

Being There

New Perspectives on Phenomenology
and the Analysis of Culture

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The Sensory Experience of Doing Fieldwork in an 'Other' Place

We must not, therefore, wonder whether we really perceive a world,
we must instead say: the world is what we perceive.

Merleau-Ponty, 1999:xvi

This article describes a methodological experiment in ethnological fieldwork. As the experiment was not completely successful, it is not my intention to present it as a fully workable alternative to the more established research methods. However, I do believe that the experiment will serve to highlight some of the problems involved in changing our concepts about and attitudes towards what we consider to be 'proper' fieldwork.

The Problem with Fieldwork

In the introduction to a book that discusses the role of location in social anthropology, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) have pointed to the fact that never before has the idea of 'fieldwork' had such an important impact on the discipline. I would claim that the same argument is also applicable to the discipline of European ethnology. In Scandinavia, the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork is being used as *the* point of distinction between social anthropology/European ethnology on the one hand, and disciplines such as human geography, history and sociology on the other.¹ The way we build our empirical base from being 'out there' – that is, in the field with ordinary people – has become a way of giving

our disciplines their identities. We tend to become researchers that see ourselves as those who (claim to) know what the world really is like. This has established direct, personal experience in the field as the hallmark of good research. It would not be unreasonable to claim that 'doing fieldwork' today plays an important part in the identity construction of the discipline as such.

The common way for ethnologists to carry out their fieldwork is to go somewhere, usually not too far away, to find people to talk to (interview), and generally try to get some kind of impression of the actual setting.² Courses in methodology usually stress the importance of making tape recordings of the interviews, and transcribing all the details. If an interview has not been recorded, its value as a reliable source is effectively reduced, so that when referring to it in a text, one usually feels the need to argue its value and explain why it is being used. Other aspects of human actions, such as gestures, ways of doing things, clothing etc, are normally treated with much less accuracy.

Our present practices rely heavily on words and this can be traced back to the idea of fieldwork as a pure collecting of material. The early ethnologists set out to record the facts about previous lives and communities through old people's recollections of the past and usually linked to the collecting of artefacts. Such people were called informants and their narratives were seen as a direct link to the past, with the main source-critical question centring on the functions (or, rather, malfunctions) of memory. Once the narrative had been established as something other than pure imagination, it could – and would – be used as an example of a general, though usually geographically limited, phenomenon.

This point of view was strongly criticised during the latter part of the 20th century, and was finally defeated through what has been called 'the linguistic turn' that reached ethnology in the last quarter of the century. To put it bluntly, one could argue that the basic ideological idea of this perspective was that the world was a text, or rather, that we could not have any knowledge about the world other than linguistically. As social and cultural beings, we live in a world of narratives – both great and small – that constitute our perspective and understanding. This meant that the focus

on words was retained in our methodology, despite the shift from seeing people's stories as possible presentations of a past or present real world, to seeing them as a source that enabled us to understand how people made sense of their worlds through language. Culture came to be seen as something that is constantly (re)created and changed, but which is primarily concerned with ways of thinking and patterns of values (cp. Ehn 1993:7f). So it is easy to see that the two positions are opposites, although they do have the common denominator of a profound trust in words as *the* main carrier of meaning for any ethnologist doing fieldwork. At best, other experiences are considered to be complementary, but are seldom seen to have any value in themselves.

Another aspect of this is that fieldwork has long since ceased to be regarded as a mere production of descriptions. Rather, in the last decades, ethnography has tended to become a discipline of clarification and interpretation. This, however, is seldom made transparent in published works. It is by no means unusual that researchers take personal experience as a starting point, but more often than not, they also tend to do nothing more than use it to sketch a situation and then quickly move on to more comprehensive interpretations (cp. Ehn 1993). In reality, of course, most of our interpretations of field material are based on inferences, in which we use knowledge gained outside the field situation to try to explain that which lies outside the original situation. One reason for this might be that today our lifeworlds are crisscrossed by references to things outside our everyday lives. One could probably say that what has happened in the late modern world is not so much that everyday *actions* have become more complex, but rather that *contexts* have become more difficult to survey (Hansen 2001). This naturally makes it hard to stick to the lifeworld situations that we meet in the field. Since words are our main reference source, it is often easy to put them into a world context, thereby missing the challenge of understanding how new contexts influence our day-to-day duties.

One of the aims of the experiment discussed in this article was to turn the habitual way of doing fieldwork upside-down: I wanted to test what might come from a situation in which the fieldworker consciously chose to abstain from talking to people, and instead

relied on other sensory impulses. By concentrating on these other kinds of input and how it might be possible to use them to analyse an event, I also wanted to increase the transparency about how we actually make cultural interpretations in 'the field'.

Finding My Way

When we at the department of European Ethnology in Lund started to take the 'European' in our name seriously, and thus to conduct studies abroad, we suddenly found ourselves in circumstances that were new to us. To start with, we did not know very much (at least comparatively) about the societies in which we were doing fieldwork, and secondly, we often had great linguistic problems. One solution could have been to use the more traditional, social anthropological ways of conducting fieldwork, namely to stay in the field for at least a year and to learn the language. However, this proved to be impossible due to the costs involved, especially when research funding was diminishing. This was the harsh reality that led us to try to develop another kind of fieldwork. In this case, I wanted to test a lead, which I believe may be found in research inspired by phenomenology, namely to focus on the role of perception in establishing field material.

The central nub of my experiment was to put myself in a situation and then use my own reactions to it as the key to understanding what was taking place. It thus became important to be acutely attentive to the sensory impressions that were released in the situation, and to consciously test the limits of my own stock of experiences as a tool for understanding them. I used this method in a series of small fieldwork exercises, which formed the basis of an article entitled *Festivals, spatiality and the new Europe* (Hansen 2002). 'The fields' included a couple of local fairs, the celebration of two national commemoration days, and an open-air museum. My main methodological aim was to capture the experiences of being both a visitor and a participant in the events.

It was my participation in the celebration of Hungary's national holiday that changed what had just been a vague idea of 'taking part and being there', into a more profound method. Now, in

discussing the method, I will therefore concentrate on what happened in Budapest during that early spring day in 1998.³

I had arrived the evening before the celebration was to take place and spent the night at one of the old, formerly fashionable, hotels on the Buda side of the city. A few days previously, someone had told me about the celebrations scheduled for Saturday, and I therefore traveled from Pécs, where I had been staying. On waking up, I was eager to go out and see what was going on. I do not know exactly what I expected, but on entering the hotel's dining room for breakfast, I felt disappointed. There was no sign of a celebration. It could just have been any ordinary Saturday. A little less eagerly, and certainly with diminished expectations, I crossed the bridge and headed towards the main street. On my way there, I did not see many indications that this was an important day for the nation – a flag here and there and a couple of people in their Sunday best – but nothing definite. It was not until I turned a corner, that I found myself among thousands of people all dressed up and with relaxed and pleasant expressions on their faces. It was as if I had crossed the border into another country.

However, to my eyes at least, they seemed to walk around without any clear direction and they did not seem to be waiting for anything in particular. I fell in with the crowd and just let my feet follow theirs. There seemed to be a certain rhythm and direction to the flow and I soon found myself on the pavement just across the street from the National Museum. I took up my position and waited. I did not know what I was waiting for, or even if there really was anything to wait for. However, having grown up in Norway, I had a clear picture of what a national day's celebration should look like: to me, the school children's parade in Oslo was a most powerful icon. So perhaps I was waiting for the parade.

But there was no parade. I stood on the pavement, like everyone else, enjoying the sun and watching people just standing or slowly walking along the street and there was probably nothing in my appearance that made me different from anyone else. But an anxiety started to arise in me, a fear that at any moment someone would step forward, address me and claim that, as a foreigner, I had no right to take part in *their* celebration. In order to mitigate the sense

of estrangement or at least to indicate my presence as being friendly, I bought a green, white and red cockade and attached it to my lapel. Thus, by discretely disguising my foreign body and masquerading as a local, I tried to become as invisible as possible.

Of course, no one addressed me. But my anxiety made me aware of my inability to read the surroundings, both linguistically and with regard to its general cultural meaning. But at the same time I realised that this did not really matter in relation to my fellow celebrators: to them I was just a body among all the others – as they were to me. And as a body it was movements and actions that counted, not thoughts and ideas.

For a while nothing much happened, but gradually the crowd grew tighter in the small park at the foot of the steps leading to the museum. Maybe something was happening after all? I crossed the street and found my way into the park. Here people were obviously waiting for something. They paid attention to every unfamiliar sound and kept glancing at the small stage at the top of the steps, manoeuvring themselves to find a good vantage point. One movement led to another so that we all seemed to take part in a strange dance – without any obvious choreography but with a discernable pattern. My participation in this dance was also a way of being transplanted into the event by the way it became incorporated into my own body's movements (cp. Merleau-Ponty 1999:143).

However, mentally, I was still a stranger waiting for the school children's parade, so that although my body was present in this real-time-event – adjusting itself on impulse to try to find a good position with a view of the stage, and mimicking the movements of others in the crowd – my mind was somewhere else, preoccupied with national identity. I could sense an estrangement and felt that I was waiting for the materialisation of my own specific childhood memories. To put this in more general terms, one could say that my perceptual world did not match that of my reflections, and vice versa.

In order to be able to reflectively understand what was happening during this sunny day in Budapest, I had to try to get rid of my pre-conceptions. The idea of a 'perceptual approach' to fieldwork is to try to experience the actual constitution of the event in which

one participates. Now, in the ordinary activities of everyday life, we are guided by past experiences (cp. Schutz 1967:79; Merleau-Ponty 1999:140). Our past experiences are present as an awareness of what to expect and do, a kind of confirmation that the world is ordered and meaningful. We usually know what to expect, such as which route the local bus will follow so that we are able to react if one day it takes an unexpected turn. In everyday life we develop what Schutz (1970:72f) calls a natural attitude. This is a central part of the lifeworld in which things and actions are taken for granted. It is also a world that we can operate within in order to confirm or change it, since we know how it works.

But in Budapest my natural attitude did not work. This became even more apparent when things started to happen at the top of the museum steps. The flags fluttered, some men started to play the kettledrums and women, in some kind of national dress that directed my thoughts to one of Wagner's operas, stepped forward and began to sing something that sounded serious. They were succeeded by speakers in neat suits. At the foot of the National museum steps, the atmosphere became rather listless. The speeches were numerous and long-winded. The applause more dutiful than enthusiastic. Actually, nothing much happened in terms of outward activities. But a sense of solemn festivity was present, even in a person like myself, who did not understand a word of what was being said. The place itself, the vague yet determined meaning materialised in the building's columnar facade, the wide, imposing steps and the little park between the building and the busy main street was in no way an accidentally chosen arena.⁴ Without the monumental illusions in front of one's eyes, the staged event would not be more than a mere abstraction (cp. Augé 1995:60). The material culture was an essential part of the event.

Imaginative Empathy

Fieldwork-wise, I believe this was a crucial moment. Since I was not in command of the language, other impressions flooded over me. The strange language forced me to navigate the atmosphere with a greater sensitivity. It was my body rather than my mind that tied

me to this world, and it seemed to come out of the surrounding space (cp. Merleau-Ponty 1999:148).

But my mind still worked flat out, testing perceptions in relation to previous experiences. I found myself trying to develop a kind of *imaginative empathy*, giving attention to the reactions of the people around me, and actively trying to put my own sentiments into the same gear as I imagined theirs were. I was trying to understand the others, that is, to experience *their* harmony between what they aimed at and what was given, between the intention and the performance (cp. Merleau-Ponty 1999:144). And I was doing this by using the sensations that arose from my bodily presence in the crowd. What was actually happening was that what was self-evident in my ordinary world was being challenged by this new one. It became apparent to me that through the bodily experience, several ways of being or living could find their way into the cultural instruments of celebrating belonging (cp. Merleau-Ponty 1999:348).

I was struggling with the motives as well as the meanings of the actions I observed.⁵ As an observer I could only guess the meaning of the actions and the motives of the actors, judging from what I could see. Normally, in my everyday surroundings, I could be quite certain that my interpretation would correspond with the actors' ideas, but now I felt I could not be so sure.

Like the others, I enjoyed the warm spring sunshine, but unlike them I was a loner in the crowd. Most people did not seem to pay very much attention to what was going on at the top of the steps, but chatted with their families and friends. Judging from similar events in Scandinavia, where I do understand the language and can take in what is being said, I guessed that people were partly commenting on the event itself, but were mostly talking about other matters. This attitude – not feeling obliged to concentrate on what was taking place on stage – was significant in the celebration as a social event, but methodologically speaking, it posed a problem. In my case, being alone in a crowd made up of small groups, I had great difficulty in using imaginative empathy. Their small talk underlined my position as an outsider.⁶ I tried to think myself into similar situations in which I had really participated, and use those recollections to imagine what was going on in the present crowd.

Thus I was trying to break out of the limitations set by my own vision. What I wanted to do was to '... break the link between my vision and the world, between myself and my vision, in order to catch and describe it' (Merleau-Ponty 1999:227).

My body was the instrument used to pick up the event, but in order to understand its meaning, I had to reflect upon the perceptions. This reflection would naturally have been much simpler if I had had a native to discuss it with. Since I did not have that, I instead started to have an imagined conversation with myself. In concrete terms I was walking, standing, looking, listening, smelling, sensing, and at the same time telling myself stories, testing which story would make the most sense, carry the highest credibility as a reflection on my experiences, and at the same time, posing the questions I wanted to find answers to. In this way, I actively turned my attention to the event in order to find its meaning (cp. Schutz 1967:71).

I later found out that the celebration at the National Museum had been officially arranged by the Government. The political implications of that did not occur to me during the event, but I started to suspect it when, at the end of the speeches, I accompanied the stream of people through the streets. In what seemed to me as an outsider to be the commercial centre, we encountered a demonstration. I could not really understand what was actually going on here either; who was demonstrating or why, and how it was related to the celebration of the nation. In contrast to the activity by the steps of the National Museum, the atmosphere around the demonstration was highly charged. The demonstrators expressed their anger and their dissatisfaction by chants, placards and banners, and the aggressive body language of the marchers spread to the bystanders. I imagined that someone had tried to (politically) 'steal' the nation, although whether this someone came from the political left or the right I could not judge. In contrast to the government's celebration, the demonstration was not tied to a specific place. It moved through the centre in such a way – through its very movement – as to symbolically seize the town. At the same time it became much more ephemeral. As soon as the demonstration had passed, it was as though it had never taken place. Only the sound of it still echoed after the marchers had disappeared from sight.

Walking along with the crowd, I had the very strong feeling that I was an unqualified actor – I could not even work out whether the demonstrators were right or left wing. The problem was that I could not really understand the others' action as a carrier or indicator of their intended meaning. I was trying to use my own lived experience as a guide, but projecting my own experiences of Scandinavian political demonstrations really made no sense (cp. Schutz 1967:107ff).

I thought I had understood the demonstration, since it matched some of my previous experiences. But the events at the foot of the museum steps did not match any of my previous experiences. Because of that, I could not interpret its meaning. If I hadn't been told that this was the celebration of Hungary's national day, I would never have guessed. But I would have been able to say that this was some kind of celebration, by reading the postures and actions of people around me, and also the staged event itself. So one could say that material culture and the bodily activities of people help us understand the atmosphere of events, but not necessarily their meaning and intention. For this we need language.

Understanding Meanings

Being qualified as an actor is about knowing what general meanings are attached to different kinds of phenomena in a specific society. In the things we take for granted, this knowledge cannot really be said to be normative in any practical sense. For example, political knowledge consists of our ability to tell the difference between right and left, thus enabling us to take a political stand. It does not, however, mean that we can dictate it. The general knowledge of a society is not external to the actions of everyday life, but rather inherent in them, as structures and conditions and as the actors' own plans and ambitions (Hansen 1998:184ff). In such processes, images of belonging are important points of reference.

Actions⁷ are always exercised according to a preconceived plan in which what one does in the present is projected into the future. Any action will, however, be characterized by the past, since the planning takes place before the action has been performed. My

previous experience guided my initial attempts to understand what I encountered in Budapest, and made me choose between the Norwegian and the Swedish national holidays – of which I have personal knowledge – as the guiding experience in understanding what was going on. Since the Swedish national holiday is hardly ever celebrated, it was natural that I should use the recollections of my Norwegian childhood as a guideline. But when this quickly proved to be of little help in understanding the event, I had to develop a new, improvised plan by reorganizing the structure of my recollection of past experiences in relation to what was happening now.

When discussing intersubjective understanding, Schutz outlines two ideal situations. The first occurs when the actor merely seeks to bring about changes in the external world. The second one occurs when the actor seeks to consciously communicate his/her mind to others (Schutz 1967:113ff). But what I was dealing with, not only in Budapest, but in the other fields that I encountered, were situations that were created – or staged – in order to trigger off sentiments of a more or less specific kind. My purpose was not to investigate the motives of the creators of the events, but to understand what was taking place when people acted in them. What I was dealing with was a complex arrangement of signs, or symbols, into which people were walking and acting. To most of the actors, there was probably a shared fundamental meaning of the totality of signs, i.e. 'we are here to celebrate our nation, Hungary'. This was quite apparent, even to a total outsider like myself. But on the level of the individual actors, we are apt to find several different ways of linking the perceptual arrangement of signs to the stock of experiences with its recollections of the past and strategies for the future.

New experiences are thus weighed in relation to old ones and already established meanings are modified. We constantly change the meanings that condition the activities we participate in (Nilsén 2000: 44). If 'culture' is seen as having something to do with making and understanding meanings, then this example shows how it develops from a constant testing and questioning of shared experiences, of shared relations and everyday lives. 'Culture' therefore cannot be seen as something static or as a 'steady category' (Stewart 1996:40). Rather 'culture' should be seen as an expectation, a way to plan

and understand the actions of oneself and others in the world, a never-ending pursuit of something that is constantly changing. This is a way of approaching the field that differs from the prevailing modernist theories, which tend to see people in their relationship to the world as being totally steered by their intellects, and thus capable of narrating this to an inquisitive fieldworker. The risk in following such an analytical track is that people's actions are read as *reactions*, so that consciousness and intellectual dimensions are overemphasized. As a result, expectations, bodily experiences and activities tend to stay in the background. In contrast to thinking, reflecting and ideologies, the sensual, physical and material experiences are hidden.⁸

Turning our focus from compensatory escapes to experiencing the life world, from modernist (or post-modernist) to phenomenological perspectives, puts a new stress on the way we do fieldwork. What is needed is a shift from participant *observation* to shared *experience*, from what people *say* to what they *do*. Being there – taking part in the activities and events we want to study – is a way of changing our focus from words to deeds, and letting people be responsible for their own actions.

One of the main methodological arguments for trying to conduct fieldwork through participant experience is to move it away from the heavy reliance on words, which has characterized most of modern ethnological work – and still continues to do so. Possibly this dominance of words, spoken as well as written, is not only a result of how we, the academic intellectuals, tend to see the world, but also something which might be traced back to the enlightenment's strong beliefs in rational thinking. But life, of course, is made up of so much more than words and rational decisions, and our experience of the world is not primarily narrative, but rather sensory. Just talking about hunger, pain, happiness or love is not the same thing as experiencing them. It might, therefore, be worthwhile to try to develop methods for reaching those first-hand experiences, rather than relying on hearing stories about them. And, naturally, this also goes for the kind of sentiments being triggered off by celebrations of belonging, no matter whether these are national, local, or familial.

I do know that no one can ever *be* another person. There are limits to both imagination and empathy. But there really is no need to exaggerate the differences between the researchers and those who inhabit the places in which we carry out our fieldwork. On the contrary, there is a lot to be said about the similarities between us.

Was It Worth It?

There are certain implications for those writing ethnographic texts based on this way of approaching the field. In their *Writing Culture* (1986), Clifford & Marcus have already begun to question the structure of ethnographic texts. Their critique may be summed up in the question about who has the right to interpret what takes place in the field. Even though I agree with much of their critique, I do not agree with their solution. On the contrary, I believe that as researchers, we must be willing to take full responsibility for the texts we produce – even when we let the voices of 'the natives' be heard. First of all, the fieldworker must be visible, since his/her sensory impressions are the starting point for the analysis. The fieldworker must therefore be an ever-present ego in the text, as must the concreteness of the surroundings. The senses that arise within are always unequivocally connected to the place in which they arise. Transparency enables the reader to reflect on his/her own experiences, and thus to evaluate and take up a position in relation to what is being presented. Transparency, then, is necessary even when the text turns from personal, sensory impressions and changes to a more general argument. On the other hand, the use of one's own perceptions as a source will change the standards for referring to the empirical material. By that I mean we will move from a 'positivist' focus on strict documentation, to a narrative that relies on its own trustworthiness. In turn, this will only be possible if the researcher is able to generalize his or her personal experiences in a way that is meaningful to the reader. A perception cannot be repeated in a scientific sense, but it can be presented so that the reader recollects perceptions of his or her own.

But turning fieldwork into a text is also a way of bringing order to a chaotic and disorganized real life. One might even say that meeting this

world through fieldwork is meeting it with a gaze that is an ordering, plot-creating gaze. And, as I have related earlier in this text, I have even used the plot-centered technique of actively telling myself stories in order to try to understand my field. This, however, is also what characterizes scientific writing and differentiates it from fiction. What we are finally aiming at is trying to understand the actors' motives. But this is in reality a different task, and the researcher will, according to Schutz, have to be satisfied with three indirect approaches:

1. He can search his memory for similar actions of his own, and finding such, can draw from them a general principle concerning the relation of their in-order-to and because-motives. ...
2. Lacking such a guideline, he can resort to his own knowledge of the customary behavior of the person observed and from this deduce the latter's in-order-to and because-motives. ...
3. ... His last resort will then be to try to infer the in-order-to motive from the act by asking whether such and such a motive would be furthered by the act in question [Schutz 1967:174f].

All these approaches imply inserting order in the world.

There are resemblances between the method sketched out here, and what is usually called participant observation. The main difference is that I have been trying to work from the fact that I was a stranger in the situation, and that my participation was that of an outsider trying to imagine what it would be like to be an insider.

A new kind of fieldwork needs to concentrate on the processes involved when places are made to represent culture and identity. This is what is meant when we say that we need to concentrate on how places are made to happen. Or as the American philosopher Edward Casey has put it: 'A place is more an event than a thing to be assimilated to known categories' (Casey 1996:26).

A Fieldwork of Perceptions?

The most striking feeling I had both during and after this fieldwork-session⁹ was a sense of non-belonging. In writing the original text, I felt I was balancing on the edge of literature. On the other hand,

putting myself actively and consciously in the position of the outsider certainly enhanced my sensitivity towards the activity of doing fieldwork.

Analytically speaking, ethnography is not pure description but rather an ongoing process of explanation and interpretation, since we, as researchers, are usually part of the same universe of meanings as the people we study. The understanding we have of what is going on in 'the field' is not only developed by what is actually taking place there, but also by the inferences we make using knowledge gained from outside the field. The experiment that I carried out helped me to understand more about the way these inferences work. They will usually normalise any situation we enter, since we habitually try to find a parallel in our previous experience. Analytically, it is therefore important to be conscious of the sensory impulses that actually start off the process.

The example used in this article turns our attention to the importance of language as a means of understanding the world, but also in becoming a real part of any world. Language is a way of picking up the thoughts of others, and a way of trying to think as they do. I could not do this and was therefore unable to get any notion of all the tailored meanings inherent in speech. Turning oneself into an outsider means placing oneself outside the thoughts that are present in language, as objects ready to be used by actors (cp. Merleau-Ponty 1999:179).

One might argue¹⁰ that this kind of fieldwork, and especially placing oneself outside language, makes it difficult or impossible to understand and grasp such phenomena as intentionality, agency, social relations, local knowledge and lifeworlds. These are all tightly integrated with language, and need real, not imaginative, empathy. On the other hand, the experiment in fieldwork described here turned out to give several insights and a more profound sensitivity towards material culture, landscape, settings, and place.

Of course we might gain some insights into everyday life, in the sense of unreflected, lived reality, dominated by 'the natural attitude' (Schutz, 1970:72f). Successful fieldwork should be characterized by reaching into this natural, unreflected attitude towards reality. Thus it means losing oneself as a reflecting intellectual – not forever,

but as a methodological move, in order to establish the imaginative empathy that will bring us closer to perceiving events and places in the same manner as the locals. So, in walking around Budapest, I was trying to catch something; something that I could claim would most resemble the feelings the locals seemed to have towards the celebrations.¹¹

It might seem difficult to find a way into the natural attitudes of other people, but it is even harder to try to grasp the ways in which they create meaning of their perceptions. This process might be described as the way perceptions are turned into lived experience. And previous experiences do influence those of the present, without really being problematised by the individual. Acting in the world takes place against a background of preconditions that we take for granted – and previous experiences are an integral part of these preconditions.

As acting individuals we have experiences which we carry with us through life. Social life is dependent on the individual's capability to make sense of and understand meaning, and previous experience plays an important role in this. But when we state that meaning is the exact significance the actor puts into the action, then it becomes clear that knowledge of meaning belongs to the actor, and not to the observer. 'Thought is focused on the object of the spatiotemporal world; life pertains to duration. The tension between the two is of the essence of the "meaningfulness" of experience. It is misleading to say that experiences have meaning. Meaning does not lie in the experience. Rather, those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively. The meaning is the way in which the Ego regards its experience.' (Schutz 1967:69)

In addition, meaning/significance is not given once and for all. It is created and recreated through actions and reflections – and is very often dependent on the actual situation which brought it to the fore. To reach beyond this, it is necessary to focus upon the lived experience, that is on the pre-reflective experience of perception.

One of the purposes of the fieldwork-experiment was to problematise the background of taken-for-granted conditions by challenging my own. By taking the perceiving, experiencing, and acting subjective individual – that is myself – as a starting point, I tried to make the

pre-reflective perceptions more visible, and thus the whole process of fieldwork more transparent. Such first-order experiences are truly bound to me as a subject, but they can then be used in order to understand the experiences of others. In the experiment I did not accomplish this, but the idea was to use the personal experience of the fieldworker as a starting point for dialogues with other actors in the same situation, and thus to create a better understanding of the process through which meanings are attached to events. 'Applied to the theory of behavior, this means that one's own behavior, while it is actually taking place, is a *prephenomenal* experience. Only when it has already taken place ... does it stand out as a discrete item from the background of one's other experiences. Phenomenal experience is therefore never of oneself behaving, only of having behaved. Yet the original experience in another sense remains the same in memory as it was when it occurred.' (Schutz 1967:56)

Fieldwork-wise this causes a problem. As a stranger – and as a professional fieldworker – it would be highly unlikely that my experiences coincided with those of the locals acting in the same situation. It became obvious in the interpretations I made in order to make sense and meaning of my perceptions of the Hungarian national celebration that I could not abstain from using my own experiences, or my academic knowledge. In the process of making sense of perceptions, I left the realm of imaginative empathy and re-entered my own realm of European ethnology. Working in this manner is obviously open to highly subjective interpretations. On the other hand, the acts and events that I dealt with were such that anyone could compare them with their own experiences and interpretations. The reader might choose to reject or accept them – to be a stranger to or to recognize himself/herself in the situations and interpretations that I have presented here.

Notes

- 1 Social anthropologists have criticised how we, the ethnologists, perform our fieldwork, but I will not go into this here.
- 2 Although oversimplified, this is the description given in a much-used Swedish textbook entitled 'Field Ethnology' (Arnstberg 1997).
- 3 It should be noted that this article is written in the aftermath of the real event

- not only regarding the time span, but inevitably also in relation to new reflections having been made.
- 4 The National Museum is exactly what the name indicates: a kind of essence of the nation where Hungary distinctly stands out as the final outcome of a historic development. In the exhibitions inside the museum, the nation begins with the arrival of the Magyars to the high tableland and concludes with the fall of Communism. Throughout, all the difficulties and distress of the nation have been brought to light.
 - 5 According to Schutz (1967:30) a motive is the expectations that an actor has on his action, while meaning refers to the significance the action has for the actor. Of course, this is a knowledge that resides with the actor, not the observer.
 - 6 One solution would be to have gone there with friends, but this would have diminished my concentration on what actually took place at the event.
 - 7 Schutz makes a distinction between behaviour, which in the lived experience will only have meaning through reflection and thereby only when it has already been done (Schutz 1967:55f), and action, which is always performed according to a plan that is projected on to the future. Actions will therefore necessarily have a character of the past, since their meanings are built from previous experiences that are projected into the future (Schutz 1967:57ff).
 - 8 There are important political dimensions to this. Policies construct subjects as objects of power. They are tools, which, in the Foucauldian tradition, could be analyzed as the translation of political interests into common knowledge. Another aspect of this could be termed re-subjectification: the way that policies are met not only through adaptation or resistance, but also with completely new ways of acting and new cultural forms. This should lead us to question ideas that idealize the homogenizing effects of policy-decisions and underline that the objects of these decisions are not objects in any true sense. People are active and acting subjects, following their own goals and ambitions. On the other hand, they usually have less power than the policy makers concerning the possibilities of carrying through their visions.
 - 9 The session included all the different fieldworks used in the article mentioned earlier.
 - 10 I am grateful to Prof. Jonas Frykman for suggesting these points.
 - 11 This might sound like a romantic idea about going instantly native. The point however is that when this is realised as a conscious act of reflection, there is also a conscious distance between oneself and the natives.

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