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Reflexive introspection on sharing gifts and shaping stories

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to convey how reflexive introspection can be used to discover new insights from previously recorded ethnographic data. A reflexive introspection of experiences recorded on tape, in fieldwork notebooks, personal journals and in correspondence bares ulterior motives and complicity in escalating consumer desires that suggests a retextualization of the fieldwork experience.

1. Introduction

This reflexive introspection of ethnographic journals and fieldwork notes is set within a self-narrative in which I tell my story of living in Negril, Jamaica, events that precipitated its end and subsequent role as friend and researcher that prolonged my engagement with the community. "People make sense of their lives by thinking about themselves and the events around them in story form" (Escalas and Bettman, 2000, p. 237). For forty years I have been retelling my story of homesteading and love-lost to understand the past as comprehensible narrative. With each reflection I get closer to understanding the impact of my involvement and how and why I stay connected. The purpose of this paper is to convey how reflexive introspection can be used to discover new insights from previously collected ethnographic research.

For over three decades, I conducted participant observation and life history interviews to record the consumer social and economic transformation of a fishing village into a tourist town where I, the researcher, bought land in 1971 to build my home. In this retrospection I find that ulterior motives for neighborly gift giving complicated my relationships with informants and, perhaps, also compromised my research agenda. In previous iterations of my narrative I realized that by building my home I was complicit in compromising the integrity of the environment (Olsen, 1997) and was observed by neighbors to be the victim in a love triangle in 1972 that resulted in an outpouring of empathy especially from local women that initiated "insider" status and an intimate ethnographic rapport (Olsen 2003, Olsen and Gould 2008). Clifford defines rapport as "acceptance and empathy, but usually implying something akin to friendship" (1988, p. 34). A pattern of mutual gift giving emerged that strengthened our relationships with neighbors and helped integrate us into the community. Gifting came in many forms but is best defined as "a good or service (including the giver's time, activities, and ideas) voluntarily provided to another person or group through some sort of ritual prestation" (Belk and Coon, 1993, p. 394). While Mauss (1967) was first to suggest that the "spirit" of the gift bears a notion of reciprocity, Sherry reminds us "The gift has been interpreted as an invitation to partnership, and as a confirmation of the donor's 'sincere participation' in a recipient's tribulations and joys, despite the presence of an ulterior motive" (1983, p. 158). Gifts not only articulate relationships between givers and recipients, but the "gift system" also contributes to "social solidarity" (Giesler, 2006, p. 283). Thus, the giver offers more than a thing, and the gift represents acknowledgment of acceptance into a broader community.

In the following sections, I begin by positioning my paper in the stream of reflexive introspection to reinterpret researcher and informant behavior from previously collected fieldwork data. Second, I provide my narrative from personal journal reports on immersion in the setting (1970s) that reflect on gifts flowing between me, the new resident, and my local neighbors as we responded to each others' lifestyle conditions. Third, I use reflexive introspection to probe the formal research collection period (mid 1980s–1999) during which I collected life histories and continued to compensate informants (who were also friends) with consumer goods and money. By using reflexive introspection I probe fieldwork notes to find feelings beyond empathy that include anger, envy, guilt and co-dependency (these feelings are ongoing). Finally, in retrospect, two important conclusions are drawn

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from introspection: I, the researcher was complicit in encouraging neighbors' acquisitive consumerism and my ulterior motive was that I desperately needed these neighbors to be my friends. Throughout this paper, I use pseudonyms (see Appendix) for informants who were compensated for participating with the author. I also use aliases for Americans who became part of my story.

2. Introspection as method of understanding

As an evolving paradigm within consumer and marketing research, the introspective project uses "self as an instrument" (McCracken, 1988) to explore not only long-term product involvement (Shankar, 2001) but also incorporates "subjective personal introspection" (Holbrook, 2006) to probe "metacognitive" perception for "mindful", consciousness awareness. "Verbalized introspection of any type takes the form of a narrative and text" (Gould, 2006, p. 193). Introspection as a research paradigm includes two approaches according to Gould, "'metacognitive introspection' … involves one investigating one's own mind and consciousness … by watching one's thoughts and feelings," while "'narrative introspection' … involves autobiographically thinking through and/or telling one's own story or various aspects of it" (2006, p. 194). Gould recognizes the merger of these two approaches as most closely fitting Holbrook's "subjective personal introspection" model of introspection. Wallendorf and Brucks (1993, p. 340–342) discuss five "categories of introspection." "Researcher introspection" involves a researcher analyzing his/her own experience. "Guided introspection" yields personal accounts from informants answering questions provided by the guide or questionnaire. "Interactive introspection" perfected by Ellis (1991) elicits shared experiences among several introspectors in a mutual context of discovery. "Syncretic forms of introspection" uses previous variants that incorporate researcher personal experiences with informant introspections. "Reflexivity within research" is ethnographic participant observation with researcher introspection of fieldwork reports and journal entries during the context experience (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, p. 340–342).

This paper builds on the last paradigm. When rereading my journals, fieldwork note books, dream diaries and correspondence I watch for words that trigger memories of the contextual moment in the storyline. I probe my feelings in those memories to locate points of discomfort, guilt, insecurity or even joy and confidence. In this process, I discovered my complicity fostering materialistic desires with my informants. Applying reflexive introspection to previously experienced ethnographic research allows a reinterpretation of those experiences by reanalyzing fieldwork notes for emergent insight and "retextualization" (Cohen, 1992; Thompson et al., 1998).

Significantly, "'reflexivity' is the label used in common currency to stand for possible but as-yet unrealized alternatives in the production of ethnography" (Marcus 1998, p. 190). Reflexivity assumes increased value when it allows other voices, "the so-called polyphonic text," to also shape the collaboration (Marcus, 1998, p. 193) and has most notably amplified feminist genres from autobiography to ethnography — by probing the political landscape to articulate once silent social and cultural agendas (Stevens, 2003). Marcus suggests using "self-critical reflexivity … to explore the ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of ethnographic research as an integral part of producing knowledge about others" (Marcus, 1998, p. 189). Stevens (2003) positions her narrative in the third person because, "Maybe it's the feminist in me the personal is political which makes me generalize my response, as if I speak for other women… personal disappointments are re-presented as disappointments all women may have felt" (p. 78). Herein lies a communal consciousness we feel, but articulate as empathy. My female informants expressed it first when I did not have a working kitchen and later for my loss. I felt it for them struggling to survive an impoverished economy.

The appropriateness of reflexivity according to Gould (1995, p. 721) is that it should conform to two qualifications: "the researcher as instrument-subject must be knowledgeable and motivated with respect to both introspection and the topic of study, and the topic must be susceptible to introspection." Cohen (1992) fulfills these conditions with a longitudinal analysis of fieldwork in Whalsay, Shetland. Over nineteen years, he made many return visits and communicated by phone and mail in his absence. He revisits earlier fieldwork assumptions and notes how much Whalsay and he, too, changed almost beyond his capacity to comprehend. Thus, we can "explore the use of *extraneous* experience and 'post hoc' ethnographic interpretation as a potential guide to the indigenous puzzle" (Cohen, 1992, p. 351).

When writing one's own participation in ethnography we must distinguish two very important perspectives — between reflecting and being reflexive. Tedlock makes the distinction. "In ordinary 'reflectiveness,' one is conscious of oneself as an Other, but in 'reflexivity,' one is conscious of *being self-conscious* of oneself as an Other" (1991, fn16 p. 85). Thus, using reflexivity to expose the "observation of participation" also requires a self-conscious understanding for how "all of our interactions involve choices… what we see or fail to see, reporting a particular misunderstanding or embarrassment, or ignoring it, all involve choices" (Tedlock, 1991, p. 72). Our choices are calculated in contexts of place that condition our responses in real time. The human response to feelings of empathy can implicate a researcher in complicity as Geertz and his wife discovered when locals rescued them from police during a raid on a cockfight in Bali (Geertz, 1973). The Oxford dictionary defines complicity as "involvement with others in an unlawful activity" (2008, p. 158) and Marcus interprets the Geertzes entrée to insider status as an "ironic entanglement of complicity" bordering on the darker side of the relationship with Other in ethnography (1998, p. 106–07). My complicity involves gift giving outside the rule of law that also nurtured consumer desires. However, the dilemma in my "observation of participation" is why I gave so many consumer goods as gifts to informant families and how these gifts perhaps contaminated the fieldwork setting while I was studying the effects of economic development on the same families.

Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) suggest researchers keep personal diaries separate from field notes because comparing the two assists understanding how mood and situational factors complicate fieldwork. Patterson claims "Qualitative diary research (QDR) is an innovative way to capture rich insights into processes, relationships, settings, products, and consumers" (2005, p. 142) because "they contain kernels of insight that would remain hidden to traditional qualitative designs" (p. 145). My reflexive introspection seeks these "kernels" by probing journals, field notes and dream diaries since 1970 for new insight on such experiences.

3. Initial entry — building a home

In 1959 Jamaican Prime Minister Norman Manley arranged construction of a road to Negril along the north coast that connected it to the airport in Montego Bay. The *Guide to Negril* (1991, p. 2) reports "In the early seventies some daring 'Hippies' and 'Flower Children' ventured to the still isolated Negril and shared accommodation with the local inhabitants." In fall 1970, I was in my second year of graduate school in anthropology when my ex-husband, Rusty, was denied tenure. For winter break we traveled to Negril and initially stayed with a local family in town until relocating to the only rental on the Lighthouse Road, an A-frame cottage with no electricity in a jungle overlooking the sea. Our neighbors were very friendly.

> January 16, 1971 — Last evening we walked to the Warf Club for supper. We passed many homes with tons of kids who ran out of their yards to talk to a stranger and hold our hands as we walked. We met a lot of nice, happy people. Everyone's related and the families are extensive.