4.4. Gatekeepers and Situated Ethnographers

Alongside the biologists' practices of framing and situated enskillment, I too experienced similar processes on entering the field in Sweden. As part of my participant observation, I underwent a situated enskillment when accompanying the biologists during their fieldwork. My enskillment occurred on two levels; on the one hand, I learnt the biological practices and methods of fieldwork to understand how they are employed and to follow the biologists' thinking and practices. I also learnt how to participate in their fieldwork, which forms the basis for my methodological approach. However, there is an additional aspect to this enskillment. Just as the biologists must learn to navigate the field and work with the birds in this specific study – a process I call 'situated enskillment' because, as I have illustrated, it is determined by the location in which they work, and the epistemological and ontological challenges that come with it – I, too, had to develop my own data-collection practices. These practices needed to align with the environment, my epistemological approach, and the practices of the biologists.

For this, I prepared my fieldwork by attempting, through conversations, to understand what to expect and the methods of data collection and practices of documentation to apply. For instance, based on these insights, I knew that the weather conditions – the extreme cold – would be challenging and I brought tools to combat the low temperatures and snow, which I could carry with me all day and take out of my pocket with my gloves on. However, I also reflected on how my presence, and the presence of media, might influence the biologists' behaviour.

One of the most important tools I brought with me was a small field notebook and pencil that fit into my jacket pocket, along with a smartphone equipped with an extra power bank. With the phone in my pocket, I always had quick

access to a camera for photos and videos, and a voice recorder for spontaneous audio recordings. In this sense, I conducted a smartphone ethnography. I also brought a digital camera to take more focused photographs and make use of the zooming effect.

However, despite all these tools and preparations, I did not have a developed practice for dealing with the weather, moving through the field, observing the biologists, or attending to the birds and documenting my observations at the same time until that first day in the field. In this sense, during those first days of fieldwork, I found myself in the rather challenging situation of a double-bound enskillment: the biological fieldwork and my own ethnographic fieldwork. After only a few days I had developed a routine for data collection that I would refer to as a situated practice, as it responded to the conditions in the boreal forests and my research interest and, thus, my partial perspective.

While the biologists must first register their samples – the birds – I did not have to *catch* any biologists. However, I had to find out how to approach them, what information to receive from whom, and how to participate in their study in a productive way. In my case, unlike many others, access to the field was not a problem, given Michael's willingness to collaborate with researchers from other disciplines. In this sense, there were no 'gatekeepers' that I had to pass, and I was able to enter the field almost immediately. However, once I entered, I had to decide how to observe and collect data.

In the natural sciences, researchers are considered *neutral*. However, in qualitative research, the researcher is simultaneously considered an observer and the main instrument of data collection. Depending on how the researcher behaves as 'instrument for data collection', the observations that can be made and data that can be collected change.[41] My behaviour as the ethnographer can influence the roles and

41
Cf. Uwe Flick, *Qualitative Sozialforschung: Eine Einführung* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2017), 142.

tasks that the interlocutors assign me. In my case, when I was expected to train the novices during their situated enskillment, I had to be careful not to 'go native' and lose my distance to the field; moreover, it was an opportunity to understand the aspects new participants need to learn and the knowledge they may bring to the field.

As with any ethnographic study, I first had to develop a sense of my interlocutors and how they react to my presence, questions, and observations. Initially I spent much time observing and identifying their different characteristics. Thus, after a few days, I knew the best times to converse with them and ask questions, and when to simply observe. This discovery happened through implicit knowledge,[42] personal judgement of the field situation, and reading the personalities of the biologists. While I was able to make formalised observations by defining rules and following guidelines, I am also implicitly part of the research and cannot separate myself from it. As the biologists intra-actively become entangled with the birds and vice versa, I am also entangled with the biologists.

This became clear as Michael often pointed out particularly *nice* and complex datasheets and drawings in field notebooks (Figures 39–41). Throughout my participation in the research project, he adjusted his data-collection methods so that the raw data would be more aesthetically pleasing. For example, he paid greater attention to the selection of frames and settings of the video recordings, thus producing not only documentation of the birds' behaviours but also *nice* videos (Figure 42). Michael had met me as a designer before I underwent training to become an anthropologist, and, initially, he recognised me mainly as a designer. He assumed that I had a particular awareness of aesthetics, thus affirming a stereotypical perception of design. Consequently, my presence in the field – as with the biologists – must be acknowledged as shaped by specific training and a particular situatedness. It greatly in-

42
Polanyi and Sen, *The Tacit Dimension*.

fluences what I can observe, and my ethnographic account cannot be reflected independently from my person. In this sense, ethnographic methodology must be understood as a situated practice that considers all agencies that contribute to the research setting and, ultimately, knowledge production.

My research practice and data are the result of an intra-active exchange between myself and the biological *other*. While the scientific result is a positivist account, the field, as I render it, is socially constructed because I attend to the social, historical, local, and pragmatic factors that influence scientific knowledge production.[43] However, although scientific knowledge production goes beyond social constructivism, it is also the result of material engagement with actors and agencies, which I aim to reveal.

4.5. Conclusions

In this chapter, I have described the practices of preparation necessary for any process of data collection in the field. Although I began by outlining the living conditions of the biologists and myself during fieldwork and our daily preparations, my focus was to assess the role of situated enskillment. I aimed to draw attention to the role of peer learning in conducting evolutionary biological data collection in the field, as opposed to formalised training in universities. My goal was to emphasise that, while university education gives biologists access to the fieldwork in the first place by providing them with basic knowledge, this training is not sufficient, and enskillment in situ is always necessary. From this perspective, fieldwork is 'down to

43
Cf. Knorr-Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures;* Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life.*