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Celebrating Chaos: The Power of Untidy Realities in Ethnographic Research

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“ *Ethnographic work is underpinned by fluid and often ambiguous methodological demands as well as dataset **chaos** [...] By ‘embracing the **chaos**’ of its subject matter and controlling for methodological messiness, ethnographers can turn the ambiguity, fluidity and fragmentation of the human condition and its cultural webs into a weapon that yields unique empirical purchase.* ”

Introduction: The “Chaotic Character” Of Ethnography

Research outcomes, often presented in the form of ‘sanitized’, linear investigation pathways, whilst high on validity and reliability, tend to avoid offering insights into the complicated and chaotic journey of practically undertaking the research itself. Epistemologically, the articulation of such a smooth and seamless narrative suggests the presence of an objective, external reality, waiting to be discovered by the researcher. The literal research process, however, involves more than the culmination of brand-new findings and does not necessarily encapsulate clean, crystallized investigation processes, narrow, straightforward lines of argument and coherent storyboarding opportunities (Plows, 2018). The ‘chaotic character’ of ethnography, in particular, bears testimony to this processual reality, explaining the scepticism surrounding qualitative research in general and

ethnographic work in particular. Disputes around tensions in ethnography, of whether it is, in fact, a ‘real’, ‘empirical’ science or not, frequently characterize intellectual debate. In part, this perception has arisen due to the messy methodological handling of qualitative research that often occurs (Hammersley, 1992). However, I argue that there is a distinction between messy methodological handling of ethnographic research and the chaotic character of ethnographic data itself. I suggest that the emotional work of ethnography, the accompanying uncertainty and confusion, can, in fact, be productive (Hochschild, 2020). When combined with robust methodological rigour, this chaotic character of ethnography can become constructive and beneficial, reflecting the unique strengths of the ethnographic method over other empirical approaches.

Ethnographic work is underpinned by fluid and often ambiguous methodological demands as well as dataset chaos, both of which are discussed in later sections of the paper. Methodological demands comprise: (i) oscillating between somewhat knowing and remaining open to surprising findings at the field site, given no ethnographer enters completely free of presupposed notions; (ii) thorny issues related to obtaining informed consent from fieldwork participants (Thorne, 1980); (iii) representations of researcher identity and the extent of information offered to participants; (iv) traversing the shadowy boundaries of what counts as a site, pitted against the practical realities that produce spatial-temporal shifting throughout the duration of fieldwork; (v) navigating access and ‘getting in’ to a field site (Goffman, 2001, 153-158); (vi) juggling the duality of developing researcher-participant relationships, whilst maintaining a suitable distance from subjects and refraining from appropriation behaviour such as mimicking of participants; (vii) confronting researcher positionality, as one tries to uncover invisible yet central narratives at a field site (Magolda, 2000); and (viii) accounting for and capturing temporal and inter-situational variation through the course of the ethnography. Collectively, these elements run the

risk of producing what I label *methodological messiness*, which requires carefully considered handling in order to prevent the ethnographic inquiry from descending into incredibility.

In addition to the threat of methodological messiness, ethnographic work frequently deals with dataset chaos; this comprises a significant part of the chaotic and beneficial character of ethnography. Ethnographic data is scruffier than the sanitized, efficient, or ostensibly ‘bleached’ data gleaned during quantitative research processes, such as during lab experiments and surveys. However, ethnographic datasets, recorded in the form of jottings and later converted into fieldnotes, offer unique depth when brought into focus through comprehensive ethnographic analysis. The empirical scrutiny of such untidy and disjointed material, upon subjection to the tools of the ethnographic approach, (coding, creating categories, building concepts, and eventually theory development), enables researchers to counter common-sense assumptions about field site participants (Katz, 2001). It offers the opportunity to illustrate the inferred rules that contribute to the day-to-day functioning of a site, whilst discovering the “cogs and wheels” (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010, p.54) underpinning social interactions among groups and individuals.

I suggest abductive ethnographic inquiry as one possible method for controlling methodological messiness and leveraging dataset chaos. Abductive ethnographies, by retaining flexibility in the chronological sequence of sifting through literature, discovering surprising outcomes and collecting data, offer a scientific route to deriving symbolic meanings of discourse and engagement in the field (Emerson, 2001). In many ways, abductive ethnographies manage to ‘de-layer’ social meanings and reach points of data access that other methods may not be able to achieve as successfully. This abductive approach is discussed in detail in a later section of this paper.

Ethnography's Object of Focus: Humans in a Cultural Web

Unlike an experiment or survey, ethnographic fieldwork will not necessarily begin with a general hypothesis put forward with the purposes of testing. The object of analysis, instead, is to grasp the complex, textured structures of meaning produced at a field site, by undertaking a mechanistic exploration of its culture and social life, and the production, perception and interpretation of social actions by participants. Through prolonged interactions at the site, ethnographers aim to access the subjectivities and emotions of their participants, that will aid in the explanation of behavioural outcomes (Emerson, 2001).

In understanding why ethnography has a more chaotic character and may pose a greater risk of methodological messiness than other approaches, we turn to Geertz. Human beings, he puts forth, are animals “suspended in webs of significance which they themselves have spun” (Geertz, 1973, pp. 55-70). Culture represents those webs, and so, when trying to explore and understand culture and its related social exchanges, an ethnographer's pursuit is not towards discovering a general law or objective theorem, but instead, to offer meaning through an interpretative lens. Therefore, if ethnography is interested in exploring cultural webs, it is unlikely for it to encompass strictly structured research sites and investigation processes. Nor is ethnographic fieldwork likely to yield immediate and obvious results, in the manner that a more quantitative-led approach might provide. By ‘embracing the chaos’ of its subject matter and controlling for methodological messiness, ethnographers can turn the ambiguity, fluidity and fragmentation of the human condition and its cultural webs into a weapon that yields unique empirical purchase.

Methodological Messiness

The object of focus for ethnographic work – culture and social life – produces the risk of methodological messiness. This messiness looks different from

the chaotic character of ethnographic work, as explained in the next section of this paper. From the initial stages of field site selection and choosing a subject of study, messiness can erupt and sustain right until the final stages of research. In order to prevent the ethnographic inquiry from succumbing to risks of incredibility, it is imperative to get a handle on this possible messiness right from the beginning. This section is divided across the various types of methodological processes and challenges that ethnographic research runs the risk of encountering.

- i) Proponents of grounded theory might liken the ethnographer's mind to Locke's blank slate theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1976). In reality, however, entering the field with a blank mental slate is virtually impossible (Tavory & Timmermans, 2009). The real process of conducting ethnographic research is far less neat, oscillating between a certain degree of 'knowing' whilst remaining open to elements of surprise. Even the process of choosing a site and participants for a study, in and of itself, demands a certain degree of inclusion and exclusion which tends to be discretionary; who to pick, who to leave out, what day and time to visit the site and which data points to focus on and analyse. These are rarely binary or direct choices posed to the ethnographer (Charmaz, 2001).
- ii) A frequently shifting ethnographic setting holds varied implications for seeking informed consent and can prove to be a challenging business (Thorne, 1980). The risks and benefits of ethnographic research are also less obvious than in medical or clinical research. This gives rise to untidy and complex ethical concerns, including types and forms of consent, such as written, verbal, implicit, as well as considerations about when to renew consent, in order to remind participants of the research underway, whilst attempting to remain inconspicuous as a researcher (Berreman, 2007).

- iii) How much detail of the research project does one provide to participants? Unlike quantitative research – such as conducted through more closed-ended questionnaires, surveys, and experiments – used to test or confirm theories and hypotheses, ethnographic interactions are open-ended, and contexts are fluid, hence, an ethnographer might be interested in one subject at the beginning but move to a different theme of exploration by the end. Is it incumbent to keep participants updated about the study as the data collection and analysis evolve? Closely allied to this is the notion of researcher identity and risks of misrepresentation. The ethnographer must deal with decisions about the degree to which complete researcher identities must be revealed to participants. There can be no rulebook for such decision-making; context eventually matters. If a particular aspect of the researcher's identity – for instance, a religious identity that differs from that of the subjects in a religious setting – poses the risk of alienating participants and hindering rich data collection, the ethnographer must decide what falls in the realm of 'acceptable' and what might become misleading or deceptive. Similarly, the ethnographer must draw boundaries between when to share personal perspectives on topics with participants in order to demonstrate empathy and build trust, and where to practice greater caution and restraint in reflexive sharing (Thorne, 1980).
- iv) Then we arrive at the question of what counts as a research site and scientific data. Given the fluid notions of time and space, ethnographic sites can move between different physical locations, capture online extensions of offline conversations as well as transmit information across domains of time. Interactions can comprise both formal and informal exchanges, the former involving the seeking of informed consent, whilst the latter typically occurring within more

relaxed, causal environments (Emerson, 2001). The ethnographer has to make the decision of which interactions to consider as part of their official data set and which to categorize as chance encounters or one-off episodes.

- v) Once fieldwork begins, getting in and gaining trust create knotty aspects of ethnographic work. Encounters in the field are often serendipitous, requiring uncomfortable conversations, decisions, negotiations. Questions of salience become: Does one begin with the superstructure and work one's way downwards? Are subordinate groups less likely to engage in open, honest dialogue, if they recognize the researcher's association with senior groups and individuals at the beginning? (Goffman, 2001) Alternatively, do such associations provide the ethnographer with a degree of legitimacy in the field? The answers are varied and puzzling, and solutions may differ significantly from one site to the next. The ethnographer must decide based on contextual subjectivities, unstated norms and sensitivities, which cannot be standardized and applied identically to every field site situation.

- vi) In order to uncover subjectivities, ethnographers are encouraged to undertake participant observation (Malinowski, 1922), establish prolonged contact and approximate the lives of their participants, without appearing to mimic them (Bernard, 2011). The line between approximating and mimicking, however, is often marked by fuzzy, opaque boundaries. Dressing in a manner that adheres to local culture and norms may be seen as a marker of respect; however, speaking in an accent that identically copies the participants' spoken form of dialect may be viewed as crossing the line and eventually become counter-productive. This wobbly dance between getting in without the impression of trying too hard or appropriating is a

complex, perplexing balance to strike; it plays a key role in deciding whether the ethnographer gains intimacy with the in-group or not (Goffman, 2001).

- vii) Whilst positionality, too, influences ethnographic work and gives rise to a type of complicity in research processes and outcomes, disclosures on positionality are heavily moderated and discouraged in common research practice. In fact, much of the positivist critique of the ethnographic method challenges the validity of ethnography, based on its value-laden, intimate, hypothesis-free approach to research. In the attempt to fortify the objectivity of their empirical pursuits, ethnographers are also deterred from indulging in reflexive introspection and are instead, urged to favour their analysis towards presenting participant-based findings only.

However, endeavouring to maintain a value-neutral stance is an impractical residue of utopian ecosystems of research. In reality, the ways in which an ethnographer's own background and disposition – what patterns they choose to focus on, which content they exclude, the limitations or benefits their positionality pose – make it difficult to ignore their role in meaning-making in the field. Hence, acknowledging and engaging with one's own politics as a researcher provides a rich, new avenue for intellectual discourse, whilst disclosing an honest, and close to the bone account of how research really happens (Becker, Gans, Newman & Vaughn, 2003).

One such example is illustrated through the ways in which gender becomes salient in a male-dominated field setting, which can hold bold implications for research (Orrico, 2015). Ignoring reflexivity (which illuminates how gendered processes unfold in the field) neglects a key mechanism in the production of ethnographic

analyses. Instead of relegating positionality as a negligible downstream effect, ethnographies can weave ethnographer politics into mainstream research and output. Whilst ethnography has begun moving towards adopting a less apologetic stance towards reflexivity and political engagement, a fair amount of distance remains to be covered in order for these elements to be considered an iterative and generative part of the investigative discourse.

- viii) In order to identify patterns, ethnographers typically conduct fieldwork over a substantial period of time. This implies changes in group composition and dynamics, both of which must be accounted for when conducting ethnographic analysis. This makes the triangulation of key data points a much more challenging task; participants may behave in a particular manner at a certain point in time, but this may be subject to temporal and inter-situational variation through the course of the ethnography (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). In order to produce a robust, valid and reliable research product, ethnographers are expected to capture these variations and empirically account for exceptions to the patterns they discover. The negative case must also be accounted for and sufficiently reasoned. However, this time consuming and diversified data can be turned into an advantage; it can offer the opportunity for longer spread out observations and interactions, allowing patterns to emerge organically. Eventually, this repeated exposure to subjects adds to the strength of the ethnographer's claims and the overall validity of their research findings.

If the methodological complexities underpinning ethnographic work are mindfully traversed – accounting for situational, context-specific dynamics, probing to question and triangulate subjects' responses, and carefully treading the lines between 'ethical' and 'inaccurate' or 'deceptive' –

then ethnographies can proceed to utilize dataset chaos to their benefit as outlined in the next section. Together, these offer constructive power in uncovering mechanisms and meanings which individuals attribute (Goffman, 2001) to social action and processes, often with more depth and nuance than other methods (Angrosino, 2007).

Dataset Chaos

Cultural and social interactions, including symbols and signs, by definition, appear elusive, even when placed under a microscopic investigative lens. Yet they form the basis of most ethnographic inquiry. How, then, does one capture their abstract veracities whilst claiming robust empirical health in our pursuit of research? Therein lies the dataset chaos of ethnography, which can be necessary, beneficial and constructive, if complemented by rigorous methodological handling, as outlined in the earlier section (Charmaz, 2001).

This section is divided across the various types of dataset chaos that ethnographic research encapsulates.

- i) To understand the informal logic of life and capturing the ‘behind the scenes’ of a social setting, ethnographers must record facts, identify symbolic actions and disentangle the complex hierarchically structured meanings at the field site. But this mechanistic way of understanding culture is highly subjective; symbolic actions can hold entirely different meanings, depending on the shared social message they convey within a particular milieu. For example, a wink can connote several different meanings, despite producing the same physical action, depending on the context, the aim of the individual performing the action and the reception and perception of it by those in the audience (Geertz, 2001). Decoding these symbolic actions is a complex task, amplified by the burden of representation for a community that ethnographers carry. Again, the significance of the local context, its norms and values, becomes paramount.

- ii) Subject matter in ethnography also produces chaos, which can be leveraged to gather thick description and produce deeply textured ethnographies. Binary notions of right and wrong, black and white have to quickly be shed. In their place, rich, grey spaces must be excavated and subjected to profound critical probing and engagement. Such analysis involves deciphering silences and spaces in interactions, unpacking the tacit norms characterizing a site and peeling back layers of meaning that don't make themselves apparent in obvious and easily decipherable ways.

For example, in his fieldwork among the Trobriand Islanders, Malinowski faced the challenge of decoding the symbolic meaning of rituals and practices adopted by locals. One such instance was when he witnessed the *Masawa* canoe builders dancing around the canoe, once the canoe had been constructed. It was only through deep and long participant observation that Malinowski could visualize and explore the world from the lens of the Islanders, eventually explaining what motivated their behaviour. His subjects' experienced fear of being at the mercy of uncontrollable powers, such as the wind and storms, which gets countered by their belief in magic as a powerful weapon to protect them against such forces. Hence, they danced around the canoe to placate the higher powers, once the canoe had been built, invoking magic to alleviate fear and protect them from any apocalyptic outcome (Malinowski, 1922).

- iii) Ethnography demands for the ongoing, iterative and reflexive processes of data collection and analysis to be conducted simultaneously. This marks a departure from other research methods which clearly demarcate the chronological order of data collection and analytical engagement. During these two processes, the meaning of the 'ethnographic present' (Halstead, 2008, pg. 2) is

fluid and ever-changing. Chaos in the dataset also stems from this constant co-mingling (Becker, 1998). After entering the field site, an ethnographer begins the process of collecting data but is also mandated to begin the exercise of making sense of the material gathered in parallel. Once the ethnographer identifies repeated patterns in the data, the researcher returns to the field to collect more concentrated data. As moving between data and analysis continues, there is an expectation that the ethnographer will triangulate dominant patterns, by returning to the field (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995). Practically, this requires the researcher to simultaneously inhabit ethnography's double fields, moving from fieldsite to 'back home' and engaging both spheres at once (Halstead, 2008, p.2). This multiplicity of the ethnographic present becomes an agent for constituting and reconstituting anthropological knowledge but requires systematic and organized handling in order to make sense of continuously emerging themes from seemingly chaotic datasets (ibid).

- iv) Finally, ethnography is a highly subjective method of inquiry, which contributes to its chaotic character (see above). Pink (2007) underlines the subjective dimension of the social scientist's gaze in visual research; however, she highlights how the researcher's subjectivity forms a crucial and central component of empirical undertaking more generally, even in textual representation. This delicate balance between traversing method and data is not without potential pitfalls. Whilst the intersubjectivity of co-created data offers an opportunity to unravel richly textured findings and meanings at a field site, this interaction is often more contingent and dialogical than in other methods (Bryman, 2016). For example, one instance where this challenge becomes obvious is during participants' presentations of themselves, which tend to vary according to time and place

(Goffman, 1959). Further, due to social desirability bias, participants will often articulate one perspective at a particular time and go on to perform or implement another action at a later time. We see this in the case of research on religiosity, for example, when subjects will often claim proclivity to attending places of worship and performing other religious acts, when in fact, those notions may depict their desires more than their behaviours. The onus of accurately unpacking this variation or seeming inconsistency, capturing the multiplicity of human representations and converting them into a coherent narrative, lies on the ethnographer.

But herein also lies the potential gravitas and strength of this qualitative technique. The fulcrum of ethnographic storyboarding is shaped by what I refer to as its subjective soul, leading to its popular referencing as a method that prioritizes depth over breadth. Few other methods offer the toolkit to unearth webs of culture and social interplay, which to the outside world may appear ordinary and every day, but which hold deep significance for field site participants. The mapping and assemblage of these latent yet substantive layers of meaning require methodological precision; in the absence of tactical thoroughness, ethnographic analysis runs the risk of descending into a complete mess.

As discussed in the preceding section, dataset chaos can become valuable only if tackled with methodological precision. This occurs through a systematic and scientific procedure of working with ethnographic data; jottings, fieldnotes, open and focused coding, discovering patterns over long periods of time, returning to the field to triangulate, categorizing, concept-building and theory development. Similarly, during the analysis stage, drawing inferences without succumbing to giant leaps and avoiding logical fallacies adds to the thoroughness of ethnographic offerings. Collectively, these processes ensure that ethnographies are not reduced to fictional storytelling (Emerson, 1995).

Therefore, to concede, in fact, leverage, the complexity and profusion of ethnographic contexts and relationships, and methodologically co-create in conjunction with the 'slipperiness' of ethnographic data, forms the bedrock of ethnographic prowess (Geertz, 2001). Undervaluing or misrepresenting this subjective soul would mean throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Turning Chaos into Value

So far, in this paper, I have made the case that ethnographic accounts are able to confront and tackle the chaotic character of their undertaking, by employing methodological rigour, in order to ensure that potentially constructive dataset chaos does not slip into a giant methodological mess. In addition to the methodological grit outlined in the sections above, a specific approach that can prove beneficial to managing ethnographic chaos is abduction. Moving away from traditional notions of induction and deduction, an abductive ethnography can help find a way to avoid methodological messiness (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014).

What might an abductive ethnography look like and what does this practically entail? Abductive ethnographies, characterized by the iterative process of moving back and forth between literature and data, produce a unique navigational map to glean meanings and narratives of significance (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). The assumption that the ethnographer will enter the field site completely blank gets discarded. Instead, by immersing themselves in existing scholarship, ethnographers allow themselves to discover surprising observations that might be anomalous to existing theories, even before entering the field site. Upon discovering this unexplained observation, abduction nudges ethnographers in the direction of collecting new data in order to produce original theoretical explanations that may fit this surprising observation (Plows, 2018). It does not shy away from the untidy, confounding realities of conducting research. Instead, it

emphasizes methodological openness, consistency and thoroughness as paramount in dealing with this chaos, insisting that only when handled systematically can dataset chaos be turned into an asset for the ethnographer. By so doing, abductive analysis enables ethnographic work to take the most creative route to data collection, analysis and theory building.

Tangentially, the presentation of ethnographic findings can also adopt exciting new forms; by using material collected through a blurry researcher lens, and reflexively and creatively representing it in the form of a coherent account, ethnographies can break new narrative ground (Fine, 2003). Creative forms of academic writing, fact-based storytelling, which do not necessarily conform to tidy and traditional modes of academic writing, can help bring ethnographic subjectivities into sharper focus. This holds the potential to push conventional boundaries which currently fence what comprises high-quality academic discourse from more accessible or informal modes of writing. Whilst the processes and outcomes of ethnographic research will continue to pass through robustness tests and aspire to adhere to the highest empirical standards, their reportage can benefit from employing narrative techniques and formats inspired by broader imaginaries, and open up spaces for future dialogue and activism (Becker, Gans, Newman & Dianne, 2003).

This combination of employing inventive yet scientific techniques of storytelling, along with leveraging ethnography's chaotic character and subjective soul, in every sense, becomes ethnography's most substantive muscle.

The Chaotic Character of Ethnographies in Action

The littered, non-linear pathways of ethnographies are visible in action, both during fieldwork as well as in the innovative pedagogical toolkit offered in university methods courses within the social sciences and humanities.

The following two cases illustrate how systematic methodological pursuit can work in conjunction with the chaotic character of ethnographic data, to generate knowledge that may otherwise be challenging to gather through quantitative methods. However, it is imperative to acknowledge the negative case as well and highlight how, if indiscriminately and unsystematically handled (in other words, sloppy methodological handling), dataset chaos can quickly succumb to messy incredibility.

Case 1: *Strangers in their own land*: why polls miscalculated Trump's victory

The 2016 American election results gave rise to considerable debate over the benefits of qualitative versus quantitative research methods, demonstrating under which conditions one set of tools might yield greater value than the other. The following example sheds light on how the dataset chaos of ethnographies can become particularly beneficial when complemented by rigorous methodological inquiry, enabling ethnographers to tap into elusive and inward elements of human interaction, such as political attitudes and beliefs upon which voting behaviour may be incumbent.

2016 was a particularly tricky year for pollsters, as polls failed to predict the election of US President, Donald Trump. In the 2016 review presented by the *American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR)*, two key factors accounted for this lapse (AAPOR, 2020). The first was the sizable number of the electorate that decided its vote towards the last few days leading up to the elections. The second reason was attributed to problems of unrepresentative sampling, in particular, the lack of representation of non-college graduates in state-level polls.

Juxtaposed against poll predictions was Hochschild's ethnographic fieldwork presented in her book, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, based on her travels to Louisiana to uncover the "deep stories" of individuals occupying the stronghold of the conservative right (Hochschild, 2016, p.135). Exploring

how people's lives had been frayed by income and home losses, notions of an elusive American dream, and gradually calcifying resentment against liberal circles, Hochschild examined their political choices and perspectives within the broader context of their lives (ibid).

Hochschild's intensely immersive fieldwork in Louisiana, comprising focus groups, participant observation and interviews, adopted abductive reasoning to reflect on the various kinds of, numbers of, combinations of causes to make sense of her data (Hochschild, 2020). By so doing, she was hazarding a best guess and generating a hypothesis. Her hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-confirming research then provided the opportunity for future scholarship to take it up later, try to make sense of the conditions under which her findings hold validity and use abduction to extend its exploration under possible new circumstances. Herein lies the surprising and theory building potential of abductive ethnographic pursuit (Hochschild, 2020).

Hochschild's research also places emphasize on bolstering interpersonal relationships and highlights the problems of "un-empathically" conducting ethnographic fieldwork. Again, we see the subjective soul of ethnographic research at the core in this case; it is not simply about achieving logistical precision, but about drawing human connections and forging relationships, without undermining the objectivity of the scientific inquiry itself.

Further, as she suggests, when conducting fieldwork especially among those whose values and beliefs might differ from one's own, it is all the more important to turn off our 'alarm systems', which might begin to colour our impressions of the data being collected (Hochschild, 2020). In her case, her personal alarm system might have been set into motion, if she had not consciously entered Louisiana with an unbiased approach. By removing this alarm system, the ethnographer is able to retain maximum openness and objectivity in the investigative pursuit (ibid).

In light of Trump's victory, Hochschild's ethnography substantiated the value-added contribution that an in-depth qualitative exploration can make in comparison to quantitative approaches. It underlined the potential of ethnographies, particularly when trying to capture social meanings, political grievances, voter perspectives and emotional cognition. Such abstract impressions and deep stories would struggle to make their way into research methods which apply a more binary logic or adopt a shorter-term investigative approach.

Making sense of ethnographic data gathered over time and piecemeal can appear unscientific and scattered at first. However, through methodological rigour including coding, discovering patterns, categorizing, triangulating and conceptualizing, ethnographers hold the power to generate theoretical frameworks that shed light on social life, behavioural outcomes and consequential choices. Hochschild's work reflected this process in her findings and analysis on the built-up umbrage among the Louisiana crew and their voting patterns. It is unlikely that a poll, survey or experiment would have been able to capture the way these individuals made sense of their lives and the symbolic significance they attached to political interactions and events.

In certain instances, such inquiry may require discarding one's personal proclivities and political subjectivities, in order to aim for an objective investigation. This way, data that initially appears haphazard, random or chaotic, begins to get systematically organized in a coding system, yielding profound and substantive empirical purchase. This is precisely what the subjective soul of Hochschild's ethnographic toolkit managed to accomplish within America's fickle political architecture (ibid), raising the overall value of ethnographies in generating social meanings and offering political predictions.

Case 2: Social isolation and physical distancing: the case for an opportunity in adversity?

This second example, highlighting the tailoring of an undergraduate ethnography methods class during the Covid-19 lockdown in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), illustrates how the chaotic character of ethnographic can become constructive and necessary to ensure the continuity of research amidst unprecedented circumstances. In comparison, had the course been training students in a more rigid research method, it may have proved challenging to turn the current contextual limitations into a useful and practical academic opportunity. Similar to the first case, this also emphasizes the subjective soul of the ethnographic method, offering an investigative asset to ethnographers during the research process.

Introductory ethnography courses will often emphasize the value of face-to-face interactions during participant observation, field note taking, conducting interviews, forming the backbone of rich ethnographic research. Typically, during undergraduate qualitative methods classes, student ethnographers are encouraged to select field sites off their university campuses. The purpose is to venture far from the familiar routine and insularity of their day-to-day student lives, in order to gain exposure to the broader patterns prevalent in the “real” parts of the city. As such, physical distancing and self-isolation, as happening globally due to the case of the Covid-19 pandemic, pose an ethnographer’s nightmare.

Mid-way through the Spring 2020 term, however, students in an undergraduate ethnographic field research course in the UAE were instructed to halt weekly field visits and begin practising physical distancing. The question became, how could the ethnographic experience be delivered to budding, young ethnographers, in the absence of physical interaction at field sites? The prospect appeared paradoxical; however, the fluid, adaptable and non-isometric nature of ethnographic research worked to the method’s advantage.

After toying with various directionalities, the course was tailored for students to continue to conduct ethnographic fieldwork, by redirecting focus to examine the social consequences of Covid-19, capturing people's experiences as they unfolded in real-time. Students could pursue fieldwork on the ethnography of everyday life during the health crisis, by taking field notes on virtual interactions (social media, chats, etc.) and conversations happening at home or on campus, where limited physical interaction may have been permitted. Alternatively, students could conduct fieldwork and interviews with any group of interest to them, beyond Covid-19, but data collection was permissible through virtual mediums only.

In response, students began drawing on a multi-sourced approach, conducting fieldwork and scheduling interviews digitally, and triangulating information through digital data sources such as exchanges on social media and *WhatsApp* conversations. In so doing, they began the process of contributing, albeit unintentionally, to the newly emerging field of digital ethnographies (case-in-action, Abu Dhabi, 2020).

The process did not occur in an unobstructed manner; in fact, a variety of unanticipated hurdles posed themselves: (i) varying levels of digital penetration among students, especially as some students had returned to their home country where internet access was sketchy; (ii) problems of trust and discomfort experienced by research participants in responding to sensitive questions over an online platform rather than in-person; (iii) temporal changes in presentations of self throughout the pandemic; and (iv) limitations of returning to the field to triangulate data previously collected or probe a particular aspect of the findings, as would have been the case in physical fieldwork.

However, applying methodological robustness to the inquiry ensured that despite these constraints, the ethnographic inquiry did not completely stall, nor were the rules of ethnographic investigation compromised. Despite the move to online fieldwork, students continued seeking consent, taking

fieldnotes, conducting coding exercises, looking out for patterns and triangulating the data collected.

It is worth mentioning that the strength of ethnography's intersubjectivity can be seen in fewer places as strongly as it makes itself evident here. Research never occurs in a social vacuum; however, in this particular instance, the ubiquitous impact of the pandemic extended to the researchers themselves. Whilst devising ways of personally dealing with and making sense of the unprecedented transitions required in light of Covid-19, these student-ethnographers were simultaneously in a dialogical exchange with their fieldwork participants. Whilst retaining methodological objectivity was of utmost importance, this was an opportunity to explore notions of positionality, as well as think through the stories of participants, rather than viewing them as material only for report and research writing. As Hochschild (2020) suggests, interviews can be seen as books, providing us with other people's stories and a greater sense of empathy; together, these hold potential to make the ethnographer a deeper person by the end of the inquiry.

Further, the subjective soul of ethnography made itself apparent through the unpacking of subjects' personal anecdotes and experiences, as the pandemic unfolded in real-time. This was a unique situation which posed limitations of owning previous statistics or findings to offer frames of reference. In such a sense, the ethnographic endeavour and its subjective soul, whilst undoubtedly chaotic in content (as subjects and researchers simultaneously made sense of their situations in real-time), provided a means of collecting unique case data, accommodate and explain surprising new outcomes and subsequently break uncharted theoretical ground.

This health and social crises also serve as examples of moulding ethnographic fieldwork into a framework of inquiry (albeit not devoid of challenges), which ensures the continued operationalization of the research process, despite dramatically altered circumstances. The flexibility of the

ethnographic toolkit offers creative routes to data collection and theory building, ensuring that researchers are not held hostage to circumstances beyond the limits of human control (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Without compromising the integrity and rigour that form the hallmark of valuable scientific research, ethnographies during Covid-19 are likely to unravel the chaotic, downstream effects of macro-level policies and interactions related to the pandemic. It will do so by capturing micro-sites of interaction for those affected on-the-ground. It is out of this dataset chaos surrounding Covid-19 that the ethnographic method will generate systematic meaning and perhaps even ground-breaking theories.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that the real power of ethnographies, when juxtaposed against other methods of inquiry, reveals itself in the chaotic character of ethnographic fieldwork itself. Specifically, I have introduced and engaged with a particular type of chaos to demonstrate this strength: dataset chaos, which stems from the abstract and often elusive social interactions occurring at a field site. It is this fluid, ambiguous and constantly changing nature of ethnographic data which produces thick description (Geertz, 2001), from which the ethnographer derives meaning. In turn, this thick description allows us to gain a handle on something; that something could comprise beliefs, emotional states or events at field sites. Part of the ethnographer's task is to explore and unpack the sensibilities, feelings and metaphors that best explain this something, which is usually of deep significance to field site participants (Hochschild, 2020).

This paper also problematizes the issue of ethnographic chaos, by drawing a clear distinction between messy methodological handling of ethnographic research and the chaotic character of ethnography itself. I have argued that only when the empirical inquiry is underpinned by vigorous methodological discipline, does ethnographic chaos hold the potential to

become a useful tool for research. On the contrary, if tackled with methodological sloppiness and compromise, dataset chaos can quickly spiral out of control and culminate in research outcomes that get reduced to unsystematic and unscientific storytelling, yielding minimal validity or reliability in its findings.

I posit an abductive ethnographic approach (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014) as one way of achieving this goal of balancing dataset chaos against potential methodological fall-out. By acknowledging that research is an iterative, processual undertaking, ethnographers can leverage the chaos found in their datasets, whilst applying a robust methodological framework. Before entering the field site and subsequent to the data collection, they can continue engaging with theoretical strands to see how their findings might explain a gap in scholarship. This creative route to empirical inquiry can play a pivotal role in generating new theoretical foundations (ibid).

By highlighting the power of ethnographic chaos, complemented by methodological rigour, I challenge those positivist paradigms which overlook the benefits of qualitative research due to the intersubjective characteristics of the latter (Plows, 2018). Relatedly, and as demonstrated through the role of gender in Orrico's fieldwork (2015), I make a case in favour of openness about reflection and positionality in research, in order to provide audiences with real and honest insights into the investigative process and the factors that influence research outcomes. I build upon Pink's emphasis on the subjective dimension of the social scientist's gaze in visual research and extend it to ethnographic inquiry of other kinds (Pink, 2007).

Therefore, instead of adopting an apologist stance for the lack of engagement with quantitative datasets and yielding of binary outputs, the subjective soul of ethnographic research can become a powerful tool for de-layering hierarchies of meaning and participants' deep stories (Hochschild, 2016), as can be seen in the case of adapting the undergraduate ethnographic research methods course in the UAE case study. In so doing, this holds

potential to surpass the production of superficial definitions, perspectives, attitudes and beliefs. In its place, it seeks out the latent norms and rules that contribute to the functioning of a social place and prevent it from descending into chaos (Katz, 2001).

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