



# DOING-IT-YOURSELF

## Autoethnography of Manual Work

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Autoethnography is a method of cultural research where you use your own experiences as a starting point or as examples of more general conditions. You are both the subject and the object of observation. Recently I tried a variant of this method in a Do-It-Yourself project, writing field notes while working as a home fixer with hammer, screwdriver and other tools. I also reflected on some differences and similarities between writing and DIY. The purpose of self-narrative experiments like this is to improve fieldwork and cultural analysis. By practising autoethnography you may learn more about the research process and become more conscious of what is going on when you are doing observations and interpreting them.

*Keywords:* autoethnography, non-verbal experience, observation, reflexivity, self-narratives, working knowledge

Writing this, I'm sitting on the living room sofa at home, with the laptop on my knee. This is my usual working position in the mornings, especially during summers and weekends. After some hours I leave my corner of the sofa and with a joyful smile enter the carpenter's shed, a small house I have built for my tools. I change clothes and get ready for today's pursuit as a home improver.

My wife and I live by the sea in two old houses, which late in life have made me a rather accomplished Do-It-Yourself (DIY) man, performing manual work of different kinds. Before we bought the houses thirteen years ago I did almost no home fixing at all (cleaning, cooking and other household tasks left out of the account) unless I was forced to. And if that happened, I was all fingers and hands.

Now I love to build, improve, repair, modify,

paint, dig and do plumbing tasks and even some electrical wiring. In the process I have learnt some of the carpenter's tricks and vocabulary; how to install water pipes and how to find the right things at building stores and timber yards. I have become an enthusiastic part of a widely spread and growing DIY culture.<sup>1</sup>

### **Autoethnography**

Switching between writing and manual work can be experienced as moving between two separate realities, where body and mind are used in different ways. Sitting quietly on the sofa seems to be rather different from labouring hard with the whole body. I feel as if I become somebody else in working clothes with a tool in my hand. However, in my role change I also experience a happy, seamless rhythm.

The alteration between making things, making text and making myself through DIY is one topic of this paper. Another one is the use and value of auto-ethnography as a research method. Whether we are aware of it or not, most cultural analysis means that you use yourself as both a research tool and source of information. Norman K. Denzin (1997: 227), among others, has described autoethnography as “a turning of the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self-experiences occur.” The ethnographer is treated as simultaneously the subject and the object of observation. Although there is a considerable literature about this method (see e.g. Reed-Danahay 1997; Frykman & Gilje 2003; Etherington 2004; Meneley & Young 2005; Anderson 2006; Chang 2008; Muncey 2010), I look for a more detailed discussion of what it means to use it and what kind of knowledge it might produce.

Over the years autoethnography has become a favourite entrance into research for me and some other ethnologists. A recent example of this is a study of waiting, routines and daydreaming that I carried out together with Orvar Löfgren. We wanted to explore “the secret world of doing nothing” (Ehn & Löfgren 2010), looking at activities people often were not aware of or found it hard to verbalize. We soon realized that we ought to use our own experiences as starting points for the ethnographic work. For example, what is going on when I stand in a queue at the supermarket or when I daydream during a train journey? In a sense, the whole book became a dialogue between our experiences and those of other people.

Observing and writing about myself as a DIYer has inspired me to think more about the importance of the researcher’s self in all ethnography and cultural analysis. Participant observation and interviewing are not the only instances where the researcher has to think about the influence of his or her personal presence. Reflexivity has almost become a *sine qua non* in all social and cultural research, at least in a *programmatic* way (see e.g. Davies 1999; Etherington 2004).

When studying social life we do, on the whole, more or less use ourselves to portray and understand various phenomena, but often without really taking self into fair consideration. An explicit discussion of autoethnography and self-narratives should make us more conscious of the subjective aspects of research. How do our own experiences, interests and emotional life affect the interpretations of other people and their behaviour? By writing about my home fixing I want to raise some more general questions about how to describe thoughts and feelings in bodily action ethnographically.

### Describing “Non-Verbal Experience”

Until now I had not reflected much about my DIY activities, at least not from a reflexive point of view. They have been fun to do, being at once leisure and work, although often rather demanding. I experience them as a relaxation from sedentary academic duties, as an expansion of my practical competence, and as a strengthening of my masculine identity in a stereotypical way.<sup>2</sup> But DIY turns out to be even more complex than that, when you look closer and try to understand what is going on.

For example, how do you describe manual work and skills based on what is called non-verbal experience? As Jonas Frykman (1990: 50) and others have emphasized, the “silent knowledge” in people’s lives cannot be transformed into text without losing important dimensions. How can we study something that is intangible and invisible? Words appear to be insufficient.

Accomplishing DIY projects you need to acquire a tacit knowledge that seems to reside in your body, as when you hit the nail with a hammer or choose the appropriate bits for the power screwdriver. You have to think ahead and plan your work; you have to know what a circular saw is and how to use it, but you also do a lot of things without thinking consciously.

It is this tension or cooperation between hand and brain that I have become curious about. Now, when I swing the hammer or start the power saw, I’m also looking at myself doing that, and wondering about it.<sup>3</sup> But when trying to reconstruct the processes of my different projects it is easier to relate *what* I

did than *how* I did it. The gulf between words and actions is a constant challenge when writing about manual tasks.

### Do it by Feel

In the same way as I move between writing on the laptop and DIY, I switch between thinking with tools and bodily movements, depending on the senses and tacit routines. How do you account for such oscillations, without necessarily becoming poetic like Gaston Bachelard (1948) or hyper technical like in a manual?

One way is to do as the sociologist Douglas Harper did (1987). Over three years he observed, interviewed and took a lot of photos of Willie, an all round craftsman who, among other things, specialized in repairing old Saabs. Endless and very detailed descriptions of Willie's projects, both in his own words and explained by Harper, give profound knowledge of this man's working knowledge, what he thought and actually did when repairing, grinding and welding. In twenty pages you get to know exactly how he built a stove door, after that how he redesigned a door handle, and so on. Many of these descriptions are hard to follow, however, since they are rather technical, as in this extract from when Willie disassembles a Saab transmission:

When you reassemble it, you've got shim washers at the end of the shafts to make sure your bearings are seated right. Then your pinion shaft has a shim to make sure it sits out in the right position to hit the ring gear. It's a little more technical when you go putting them back together than it is taking them apart. Those gears have to all match up and run true. I do it by feel. (Harper 1987: 124)

When I try to tell about my tackling of tools and building materials it is sometimes tempting to say, like Willie, that I do it by feel. Other times the things seem to become animated in their resistance or will to co-operate.<sup>4</sup> What do I and other DIY people do, think, feel and imagine when working? How are we learning to use appropriate tools and to solve practical problems of different kinds?

### Writing DIY: Three Versions

In searching for answers to these questions, I shall try different ways of describing a project, based on my own experience. Among all possible cases, let me choose a rather small one: making duckboards for the shower floor. How many ways of portraying this work process are there? Here, I have been inspired by two examples. In his book *Exercises in Style* the French author Raymond Queneau (1979) wrote 99 retellings of the same story, each in a different style. In *A Thrice-Told Tale* the anthropologist Margery Wolf (1992) uses three texts that developed out of her research in Taiwan – a piece of fiction, anthropological field notes, and a social science article – to explore the same set of events.<sup>5</sup> Like Wolf, I shall write three types of small accounts about the making of duckboards: one specific, one informal and one of a more academic kind. How does the choice of style influence my way of thinking about this activity?

#### *The Specific Version*

At the timber yard they proposed a water repellent wood called Cumaro or "Brazilian teak", but it was rather expensive. My wife asked if I couldn't use some of the spruce wood I already had in the store. Of course duckboards made of this would not last as long as a more water hardy material, but then I could just make new ones.

First I had to measure the floor in the bathroom with the folding rule. The area under the shower was 930 x 800 mm and I decided to make the bars 50 mm wide because then I could use boards that are 22 x 150 mm and cut three lengths out of each with the circular saw. I fetched some boards that were planed on one side and laid them on a saw stand.

I made 13 bars 50 mm wide and 910 mm in length. I also made four strips of the same wood to keep the bars together underneath. I filed and sandpapered the bars before fastening them with screws on the strips with 15 mm wide openings. In the middle, I used the compass saw to make a hole for the washing machine hose (which we take away when the machine is off). The final task was to oil the duckboards several times.

### *The Informal Version*

Without any do-it-yourself projects on the go, George gets restless. When he had finished glazing the large veranda and making the guesthouse fit for winter living there seemed to be nothing more to do. He felt empty and at a loose end. Luckily his wife discovered that they needed new duckboards for the shower floor in the big house. “Couldn’t you make them?” she proposed, seeing him suffer, and he immediately became interested in the idea.

As usual when doing carpentry, George didn’t take much notice of the time. With sweat in his eyes on this sunny Saturday he was on a roll of pleasure, his heart in his work and occupied with interesting troubleshooting. There was a repeated change between meditative states and more dramatic moments, when all his senses were in suspense. He felt like a moving and thinking part of the tools in his hands. Some of them, like the power screwdriver, pieces of ironwork and the water level, were close friends in helping him solving tricky problems. He was proud of mastering them on different materials, something he had learned late in life, partly by observing his father-in-law in action.

It was both a serious and a playful task to make duckboards. The roaring circular saw ploughed through the boards, the power screwdriver whirled dancing screws one by one down through the solid wood, and the sawdust filled the air like stinging insects. The sky was blue and the radio played Mozart. This radio, another essential device in George’s DIY universe, was always on while he worked, attaching the experience of materials, tools and bodywork to a special piece of music or somebody talking.

It was a perfect day for outdoor work. The wind was sighing in the trees. The waves from the sea below the houses rolled calmly against the beach. Bent over the saw stand in his working clothes, George felt a unity of body and mind, using the tools like musical instruments, not thinking of anything else other than how to make fine duckboards, totally immersed in the project.

The hands knew what to do, although his fine motor ability was not always perfect. He dropped things and fumbled with screws. Sometimes he was in too

great a hurry, making errors that made him smile with embarrassment, relieved that no one else had seen them. “You have to think before you start,” he reproached himself. Sometimes he used this internal monologue to remind himself of what to do next. But mostly the inner voice was silent and then he was all eyes and body.

When the duckboards were completed, George showed the little masterpiece to his wife. She was very satisfied and exclaimed as she usually did when he had accomplished a DIY task: “Oh, how clever you are, George!” He was pleased of course, but soon the feeling of emptiness returned. What to do now? He entered the carpenter’s shed and looked urgently at the tools, as if they could suggest a new project.

### *The Academic Version*

Studying DIY – somebody making duckboards for the bathroom, for example – you realize that this is a social and cultural activity, even if you work alone. It is symbolically constructed, learned and communicated. It is permeated by history, ideas and values. In my case, I discussed the project with my wife. When I started up the circular saw to cut the wood into suitable lengths I was reminded of her father, who has been my personal teacher in doing carpentry and being a bit of an autodidact himself as well. It was him who showed me how to “let the hammer do the work”, by holding it right out on the handle, instead of in the middle. It was also him who opened my eyes for the potential usefulness of so-called junk, all these things and materials that are hoarded up in the backyard or the cellar. I was close on his heels when he went there to hunt for a piece of metal or a tube with the right dimension. In fact, being a self-taught person often means that in this way you have learnt a lot from others by watching them working.

My father-in-law also provided me with the circular saw and other instruments that he no longer needs. These things are, of course, necessary for my DIY projects. But moreover they have other meanings that are not always evident when actually using them. Besides containing ready made answers to practical problems, they have involved me in different kinds of transactions, since I have bought them

somewhere or received them from somebody. As Elizabeth Shove et al. (2007: 52) observed in a study of DIYers, they reveal personal histories of inheritance, exchange, gift giving and attachment. They have a history connected to finished or unsuccessful projects and to situations when they have been broken or when somebody else has borrowed them.

The tools require that you learn how to use them. This competence is at once embedded in humans *and* in things (Shove et al. 2007: 56). The combination of a person and a tool constitutes a human-non-human hybrid. In this dynamic, skills and experience develop through using different things. With a hammer or a power drill you have other capabilities for engaging with reality than without them.<sup>6</sup>

Another aspect of tools is their ability to communicate: when you use the hammer or start the circular saw, other people hear or see what you are doing. For example, when I made the duckboards, my wife and a couple of friends watched me now and then from the veranda where they were drinking coffee. When the circular saw got stuck and then jumped backwards, one of the friends noticed it. He told me afterwards that it had looked dangerous.

Then we also have the aesthetics. When I filed and sandpapered the bars and the strips, I wanted the surface to be soft and smooth mainly for my wife and for others who will stand on them in the shower. Many carpentry projects are in the same way guided by care for other people. The result will be nice to look at, it will work well, and it will protect against cold and winds. The question of aesthetics is often as crucial as the question of function. Even if no one else should notice my errors or my dirty and quick solutions, I may spend many hours redoing the work, because I want it to be as perfect as possible. Sometimes you have to create optical illusions to hide irreparable errors. The look of the completed work, in this case the duckboards, becomes a mark of identity as (an amateur) carpenter.

### Working Knowledge

These three ways of telling the story about the coming into being of duckboards demonstrate different kinds of working knowledge. The first version is like

a manual, you can use it for making duckboards yourself. In its exactness it is also a kind of bragging about my new technical competence. The second account allows me to write about the emotions and sensuality that are involved in working with my hands. I use an alter ego to relate this multisensory experience. The third text is very much like the rest of this article, using analytical concepts, generalizing and referring to other researchers. This means that you observe and think about other things when you intend to describe exactly how duckboards are made, than when you use empathy to tell a story of a DIYer in action or when you analyze him from a distance.

Most of all I enjoyed writing about George. I was free to tell what he felt and thought, as if I could read his mind. I really didn't make up anything, but followed my memory and imagination when choosing words and metaphors, picturing the situation rather than only using controllable facts. Writing the story<sup>7</sup> helped me to see the inner life of DIY. But when I continued, I left George and returned to the more conventional style of the third version, trying to sum up my main thoughts, as an ethnologist, about DIY: the involvement, intimacy, intelligence and sensuality that are brought to the fore when trying to solve practical problems. I will develop these thoughts below.

*Involvement.* Using autoethnography as a starting point, I think I have a lot in common with other DIYers of both sexes. In the work process we are more or less consciously present and involved. We plan our work, but also dream and fantasize about it. Mostly we are concentrating as the tasks implicate different kinds of troubleshooting, where you have to think and measure carefully. For my part, the work means a lot of staring and figuring out how to do something. You can often see me just standing immovable in front of a wall or a piece of wood, gazing intently at it.

The topic of concentration is a reminder of the significant difference between learning and routine, in doing something the first time and doing it again for the second, third and fourth time, and so on. As a beginner, you are insecure the first time, you don't

know if you are doing the right things and if the result will be good enough. You must think and think again, and perhaps ask someone who is more experienced. This learning process is rather exciting, like an adventure. However, the thirteenth time I made a bar for the duckboards I didn't have to think very hard. It felt like it made itself. And then it wasn't exciting anymore.

When something becomes routine the autopilot is often switched on and you can let the mind wander. But not always; for example, when I'm felling trees with the power saw I don't consciously think about anything else, even if I have done that job many times before. The danger makes you very attentive. Besides, for most DIYers there is not much space for routines; as beginners we most often have to be 100 percent focused on our tasks.

*Intimacy.* Absorbed by the work you get physically close to the materials. In this intimacy you use your senses and also feel the strains of heavy labour. Wounds, scars and swellings on your body are signs of the painful moments of DIY. Especially when you get tired, it's easy to be clumsy and make errors – the usual product of the beginner's efforts. They force you to concentrate still harder and, as I mentioned, sometimes even to pull down what you have built and redo it. The manual work is therefore often emotionally charged. Like George, I feel happy and proud when I succeed. When I fail and the result is all but perfect I get angry at myself, frustrated and disappointed.

*Intelligence.* The importance of thinking when doing carpentry and other manual tasks should be obvious. However, the intellectual skills that physical labour requires are generally underestimated. Observing teachers and students in vocational training, Mike Rose (2004) noted the mental processes of carpentry and plumbing, for example the mathematics involved in cabinet assembly. He portrays the choreography of hand, eye, ear and brain, and writes about finished products as "materialized thoughts". The ever presence of abstraction, planning, and problem solving in everyday work is described as a complex cybernetic system, information flowing back and forth in action (Rose 2004: 79).

In spite of the "silent knowledge", the reality of manual work – for both professionals and DIYers – is linguistically and intellectually organized, something that Douglas Harper and Mike Rose have both shown eloquently in their books. You have to learn a vocabulary and a symbol system for carpentry, plumbing and electrical work. The skills of craftsmen like Willie are exhaustively verbalized by themselves, but also, for example, in many handbooks and instruction films.

*Sensuality.* When doing work on the wall, the pipes or the roof, you are immersed in bodily activities that are about your senses as well as about words.<sup>8</sup> Although feelings and sensual experiences are mentioned seldom in DIY manuals, every amateur carpenter knows how important they are. I'm looking, listening, touching and smelling to know what to do. I'm balancing on the ladder, crawling on the floor, kneeling and lying on my back, using parts of the body as tentacles. I'm measuring by eye and stroking surfaces with my hands. I'm adjusting my stance and motion via the tactile feedback I get from tools and materials. This haptic dimension of manual work means that you "see" with your hands and feet. By touching things you learn what to do next. The fingers become an "extended gaze" (Ehnmark 2002: 27).

Returning to Jonas Frykman's thoughts about "what people do, but seldom say," I now have to do an about-turn. In spite of the intellectual capacity it takes to do manual work, it might perhaps be better sometimes to show what you are doing and how you are doing it, rather than to tell about it. Many of the skills I need and use in DIY are in fact not very suitable for talking or writing about. They are certainly possible to describe, but it would be as futile as teaching someone only with words how to bike, swim, dance, sail or to drive a car. Instead you just have to learn by doing. Then you do it "by feel", as Willie said.

So, while the circular saw is roaring, there is silence around how to master it. Both doing practical things and communicating that in written words are about conscious or un-conscious selection. It's about choosing words and materials, testing sentences and

solutions, drilling, filing and planing, cutting out and redoing. This means that in the three stories about the duckboards I have omitted several pieces of information that I certainly need to know as an amateur carpenter, but which the reader doesn't have to know to follow my line of argument – for example, the exact movements of screwing, sawing, sandpapering, and oiling. These are movements that the hand “knows” how to do.

### Smooth Transitions

In thinking further about switching between writing and manual work, I now see both differences and similarities. Unlike building duckboards, where I pretty much knew before I started what the product would look like, picturing it in my mind, I didn't know at all in advance what this article should contain. It is now rather a completely different text when compared to the first draft. And unlike DIY, writing a paper (for me) means writing several versions, deleting sentences and whole paragraphs, changing words, arguments and even ideas. In making duckboards, I knew very well what the point was: I saw it clearly; there it was, ready to be used, as it was intended. When writing, I have to discover the point, since it is rarely evident. There is more room for surprises when the reader takes over, than when one places oneself on the duckboards.

As a carpenter you develop a sense of anticipation. You think ahead and visualize where you will end up, what you will do next, and next after that. When I write, I first put together words to see what I'm thinking, and then I continue writing. If I have any anticipation at all of where I will end up, it mostly proves to be wrong. The new version beats the old.

I almost always write something else than I planned – and that is a blessing. It is the longing for discoveries that keeps me writing. Certainly I “build” and “repair” my text, but without understanding much about the process. I feel that I have very little command of my thinking, compared to my recently acquired DIY expertise. It's the composition of words into sentences that I master, if anything, by pressing the right keys with my index fingers.

The building of a house may, of course, also implicate a lot of changes and modifications, but it's a more linear process notwithstanding all the small and big errors, the nasty surprises and all that goes awry. However, in spite of what I have just said, Elizabeth Shove et al. (2007: 61) believe that there can be few DIYers who have completed a major project in exactly the way they anticipated, having gone through only the processes envisaged and used only the tools and materials they thought they would need. In that way it once more resembles writing.

But even if DIY is almost inherently explorative, you don't suddenly decide to use bricks instead of wood for the walls. You may choose between screws and nails, but preferably you don't hit the nail with a screwdriver. You don't start intending to make duckboards and end up with a firewood bin. And, again, it's easier to visualize the planned project. In DIY there are ready made answers, but not in writing. Writing can take you almost anywhere, where it's even quite possible to hit metaphorical nails with a metaphorical screwdriver, especially when doing licentious ethnography.

In spite of the differences between DIY and writing, there have been rather smooth transitions for me lately between intellectual and manual work, between thought and accomplishment, between hunch and undertaking. You just rise from the sofa and the laptop, walk a few steps, change clothes, grab hold of your tools and start making things. Then you try to think of what you are doing while doing it, writing down ideas in a notebook as they are emerging and later on transform them into readable text on the computer.

This kind of DIY autoethnography, besides being enjoyable (at least to myself), also has the advantage of being doubly productive; you manufacture lasting things with your hands as well as produce ideas (also with the help of your hands) about your own and other home fixers' activities. Thinking, writing and performing manual tasks become deeds that correspond with each others. If the paper doesn't turn out good enough, you still have made duckboards that are nice to stand on while taking a shower.



## Conclusion

Writing about DIY has influenced both my home fixing and my research. As an amateur carpenter, I have become more reflexive and as an ethnographer more nearsighted, producing research material by interacting with tools and materials, rather than with other people. Hitting the nail with the hammer I now listen to the echoing sound, consciously sensing the movement and the blow in my hand and arm, but also looking curiously at myself from a distance or recording the interior monologue.

Once in a while I catch myself mumbling phrases from this article. I climb on to the roof to mend the gutter, thinking loudly: "Climbing the ladder to reach higher is a multisensory experience." Yes, indeed it is and now it's time for George to return. He perceives the cold steel and hears the ringing sound of it swinging and scraping against the wall. Carefully he is feeling his way on the steps with hands and feet, balancing for fear of falling. At the same time he is excited by being high up in the air. As usual, the radio is on, creating a special soundscape.

Using George as an alter ego has helped me to become a more licentious ethnographer. Being an acting subject as well as an observed person, body and mind intertwined, I have tried to capture complex bodily micro-events in words, using different styles of writing. What remains is to reflect on what one might learn from this piece of joint intellectual and practical work.

It has certainly been fun to tell stories about how to make duckboards, but the purpose of this article is, of course, not only that. Neither do I want to take the opportunity to promote autoethnography as a superior research method or style of writing. Like Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2007: 204), I would rather keep a proper balance "between a totally impersonal authorial style that elides the agency of the observer-author and an exaggeratedly literary form in which the author seems more important than the rest of the social world." And I also want to avoid, or at least be conscious of, the pitfalls of autoethnography that Heewon Chang (2008: 54 ff.) warns about: self-indulgent introspection, over-relying on personal memory, and elaborate narratives with underdeveloped cultural analysis.

Instead, the aim is to figure out how this way of doing research may contribute to a development of ethnographic practice in general. How can you use autoethnographic and self-narrative experiments to improve fieldwork and writing? Thinking about this task, six main ideas come to my mind. They will be presented below.

*Irregularity.* The first is that all ethnography may be seen as a kind of DIY project. You are using yourself, your body, mind and personality, not only scientific methods, to produce knowledge. In this process you are learning by doing through trial and error, as when you learn how to fix things at home. All the time you have to ask if your way of producing materials and ideas is working. Are the field notes good enough for your purposes? Is the analysis well thought out? Are the interpretations interesting?

You can never be sure of how to accomplish these undertakings in the right way since there are very few solid rules to guide research. Therefore you must do a lot of experimenting along the way. In fact, you could say that standard ethnography is characterized by irregularity. Everybody who has done fieldwork and written about it knows that. But still, it has to be repeated, because it is easy to forget all the mess before the book or article is finished. There may also be a wish to conceal it in order to present a more systematic picture of the research process. Then, even the professional ethnographer feels like a DIYer when in the field, trying to understand what is going on.

*Oscillation.* Second, the practice of ethnography may be described as a continuous oscillation between observation, listening, thinking, interpreting, writing, reading, sensing, discovering, and new observations. In this heavy intellectual and sensory traffic, the researcher confronts a mix of frustration, joy and new energy. This means you have to prepare yourself for such emotional turns to have the courage to finish the fieldwork, to continue to write and finally present a text for critical readers. My experience is that autoethnography is a good way to practice the crisscrossing between feelings and reflections and make you a more sensitive fieldworker.

*Oblivion.* Third, I think ethnography is partly re-

search in disguise, however open and honest you want to be for ethical reasons. This applies even to autoethnography, oddly enough. When making duckboards I was not all the time conscious of being observed, in spite of being the observer myself. In fact, many times I forgot that I was a research object, being immersed in my role as a carpenter. It wasn't until afterwards that I became intellectually aware of what had been going on. Therefore we can be rather sure that other people yet more easily overlook that they are targets for ethnographic research. Sometimes even the fieldworker does the same and instead sees them as more or less nice company.

Oblivion is, then, one of the conditions of fieldwork – as well, of course, as the momentary full attention of the ethnographic observer and listener. The question is what to do with this absent-mindedness. Is it possible to get something out of these instants that you didn't define as research material? As an autoethnographer you can try to remember later on what you did and experienced when you were totally concentrating on a special task – and while managing the power saw, for example. It may be exciting to discover what happened at the same time as the tree was falling. What did you perceive half consciously? By being more attentive to your own mind's wanderings you could develop a split vision competence.

*Bias.* Fourth, studying my own manual labour, I have rather bad control of the bias in the observations and interpretations resulting from my positions as an elderly, heterosexual, white, privileged, academic male. These are only a few of all potential social and cultural elements that influence the experience and representations of my carpentry. Nowadays it's common to hear that all social and cultural research, for better or worse, is predisposed in some way or other. Without bias, here broadly defined as interest and commitment, you perhaps cannot ask meaningful questions or look enquiringly at the world. Are there really any notions at all concerning human relations that are not preconceived?

Subjectivity should therefore not necessarily be seen as a threat to ethnographic detachment. Instead you should transform it into an analytic resource, by treating it in the same way as other people's subjective

experiences. This means that the ethnographer will reflect on her or his fieldwork as a coproduction together with those being studied, being a special part of the ongoing interaction.

*Exercises.* Fifth, I think that autoethnography is a good way of exercising observation and interpretation, without disturbing other people. It's a helpful technique to learn more about the complexity of doing fieldwork. You will also get to know more about how the research material is produced in situ.

In these exercises you will moreover have the time and opportunity to experiment with different ways of looking, listening and writing. For example, what happens if I write about my actions without mentioning anything about thoughts and feelings? What if you look at the present from a historic point of view? What would a sensory ethnography of DIY look like, taking into account smells, tastes and touches? These are only a few of all the possible autoethnographic try-outs.

In academic education, autoethnographic exercises prove to be an effective way to teach students how to do cultural research using their senses. When they return from their first fieldwork – observing social life in a department store or a railway station, for example, or describing their own family's celebration of Christmas – they are often excited by their new ability to see or hear or smell something other than before at places and in situations they thought they were familiar with. Performing observations and writing field notes makes them more attentive to how strange ordinary everyday life may appear, depending on how you look at it. It is one thing to read about this discovery, quite another to experience it yourself.

*Imagination.* Finally, you still cannot simply transfer this method into conventional research of social behaviour. Introspection or watching yourself is something different to observing other people. As an autoethnographer, studying your own experiences, you have for sure a privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of the observed person. In theory, you ought to be a good informant about yourself. Regarding other people, you mostly have to imagine what they are up to.

However, my efforts to be an object of autoethnographic observation only partly succeeded, as I hinted above. It turned out that I was not always a reliable witness of my own actions. A haze of unconsciousness, blurred feelings and silent knowledge made me a secret to myself sometimes. Even now I have to guess. When studying other people, your basic assumption should therefore be that you *never* know what they are really thinking and feeling, whatever they tell you. You can only get some biased knowledge about what they say and do through observing and listening to them carefully, always in doubt about what they mean. In this endeavour, imagination and empathy are indispensable research assets.

Doing good ethnography simply means to use all conceivable kinds of materials and to analyze them, for example, from a cultural point of view. Doing autoethnography – of DIY, or of anything – is a means for those purposes. It may be, as in writing this paper, a way to study how you learn to manage tools for practical purposes, how you carry out ideas in manual work or what it means to switch between intellectual and bodily activities. After that, of course, you have to broaden your perspective and put your personal experiences in a larger social context.

But right now I close the laptop and leave the sofa, eagerly aiming for my carpenter's shed and all the waiting tools. It's time to make new staircase banisters.

## Notes

- DIY, as home fixing, is a mass movement in the Western world, involving a majority of men and supported by a lot of handbooks, magazines, TV programmes, and by the Internet. See Goldstein (1998) for a historic perspective.
- The gendering of DIY is of course an important issue. Places like the garage, the workshop and the carpenter's shed have been described as men's special hide-outs, where they are protected against other, less satisfying, demands, and yet respond to the expectation that men should play a more active role in the home (Twitchell 2006). See also the discussions in Gelber (1997) and Schweder (2003). Moreover, in media the home fixer is usually presented as a masculine person.

If I had devoted myself to classic female dominated DIY activities such as knitting, sewing, weaving or lace making, I think I would have experienced myself – and been regarded by other people – in a different way.

- See Ingold & Vergunst (2008) about the art of walking, explored by researchers walking in different places and different ways.
- For a discussion of magical-mythical thinking about material objects, see Verrips (1994).
- In a similar way, Heewon Chang (2008: 143ff.) mentions four different styles of writing “self-narratives”: descriptive-realistic, confessional-emotive, analytical-interpretive and imaginative-creative.
- In recent years the theoretical discussion about materiality has become intensified. A lot of cultural researchers have been inspired by Bruno Latour's and others' ideas about things as “actants” in networks of human and material interaction (see, e.g., Frykman 2006; Damsholt, Simonsen & Mordhorst 2009; Miller 2009).
- There are a lot of other autoethnographies using subjective/literary forms of writing, see e.g. Bochner & Ellis (2002).
- For an introduction to “sensory ethnography”, see Pink (2009).

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