case of the so-called “action research” about which I have serious doubts. As an ethnologist I have refrained from taking a stand for or against the opposite parties. As a scholar I am interested in encounters and conflicts as well as in different kinds of cooperation between different groups and cultures. I conducted the study of the summer visitors and the local residents taking into account interests of both summer visitors and residents. By avoiding to openly support one or the other party, I had the best opportunities to get in contacts with people and information from the various parties, without any of them having the feeling of being left out and becoming suspicious of the survey. It is important that the ethnologists in field work situations are not perceived as a threat by one or both parties.

In German ethnology, there has been a stronger link between research and politics than ethnologists are used to in the Nordic region. The first time I was aware of that link was at the ethnological congress in Kiel in Western Germany in 1979 when they discussed the politically charged term “Heimat” (homeland) that has long been associated with the Nazi ideology. Professor Hermann Bausinger in Tübingen wanted to get rid of the negative Nazi stamp and fill the concept with a new and positive meaning (KÖSTLIN – BAUSINGER 1980).

A similar link between ethnological research and politics was very clear at the ethnologist congress on urban research in West Berlin in 1983. In a tense political conflict during the Cold War debated the West German ethnologists vividly how to send protests to the United States and / or to the Soviet Union to prevent the deployment of military missiles on both sides of the German Iron Curtain. Left-wing scholars from the department in Tübingen



argued for protests only to the United States and president Ronald Reagan. More right-wing scholars from Würzburg wanted to send protests to both the Soviet Union and the United States. A vigorous debate with political overtones also erupted when professor Wolfgang Brückner from Würzburg presented his and Klaus Beitzl's edited anthology on ethnology in Germany during the Nazi period (BRÜCKNER – BEITL 1983). This was a very sensitive topic for the German audience. Brückner was criticized in a loud voice by the Marxist anthropologist Utz Jeggle in Tübingen. He maintained that Brückner tried to whitewash ethnologists who were active during the Nazi era, that they were anti-Nazis. Brückner left the auditorium booed by a large group of young scientists from Tübingen. I and other Scandinavian ethnologists on this occasion found it liberating that Nordic Ethnology did not debate political issues during the topic discussions. Scholars do not stand aside the community, but our primary job is not to influence the society but to document and explain historical processes. This can and should give outsiders greater knowledge and insights.

## 6. TO RETURN TO PREVIOUS RESEARCH FIELDS

Finally, I want to illustrate the importance of “the ethnography of the return” which is referred to lately in Swedish ethnology, and that involves the researcher's resumption of previous fields of research after a long period of time (GUNNEMARK 2011). When a researcher has completed a study, one tends to avoid continuing to study the same problem. However, this feeling of satiety with the topic may gradually disappear after a greater time interval. I noticed that when during the 2000s I returned to inquiries regarding death and dying. Then it had been a long time since I in the 1970s conducted studies on cemeteries and the very old custom of drinking in the memory of the deceased at funerals (GUSTAVSSON 1980). The prerequisite for my renewed studies was that researcher's curiosity had reappeared. New and unexplored fields of research had emerged, in my case, the current memorial websites on deaths on the Internet, and new laws and practices relating to the choice of symbols on tombstones in both Sweden and Norway (GUSTAVSSON 2011). Research must be filled with engagement in what you are investigating. The feeling of saturation or fatigue is devastating. Then you have to take a break and wait for new inspiration as a force to resume your studies.

Another field of research that I resumed during the 2000s, was the cultural encounters between tourists and permanent residents along the Bohuslän coast from the 1990s onwards. New situations and conditions had happened in this area since I performed my summer visitor surveys during the early 1980s (GUSTAVSSON 2013b). On the island of Åstol only about 20 percent of the houses were summer-owned in the early 1980s when I conducted the survey of the Pentecostal movement (GUSTAVSSON 2012). When I made a new field work on this island in 2011 and 2012, the proportion of the summer-owned houses had risen to over half of the approximately 200 houses. My curiosity was aroused to analyze what consequences this change had regarding the summer residents' encounters with local residents and the earlier strong Pentecostal Free Church on the island.

To sum up, new research fields constantly turn up for observant and dedicated researchers. The investigation starts in the meeting between the researcher and the field of research, and the intricacies of this process have been the main message of this essay.

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