

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 22 (2017)

Artikel: "Go-along" method in anthropological research with artists with
disabilities : an insight into the researchers' experiences

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007192>

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«GO-ALONG» METHOD IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITH ARTISTS WITH DISABILITIES

An Insight into the Researchers' Experiences

Text: Sonia Perego, Sophia Völksen

Keywords: *ethnographic research, methodology, go-along method, mental and physical disability, visual art*

Introduction

The article explores the methodological challenges encountered when translating anthropological research with artists living with physical and / or mental disabilities¹ into practice. The research² for this article was carried out in four artist studios for mentally and / or physically disadvantaged artists in Switzerland. These ateliers claim to provide professional assistance and artistic promotion for the artists. In order to attain a better understanding of the roles of these art studios, four spheres of interest have been identified: i) the functioning of the atelier, ii) the artworks and their circulation, iii) the participants' artistic career, and finally iii) the artists' self-conception. The research adopts an interactionist perspective, which assumes that art itself results from collective production, also referred to as «artification» (Heinich & Shapiro 2012)³. Hence, the key question reads

as follows: in what way can these studios be referred to as «live art worlds»⁴ (Becker 2010)? Participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt 2002; Silverman 2010) was the primary research method used in the early stage of research. However, after the first set of data analysis and reflection we realized that in order to pay appropriate respect to the informants in question we needed a specific method designed for this purpose. Thus, we selected and implemented the so-called «go-along» method (see Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2009). A key assumption was that this method is less rigid in nature than a conventional interview. As people with disabilities are characterized by limited communication skills, personal interaction during bodily movement, such as during walking, may represent a fruitful method for gathering relevant information. As for any other method, the application of the «go-along» method has its advantages as well as its restrictions. The objective of this article is to discuss the

¹ The research adopts this simplifying and collective term to encompass diverse types of disabilities, namely: physical disability (i.e. cerebral disorders), mental disability (i.e. trisomy, autism), and mental illness.

² Research was conducted under the guidance of Dr. Francis Loser (HETS Genève) and Dr. Barbara Waldis (HETS Valais-Wallis) together with the scientific assistants Sonia Perego (HETS Genève) and Sophia Völksen (HETS Valais-Wallis). Whereby the latter two are the authors of this article.

³ Heinich and Shapiro (2012) emphasize that art is referred to as such through means of social interactions and networks. In order to investigate under what circumstances art is produced – «quand y-a-t-il artification?» – Heinich and Shapiro are interested in the reflexivity of the artist, at what he or she does or did, and in the performative discourse which, according to the authors, allows them to produce art (270).

⁴ Becker's (1982) «Art Worlds»: for Becker, an art world is a collective activity engaging a group of persons whose activities are necessary to the production of very special works that this particular world (and possibly others) defines as art. They are like networks of people who cooperate. These worlds are governed by their own sets of conventions and modalities.

intertwined possibilities and characteristics of the method, specifically in the case of ethnographic research with people with disabilities.

Implementing the «go-along» method for research with people with disabilities

During research, it became apparent that the methodological approach had to be enhanced to better capture the individuals' point of view. Obviously, the production of art is not limited to the atelier itself but continues to a considerable extent outside of its doors. Furthermore, it has been found that within the research context with people with disabilities, a dialogue based on trust and mutual respect is of fundamental relevance. To allow for a fruitful engagement in research with people with disabilities Julien Gauthier et al. (2009: 80 ff) identify three conditions: First off, the first encounter has to be maintained in a familiar setting and timing should respect the interviewees' daily habits. Second, the researcher should adopt an attitude of appreciation for the individuals' unique character to allow for a positive consideration of the individual. Third, it is important to guaranty for spontaneous recount by using open questions for introduction. This may then allow, in a next step, to focus on more precise and closed questions (op. cit.: 181). The search of an appropriate methodological approach has led us to the «go-along» method. According to Kusenbach, the «go-along» method provides an informal, open, and undirected way of accompanying a person while following his or her daily routine (i.e. to work, shopping, or a leisure activity). It allows for the observation of on-site transcendent and reflexive aspects of the lived experience, thereby enabling the researcher to gain access to individual associations and memories (op. cit.: 455 ff). In more detail, this research employs the enhanced method of a «semi-structured go-along» (Carpiano 2009) that is «potentially more conversational in nature» (265). Thereby, the application of a checklist of questions / list of topics and the possibility to formulate *ad hoc* questions / comments assists in addressing key issues. This was found to be particularly useful as the artists would, in the majority of cases, require support through thematic guidance. In general, bodily movement may allow for the emergence and discussion of themes that might not otherwise have arisen during a conventional, interview setting.

In practical terms, the «go-alongs» were initiated and implemented by researchers who had previously conducted participant observation in the studios. Likewise, the first meetings and discussions with the informants on how to organise the go-along were held in the studios itself. This study comprises

of a total of six «go-alongs» focusing on three main topics of interest: (i) the artists' personality, (ii) his / her artistic career, and (iii) their source of inspiration. The artist was free to either identify simply the setting of the «going-along» or to explicitly name two to three places of interest for the «go-along».

The researchers' experiences

In presenting two of these «go-alongs» sessions we undertook during our research, we want to shed light on the challenges related to using the method with artists with disabilities.

Bent low over his desk in the art studio, Claus works in an utmost quiet and concentrated manner. Disrupting him would seem like an offense. Claus, in his fifties, is congenitally mentally disabled and depends on assisted living. As a member of a distinguished artist collective, he embraces the possibility of working independently in the art studio. His comic series touches on life in an institution and through his drawings; he processes his experiences and feelings. Still waiting for him to look up and to lower his pen, I prepare myself for how I would explain to him the idea of the go-along in a simple manner. Eventually we engage in a conversation. I realize though, that for Claus the free choice of where to go and what to visit during the go-along would be challenging for him. Repeatedly I need to direct the conversation back to our plan. While preparing for the go-along it was essential to guarantee flexible time management (i.e. no strict time limits). If at first Claus showed problems in selecting places of interest, during the ongoing discussion two places finally emerged as having primary importance for his artistic work. Interestingly, he chose his parents' home – despite their disapproval of his artistic work. His parents run a second-hand bookshop. Since childhood, Claus has distanced himself from this «book-empire» by pursuing his passion for cartoons and movies. Biographically moving onwards from his childhood to his artistic career as an adult we then also moved physically by next visiting a good friend of his, Sandra, a freelance artist. It was Sandra who had identified the need for Claus to be able to work in a professional art studio. For me as a researcher interested in his «world of art», the visit of his parents' shop and his former childhood bedroom particularly enhanced my understanding of his artistic career. His early self-drawn cartoons, which still hidden in a box under his bed, become a symbol for his struggle for (artistic) emancipation. During the conversation that follows, Claus articulates his passion for art by giving me several personal accounts. He would rip out pieces of his room's wallpaper in the shape of cats because he was so much longing for a pet. This experience would decades later become a source of inspiration for his first (professional) artistic project together

with his friend Sandra. In conclusion, for this particular go-along, routine interview techniques would probably not have allowed for such fruitful and enriching exchanges with the informant. During our go-along, Claus was full of enthusiasm, proudly discussing his personal understanding of art. In retrospect, informal conversation was one of the main gains generated through applying the «go-along» method. This created the possibility to boost Claus' reflexivity on his conception of art and thus enabled a very personal perspective. Thus, from this particular experience, it can be assumed that the above-described approach is effective in encouraging the individuals' self-confidence in articulating their own perspective.

The second researcher had similar, albeit different experiences with her «Go-along». For this «go-along», the researcher accompanied Fabrice, a 48-year-old artist who had been living in an institution for the mentally disabled for more than ten years. The workshop in which this artist practices is part of a foundation. The artists of this workshop are active in fields such as painting, drawing, engraving and photography. Focused on painting and drawing, Fabrice uses paints, watercolours, acrylic and wax crayons which give his work a «colourist» impression. He spends on average seven hours a day there, developing his artistic practice and acquiring technical skills. As a painter, his works are full of bright colours and abstract, sometimes geometrical shapes. Fabrice draws inspiration from his everyday life, especially from his relationship with the world, which is strongly influenced by life in the mountains.

Before asking Fabrice if he would be interested in contributing to our study by way of a meeting, I talked with the person in charge of the workshop to determine the appropriate setting and content for the meeting. Fabrice had expressed the wish to participate in the «go-along» by taking me with him to the mountains, to a place that he was particularly fond of. After much discussion, all three of us agreed to take a walk near the work place / workshop, since I personally was not familiar with the place where Fabrice wanted to take me and there was a risk of getting lost in the mountains. On the day of the «go-along», Fabrice took me to the banks of the Rhône, nature being an important component of his life. To establish a sense of trust, I began the interview with an informal discussion and gradually persuaded him to talk about the place where he was taking me, and the link it had with his artistic work.

During our walk, I quickly noticed that Fabrice is very sensitive to our environment. We are walking and talking as we progress, but I notice how difficult it is for him to concentrate on a single element, so I suggest we stop walking for a moment

to talk more quietly about his artistic itinerary. Fabrice tells me of one of his current projects and I try to get to the heart of the matter in order to understand / grasp his artwork in further detail. I understand that he is eager to answer me «well» and to highlight his pleasure in working at the art workshop. Confronted with Fabrice's limited ability to focus, and the bias of impression management, I choose nonetheless to pursue the interview while considering these two difficulties. To understand Fabrice's artistic journey, as well as his inspiration, I bounce questions focused mainly on his love of nature, the mountains, and his everyday, taking into account the environment in which we are presently walking. Fabrice appears to find it difficult to explain his feelings / perceptions of the moment as well as the motivations or questions that are at the base of his artistic work or to retrace his artistic itinerary. Given that his artwork is abstract, in order to see what parallels could be drawn between his work and the mountains I try to ask him about the forms of expression, the colours, and techniques he uses in his paintings. I also try to see / understand how the environment we are in interacts with his work and his artistic experience. Gradually, as he answers my questions, I see that Fabrice is beginning to feel tired, that he has a hard time focusing and expressing his own viewpoint and reasoning. I see that he wants to make a good impression and to give me «the right answer» but he is struggling to conceptualise his artistic work and to retrace it within a particular artistic itinerary. For my part, I notice that what little information given by Fabrice during our conversation (even regarding the environment surrounding us) reminds me of my own limitations as a researcher: am I not expecting from my exchanges with Fabrice that they correspond to what I wish to obtain through the use of «go-along»?

This experience with Fabrice led me to question my own position as a scientific researcher: am I exercising some form of symbolic violence? In trying to understand, to retrace the artistic journey and motivations of an artist with disabilities, am I introducing some form of asymmetry that reinforces the submission of an individual to what he may perceive as authority or norm – in this case in trying to understand his artistic journey and his source of inspiration through a stroll supposed to act as an opening for discussion? Putting this methodology into practice has led me to question myself on several levels relating to interviewing a disabled person and namely on the various points noted by Julien – Gauthier et al. (2009) – the importance of establishing a relationship based on trust, that can only take shape after a long immersion in the field, and the tendency of a person with an intellectual disability to show acquiescence and conformity, particularly in the context of an artistic activity where the representation of oneself is more evident. Despite the use of situational landmarks

and/or significant events in the life of the person being interviewed, the limited attention-span of the disabled person confirms the importance of elaborating a framework for the interview (place and time of the meeting, duration, introduction, formulation of statements, closed rather than open questions in the second part of the interview, etc.) and also of taking into account the limitations of this framework and involving the simultaneous use of alternative means. In the case of this «go-along», the over-stimulation and the demand on different organs of perception induced a clearly limited exchange between the interviewer and the interviewed and not the reverse. Finally, if the attitudes of the researcher and the methodological tools are essential elements to successfully carry out this type of interview, one must acknowledge the importance of the researcher's prior experience in meeting people with disabilities – a good knowledge of the intellectual deficiency is recommended (Julien-Gauthier et al. (2009). My meeting with Fabrice was extraordinarily enriching, and it allowed me to question not only the choice and methodological approach of the object and of the subject of our research, but also the position of the researcher with respect to his/her own practices, resulting in a greater reflexivity.

Concluding remarks

The two reports above recount very differently perceived research experiences and point towards the challenges we face when applying the «go-along» method in research with disabled people. However, the positive aspects of the method should not be overlooked. Indeed, a critical reflection on the method may be interesting for several reasons. As mentioned above, putting the «go-along» method into practice requires that we take into account a range of diverse elements when undertaking research with disabled people. Although this context requires a deep immersion in the field with the actors involved, it also requires a high level of reflexivity from the researcher in terms of methodology, theory, self-analysis, and so on. Not only should researchers have acquired some previous experience and some specific skills in interacting with disabled people as a means of better understanding this field, they should also take into account the various obstacles that are inherent to the «sensitive» context with which they are confronted. Once difficulties such as limited attention span, impression management, verbal expression, and so on, are put into perspective, researchers should also consider the institutional and societal frameworks in which all the actors are evolving.

Researchers should closely examine the means by which they collect information: is the data gathered using concepts and questions that are specific to the theoretical framework

of the art world? And what does this imply? The «go-along» methodology, as applied in our research, has shown some limitations in terms of our ambition to understand the inspiration and itinerary of the artist in referring us to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the «art worlds» and of the «artification», in trying to capture a verbal expression, a rational thought or any reference to artistic culture – be it practical, symbolic, organisational, discursive, etc. In the case of artists with disabilities, living or working inside institutions our theoretical framework limited the field reality. These limitations bring questions about the artworks and forms of expression of some of the artists (both men and women) that we met during this research. Their artistic practice doesn't necessarily follow a theoretical and conceptual reflection nor is it mirroring criteria that are specific to the art world or to the «cultural arts» (Dubuffet, 1949). Rather, they come to life in an instinctive, spontaneous manner. The challenge of truly grasping the disabled artists' perception and involvement in these workshops, – specifically in the case of art practices within disability-related institutions – can be overcome by considering the institutional framework in which they evolve: despite its emphasis on allowing the participants some autonomy, that autonomy remains limited since the artists not only subscribe to an institutional framework but also interact closely with the workshop's counsellors who are themselves not entirely detached from artistic norms or independent of them. And the situation is similar for the scientists who are interested in such issues. For all these reasons, conducting an interview with a disabled artist represents a major challenge that a methodological tool such as the «go-along» cannot tackle alone. Nonetheless it allowed us to notice the importance of each specific context, specialised institutions versus regular art centres, and to question some aspects of the art theory framework.

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