## Chapter Seven

## ETHNOGRAPHIC EXPERIENCE AND THE POLITICS OF SITUATEDNESS

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Over the last few decades there have been intensive ongoing discussions in anthropology on the limits of cognition, the role and function of the subject in the production of knowledge, as well as the representations of the cultural reality in ethnographic texts. Within the research interests there have been included issues related to the status of ethnographic truth and knowledge acquired within the discipline. The concept of an autonomous and rational subject has been challenged, the possibility of objective description of reality has been questioned, and the correspondence theory of truth has been rejected together with the belief in the universal nature of human reason (Buchowski & Kempny, 1999, p. 11). The content shape of these debates has been influenced by the criticism of the interdependencies existing between anthropology, colonialism and imperialism (the so-called political crisis), feminist research (taking up such issues as the impact of gender and other 'markers of identity' on the cognitive process) and the discovery of "literary mechanisms of producing the presented worlds" (Brocki, 2008, p. 9) closely related to the epistemological crisis. These considerations have largely changed the image and the perception of anthropology; they have become a starting point for the reflection in the field of the theory, methodology and methods of ethnographic research. This has led to the emergence of a number of trends of an interdisciplinary nature and the creation of various forms of ethnographic writing and innovative research techniques. In addition, gradual moving away from the positivist to the hermeneutic or phenomenological research model has become apparent, as well as turning to the critical theory.

With the discovery of the dialogic nature of knowledge, emerging in the process of negotiations of meanings and senses, the researchers have made the subject of the overview the anthropology itself, which, in their opinions, produces Otherness through locating it in the Western cultural discourses. Moreover, within these considerations, the Other is also the "anthropologist, who is his/her own anthropological imagination" (Kaniowska, 1999, p. 135). Therefore, it can be seen that a unique role in the contemporary anthropology is played by reflexivity, understood as a kind of 'self-deconstruction' of the discipline combined with the development of its self-awareness. The assertion that reality is interpreted by culturally situated subjects allows also to see reflexivity as a "critical scrutiny of the self" (Okely, 1992, p. 2), which in turn provokes reflection on the role of biographical elements in the production of knowledge.

In this chapter, I will consider what methodological effects are brought about by the changes described above, and how they contribute not so much to a fuller understanding of what (anthropological) knowledge is and how it is created, but to a better, more in-depth comprehension of the reality studied by anthropologists. This matter I will examine in relation to the fundamental anthropological category, namely **experience**. I will be interested on the one hand in the question of relations between *individual experience of a researcher* and *ethnographic experience* ('professional' one), and on the other hand, in the issue of *political conditions of anthropological knowledge*.

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As noted by Wojciech J. Burszta (1992, p. 141), "since the time of [Bronisław] Malinowski, the method of the so-called participant observation has been meant to establish a delicate balance between subjectivity and objectivity of the knowledge possessed by an anthropologist. Personal experience of a researcher and particularly participation and empathy for the natives were considered central to the process of understanding the society and culture in question. They were, however, simultaneously limited by the impersonal standards of observation and 'objective distance.'" It can be clearly seen that in this fieldwork method constitutive for anthropology, namely participant observation, there lies a certain paradox. The researcher is required both to perform the total 'immersion' in the indigenous culture and keep the critical distance towards it. Therefore, since the dissemination and institutionalization of the long-term field research in the humanities, a boundary difficult to define between 'personal' and 'professional' has manifested itself. This division is reflected in the kinds of elaborated texts: studies of communities and-written somewhat at the margins of

the mainstream—'memories' of scholars (diaries, dramatized stories, poems, novels, etc.). Interestingly, in a large part because of Bronisław Malinowski and his diaries first published in 1967 (cf. Malinowski, 1967), the category of ethnographic experience is subjected to further reconceptualization. The stream of personal experiences of a researcher, previously hidden under the mask of objective description, becomes the leitmotif of the confessional and impressionist experimental ethnographies (cf. Van Maanen, 1988, pp. 73-100).

According to Katarzyna Kaniowska, a change in the understanding of the status of experience in anthropology goes hand in hand with an increase in the role of hermeneutics and postmodernism on the grounds of the discipline. Kaniowska (2006, p. 20) writes, "From trusting the perception through the senses we have moved to understanding experience as a complex category, having at its basis not only the testimony of the senses, but the evidence of thought and emotions. Let's add to that the awareness of its cultural circumstances." Transformations taking place in the process of experience conceptualization also result in an entirely new way of defining the research method (the place of participant observation is taken here by co-participation), and the distant attitude, which previously was "the condition for maintaining objectivity" is replaced, among other things, with "emotional and empathic engagement" (ibid., p. 21). This way of approaching ethnographic experience reveals the specific role of the subject in the process of knowledge creation; as emphasized by Kaniowska, "in contemporary anthropology, gaining research experience has been turned into an effort to experience the studied reality" (ibid., pp. 20-21). It is worth mentioning that these processes are often accompanied by a belief in the 'truthful' dimension of personal experience (both on the part of a researcher and the researched subject), and the conviction of its authenticity. This in turn leads to an attempt to blur the boundary between the research situation (perceived as a kind of 'unnatural'

It is worth adding at the margin of these considerations that experience becomes also an important element of shaping the politics of identity in feminism and within the framework of other trends of the so-called oppositional criticism (Gandhi, 1998). Epistemological perspective of subordinate groups is justified by the "fact of separate experiential spaces" (Hasturp, 1995, p. 153) of individuals subjected to oppression. The position occupied by 'subalterns' in the social structure legitimizes knowledge produced by them as knowledge truly objective and free of ideological bias. One of the symptoms of the 'turn to experience' characteristic for many contemporary trends in humanities is, for example, the concept of "emotive knowledge" coined by Alberto López Pulido. In this project, "experience, emotions, sincerity and empathy are not only methodological tools, but they are also mounted in identity politics, since in fact they play the key role in establishing the location of an author and recovery of his/her 'true' identity" (Domańska, 2008, p. 138; cf. also, Songin, 2011).

one), and daily life as something 'unadulterated.' What happens here is the rejection of an attitude based on the distinction between involvement and detachment, and the personal experience of the researcher is being directly included in the creation of knowledge (cf. e.g. Kafar, 2004; 2010; Michoń, 2010; Pietrowiak, 2011). At the same time, this practice gains not so much epistemological as ethical justification (Kafar, 2010; Pietrowiak, 2011), which to my mind, at least in part, stems from the belief that the impersonal mode of expression provides incomplete account of the events that have occurred in the field, and thus, it is perceived as insincere, forging the experience, as well as devoid of the necessary sensitivity and the empathic insight (cf. Kaniowska, 2010). Autobiographical texts are in fact intimate descriptions of events and considerations of the authors and their struggle with the matter of field experience, which leads to shifting away from the dispassionate language of realistic ethnography. An important feature of these writings is also that they cease treating the studied subject as an informant, which makes the field account a platform for the contact with another human being (cf. Kafar, 2004; Pietrowiak, 2010).<sup>2</sup> It seems that authors seeking support in ethics are at the same time convinced that empathy, co-participation, co-experiencing, 'moral meltdown of horizons' (cf. Kafar, 2004; 2010), enable reaching the truth, which cannot be achieved by the standard tools of scientific cognition.

Let us now examine more closely the structure of texts that can be considered as exemplification of the genre of autobiographical ethnography, which is characterized by the incorporation of descriptions reflecting the experiences and beliefs of the researchers into the anthropological narration (cf. Reed-Danahay, 2001). The subject of my analysis will be two articles: Marcin Kafar's Wobec wykluczonych: Antropolog w Domu Pomocy Społecznej dla Przewlekle Chorych (Towards the Excluded: Anthropologist in the Aid Centre for the Chronically Ill) (2010) and Kamil Pietrowiak's Gdzieś pomiędzy: Przestrzeń spotkania (w terenie) (Somewhere in Between: Meeting Space) (in the Field) (2011).

Already the introduction of the article written by Marcin Kafar suggests that we are not dealing with the classic ethnographic text. But are we sure about that? The Author speaks in the first person, thus clearly indicating his presence. The introduction is a description of the first visit to the Nursing Home where the Reader follows the Author-novice, a little insecure and lost. Our attention is captivated, almost from the beginning,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Significant in this case is the title of the doctoral dissertation of Marcin Kafar, namely, *I the Anthropologist—I, the Human Being: On a Certain Variant of Engaged Anthropology* (the dissertation was prepared at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Lódź, 2009, under the direction of professor A.P. Wejland).

by the realistic description. The Author makes a detailed report of what he observed (the "iron fence," "eight steps," "big mirror divided into parts," "cardboard chart," "gate that is about a meter high"), what he experienced ("I clench my hand on a metal rod, give it a pull once or twice, until the lock gives in"), and what he thought ("Who are These, in whose hands the Residents entrust the 'days of their lives'? Who are the Residents themselves?"). As Marcin Kafar (2010, p. 203) points out, the reflections contained in the text are a kind of "a counter-discourse imitating thoughts," which is aimed at introducing "additional story dramatization." This sentence clearly suggests the Reader that he/she deals with the Author conscious of his creation of anthropological narratives. The literary devices used here resemble the efforts of Bronisław Malinowski, aimed at making being There more real not only for the Author, but for the Reader as well (cf. Mokrzan, 2010). Just as Malinowski encourages his Readers to "fully surrender to reading, to come aboard together with the Author and to be with him on the Trobriand Islands" (ibid., p. 28), Kafar forces us to walk with him along the corridors of the Aid Center and feel 'with our own skin' the atmosphere of the place. His (and the Reader's) aim is to hear the history of life of the residents, the stories that are significant not only cognitively, but also therapeutically. Opening oneself to the story of the Other is to make our lives better and more valuable, to break the boundaries separating people and to facilitate "searching for answers to the question 'Who are we?'" (Kafar, 2010, p. 213). As the Author writes, "all theories are useless if we forget that in front of us first of all there is a person who is the subject" (ibid., p. 208). This kind of ethnographic research is filled with the call to "fulfill a moral duty 'to be for the other" (ibid., p. 209); and it is not about the cultural meanings or social constructs, but a more fundamental issue—the "essence of humanity" (ibid., p. 213).

Kamil Pietrowiak chooses a slightly different way, namely, he follows the path of the dialogue, for which the inspiration is the philosophy of Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas and Józef Tischner. It is not only a conversation between two parties, but a dialogue of the (anthropological?) 'I' with the informants, readers, authors of other texts (thus 'You' is plural in this case). The way of presentation, adopted by the Author—as he admits himself—stems from the perceived fatigue with "some, intellectually over-saturated anthropological texts whose primary purpose seems to be hindering or even preventing the Readers from reading them and whose hermetic language rather tends to indicate the weakness than epistemological opportunities of anthropological research" (Pietrowiak, 2011, p. 26); Pietrowiak, on the other hand, wants to speak "as a normal human being," in order to give pleasure to the Reader (ibid., pp. 26-27). Although the text

refers to the fieldwork methodology, the Author conceives it to be something more—it is to be a reflection over a meeting and a conversation of two people. It might also be concluded that this is a description of field experiences that becomes a contribution to the quest for the truth. It is not, however, about the truth (cognition) of the reality, but the veracity of experiencing this reality by the researcher and the researched. But for the promise of the truth that is rendered by experience, "it would be better to sit at home, read more books, watch rather than listen, write texts about texts" (ibid., p. 28).

Ethnographic experience, described by Kafar and Pietrowiak, is examined by both these Authors from the point of view of ethics, and—as Lévinas argues—it involves direct concentration on the Other. The responsibility for the Other is, as the philosopher thinks, "non-removable in its ethical possession. It is the responsibility from which one cannot escape, and thus it becomes a principle of absolute individualization" (Lorenc, 1998, p. 48). In the cited works the relation I—the Other is understood metaphorically as "the cradle of the Real Life" (Buber, 1958, p. 9). Adopting this perspective results in the rejection of the distance and giving the priority to the bond forming between two people; to use the words of Martin Buber, "the one primary word is the combination I—Thou" (Buber, 1958, p. 3). As a result, the anthropological narrative is transformed into a description of our own experience and the one of the encountered people, it is the story of life, stemming from a desire to establish a genuine relationship based on reciprocity and co-experiencing.

The discussed texts induce us to ask the following question: how do the circumstances (experiencing the loss—Marcin Kafar) and the object of study (faith and holiness—Kamil Pietrowiak), determine the narrative and research perspective of anthropologists? Reading these publications also raises doubts as to whether the necessary condition for the Reader to participate in the (fieldwork?) experience of the Authors is sharing their view on the world and a certain type of sensitivity represented by them. In other words, should the reading of these texts not be preceded by an annotation included by Rudolf Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy:* "Whoever cannot do this, whoever knows no such moments in his experience, is requested to read no farther" (Otto, 1958, p. 8). Certainly, it would be wrong to assume that longing for contact with another human being, so close to Kafar and Pietrowiak, is just as close to all researchers.

In the second part of my paper I will discuss the way of conceptualizing ethnographic experience by female researchers associated with the poststructuralist and feminist approach. However, I would like to stress that the perspective adopted by Kafar and Pietrowiak, as well as those presented below, I consider as different, but in equal extent legitimate

forms of reflection on the specifics of the field research and the role of the subject in the generation of anthropological knowledge.

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One of the risks associated with the adoption of the perspective favored by Kafar and Pietrowiak is, in my opinion, the assumption that the cognitive process is subjective in nature and it is not focused on the subject of study, but—to use the words of Roy D'Andrade—on how an anthropologist doing the description of the reality responds to or reacts to the object of the description (D'Andrade, 1995, p. 399). Such a conviction stems from a misinterpretation of the consequences arising from the criticism of objectivism. In the positivist model of research, knowledge-building is defined as a process from which there are eliminated any and all personal factors. Hence, the logic of this process is based on dichotomies such as: 'objective—subjective, 'rational—emotional,' 'mental—physical,' 'personal—professional," 'intuitive—analytical.' The experience of the subject is located here in the personal, subjective or private sphere, and lies outside of the actual area of research ('professional') interest of an anthropologist. The criticism of objectivity and rationality, however, should not be identified with the validation of subjectivity and emotions as the dominant tools of acquiring knowledge, because they, standing in opposition to the Enlightenment strategies constituting the authority of the subject, are included in the Enlightenment framework of the discourse (cf. Bar On, 1992). To contribute to a better understanding of the reality studied by anthropologists, reflexivity must, to my mind, become an effort oriented on going beyond the categories embraced in the positivist model of knowledge construction. In the execution of this task, one of the helpful concepts is that of Donna Haraway's "situated knowledges," which refers to "politics and epistemology of location."3 The knowledge of the subject, resulting from its situatedness, is considered here in terms of a kind of semiotic-material technology linking the bodies and meanings. This means that while trying to understand ourselves, we do it in a symbolic language mode, we narrativize our own experience. Haraway's proposal allows for casting away the understanding of the subject as identical with itself, reductionist and transparent at the same time (cf. Haraway, 1988). Experience is perceived

A similar value has the concept of the so-called strong objectivity coined by Sandra Harding. The author points to the need to disclose the history, location, influences, beliefs and moral views of a researcher at every stage of the research project. In other words, the researcher is required to continuously disclose his/her standpoint throughout the duration of the project (cf. Harding, 1991; 1993).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that the problem of the situatedness of the subject is also present in the positivistic research model. The necessity to eliminate the evaluative judgments assumes *implicite* its location.

in a similar way by Joan Scott, who emphasizes that it must be regarded as an event of a discursive nature. According to her, there are no "individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience." Thus, in her opinion, what can be seen and what can be felt is not an "evidence that grounds what is known," but should rather be problematized as something that requires further review and analysis (Scott, 1992, p. 26). Scott claims that "experience is always a constructed category that contains the ideological traces of the context from which it emerges" (Domańska, 2008, p. 135; cf. Scott, 1991; see also, Scott, 1992). Thus, experience is not a tool, which makes it possible to reach directly some kind of external, non-ideological reality. The adoption of an opposite assumption would lead to the conclusion that the identities of the researcher and the researched are self-explanatory. Scott strongly emphasizes that situatedness must be understood as a place of intersection of various discourses taking an active part in the forming of subject positions (Scott, 1992, p. 25).<sup>5</sup> The reasoning used by both researchers argues that reflective consideration over the role played by experiences in the process of knowledge production cannot be limited to describing the private feelings and views of the researcher and his/her informants. Due to such practice, anthropologists risk being accused of solipsism and narcissism. In addition, it is also questionable in terms of cognition.

Valuable tips, regarding the potential uses of reflection on the meaning of subjective experience in the production of knowledge, can be found in the texts of feminist scholars. They point to the role played in research by different kinds of discursively constructed identity categories. The factors emphasized by them include historical, national and generational factors, as well as race, class, gender and sexuality, taking an active part in the formation of subject positions. According to feminists, it is acceptable and even recommended to consider "the aspect of being as a way of knowing" (Wickramasinge, 2006). Situatedness allows one to understand the dynamic nature of the mutual interactions between the different identity categories that determine the ways of interpreting the reality. In the opinion of Donna Haraway, situatedness is not static, defined or fixed, on the contrary—it is relational and unstable, which results from its contextual

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The poststructuralist approach assumes that a subject is a function of discourse.

The debates conducted by radical anthropologists in the 1970s were also of great importance for the development of the interest in this subject. This refers primarily to the reflections on the so-called native knowledge (Jones, 1970) and perspectivistic knowledge (Lewis, 1970), the influence of ideological factors, as well as the impact of the 'markers of identity' such as culture, class or nationality on the way of constructing knowledge in anthropology.

nature (Haraway, 1988). This approach emphasizes the diversity of subjective locations and points of view, encouraging feminist researchers to reflect on their situatedness in research projects. It can therefore be concluded that location is the exemplification of the active inclusion of the 'self' in the process of knowledge production, which in feminism is considered from the point of view of politics, understood as a synonym of strategy and means "critical reflection on the consequences of our own location in the world, the values in which we believe, the objectives we are trying to achieve [...]; power relations, in which everyone, in one way or another, is involved" (Baer, 2005, p. 7). In short, this approach suggests that experience is created as a result of the subject's situatedness in the social and cultural discourses and thus it cannot be comprehended in terms of subjectivity.

Feminist anthropologists problematize ethnographic experience and sensitize us, inter alia, to the perceptions of a researcher and her femininity by the researched. Peggy Golde (1986) indicates that women in the course of fieldwork tend to be treated as androgyny, honorable men, children or as weak creatures that need constant care and protection. Sometimes it also happens that in order to be able to participate in the local community life, they must pass a series of initiation rituals by which they acquire a symbolic identity, defining their place within the culture they study. Carol Warren (1988), in turn, argues that female anthropologists usually have a lower status in the researched communities and their authority is created on the basis of their race, class or culture. The studies conducted by Elizabeth Enslin show, however, that the distinction such as: 'the self' and 'the Other' or distance and commitment, are now unnecessary and often unfounded. Enslin, who is an American and the wife of an Indian anthropologist (a graduate of Oxford University), carried out a research in her husband's home village. Her interests were mainly focused on the problems of landless women. In addition to family connections, another difficulty in the research project was the fact that the relatives of Enslin's husband—taking up an activist action for the creation of the Help Center for Women—required that Enslin should engage in local politics. The situation resulted in a serious dilemma concerning the boundary between her and the Others, who due to her marriage became a part of her family. This dilemma, in a broader horizon, concerned the need for differing the levels of engagement and distance (Enslin, 1994).

Reflection on the situatedness of the female subject facilitates distinguishing a lot of interdependencies important from the point of view of the research process and the cultural ways of defining gender. One of the strategies used during the field research is following the gender dos and

don'ts specific for a given cultural area. Female researchers use in this way the perspective of 'a look from within' underpinned by the concept of "embodied subjectivity" (Smith, 1987).7 On multiple occasions, the mere fact of being a woman compels a researcher to submit to the local norms in a much more severe way than in case of male anthropologists (Wolf, 1996). Diane Wolf reminds us of the difficulties faced especially by those anthropologists who led their studies in societies with strong partiarchalism, to which they often gained access thanks to the privileged position of certain men: their fathers, husbands or brothers (Oboler, 1986; Berik, 1996). Feminists carrying out research projects in the Middle East or South Asia point to the necessity of wearing traditional local clothes and complying with certain rules such as the prohibition of looking at men or talking to them in certain situations (Wolf, 1996; cf. Pettigrew, 1981; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Schenk-Sandbergen, 1992). Similar restrictions apply to women conducting research in caste communities, where female anthropologists are required to act in accordance with the established cultural rules. They cannot perform activities traditionally associated with different spheres of the society, such as cleaning their own homes or toilets, cooking and eating food with people coming from certain castes (Wolf, 1996; cf. Kumar, 1992; Schenk-Sandbergen, 1992).8 Unmarried female anthropologists face various pressures on the part of the researched with regard to changing their social status or must be prepared for the fact that they may become addressees of marriage proposals. Married women, in turn, may be advised that the proper place for them is not 'in the field,' but at home with their children (Enslin, 1990; after Wolf, 1996, p. 9). Female researchers also found themselves in situations where if they were pregnant, the status of impure women was attributed to them (Enslin, 1990).

Feminist anthropologists clearly show that knowledge is produced by subjects having gender, nationality, sexuality and age, and although they acknowledge that "the autobiography of fieldwork is about lived interactions, participatory experience and embodied knowledge" (Okely, 1992, p. 3), this does not mean that it does not require in-depth theoretical consideration; as stated by Ewa Domańska (2008, p. 131), "experience (along with other concepts accompanying it such as memory, testimony, emotions, trauma, empathy and compassion) belongs to 'engaged' categories, which require particular vigilance."

This approach enables including the researcher's own experiences and beliefs in the process of knowledge production.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth indicating that these restrictions apply equally to male and female anthropologists.

In my opinion, ethnographic experience, although inevitably linked to what is individual, should stay far away from the practice which aims at describing personal experiences of the researcher and the researched, because, as instructed by Cifford Geertz (2000, p. 58), "The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants." Recognition of the research process as a "complex intercultural mediation, and a dynamic interpersonal experience" (Scholte, 1974, p. 438), allows to conclude that experience is indeed born somewhere "between us and the Others" (Hastrup, 1987). Special importance of the word 'between' must be highlighted here, as it indicates both an important mediating role of a language and the fact that 'the self' is always relational and it is defined in relation to the Other. Therefore, experience does not correspond to the category of authenticity, since to become understandable to a researcher (or the researched) it must be viewed from a distance. In this way, the desire to directly approach the Other, associated with attempts to erase the border between life and research, can never be fulfilled. The effort oriented on diminishing the distance between the self and the Other is dissipated in the process of understanding, which inevitably assumes at least the minimum narrative distance (cf. Songin, 2010, pp. 77-80).

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