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Re-Writing (against) Culture

Ethnographic writing in educational ethnography: practices, approaches, innovations, and positionings

“What does the ethnographer do? – [s]he writes. Or, again, more exactly, ‘inscribes’” (Geertz 1973, 19)

The statement made by Clifford Geertz 50 years ago is still valid today, despite the latest digital developments such as ChatGPT: writing is *the* central ethnographic activity. Ethnographers write while they are doing participant observation (inscription), they transcribe statements of informants from interviews and ethnographic talks (transcription) and they finally produce a “thick description” (Geertz 1983) at their writing desk (for the three practices of ethnographic writing see Clifford 1990; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). The “writing culture” debate of the 1980s and 90s (Clifford 1983; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1991) was shaped by the linguistic and ontological turn and transferred to the German-speaking world under the title “Krise der Repräsentation” (Berg and Fuchs 1993). It brought writing and thus the act of representation into the focus of discussions about ethnography. Since then, writing and representation have been and continue to be widely discussed in several ways: on the one hand, questions have arisen about authorship, the positionality of ethnographers, literary forms, the relationship between literality and orality, and the way in which dialogical experiences can be transferred into monological representations.

On the other hand, in the discussion on the criteria of good qualitative social research, “textual performance” (Strübing et al. 2018, translated by the authors) has been put in the spotlight. Unlike with standardized techniques, writing and text themselves are considered part of the analysis: They not only seek to persuade others, but to “translate between worlds of meaning” (Strübing et al. 2018, 93, translated by the authors). Accordingly, writing in all its different forms has an epistemologically strong role in ethnographic research. Ethnographic writing reduces concrete experiences in such a way that they become communicable and make phenomena present through language that were not present before (Pöhlmann and Sökefeld 2021, 10), or not yet articulated (Hirschauer 2001, 429). Experiences, observations, sensual impressions such as atmospheres, noises, sounds, feelings, emotions, moods, etc., encounters, images, but also things as well as the seemingly indescribable and inexpressible are given a form of expression, a representation, in words. Fabian (1990) argued that representation should not be understood as the difference between reality and its representations but should be concerned with the *presence* hidden *in* representation. Because by focusing on re-presentation, the process of ethnographic writing can be understood as a practice of envisioning the other(s), rather than assuming an insurmountable gap between reality and symbol (Pöhlmann and Sökefeld 2021, 14). This reference to “the others” in the context of questions about representation is not unproblematic, especially from a gender-theoretical and postcolonial perspective. It was critically addressed by feminist ethnographers early on, in some cases even before the publication of the epochal book *Writing Culture* (Strathern 1987; Ortner 1993; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). In her text “Writing *against* culture” (1991), Abu-Lughod addressed the pitfalls of ethnographic research and analysis methods that all too often constructed generalizing assumptions based on cultural differences. She called for a “writing *against* culture” not only to critically confront the concept of culture, but also to look productively at intersections between



societies, social and cultural change, subjectivity, and everyday contradictions/inconsistencies/paradoxes. Furthermore, Spivak (1988, 277) has argued that the term ‘representing’ allows a twofold interpretation: representing in the sense of “describing” and representing in the sense of “speaking for”. Until today, the question of who can speak and who should be given a voice is a central point of discussion and legitimation around ethnographic writing. This impetus also overlaps with discussions within childhood studies (in lieu of many James 2007; Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007).

It is also important to juxtapose the concept of the “other” with that of the “own”, which becomes an issue, especially in ethnographic research of (seemingly) familiar fields and which has been discussed with terms such as “Fighting Familiarity” (Delamont and Atkinson 1996) or "Befremdung der eigenen Kultur" (Amann and Hirschauer 1997). Meanwhile, however, the discussion is no longer just about the representations of the strange or unfamiliar and the de-familiarisation or “making strange” of the familiar, but about the manifold relations and positionings of ethnographers to and in the field (Ploder and Hamann 2021). This also goes hand in hand with different forms and strategies of writing. With perspectives developed in postcolonial, critical race, and feminist theories, this debate has taken on a greater urgency (Davis and Craven 2016; Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995). The problematization of representations of “the other” has been accentuated by the increased rejection of descriptions that are not (also) linked to one's own background and experience. Finally, posthumanist (Latour 2005; Mol 2002) and new materialist (Barad 2007; Coole and Frost 2010) approaches enlarge the circle of entities to be considered to include things, artifacts, organisms, substances, animals, and more. Ethnographic writing looks for ways to represent these as well - for example in “multispecies storytelling” (Bencke and Bruhn 2022) or as “entangled publications” (Schadler 2019).

At the same time, ethnographic writing is undergoing a fundamental change in the use of media. For a considerable time now, ethnographers have not only been writing with pen and paper in the field and at their desks; they reach for their smartphones to file notes, make use of the multimedia possibilities of digital media and process their observation protocols digitally. The research fields of ethnography are becoming increasingly digital, too: chat groups, social media, or video conferences. It is not yet clear what this means for the representational practices of ethnography: a continuation of ethnographic work and writing in the digital (Coleman 2010) or entirely different forms of representation that use the possibilities of digital media themselves (Marres 2017). In the mirror of the new digital possibilities, the tools of ethnographic writing are increasingly coming into view (Thompson and Adams 2013; Schindler and Schäfer 2021; Kalthoff 2013).

Against the background of all these issues – some of which concern theoretical and epistemological questions, other rather hands-on and practical concerns – an actualization of the Writing (against) Culture debate with reference to the ethnographic research of educational science and pedagogical fields is the subject of the conference. The following topics and aspects, among others, will be discussed:

1. Positioned writing, positioning while writing

What role does the positionality of the ethnographer play in the writing of ethnographic texts such as field notes, observation protocols, dense descriptions, monographs, or articles? The positioning in the social field of research influences both the interaction event itself as well as its perception and interpretation and the subsequent written representation. The position in the scientific field –



for example as a junior researcher or in a certain disciplinary context – also influences the resulting texts.

- How exactly are positioning and text production related in concrete cases and situations, what is the relationship between them?
- How are different aspects and facets of representation – e.g. “representation as description” and “representation as speaking for” – related to the positioning of the ethnographer?
- How can positionality and positioning be taken up and reflected in the ethnographic text?

2. Ethnographic Writing as Practice - Doing Ethnography

The second area focuses on ethnographic writing as a practice and on ethnographic writing practices in the context of debates about representation. The following questions can be asked:

- *Writing Practices*: What are concrete different writing practices – as a lone ethnographer in the field, writing collaboratively, writing in dialogue with other texts, writing rhizomatically vs. sequentially, writing with pen and paper vs. keyboard, or hybrid forms of writing? What are the respective yields, potentials, and limitations of these practices? And how do they interact with issues of representation?
- *Textual performance*: How and by what criteria can the quality of (published) ethnographic texts be determined? Which different writing styles (Maanen 2011) are employed to produce adequate descriptions of the field on the one hand (the text as translation) and to convince expert audiences on the other (the text as rhetorical tool) (Strübing et al. 2018)? What can something like qualitative literacy (Small and McCrory Calarco 2022) – that is, recognizing good ethnographic descriptions – be measured by?
- *Communicating ethnographically produced knowledge*: How can ethnographic knowledge be communicated through genres of representation other than scholarly texts (e.g. novels, comics, films, theater, cartographies, artistic performances) and thus be made accessible and usable in different ways for a wider audience or for different audiences? To what extent do such “new” forms of mediation change the practice of ethnographic research?
- *Appropriation of ethnographic writing*: How can ethnographic writing be appropriated, taught, and learned? (Is learning by doing still predominant?) What formats and forms of mediation are needed for the practice of ethnographic writing? (Cf. also the contribution format “Workshop”)

3. After having written ...

The third area concerns questions of how to deal with the diverse ethnographic text types after their production (Bambey et al. 2018). What remains of field notes, field protocols, analyses, and published ethnographic texts? What comes into the view of a (scientific) public? What is reused by whom and what disappears in the researcher’s “poison cabinet”? In recent years, the handling of research data and research output has been increasingly characterized by terms such as open data, open science, and open access. Behind this are different developments and interests in science policy, which are often in tension with scientific concerns and specifics. As made clear in various position papers by disciplines working in ethnography, the very “constitution of ethnographic research (...) poses major challenges to the concerns of archiving, but also of secondary use” (Meier zu Verl and Meyer 2018, 81). In this context, the following questions arise:



- *Archiving and preservation*: What does it mean to preserve ethnographic research data such as observation protocols or even photographs and field documents in the long term? Is this desirable? What criteria are applied when choosing which data to secure, and what uses are considered? What procedures and standards exist for archiving research data?
- *Open Data and (secondary) use of ethnographic data*: When – and with what effort – is it worthwhile to take a second look at ethnographic data, and what challenges arise? How can this succeed in the case of context-sensitive and confidential ethnographic data?
- *Generating data as a process of co-construction with field participants*: What claims to "ownership" and "consent" are made and by whom?
- *Meta ethnography*: How can we use already published or still ongoing ethnographic studies for meta ethnographies? What are the potentials and risks of such a strategy?
- *Collaborative and participatory ethnography, Citizen Science*: By involving and engaging citizens and non-academic actors from the researched fields, new forms of writing and co-production of texts are tested. The question of the speaker's position – who writes about whom and for whom – gains specific importance in this context. To what extent is decentering an academic perspective fruitful for the production of knowledge? Where do the boundaries of academic text production lie? What is the utilization context of writing?

Submission of contributions

Conference language: conference contributions can be submitted and given in English and German. The language of the abstracts determines the language of the presentation.

Participation: Contributions to the congress can be submitted as individual paper, symposia, research forums, alternative presentation formats or workshops:

- *Paper (maximum 30 min)*: single or multiple authors* may be responsible for a paper. Three individual papers will be combined into one session. A synopsis of an individual contribution comprises a maximum of 500 words with central statements about the research question, methodological approaches and points of discussion.
- *Symposium (120 min)*: A symposium is directly related to the conference topic. It is organized and coordinated by one or more parties. It lasts 120 minutes and bundles three to a maximum of four scientific presentations, whereby at least one presentation should be given by a researcher in the qualification phase. Internationality and interdisciplinarity in the selection of speakers for the symposia are desired. A synopsis includes a frame text of max. 400 words and short presentations of the papers of max. 200 words each.
- *Research Forum (120 min)*: The Research Forum is free in its content and form. It offers national and international research projects or networks as well as groups of young researchers and doctoral students an opportunity for professional exchange. An exposé describes the intention and the planned procedure and comprises a maximum of 500 words.
- *Alternative presentation forms*: This format offers the possibility to present research projects, plans and results to the conference audience. The choice of the type of presentation is open and can, for example, take the form of audio-visual formats, performance, installation, podcast, video clip, animation, poster, etc. Presentations are accessible



throughout the course of the conference. A synopsis describes the project and presentation format with a maximum of 300 words.

- *Workshop (180 min)*: This format offers experienced ethnographers the opportunity to provide a workshop on the conference topic for other researchers, in which participants can work on their own texts or engage in exchange with each other about their texts. An exposé of max. 500 words describes the topic as well as the planned course of the workshop, how the leaders and participants (can) get involved and provides information about the maximum possible number of participants.

Contributions can be submitted from **August 15, 2023, until October 16, 2023**, at <https://www.conftool.net/ethnography-conference-2024/>

Organizing team: Dr. Simone Brauchli [UZH], Felizitas Juen [PHZH], Georg Rißler [PHZH], Prof. Dr. Tobias Röhl [PHZH], Prof. Dr. Anja Sieber Egger [PHZH] & Dr. Gisela Unterweger [PHZH].

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