Commentary

Anthropologists, the co-creators of stories

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The practice of participant–observation is the anthropologist’s primary tool to find what they are looking for in a specific setting and context. One thing included is that we listen to what individuals say, their experiences, their life stories. This is an essential part of our method. When anthropologists talk about interviews or the practice of listening to interlocutors it is usually about the setting of the interview, not the practice or the process itself. Davies writes about ‘structured’, ‘semi-structured’, and ‘unstructured’ interviews, which describes the structure and setting in which interviews take place (Davies 2008: 105-6). These terms are used to define how stringent the interviewer is in following pre–elected questions, and if the interview is scheduled beforehand or is conducted spontaneously. However, this does not explain what happens during interviews, which processes are at play, and in what way interviewers or listeners actually affect the story being produced, in other words: the power relations included (Eastmond 2007). In arguing for the anthropological use of narrative theory—an interdisciplinary line of thought—I propose a way to attend these questions: Why and how the stories that we write down are produced by our interlocutors in relation to our presence. As Raine (2013) writes, narrative theory offers via its diversity in methods and approaches a ‘fertile ground for innovation to those willing to consider a range of perspectives.’, and this I argue we should. In this paper I focus on how narratives as life stories are created and by which approaches we can access these. I base the discussion on my own fieldwork among Syrian refugees in Sweden between January and February 2015.

Collecting life stories
Our discussion will focus on life stories—a story told by the interlocutor, about the interlocutor. The story is based on lived experience, a part of the interlocutor’s history (Johansson 1999, 7). Skott (2004, 39) suggests that anthropologists should use narrative theory to study individual stories as part of the
The co-creators of stories—descriptions of culture. The stories told by interlocutors can be used as verbal descriptions of the society wherein they have been lived, thus providing a narrative of a society other than which can be observed by the ethnographer. Life stories can for example provide one medium of lived experiences of Forced Migration and are therefore an important tool for many researchers in this field (Eastmond 2007). The importance of life stories is further elaborated on by Duna Kristmundsdottir (2006, 165) who suggests that collecting life stories always been part of the anthropological endeavor. Further, Hamersley and Atkinson (2007, 98) writes that spoken accounts—such as life stories—can be viewed as parts of the context that constructed them, and as such not only mirror the culture, but providing a piece of it to include in analysis. Malkki (1995) illustrates this in her work on Hutu refugees from Burundi, in how they created narratives based on their lived histories and their current situation.

When collecting life stories Chase argues that the researcher should invite the interlocutor to ‘import’ their stories. The interlocutor should be allowed to retell their story freely, with minor intervention by the researcher, leading to a real life story, not a report on the researcher’s questions (Chase 2003: 282). However, the researcher will still have some impact (Hamersley and Atkinson 2007, 101). The issue how a researcher affects the narrative being produced is problematic and has been addressed mainly since the 80is by a number of anthropologists (Eastmond 2007). Appadurai (1988) address it mentioning that researchers can by directing questions, or reading a story in a certain way, alter the meaning of a story. Further, Appadurai (1988, 17) suggests that it is a problem about voice, ‘who really speaks for whom?’ Chase’s suggestion of letting go of control in the setting of an interview is one way to tackle the issue about altering the story, however, it does not address the aspect of voice. Davies (2008, 106) suggests that when an interlocutor is allowed to tell their story freely it gives the researcher the opportunity to discover new leads to follow, which could be done by ‘usual’ anthropologic interview techniques such as semi–structured interviews. However, it is important to remember that not all interlocutors will simply tell their story, but instead use it as an opportunity to act their own agenda. This is a reason to why I propose using open–ended interviews in combination with more structured ones that allow posing direct questions. This is especially important when research is conducted among groups or individuals whose stories might be contested—as were the case with my interlocutors—stories might
Alf Arvidsson (1998: 25-26) advocates using a schematic approach to narratives where a story contains three different, not ordered parts which I read as Chronologic, Descriptive, and Triggering. Dividing a life story into these parts allows the structure of the story to be spelled out, and thus making the work of analyzing easier. I will provide some examples: A Chronologic sequence is when my interlocutors explained why they had to escape Syria, being hunted by the regime for political reasons, or for defecting from the military. Continuing with how they crossed the border to Turkey, and from there travelled to Greece. In Greece they got hold of fake documents with which they could travel to Sweden. It is a story with a clear order that follows the development in time. A Descriptive part is when the interlocutors explained in detail how they crossed the border between Turkey and Greece. How failure to cross the border resulted in a violent treatment by the Greek border guards. They were beaten and sent back to Turkey. Or how my interlocutors were arrested in Greece and held in a prisonlike building without beds or food for weeks as a punishment for being in the country illegally. This part focus on detail and is to be analyzed as a story in itself, before pulling the conclusions into the wider analysis. The Triggering part is a sequence that focus on a specific triggering moment, and a solution to it. For my interlocutors the triggering moment is the start of the civil war in Syria and the solution a possible residence permit in Sweden. This part provides the life story with momentum; it makes the researcher to point out the various moments that makes the story go forward, it also opens up a possible discussion around the concept of liminality1 (Turner 1966). A threshold being passed followed by a situation in flux, as for my interlocutors en route to Sweden from Syria, before again reaching stability in Sweden. An approach often used in relation to border crossings (e.g Andersson 2014, 120; Khosravi 2010a, 27; Inda 2007, 149).

The creation of a life story
Creating a story is a intersubjective social process, it is created in the interplay between teller and listener, and therefore each story is unique, being created by the combination of personalities, experiences, and behavior of the teller and the listener (Rodineliussen 2016). When we tell a story it is to convey a message, in order to do so someone must understand this message. In a
viewing not only the ‘extra–ordinary’ but also the ‘ordinary’ allows an understanding ‘beyond the ascribed status of being a refugee’, especially in a Forced Migration context—as is the case with my Interlocutors. Understanding interlocutors and their behavior includes more than the hardships they have endured. It is important that we as researchers are cautious about our role in creating stories, and of how we later represent them in text, in order not to harm or miss-represent anyone (Eastmond 2007).

The interlocutors can talk about things that matter to them and which they believe will affect their current situation—giving them agency within the interview. This perspective of the interlocutor can be placed in relation and contrast to other life stories, processes, and contexts within existing literature. And by so doing render visible the correlation, or lack of it, between how our interlocutors explain things and how we ourselves view them. In this interplay between the interlocutors story, our own perspective, and the perspectives of our colleagues I believe there is much to be found—such as illustrate how interlocutors chose between the ‘extra–ordinary’ and the ‘ordinary’ in their storytelling, other sources might provide the other angle.

The story being told must fit a specific context in order for the
Another replied like this:

“I have not changed or altered anything; I told my story the way that I remember it. Nothing more or less.”

Two different interlocutors, two different ways of thinking about how they told their story. Both have provided similar stories of hardships, war, and the need of fleeing their country of birth. These two accounts points out why a researcher must be vary about the agenda of interlocutors, and the power relations affecting them, which must be taken into account in order to construct a narrative of their stories that build on reality as it is, not as it is narrated. Further, stories can be part of creating a myth about a refugee destination. Following a discussion I started elsewhere (Rodineliussen 2016), I want to discuss the Swedish Dream as an example of this myth creating process. Refugees already in Sweden tell those back home about this new amazing country in order to assure those at home that their journey was worth all the trouble and that they now are safe. They tell things in a way that does not correspond with reality and thus make other individuals who start their travel to Sweden believe that the country they are going to will provide them with things that it actually will not. The Swedish Dream

story to be understood and accepted by the listener. Khosravi writes that refugees in Sweden must tell a specific kind of story, have a refugee kind of narrative, if they are to be believed by the Swedish migration board (Khosravi 2009, 2010b). Langellier (2010, 70) elaborates on this point mentioning that personal narratives of refugees often are reproducing ‘dominant relations of power’ by refugees not only being expected to harbor these stories but also to tell them. Creating a sort of discursive prison that restrains the refugees’ possibilities to define who they are in their current situation (Forman 2001, 44–5). Another example is Tictktin’s (2011) study in France, where refugees needed to play the ‘sick card’ to be eligible using a clause for sickness to apply for residence. In the case of my interlocutors they needed their story to fit the context of being a Syrian refugee. Some were very aware of this, others less.

“I told the officer at the Migration board about the torture and my political struggles in order to make my case stronger. I have not made anything up, but I decided to focus on the hardest parts.”

That is how one interlocutor responded when I posed this question to him after my fieldwork was over.
exemplifies a failed dream by those coming being disappointed of the reality meeting them, but since they do not want to disappoint those left behind they build upon the myth of the dream destination. In this way the myth is recreated and strengthened for each refugee arriving in Sweden. This phenomenon does not only apply to Sweden, but to many other destinations for refugees (e.g. Lindquist 2009). One way to research processes such as the Swedish Dream is by collecting life stories, these are often capable of inviting researchers to understand different aspects of, for example, migration that the researcher has not been able to observe in person (Eastmond 2007).

**Summing up the reason to rethink the way we listen**

In this paper I have used narrative theory, especially with focus on collecting life stories, to argue for the use of more open-ended interview techniques. This in order to allow more agency to the teller within the setting of an interview. To me, open-ended interviews are in pair with participant-observation because when we observe social practices we do not know what will come next, and this not knowing play part in sharpening our attentiveness to what we observe. I believe the same rationale goes for interviews. Further, I do not suggest that we should use open-ended methods instead of, lets say ‘semi-structured interviews’. I propose that they be used in combination, life stories can provide a lived context to the social processes being observed, and as such provide material for more structured interviews.

Stories does not only fit, explain, or abide to contexts, they create them as well. This is clear in the case of the Swedish Dream. The context created more or less forces refugees to abide to the myth about the dream destination in order not to disappoint their loved ones. This forcing effect of the myth can be viewed as a double bind\(^2\) (Bateson et. al 1956), meaning a situation where your every step will be wrong. You either expose the myth, this would then lead to your family and friends understanding that you have not got to the country you left for. Or you can coup with the myth, but by so doing allow for others to make a similar miss-informed decision.

Thus, improved awareness of the way stories are created, and the role of the researcher as co-creator is important because that self-awareness on behalf of the researchers allows for reflexivity within the process of interviewing. And this is vital for making ‘good’ and reflexive anthropology. Using open-ended interview methods in combination with ‘ordinary’ techniques is one way
to widen the scope of anthropological research methods.

Notes
1. Victor Turner develops the concept of liminality from Arnold van Gennep. Liminality is explained to be the second step in a rite of passage. The first step, separation, is when the individual is separated from a known environment. Step two, liminality, is a state of not knowing—where anything can happen. The final step is incorporation, when the individual once again gains a distinguished role in society. The concept of liminality has been used by scholars interested in rituals, border studies, and many other areas.
2. Double Bind means to describe a situation wherein there is a dilemma in communication. The individual who are put in the dilemma will however he or she act be acting wrongly due to the double binding effect of the dilemma based on conflicting messages that negates each other.

References Cited
Series.