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Overponderabilia: Overcoming Overthinking When Studying "Ourselves"

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Abstract: This article discusses a key methodological difficulty in conducting qualitative research close to home: the issue of overthinking. Whereas MALINOWSKI's concern regarding *im*ponderabilia, i.e., the risk of not thinking about the subtle phenomena of everyday life, has long haunted ethnographers and qualitative researchers, not least those working "at home," we highlight an issue of *over*ponderabilia, i.e., the risk of overthinking seemingly familiar statements and practices of the people studied. How do we, as qualitative researchers, study very well-known phenomena such as science, bureaucracy, management etc. without reading our own ideas and understandings into the deceptively familiar concepts and accounts of our research subjects? Pondering this issue is inevitably a central concern for the increasing number of qualitative researchers who study people who apparently talk, think and work in a way which is similar to their own. While previous answers or solutions to this issue first and foremost emphasize various means of reflexivity, this article presents the method of "mutual participatory observation" as a particular way of overcoming overthinking: a method which *in situ* invites our research subjects into our thinking. Thus, in the pursuit of an ever enhanced understanding, qualitative research becomes not so much a reflexive deciphering as an active debate; that is, a mutual induction of the differences between the qualitative researcher and the research subjects.

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1. Introduction

In the introduction to "Argonauts of the Western Pacific," Bronislaw MALINOWSKI (1932 [1922]) famously argues that ethnographers must pay close attention to all those phenomena "which cannot possibly be recorded by questioning or computing documents, but have to be observed in their full actuality" (p.18). Referring to such everyday aspects as the modes of preparing food, the routines of a working day, the passing sympathies or dislikes between people, etc., MALINOWSKI terms these phenomena *the imponderabilia of actual life* (ibid.). As has since been emphasized by numerous anthropologists, not least in debates on "anthropology at home" (e.g., JACKSON, 1987;

MESSERSCHMIDT, 1981), taking note of and describing in detail such common, tacit, and embodied matters of life clearly constitutes a key challenge, particularly when one embarks on research in more homely or well-known surroundings. "Because," as MALINOWSKI contends, "certain subtle peculiarities, which make an impression as long as they are novel, cease to be noticed as soon as they become familiar" (1932 [1922], p.21). These are indeed well-known and well-rehearsed arguments in qualitative studies in general and ethnography in particular. [1]

In this article, we are, therefore, not concerned with the challenges of *im*ponderabilia; instead, we are concerned with the challenges of *over*ponderabilia, as we propose to call it. Our focus is not on how qualitative researchers may possibly overcome the challenges of noticing and describing the imponderable aspects of everyday life, but, on the contrary, how they must also overcome the challenges of overthinking—or, precisely, "overpondering"—their observations and descriptions; that is, *the overponderabilia of actual life,* if you will. In view of the ever-present risk of ethnocentrism, it is clearly a general concern in qualitative research that the researcher must not take his own ideas and understandings for those of the people studied. But today this challenge seems particularly pronounced in studies conducted among people who "share some of the same privileges and modest empowerments as those of us who interview and write about them," as George E. MARCUS puts it (2000, p.2). As qualitative researchers move into terrains such as bureaucracy, science, management, etc., issues of overponderabilia become increasingly pertinent because we will be studying agents who are not very different from ourselves; agents who may be trained in the human and social sciences, and who are therefore accustomed to applying and understanding familiar terminologies, concepts, and theories. In fact, as outlined in a previous *FQS* article, we may do cultural research on cultural research (DRESSEL & LANGREITER, 2003); that is, our research subjects may even be qualitative researchers themselves! [2]

An example may clarify what we mean. In "Flexible Firm. The Design of Culture at Bang & Olufsen," Danish anthropologist Jakob KRAUSE-JENSEN (2010) faces a particular problem in his ethnographic exploration of value-based management. Based in the Human Resources Department of the renowned Danish producer of high-end home electronics, KRAUSE-JENSEN finds himself to be quite similar to the employees, sharing a middle-class background, an everyday life in Denmark, a flexible division between work and home, etc. (pp.34-35). What is more, organizational life in general and value-based management in particular are radically reflexive and theorized, not least by means of such (anthropological) concepts as "culture," "value," and "religion," meaning that KRAUSE-JENSEN's work represents, in fact, "an ethnography of lay ethnographers" (p.39). This, he says, poses a particular difficulty:

> "the key methodological challenge was not to avoid drowning in 'experience-near' phenomenological immediacy. Rather, the central methodological task was to maintain a constant awareness of the differences that underlie the *surface similarity*

> *in the often-identical* 'experience-far' concepts used by the ethnographer and the informants" (p.20; emphasis added). [3]

In other words, in a corporate context where life was "tied up with conceptual description and self-reflection" (p.39), the challenge for KRAUSE-JENSEN was how to resist the urge, unconscious and unintentional as it may have been, to read his own ideas and perceptions, mundane as well as theoretical, into his informants' concepts and accounts. How could he counteract the risk of assuming a mutual understanding which would suppress the potential multitude of differences hiding underneath? That is, in our terms, how was he to overcome overthinking? [4]

Clearly, this issue of overponderabilia is not an entirely new methodological concern. Addressing it through the classic question of proximity versus distance, there has been considerable discussion of how "ethnographers at home" need specific strategies in order to get *out* of their far-too-familiar social and cultural worlds (e.g., AGUILAR, 1981; LÖFGREN, 1987; VAN GINKEL, 1998). Several such strategies have been proposed: for instance, using a comparative method of cross-cultural juxtaposition as a strategy of defamiliarization (MARCUS & FISCHER, 1986, pp.137-141); adopting a position as a "radical other" in the sense of presupposing a discontinuity between the social space explored and the particular knowledge project (HASTRUP, 1993, p.157); and, more generally, acknowledging that qualitative researchers are far from neutral registrants but positioned agents, which requires a profound degree of reflexivity regarding the interrelations between the researcher and the informants (KRAUSE-JENSEN, 2010, pp.39-41; see also RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002). Indeed, these strategies constitute significant attempts to attain a necessary and productive distance to the field of research. However, making up the essential argument of this article, we contend that these strategies do not necessarily suffice. In fact, it may be highly productive to take much more seriously the conditions actually prompting the concern regarding overponderabilia; namely, that many of our informants today are fully conversant with and routinely applying the same concepts, theories and methods as we do. As Douglas R. HOLMES and George E. MARCUS point out, "we find figures involved in creative practices that assume *intellectual partners*, interlocutors with whom a *critical conversation* can unfold thus anticipating a collaborative engagement" (2008, p.83; emphasis added). [5]

In this article, we argue that a solution to the issue of overponderabilia is precisely to be found in this move from "informants" to "intellectual partners." Overcoming overthinking is not, we claim, an issue to be solved merely through a heightened reflexivity before, during, and after conducting qualitative field research, but, crucially, also *via* this research. Drawing on the analytical acumen and critical thinking of our intellectual partners in the field, issues of overponderabilia may be revealed, revised, and resolved by purposely and openly exposing and discussing our ideas and understandings with our intellectual partners, thus inviting them into a critical debate rather than side-lining them as "mere" empirical mediators. Importantly, this is not merely a question of incorporating receptions and responses into the process of qualitative research

(see MARCUS, 2012, p.434), but essentially of allowing the research subjects to actively explore, scrutinize, and question the assumptions, concepts, and theories of the researcher. Or, in other words, it constitutes not simply a kind of feedback session—or an observation of the researchers' epistemologies by the researched—but rather a mutually engaged exchange and critical discussion, in which the researcher does not merely seek to partake in and explore the perspectives and lives of the people studied, but also allows them *in situ* to participate in and discuss the conceptual and theoretical "world" of the researcher. Hence, we term this strategy *mutual participatory observation*. [6]

Our central argument is that this methodological strategy—and its underlying "mutual induction," as we term it—has the potential to unearth assumptions and viewpoints of the people studied *and* those of the qualitative researcher. As such, serving both as a probe into the former and as a mirror of the latter, the move towards critical discussion rather than mere delineation is a move towards establishing a common ground from where the researcher and the researched can mutually explore and expose their interrelationship, and not least their differences. In this respect, mutual participatory observation is not to be understood as a singular method that works independently of other methods; rather, it is firmly embedded in more conventional participant observation and is, therefore, a kind of "intensification" of the exchanges and interactions that are already at the core of this method. We argue, however, that it is precisely this intensification and the implied move from seeing our research subjects as mediating informants to perceiving them as mentoring instructors—and, thus, as debating counterparts—which allow us to overcome the conundrums of overponderabilia. Ultimately, this contributes to the basic research purpose of approaching as close and as accurate an understanding of the people studied as possible. [7]

In what follows, we focus on the issue of overponderabilia when exploring processes of creativity. Drawing upon two ethnographic studies—one among a collective of artists in East London, the other among fashion designers in a fashion company—we show how the notion of creativity is not only essential to, and often debated by, artists and designers, but also familiar to, and broadly discussed by, ethnographers like ourselves (e.g., HALLAM & INGOLD, 2007; LAVIE, NARAYAN & ROSALDO, 1993; LIEP, 2001). In our research, we thus faced the potential pitfall of reading our own ideas and understandings of creativity into the descriptions and explanations offered by the artists and designers; and, admittedly, we fell into this pitfall of overthinking more than once. [8]

We begin, therefore, by exemplifying and further discussing what we mean by issues of overponderabilia. On this basis, we then revisit the reflexive turn, as we explain how our argument essentially both builds upon and extends its insights. Subsequently, we introduce the strategy of mutual participatory observation as a particular methodological means of overcoming overthinking. Finally, we expand on this method by outlining the concept of mutual induction, before we conclude with a few closing thoughts on how this article and its key contribution are to be understood in what we call a *nouveau* empiricist spirit. [9]

2. Issues of Overponderabilia: A Problem of Distance

In the late summer of 2009, David began a four-month period of ethnographic fieldwork among a collective of artists in East London. Intending to explore the notion of creativity as a specific Euro-American mode of thought (LEACH, 2004), he had carefully singled out this group of people, as late-youth artists in cosmopolitan settings are often portrayed as epitomic representatives of the contemporary Euro-American focus on creativity (see e.g., FLORIDA, 2005; LAVIE et al., 1993; LEACH, 2004; LIEP, 2001). Thus, it was his, perhaps naïve, expectation that fieldwork among young urban artists would bring him closer to an understanding of the distinctive characteristics of a Euro-American creativity. However, as most ethnographers know, fieldwork rarely unfolds as expected. [10]

Soon after starting his fieldwork, David began to realize that his conception of creativity would not become any clearer as his fieldwork progressed. Quite the opposite, in fact. While his objective was to enclose the notion of creativity into a conceptual form, the notion of creativity seemed to enclose him within a multitude of meanings instead. The artists' descriptions and explanations, as well as his own observations and experiences, were not only remarkably varied but also vexingly contradictory. For instance, on a Thursday night when David and the artists had roamed the art galleries of East London exhibiting mostly upcoming artists, they went for a nightcap. Making an effort to consume not only the drink but also the impressions of the day, David probed into what the artists thought of the art. "Was it any good?" he asked. "Fairly good," one of the artists replied. "Some of the pieces revealed real creativity." The others agreed. "How?," David then asked. LP[1], a 30-year-old French Canadian creative advertiser and filmmaker who had recently moved to London, responded: "I liked the almost whispering subtleness of it," he said with reference to a specific painting. "Very true," Fabrice, a 29-year-old graphic artist from Australia, agreed, "but it was also the way in which he almost made it scream." Noting the oxymoron between the creativity of simultaneously whispering and screaming, David asked if their statements were not somewhat contradictory. "Maybe ..." they replied. "But listen ... creativity is not about making sense and being harmonious." "You think too much," they said, "creativity isn't like anthropology." [11]

In another project, Kasper had gained access to a European-based fashion company in order to explore the processes and conditions involved in creating a fashion collection. Intrigued by the fact that fashion is by definition creative (FERNANDEZ, 2001, p.27), because it naturally has to establish a discontinuity with what exists (DAVIS, 1992, pp.14-15; ENTWISTLE, 2000, pp.41-48), Kasper reasoned that an ethnography of fashion designers would shed fresh light on how creativity unfolds in practice. Over the course of eight months, he followed the efforts of various fashion designers and engaged in conversations about the imperative to be creative at highly specific time intervals, i.e., in seasons. The purpose, in other words, was essentially to understand and, thus, demystify

1 All names on our fieldwork subjects throughout the article are pseudonyms in order to ensure anonymization.

processes of creativity by explicating how and why fashion designers go about doing what they do. [12]

At various points, precisely this objective to explicate or articulate creative practices, and not least the logics underlying them, was indeed complicated, if not, in fact, an entirely mistaken objective. Faced with the question of how to determine what to do, going for one particular material, concept, prototype, etc. rather than others, the designers spontaneously objected that "this is so difficult to talk about." As Kasper probably looked disappointed with such an evasive and unarticulated response, the designers often hastened to elaborate: "you have to know the *zeitgeist* [the time spirit]. You have to have a feeling for the time," Rebecca, a young talented fashion designer from Germany, explained. In the usual ethnographic style, Kasper then asked for more elaboration, more articulation. For was it not obvious that the designer was simply paraphrasing a romantic trope of the creative person as a kind of emissary of the divine, being able to connect with a certain spiritual impulse and let it speak through oneself (cf. NEGUS & PICKERING, 2004, pp.3-4)? "Can you describe that feeling?" Kasper therefore asked. "No," Rebecca insisted. "I think that it is just a feeling [...] Just a feeling about the time and what is going to happen. I cannot describe it exactly. It is just a feeling" (see also VANGKILDE 2013, 2015). [13]

We shall get back to these ethnographic cases in due course. For now, it ought to be clear that they lead us directly to the concern of overponderabilia. David's inclination to "think too much" was brought about not just by his anthropological eagerness to analyze and theorize but, more importantly, by his *a priori* assumptions, commonsensical as well as anthropological, about the notion of creativity. While these assumptions led him to think in particular ways about creativity—for instance, that creativity had something to do with the right combination of original thinking and practical and material know-how—the fact that his objective was to *explore* this notion seemed to fade into the background. For Kasper, the problem was much the same. By immediately assuming that the account of a *zeitgeist* was an articulation of the romantic trope of artistic creation—and, thus, not to be taken at face value but as something that could be explained and articulated in more detail—he was in danger of failing to take seriously what the designers themselves took seriously, relegating their experiences, perceptions, and beliefs to mere romanticism. Clearly, due to his knowledge of romantic ideas of creativity, the *zeitgeist* was "over-pondered." [14]

Such matters of overponderabilia go to the heart of ethnography in that they concern the issue of how to obtain a certain degree of distance to one's field of research. "There is clearly something in the idea," Edwin ARDENER notes, "that distance lends enhancement, if not enchantment, to the anthropological vision" (1989, p.211). The issue of distance has been much debated in regard to the aforementioned imponderabilia, which may escape the gaze of the ethnographer and which may, therefore, have led more than a few ethnographers to search for research areas considered to be "remote"—not merely in a geographical but in a conceptual or social sense as well (ARDENER, 1989). It may appear paradoxical, but we apparently become blind to things if or when, and although, they are right

in front of our eyes. Thus, while the challenge for ethnographers has traditionally been to get *into* a new culture, as Orvar LÖFGREN writes, "European ethnologists have struggled with the problem of getting *out*, of distancing themselves from their far-too-familiar surroundings" (1987, p.76). [15]

Crucially, this distancing is equally pertinent when the quandary shifts from concerns of imponderabilia to concerns of overponderabilia. If the former designates a problem of "not seeing the wood for the trees," the latter denotes a problem of "seeing a wood the trees do not make up." This centrality of distance appears to be closely linked to the very modality of reflection, which, in the double sense of the term, refers to a "throwing back" by a given surface and a serious "thinking through" (see WILLERSLEV, 2007); that is, it is hardly possible to reflect on things—think them through—if they are too close and throw nothing back. "Thus, what anthropology is in search of," Rane WILLERSLEV emphasizes, "is not an experience of truly radical proximity, but a type of experience that puts us in contact with others and yet separates us from them, keeping us at a distance" (p.40). This is precisely what the number one method in ethnographic research—participant observation—is all about; that is, generating knowledge through an inside, participatory intimacy while upholding an outside, observational distance. The point remains, however, that no knowledge generating practices take place on a *tabula rasa* but always on top of, or in addition to, pre-existing experiences and perspectives (RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002, §2). [16]

To reiterate our conundrum, then, how were we to impose and uphold a distance so as to escape issues of overponderabilia when the notion of creativity and the appurtenant socio-cultural surroundings appeared so familiar to us? Although significant knowledge may certainly be gained through an inside, participatory position, we had to obtain an outside, observational position in order to turn the "inside out," so to speak; being, importantly, the "inside" of both the artists or designers and ourselves as ethnographers. We had, as such, to become aware of, and reflect on, our own situatedness in terms of epistemological positioning and presuppositions. Indeed, the concerns of overponderabilia required just the same degree of reflexivity as the concerns of imponderabilia. A solution to our conundrum, then, seemed precisely to lie in a heightened reflexivity as an intrinsic part of ethnographic research (HASTRUP, 1995; MRUCK, ROTH & BREUER, 2002; ROTH, BREUER & MRUCK, 2003). And, in a sense, it did; though certainly not in the common sense of carrying out "reflexive ethnography" (DAVIES, 1999). [17]

We proceed, therefore, by revising the reflexive turn, since our argument essentially builds upon, but also extends, its insights. In particular, we stress the potential of a greater insistence on including our fieldwork subjects in our thinking *whilst* being in the field. [18]

3. Revisiting the Reflexive Turn: From Intrinsic Reflexivity to Outspoken Debate

It is by now a truism that all research is based on an intervention. Even in the most objective of sciences (for instance, astronomy or physics), the assumption that the researcher is fundamentally disconnected from the research object can hardly be upheld. In fact, in these disciplines, the specific effects of the former upon the latter are a constant concern, which supports the point that "we cannot research something with which we have no contact" (p.3). Representing and intervening are, in other words, inextricably entangled, as intervention is a *conditio sine qua non* for coming to a robust form of knowledge (HACKING, 1983). It follows, then, that not merely the object of knowledge (i.e., the ontology) but the particular mode of engaging it (i.e., the epistemology) is of critical importance, because, as Kirsten HASTRUP puts it, "[t]he relation between the 'knower' and the 'object' of necessity bends back into the perception of the object itself" (2004, p.456). [19]

Not only in our respective work on creativity but also in ethnographic research in general, this issue seems particularly pronounced given the fact that our research object is also our research tool; that is, we explore social relations through social relations (LEACH, 2010, p.194). Due to our efforts to enter another world by way of a concrete presence and active participation, ethnographic research is essentially anchored in this engagement. Ethnographers, James LEACH therefore stresses, participate in the emergence of events and phenomena in the field, meaning that this kind of research is by no means a disinterested observation, being instead a situated intervention eliciting a form of social action (ibid.). Intervening in social relations, we both act on and are acted upon by our research objects (who are, of course, reflective and agentive subjects), for which reason the knowledge derived from such interventions can only be inherently relational (HASTRUP, 2004) and dialogic (RUSSELL & KELLY, 2002). [20]

The reflexive turn was ignited precisely by a gradual recognition of this ethnographic fact, as it were. Initially unfolding as a critique of how anthropologists did not consciously reflect on the power relations involved in studying and representing the former European colonies, it was strongly argued that anthropology had been a product and beneficiary of colonialism and, thus, was deeply enmeshed in these power relations (ASAD, 1973; HYMES, 1972). In their accounts, however, ethnographers paid virtually no attention to these relations and were, therefore, critiqued for presenting a distorted view of the people under study (DAVIES, 1999, p.13). But the critique revolved not merely around power. With a focus on how gender affected ethnographic research, feminists argued that this research essentially suffered from an androcentric bias. Male ethnographers relied mainly on male informants, and insofar as females were discussed at all, this was done from a male perspective (BEHAR & GORDON, 1995; MOORE, 1988). For some critics, ethnographic research thus amounted to nothing more than mere projections of the ethnographer's cultural or gendered preconceptions and imaginings (DAVIES, 1999, p.13); a kind of ethnocentric "orientalism" (SAID, 1978) on a broad scale. [21]

In general, these discussions concerned the issue of positioning and the importance of continuously reflecting upon "the situatedness and partiality of all claims to knowledge," as MARCUS had it (1998, p.198). Together with James CLIFFORD (CLIFFORD & MARCUS, 1986) and Michael M.J. FISCHER (MARCUS & FISCHER, 1986), MARCUS instigated the well-known "writing culture" debate, calling for more reflection on, and a rethinking of, the rhetorical strategies by which people's lives were represented in ethnographic writing. Focusing not only on an *a priori* reflexivity, i.e., how power, gender, age, etc. may or may not influence the research process, but also on an *a posteriori* reflexivity, i.e., how various styles of writing may or may not constitute productive modes of representation, Marcus and others made it clear that ethnographers are not "recording machine[s]" (NASH & WINTROB, 1972, p.527) but actual agents in the field and, hence, in the field*work* that we conduct. To account for the partiality of any claims to knowledge, then, we must reflect on our epistemological positioning, as it has also been thoroughly discussed in two thematic issues of *FQS* (MRUCK et al., 2002; ROTH et al., 2003). [22]

These matters have certainly not become less significant as ethnographers have turned home to explore not-so-remote, or deceptively familiar (KRAUSE-JENSEN, 2013, p.43), activities, agents, and locations. In our studies of creativity among artists and designers, we employed various strategies to impose a distance that would allow us to explore our research subjects' perspectives as well as to reflect on our underlying epistemological assumptions. In an effort not to overthink familiar notions such as the *zeitgeist*, Kasper pursued a methodological strategy of purposeful naïveté (HENARE, HOLBRAAD & WASTELL, 2007a, p.2; see also LATOUR, 2005, pp.47-49), seeking to uphold a sense of wonderment and hold these notions in a state of suspension by being deliberately, sometimes even exaggeratedly, ignorant or naïve. Thus, by presupposing and emphasizing a discontinuity between his own ideas, concepts, theories, etc. and those of the designers (cf. HASTRUP, 1993, p.157), he sought to overcome overthinking whilst conducting his fieldwork. For David, another strategy took on particular significance, though not so much during as after his fieldwork. By discussing the Euro-American notion of creativity on a par with the Melanesian/Polynesian notion of *mana* (see e.g., LÉVI-STRAUSS, 1987 [1950]; MAUSS, 1972 [1950]), he applied a strategy of defamiliarization by cross-cultural juxtaposition (MARCUS & FISCHER, 1986). Using "the substantive facts about another culture as a probe into the specific facts about a subject of criticism at home" (ibid. 138), David proposed that creativity, just like *mana*, is a "fluid semantic notion" whose fluidity, i.e., its ability to mean a multitude of things, is precisely what makes it so socially potent—again, just like *mana* (cf. MAUSS, 1972 [1950]). [23]

While these reflexive strategies were surely productive in making the familiar strange and addressing the close relations between the knower, i.e., us, and the object, i.e., creativity (cf. HASTRUP, 2004, p.456), the fact that artists and designers are themselves reflexive subjects prompted another and, we shall argue, highly fruitful strategy. In the words of Jay RUBY, being reflexive means that:

> "the producer deliberately, intentionally reveals to his audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which caused him to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, to seek answers to those questions in a particular way, and finally to present his findings in a particular way" (1980, p.157). [24]

But if this is so, then we are still left with the central issue of how, in fact, to disclose these assumptions and deal with overponderabilia. Is it not the case, particularly in contexts of deceptive familiarity, that such assumptions are too close to be exposed and reflected upon through either subtraction or abstraction; that is, by physical or philosophical removal from the field or oneself? Are we really able to do this by ourselves? Or might we, perhaps, need some assistance from a distant outside? [25]

Our reflexive partners in the field constitute an overlooked and untapped potential in this respect. In their work towards a refunctioning of ethnography, HOLMES and MARCUS (e.g., 2005, 2006, 2008; see also VANGKILDE & ROD, forthcoming) argue that, within many contemporary fieldwork contexts, "operate reflexive subjects whose intellectual practices assume real or figurative interlocutors. We can find a preexisting ethnographic consciousness or curiosity, which we term para-ethnography" (HOLMES & MARCUS, 2008, p.82). Significantly, for HOLMES and MARCUS, this essentially alters the conditions of ethnographic research, as it places collaboration at the very center, although not merely in the old sense of collaborative fieldwork relationships understood as informants "responding to, cooperating with, and tolerating the ethnographer's more or less overt agendas" (p.85). Rather, the key point is "to integrate fully our subjects' analytical acumen and insights to define the issues at stake in our projects as well as the means by which we explore them" (p.86). In other words, as the circumstances of ethnographic fieldwork have changed radically, ethnographers can no longer rely solely on a Malinowskian aesthetic of fieldwork which favors such distanced practices as description and analysis (p.82; see also MARCUS, 2010). Not least due to the fact that fieldwork today largely hinges on negotiations and expectations of the meanings of ethnography, ethnographers need to engage actively with their dialogic, epistemic partners in the field, who, accordingly, turn into counterparts and co-producers of interpretations and knowledge (HOLMES & MARCUS, 2005, 2008). [26]

For us, this rethinking of ethnography constitutes not only a response to the altered conditions of fieldwork but also a way of actually taking the fact of intervention in research seriously. Ethnographers' actual presence in the everyday lives of their research subjects clearly makes reflexivity an intrinsic part of ethnography; but our argument is that to fully realize the potential of reflexive ethnography and, thus, to overcome overthinking, it is simply not enough to include people in our research and then reflect upon the epistemological positioning—*of* and *by* ourselves. The reflexive turn, we argue, needs to be taken a step further, in that we must "make ourselves experimental subjects," as Michael JACKSON (1989, p.4) has it; or, to paraphrase Marianne GULLESTAD, "[w]e have not only to look at 'us' in the same way as we look at 'them', but also to see 'us' through 'their' eyes" (1989, p.71). What we propose, then, is a move

towards a more generative, active and outward sense of reflexivity, which focuses on the potential in openly exposing and debating our reflections, concepts, and theories with our partners in the field; that is, allowing them to explore and scrutinize our "worlds" as much as we explore and scrutinize theirs. This constitutes a way of bringing reflexive exchange and critical debate to the fore of the intervening and collaborative nature of ethnography. And, as we shall now argue, it provides the grounds for dealing with overponderabilia through a strategy of what we call "mutual participatory observation." [27]

4. Mutual Participatory Observation: Moments of Dialogue and Debate

Having spent several evenings at his desk, reading and scrutinizing his fieldnotes and other ethnographic studies, David decided to invite five artists over for dinner; a delightful dish of so-called *krebinetter*, which is a special kind of Danish meatballs. Of course, his hope was that the dinner would turn into a productive ethnographic event that would give rise to a sort of "cultural exchange," with him providing the artists with kitsch Danish food and the artists providing him with distinctive perspectives on creativity—food for thought, indeed! As it turned out, however, the idea of serving food and then simply observing and listening in on the artists' conversations and discussions was basically untenable. David could not just sit there, observe, ask questions, and reflect, as most ethnographic approaches will have it. [28]

At one point during the dinner, Fabrice, one of the artists, began to talk about an art piece which he was doing for a notorious British singer, one of his most highly profiled clients. The other artists asked about the project, and soon they were all excitedly discussing how Fabrice ought to go about it. How was he to give it "a creative twist," as one of them put it? Then, rather out of the blue, David was dragged into the discussion. What did *he* think? As an anthropologist delving into creativity, he surely had an opinion, the artists reasoned. Being, in this sense, caught on his distanced, observational feet, as it were, David mulled things over. How was he to respond? Clearly, he could play the old ethnographic trick and claim that he had really no opinion, that he was conducting fieldwork precisely in order to learn from *them*, and that he would accordingly compromise his research by intervening in their discussion. But this seemed both untrustworthy and counterproductive. Of course, he had a viewpoint, and it seemed downright disrespectful not to share it. [29]

After some pondering, David decided to recount an argument by anthropologist Tim INGOLD, who has suggested that a certain kind of novelty or creativity is often thought to come about through the dual interplay of chance and necessity (see LEACH, 2004, p.161). Although he did not remember INGOLD's exact words, he explained the ideas and thoughts underlying this statement, emphasizing INGOLD's focus on the improvisational processes of creativity in fields of forces and materials (see e.g., INGOLD, 2010a, 2010b; INGOLD & HALLAM, 2007). While this sounded rather unclear in David's own ears, the artists responded with pure curiosity and urged him to fetch this "Tim Ingold." This he did—and then some. On his desk, David found a number of

anthropological books and theories, which he literally brought to the table. The artists became instantly intrigued but, importantly, not convinced. Having flicked through the pages of the books and debated the various takes on creativity, they all agreed that the theories contained some elements of truth but that the analysis was too simplistic. "There is more to it," Fabrice said. And one of the others added: "Creativity is just not something that you can clearly grasp by putting it on formula." Indeed, David's thoughts on creativity, as well as those of his fellow anthropologists, were critically challenged. [30]

In the fashion company, Kasper faced similar discussions, though usually in more formal settings. About two weeks into his fieldwork, he was asked to present his project to the employees in a special unit called The Innovation Lab. Under the title "Creativity and Innovation in Fashion: From an Anthropological Perspective," he gave a brief introduction to the field of anthropology before proceeding to a discussion of how creativity, as well as innovation, are typically conceptualized and approached anthropologically; that is, as social phenomena rather than mere individual dispositions (e.g., FRIEDMAN, 2001; HASTRUP, 2007; INGOLD & HALLAM, 2007). However, Kasper did not get very far in his presentation, as he was soon interrupted with various questions and objections. In addition to the more or less expected doubt regarding the concrete "value" and "use" of the project, the inquiries and debate concerned, first and foremost, the concepts of creativity and innovation. [31]

When constructing his project, Kasper had strategically zoomed in on fashion due to the essentially creative and innovative nature of this phenomenon. However, far from being convinced, the employees in The Innovation Lab explicitly questioned why, in fact, he had chosen *fashion* to explore *innovation*. "There are so many other industries which are far more innovative than the fashion industry," they objected. For Kasper, this not only came as a surprise in the light of several definitions of fashion, according to which fashion rests on its continuous breaks with the preceding years' canons (BOURDIEU & DELSAUT, 1975, p.17; DAVIS, 1992, pp.14-15; ENTWISTLE, 2000, pp.41-48). In addition, it pushed him to explicate his conceptual distinction between creativity and innovation. Drawing on various sources of literature, he argued that it is common to differentiate between creativity as the generation of new ideas and innovation as the realization of those new ideas in practice (e.g., ANDERSON, DE DREU & NIJSTAD, 2004, p.148; WEST, 2001, p.2895). Thus, for him, the point would not be to rank innovation into "more or less," but to explore the concrete processes from idea to collection, i.e., from creativity to innovation. Thomas, a guy responsible for identifying new developments in fabrics, then said: "Okay, that makes more sense. But I really do think that innovation only happens rarely in fashion. It is more a matter of recombining existing elements than of creating something entirely new." When Kasper looked around, the other employees nodded in agreement. [32]

What characterizes these ethnographic moments of dialogue and debate? While it is surely common for many ethnographers today to engage in some sort of reflexive exchange with their partners in fieldwork, the debates above are

nonetheless distinctive, we believe, in two ways. First, the research subjects are given an explicit opportunity to actively explore and question the ethnographers' underlying theoretical assumptions and viewpoints. Rather than relying exclusively on our own ability to turn back on ourselves, i.e., reflexivity (DAVIES, 1999, p.4), our views and understandings are explicitly disclosed and openly discussed with our partners in the field. In this way, we purposely seek to make ourselves experimental subjects, allowing our epistemic partners to uncover our predispositions whilst we uncover theirs. Second, it follows that our customary ideas of empirical material as a near-perfect inductive ground for in-depth analysis—that is, "as the basic building block in research," to quote Mats ALVESSON (2011, p.146)—are radically rethought. The critical discussion with our research subjects clearly exposes discrepancies in understanding, not least with respect to the seemingly shared concept of creativity, for which reason it is worthwhile to also "see empirical material (like interview statements) as a critical dialogue or analytical partner for the researcher [...] as a 'mini-seminar' offering ideas and analytical help" (ibid.). Thus, drawing on the analytical acumen and critical thinking of our partners in the field essentially changes their status, not only from "informants" to "interlocutors," but from "empirical sources" to "epistemic partners." [33]

The artists and designers, as well as other agents in our fieldwork, clearly figured as such epistemic partners offering analytical help. In debates such as the above, the reflexive exchanges established a common ground, or a third space, where we not only probed into *their* notions, assumptions, and viewpoints (i.e., the first space of the researcher's view of the research subjects), and where they, in turn, not only delved into *ours* (i.e., the second space of the research subjects' view of the researcher). Rather, we mutually observed and took part in each other's perspectives, reciprocally engaging in and exploring our interrelationship (i.e., the third space of the *inter*play between the researcher and the research subjects) (see also FISCHER, 2003). This is what we term *a strategy of mutual participatory observation*. With this strategy, it is not the researcher alone who explores and partakes in another perspective, as a joint venture emerges in moments of dialogue and debate where the research subjects concurrently explore and participate in the perspective of the researcher. While this prompted David to rethink and revise his conception of creativity as a more fluid and multifarious phenomenon (cf. his comparison with *mana*), it led Kasper to de-emphasize his focus on innovation and zoom in specifically on creativity. In both cases, this seemed more in line with the ethnographic contexts and was, as such, a distinctive style of alignment and collaboration with the critical perspectives of our partners in the field (see also MARCUS in MOERAN et al., 2012, p.270). This is, however, not to be confused with "pure participation" and the associated hitches of "going native" in the sense that the ethnographer suffers "a loss of analytical interest" (DeWALT & DeWALT, 2002, p.18). Indeed, our point is the reverse: mutual participatory observation constitutes a strategy of distanciation which counteracts instances of deceptive familiarity by encouraging a reciprocal exchange of perspectives that allows our research subjects to disclose and dispute our preconceptions. As a new and more generative sense of the use of reflexivity, it thus constitutes a particularly serviceable method of dealing with

overponderabilia, based as it is on a principle of "mutual induction" by which viewpoints and assumptions of the people studied *and* the ethnographer are disclosed; that is, a *mutual* exploration and exposition of their interrelationship. [34]

5. Towards Mutual Induction: Overcoming Overthinking

In a nutshell, the central argument in the above paragraphs is that a methodology of mutual participatory observation entails a wish not only to explore the perspectives of the people studied, but also to actively and constantly challenge our own. This is, indeed, crucial in contemporary ethnographic research, which is often conducted among people fairly similar to ourselves. In this respect, a heightened reflexivity is hardly enough as a means of disclosing our underlying epistemological positioning; but importantly, it can be achieved by openly discussing with our reflexive and critical partners in fieldwork. Even though pointing to the analytical and theoretical capacities of those previously described as mere informants is no longer uncommon in anthropology (see e.g., HENARE, HOLBRAAD & WASTELL, 2007b; HOLMES & MARCUS, 2005; LATOUR, 2005), these capacities are still largely left untouched and seen to belong mainly to the ethnographer. However, Bruno LATOUR argues: "As anthropologists have tirelessly shown, actors incessantly engage in the most abstruse metaphysical constructions by redefining all the elements of the world" (2005, p.51). And, he continues, "the metaphysical innovations proposed by ordinary actors [...] often go beyond those of professional philosophers" (ibid.). While we shall not go into detail with this claim, it highlights the inherent reflexivity of so-called "ordinary actors," which, we assert, ought to be brought more to the fore in qualitative research and ethnography, not least in regard to our efforts at overcoming overthinking. [35]

The underlying principle of this proposition is what we term "mutual induction." In his outline of a "radical empiricism," Michael JACKSON argues strongly for making lived experience and the *inter*play of things the starting point of an ethnographic inquiry. In particular, this includes the concrete *inter*action between observer and observed, method and object, which traditional empiricism has struggled to keep apart (1989, p.3). While the reciprocal and *inter*experiential nature of ethnography is thus emphasized, making the ethnographer an experimental subject too (pp.3-4), Michael JACKSON furthermore contends:

> "In ethnography, this means abandoning induction and *actively* debating and exchanging points of view with our informants. It means placing our ideas on a par with theirs, testing them not against predetermined standards of rationality but against the immediate exigencies of life" (p.14). [36]

As ethnographers, in this sense, we can no longer make do with observing and participating in the lives of our partners in fieldwork, but must let them discern and take part in ours as well, meaning that we need to become articulated subjects, because, as Bruno LATOUR remarks, "an articulate subject is someone who learns to be affected by others—*not by itself*" (2004, p.210). [37]

Indeed, this amounts to stressing that qualitative research and ethnography are not studies *of* but studies *with* people. While Tim INGOLD suggests that it is precisely this fact that distinguishes anthropology from other disciplines studying people, in that anthropologists learn other ways of perceiving the world by working and studying *with* people, not merely by gaining knowledge *about* them (2008, p.82), we contend that there is more to our proposed method of mutual participatory observation than this acknowledgment of how "the world and its inhabitants, human and non-human, are our teachers, mentors and interlocutors" (p.83). Our point is that the inherent mutuality in qualitative and ethnographic research ought to be made more equal in the sense that the world of the researcher, and not only of the people in the field, should be opened up to scrutiny and debate. We need to place our ideas on a par with theirs, so that a common ground is established where the researcher and the epistemic partners can reciprocally and communally induce meanings and conduct analysis through open dialogue and debate. This, we argue, is a true move from individual induction to mutual induction. It is a move from a one-way probing into the world of the informants to a two-way engagement with critical, epistemic partners, which allows the ethnographer to uphold the acts of probing while, at the same time, urging the fieldwork partners to "counter-probe." Qualitative material, in this way, becomes a kind of "matter of concern" (cf. LATOUR, 2005, pp.114-115), arising from an engaged *mutual* interaction and induction. [38]

The key contribution of this method is precisely that it constitutes a way of dealing with overponderabilia in that our fieldwork partners are allowed to take part in *our* perspectives and to disclose and dispute *our* biases and preconceptions. For Michael JACKSON, this leads to a distinct research situation: "In this process we put ourselves on the line; we run the risk of having our sense of ourselves as different and distanced from the people we study dissolve" (1989, p.4). For us, the point is rather the reverse: it is true that we put ourselves on the line, but what dissolves is not so much our sense of ourselves as being different and distanced from the people we study, but our sense of being *similar* and *close* to them. This is the key point of the principle of mutual induction: by entering into a reciprocal exchange with our research subjects, thus allowing them to also explore and debate our ideas and concepts, we may overcome overthinking and, hence, aim for a closer and more accurate understanding of the people studied. By way of closing this article, we shall give this aim a few final thoughts. [39]

6. Conclusion: Aiming for Instruction Rather Than Construction

It ought to be emphasized that our argument is not to be read as yet another contribution to the realm of post-modernist methodologies proposing more collaboration and co-construction with fieldwork subjects. While our argument may seem to point in that direction given our emphasis on mutuality, interaction, dialogue, and debate, the ontological premise underlying our methodological concern is *not* that the social worlds studied should be understood as a whirlpool of whimsical socio-cultural (co-)construction, making the notion of "reality" virtually insignificant. In such a post-modernist approach, an interview, for instance, represents not an epistemological exploration of the interviewee's

reality, but a kind of "construction site" where the interviewer and the interviewee as equal and active partners co-construct meanings anew (see e.g., HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1995). As argued by Glenda M. RUSSELL and Nancy H. KELLY, "the dialogic interplay enacted as part of the interview process serves to join and integrate the two independent voices into a seamless co-creation of a newly formed reality" (2002, §14). In this light, our proposed method is based more on a particular kind of empiricist endeavor, as we still consider the ethnographic project to be essentially concerned with respectfully understanding and conveying our research subjects' ways of acting and perceiving in the best possible way, without thwarting the understanding through ethnocentric concepts and biased interpretations. Although we realize, of course, that this is, in principle, an impossible endeavor (as the reflexive turn and other post-modernist turns have showed us), it remains worthwhile, we insist, to *approach* the most precise understanding of their lives possible. [40]

It is in this, so to speak, *nouveau* empiricist spirit that we propose the method of mutual participatory observation as a means of coming closer to an understanding of our subjects' lives by decreasing the risk of overthinking. The point, however, is not to resurrect a methodological approach based on the often proposed conception that our fieldwork subjects inhabit a kind of "fragile ontology," which the ethnographer should do everything possible not to contaminate with his/her presence. Such an approach is, for instance, advanced by James P. SPRADLEY, who, in his renowned books on "The Ethnographic Interview" (1979) and "Participant Observation" (1980), is preoccupied with understanding the culture of the people studied without, in any way, tainting this understanding with the ethnographer's own cultural practices and perceptions. SPRADLEY, in this way, is on a par with ethnographers of the reflexive turn; but while the latter are pessimistic about this endeavor and find it to be impossible, SPRADLEY is optimistic and regards it as difficult yet doable. The key challenge, he argues, is to practice an approach where one does not ask conceptual questions as this forces the informants into possible first-time conceptual ponderings or, more alarmingly, forces them to take on the ethnographer's own conceptual framework (see e.g., 1979). Underlying this approach is the idea that our research subjects inhabit delicate and fragile socio-cultural worlds, which can easily, but should not, be disturbed by the not-so-elegant ethnographer. For us, however, this is an anxiety that we do not share. Stated somewhat polemically, the ethnographer who truly believes that his/her mere presence and participation in the field *radically* alters the given socio-cultural world gives way too much credence to him/herself and way too little to the subjects in the field. As Pierre BOURDIEU contends, ethnographic research has seen "an explosion of narcissism sometimes verging on exhibitionism, which came in the wake of, and in reaction to, long years of positivist repression" (2003, p.282). In particular, when studying up (NADER, 1972) or studying sideways (HANNERZ, 1998), our fieldwork partners are not, we believe, that easily swayed. [41]

Bearing the above-mentioned points in mind, the method of mutual participatory observation constitutes a balance between these approaches to ethnographic research. In contemporary ethnography, as we have argued, many agents such

as artists and designers possess quite resilient practices and perceptions, which seem neither to prompt a more or less whimsical co-construction nor to be radically altered by the ethnographer's mere presence. Put differently, they have relatively stable ideas about their world and lives, and the task for the ethnographer is, as always, to get closer to an understanding of these ideas. Clearly, this can only be achieved through the *inter*actions and *inter*relations between the ethnographer and the research subjects, which may surely have effects on both of them. But it is precisely the resilience of the latter, we contend, that allows and invites a kind of third space from where the ethnographer's basic endeavor to understand the research subjects may unfold as a reciprocal and *inter*active process *with* these subjects. Through open dialogue and critical debate, this is a strategy of overcoming overthinking—of counteracting the impulse to trust the signified while, in fact, only the signifiers can be trusted (HASTRUP, 1987, p.104)—as the people studied are allowed into and urged to unearth *our* world of assumptions, concepts, and theories; that is, to modify, align, and dispute the thoughts we think and the conclusions we draw. This is what we consider to be the key contribution of the method of mutual participatory observation. Entering into a reciprocal exchange with our research subjects, understood not as constructors but as instructors, the latter are given the means of guiding our thinking so that it comes as close to their thinking as possible. In a nutshell, the central epistemological aim is thus to approach a deeper or closer mutual understanding, evidently benefiting the research purpose but also, and not least, the research subjects by providing them with a (hitherto rather rare) opportunity to thoroughly comprehend the particular research endeavors in which they take part. [42]

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