Editorial
Methods in Contemporary Ethnology
Anna Kajander, Johanna Pohtinen & Inkeri Hakamies

For this issue of Ethnologia Fennica, we called for research and review articles that focus on the choices and use of different methods in ethnology and related disciplines. Although methods concern all research and are a fundamental part of every research article, we feel that there is still room for further reflection on the processes underpinning our methodological work. Recently, ethnographical methods focusing on sensory, affective and urban ethnography have generated much interest and discussion within Finnish ethnology, and these methods have also been well represented in the latest issues of *Ethnologia Fennica*. With the current issue, we wanted to encourage more dialogue on what other kinds of methods and ethnographical variations are being used, and why. We provided space for researchers to reflect on the choices, challenges and benefits of their chosen methods, as well as on the need to apply different methodological variations or even create new methods in their work. We were also interested in digital technologies, multidisciplinary research and ethical concerns related to the different methods.

Our contributors responded wholeheartedly, offering many nuanced reflections on methods of both producing and analysing research material. Indeed, the call was so successful that we decided to publish two issues under the same theme. The articles included in this first volume of "Methods in Contemporary Ethnology" introduce new innovative fieldwork methods and look at the uses of established methods and theories from new angles. We hope that the articles provide food for thought for all ethnologists as they ponder their own methodological choices.

In the first research article, **Juhana Venäläinen** explores on-site nature experiences in mire landscapes and their digital counterparts, photographs found on Instagram. Venäläinen has created a hybrid methodology that combines ethnographic fieldwork with computer vision analysis. The participants in the ethnographic senso-digital walks were asked to discuss their sensory nature experiences and use of digital tools to record and share their experiences

with others. The AI-based analysis focused on image clustering, using a dataset of more than 6000 Instagram images from the Patvinsuo mire. By combining such approaches, Venäläinen makes an important observation that instead of juxtaposing qualitative ethnographic and quantitative AI-based analysis, combining them can benefit both approaches. In the context of this article, the methodological experiment showed how digital mediations shape engagement with nature and also how ethnography reveals something about the intersection between algorithmic logic and cultural representations of nature.

In the second article, **Yonas Tesema** discusses the method of participant observation from the viewpoint of access. He has collected research material for his PhD thesis from a company in Ethiopia, which is, as Tesema points out, an ethnically divided society. He raises the question of a shared ethnic background as a possibility to build friendship and trust and eventually gain access to a company that does not necessarily welcome researchers. In his case, the shared ethnic background worked as a gateway to fieldwork, which in another case and for a person with another background may have been denied. Tesema's article also discusses how ethnic privilege can create both possibilities and ethical dilemmas. He likewise illustrates the importance of taking the relationship dynamics that are formed during fieldwork into consideration when writing the ethnography.

Caroline Reinhammar's article analyses how common sense is constructed and used in social media narratives about climate change denial. She has collected data from social media sites, focusing on narratives that combine the climate change warnings issued by the scientific community with the case of Galileo Galilei, the Inquisition, authoritarianism and the economy. In her methodological discussion, she suggests that to best capture and analyse the narratives, critical folkloristics and particularly Fredric Jameson's four-fold model for allegorical analysis are needed because they help reveal how the narratives are connected to cultural, historical, and political frameworks and help us understand their political influence.

In the final research article included in this issue, **Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed, Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju** and **Aale Luusua** look at the possibilities offered by playfulness and creativity through the application of cultural probes as a research method. Cultural probes, originally developed as a method in design anthropology, encourage creative ways of self-documentation by participants and can make it possible for them to conduct investigations without the researcher's presence. Different probes can be sent to research participants, and they may include playful activities like drawing and journalling. Häkkinen, Chajed, Ylipulli, Raju and Luusua introduce three case studies and show how this experimental method can provide

understanding in multidisciplinary and multicultural research settings and with topics that might otherwise be difficult to grasp when using more conventional methods, such as interviews. They also discuss how the method may work better in some social and cultural settings than others and emphasise the need to scrutinise the method critically and consider the epistemological understanding behind its use.

Creativity is also the focus of a commentary article by **Tytti Suominen,** who examines the creative thinking of work counsellors and its connections to methodological creativity in research. According to Suominen, everyday creativity is connected to imagination and flexible and spontaneous thinking. Creative thinking and the ability to find new solutions in different situations are needed in working life but also in methodological work in research. She also notes that an ethnological understanding of everyday life and its processes has something to offer to our understanding of the concept of creativity. Creativity is not just an individual or psychological process; it also involves historical, social and cultural elements. Especially the cultural aspects of creativity could be scrutinised more, which would be a task for ethnologists.

In addition to the articles, this issue also contains three conference reports. **Johanna Pohtinen** attended the Artefacta conference, held on 13–14 February 2025 in Helsinki. Artefacta is a conference for those involved with research on materiality and objects. Even though the programme covered multiple topics related to materiality, Pohtinen found they shared a common thread of sustainability and the environmental impact of objects.

The Ethnos Spring Seminar, held in Helsinki on the 28th of March 2025, focused on the theme of power in the partnerships between museums and ethnology. As recounted by **Helena Laukkoski**, the seminar offered presentations on the relationship between museums and ethnology, followed by a panel discussion focused on enhancing their collaboration. The ties between ethnologists and the museum field have strong roots, and as Laukkoski points out, the methods of creative co-creation are familiar to both. However, in practice the collaborative projects between museums and universities need thorough planning so that they will serve the needs of both organisations.

Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto and **Anna Kajander** participated in the Digital Research Data and Human Sciences (DRDHum) conference, which was held on 10–12 December 2024 in Joensuu. In the report, they discuss the need to develop methods that combine qualitative and digital/AI-based tools for gathering and analysing data. In the context of humanistically driven digital methods, it is important to discuss both the successes as well as the problems that may concern, for instance, the development, use, and ethics of the tools.

We dedicate this issue to our beloved and greatly missed colleague J**enni Rinne**. We thank **Päivi Leinonen, Eino Heikkilä** and **Maija Mäki** for composing a thoughtful eulogy for Jenni, reminding us of her incredible personality and her multiple roles in the field of ethnology.

We would also like to thank Maija Mäki and **Kirsi Sonck-Rautio** for leading *Ethnologia Fennica* during the past three years. **Inkeri Hakamies** and Anna Kajander will continue their work as Editors-in-Chief for the next three-year-period. Both this year's issues have been edited with the support of our Guest-Editor-in-Chief Johanna Pohtinen, whose insight and input throughout the process, starting from drafting the call for papers, has been invaluable.

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Cover photo: A sculpture depicting a platypus at the ANOHA – Children's World of the Jewish Museum in Berlin. Picture by Inkeri Hakamies, 2023.

OBITUARY

Jenni Rinne (1977–2025)

Our beloved colleague, associate professor, PhD Jenni Rinne, died on 5 February 2025 in a tragic traffic accident on her way to Suomussalmi, heading to her family cottage for a writing retreat with colleagues. She was only 47 years old, born in Oulu on 10 December 1977.

Jenni had a diverse and international career path in the field of ethnology. She graduated with a bachelor's degree from the University of Tartu, a master's degree from the University of Jyväskylä and a doctoral degree from the University of Södertörn. Her doctoral thesis, which was revised

in 2016, dealt with the Estonian Maausk movement and its practitioners' understandings of events in relation to the broader history and surrounding society. Furthermore, she analysed the affective and embodied experiences of being a Maausk practitioner from a phenomenological perspective. She developed the theoretical perspectives further in her later studies. After completing the thesis, Jenni worked as a university lecturer at the University of Helsinki and Turku and as a senior research fellow at the University of Oulu. She was an associate professor of ethnology at the University of Turku. The most recent research project she was working on, together with Tiina Suopajärvi, Kirsi Sonck-Rautio and Helena Ruotsala, dealt the relationship between ageing and nature – a research theme truly close to her heart.

Jenni was a skilled and dedicated ethnographer. We, Maija and Päivi, worked with Jenni on a research project that explored everyday routes and experiences of change in a new residential area in Turku from the perspective of sensory ethnography. Jenni's contribution was essential to the project already in the planning phase. Her expertise in affective experiences of the environment was central to the project's methodological and theoretical framework. She was always eager to familiarise herself with the research field, meet new people and make sharp observations. For example, with the above-mentioned research project she found an Airbnb apartment in the middle of our research area, where she stayed for several nights on her field trips. We also enjoyed a one-week writing residency in Tartu. Having studied and lived there, Jenni was a wonderful guide for exploring the city, and for her, the week included a nostalgic visit to the university's Department of Ethnology.

Jenni was a clever and dedicated writer. She enjoyed writing – also with colleagues. She had a sensitivity to recognising the different strengths of people, and she encouraged them to bring those strengths to their texts as well as to trust their own voice. Her latest editorial works included a recent special issue of *Ethnologia Fennica*, "Sensing the Urban" (2024), in which she was acting as a visiting editor-in-chief. She also developed the idea and worked as an editor for the article collection *Affektit ja tunteet kulttuurien tutkimuksessa* [Affects and emotions in cultural studies], published by Ethnos.

Jenni promoted an awareness of ethnological research while working for Ethnos, the Finnish Ethnological Association, first in other roles and later as the chairperson. Jenni understood that the Association's activities are based on cooperation and that the chairperson's most important task is therefore to get all the board members to work together. Jenni showed great leadership,

especially by encouraging and supporting everyone equally while maintaining a constructive working environment. Her strengths were empathy and the ability to remain focused on the goal.

Jenni was also a well-liked teacher and skilled at engaging with her students. She was able to offer a variety of literary tips and perspectives on different subjects. She was well informed about new research projects and knew scholars across academic boundaries. She also had a confident approach to planning and developing her teaching. In the collaborative meetings, she did not necessarily express her views first but instead listened to others and then shared her insightful opinion, which was always well-reasoned.

Supervising a doctoral thesis is a multi-step process, one that Jenni knew particularly well. Her handprint is visible in the work of many doctoral candidates in ethnology. She demonstrated her ability as a supervisor by being sensitive to the demand for guidance from her supervisees. Some wrote their theses quite independently and mainly need guidance regarding the topic and content. Others, though, needed more emotional support and hands-on guidance. Jenni was able to assess what supervisory method worked best for each person. Jenni's supervisory method was attentive in that she suggested and gave recommendations, but she did not place demands or undue pressure on the supervisee.

It is noteworthy that Jenni was able to fully concentrate on both her supervisory and association duties while simultaneously holding a teaching position at the university. It shows a great dedication to the advancement of the ethnological discipline and research as a whole. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that those who knew Jenni appreciated, in addition to her expertise, her warmth, open-mindedness and inquisitive mind. Those qualities made her not only a respected academic but also a great person to work with. In her work, Jenni was diligent and thorough. She approached challenging situations with calm confidence and instilled a sense of belief in her colleagues as well. In moments of doubt, her words come to mind: "We'll get this done." The ethnological community in Finland as well as a great many international friends and colleagues will sorely miss her.

Eino Heikkilä
Päivi Leinonen
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Algorithmic Landscapes of Finnish Nature
Exploring Mires through Computer Vision and Senso-Digital Walks

Abstract

This article examines how digital technologies and AI shape perceptions of Finnish mire landscapes, focusing on imagery and experiences of the Patvinsuo National Park. Employing a hybrid methodological approach, the study integrates senso-digital walks and computer vision analysis to explore the interplay between embodied on-site experiences of nature and their online digital counterparts. By drawing inspiration from sensory ethnography and various walking methods, senso-digital walks involve participants reflecting on their use of digital tools and the contrasts between physically experienced and digitally mediated environments. To complement the ethnographic fieldwork, a large set of Instagram images of Patvinsuo was scraped and clustered using machine learning techniques to create a visual taxonomy of the various ways in which Patvinsuo is represented in the digital sphere. The process of attempting to interpret the machine-generated clusters hints at how algorithms participate in reframing aesthetic sensibilities in the perception of the environment. By combining digital and sensory approaches, the study explores the complex interrelations between algorithms, human practices, and aesthetic values in shaping environmental perceptions and ethics.

Keywords: nature photography, environmental relations, digital aestheticization, social media, computer vision, ethnography, walking methods

Introduction: Into the Mire

"There's something… I don't know if a mire landscape just isn't… maybe it's a bit contradictory. It can look just like a field. And yet, personally, for me, a place like this is incredibly beautiful. This vastness here… In North Karelia, we don't usually have this kind of openness; everything is forested and dense. So this is a good contrast, seeing almost as far as the eye can reach. And then, of course, all the scents and colours present. Maybe I underestimate or undervalue my clients, thinking they wouldn't understand …" (P1, Wilderness guide)

For a wilderness guide well acquainted with the vast, flat expanses of Patvinsuo, the beauty of the mire lies not in dramatic scenery, but in its understated openness and sensory subtleties. Situated on the periphery of eastern Finland, Patvinsuo National Park's mire landscape provides a tranquil counterpoint to more visually striking, culturally canonised and popular destinations such as the nearby Koli National Park, whose steep hills and iconic lake views have captivated visitors for centuries.

For Patvinsuo, even the historical starting point is different, as mires have traditionally not been seen as objects of aesthetic admiration or as belonging to national cultural heritage, but rather as mythical and dreadful places to avoid (Kaukio 2023), or wastelands that need to be transformed and taken into productive use (Laurén, Kaukio & Latvala-Harvilahti 2023). Still, for the wilderness guide with whom we walked in the autumn of 2023, a man in his forties, it is not so much the mixed cultural connotations or the complex social histories of mires that make him doubtful. Instead, the guide explains that he hesitates to bring groups here, because he fears that they might fail to grasp the mire's aesthetic allure, as even some of his own family members have struggled to appreciate its modest beauty.

As the guide suggests, Patvinsuo's charm may not only reveal itself through repeated exposure and a gradually developing ability to appreciate the wide, horizon-spanning views; but also by sensing *beyond the visual*, paying attention to the mire's "intoxicating scents", to its particular ecology, and to the extended human and more-than-human histories that render the place unique and meaningful (see Berleant 2015; Bennett 2020). "People who looked at this 100 or even 1,000 years ago saw almost the same landscape" the guide contemplates, his tone expressing a great respect for this environment. Without proper knowledge and an aesthetic disposition, he worries that visitors might see the mire as "just a field", failing to recognise the fine-drawn diversity that could make it captivating, and leading to them never coming back again.

The vast and flat mire landscape of Patvinsuo National Park seems to resist the spectacularity often seen and sought in digital imagery of nature (Laurén, Seppä & Venäläinen 2025; see also Grebowicz 2014). Yet, like any other nature park in the world today, representations of ecologically valued places like Patvinsuo are being translated into digital data and rendered globally visible through online platforms (Carruth & Marzec 2014; Büscher 2016; Gabrys 2016), where images tagged with relevant place names or coded with location markers bring these remote environments into a wider audience's eyes (Figure 1). As human encounters with nature increasingly occur through screens, the *digital gaze* (Scribano & Lisdero 2019)—a way of perceiving the environment as being embodied and co-constructed by both humans and algorithms—takes on an influential role in shaping how we sense and feel nature landscapes. This article explores the interplay between sensory and digital encounters with Finnish mires, using both ethnographic walking methods and an experiment with AI-assisted clustering to probe how technology mediates our views of nature. More specifically, the study asks how digital technologies shape human perception of mire landscapes, how AI-based clustering methods categorise and "see" these landscapes, and what methodological and epistemological implications arise from combining computational and ethnographic approaches in environmental research.

Many national parks in Finland and elsewhere have their favourite "Instagrammable" spots and views, where most visitors would stop to take a photo

Figure 1. Patvinsuo National Park as depicted through the hashtag #patvinsuo in Instagram's "For you" view, 2 October 2024.

(Arts et al. 2021; Božić-Vrbančić 2025).[1] However, the mire landscape of Patvinsuo presents a distinct challenge in this regard. With the wide and open views and absence of striking focal points, the aesthetic valuation of mire environments relies on more contextual and fine-grained approaches (Laurén, Seppä & Venäläinen 2025; see also Hakala 1999; Carlson 2008). Still, it is precisely these seemingly empty landscapes—rather than just "pictures of pine branches or something" (P5, Visual artist)—that many visitors deeply appreciate. While our participants often found it difficult to verbalise the allure of these sights, conversation frequently emerged on the practicalities of photographing the landscape in a way that could adequately capture its essence and the *affective experience* (Wetherell 2012) it evokes.

Mires play an indispensable role as both ecological and cultural landscapes. As carbon sinks, they help mitigate climate change, and as wetland environments, they sustain unique biodiversity. However, mires are fragile ecosystems that have been threatened for decades by human activities such as ditching and peat extraction. Patvinsuo is one of the largest intact mires in the southern parts of Finland, which highlights its ecological importance.

Mires also occupy a distinctive place in Finnish culture. Historically, they have been liminal spaces, often associated with mysticism and danger in folklore (Laurén 2006, 98–108). In contemporary Finland, mires are increasingly valued for recreational activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and berry picking, as well as a growing number of sports and cultural activities (Kaukio 2022; Laurén & Piirainen 2022). Still, the most cherished feature of these environments appears to be their understated plainness (a quality often regarded as needing an attuned eye to fully appreciate), as well as their sense of "pristine nature" and "wilderness" (cf. Cronon 1995; Bajuk Sencar 2014; Klekot 2014), which are elements that are also used in marketing the area to prospective visitors.[2]

In mires, an important part of the sensory experiences is non-visual, and at times, non-*audio*visual, rendering it categorically impossible to fully convey in digital formats (Laurén, Seppä & Venäläinen 2025). Particularly, the distinct

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1   The most obvious example in the Finnish context is the already mentioned Koli National Park, also situated in North Karelia on the eastern flank of Finland, where the lake views as seen from the top of Ukko-Koli have been engrained into Finland's nation-building imagery in the early 20th century by prominent painters like Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937).

2   *"Patvinsuo National Park is a peaceful destination nestled in the heart of the wilderness"* ("Patvinsuon kansallispuisto on rauhaisa retkeilykohde erämaisen luonnon helmassa") is a description offered by *Luontoon.fi*, the information portal for Finnish national parks and other publicly managed hiking destinations (https://www.luontoon.fi/-/patvinsuo). The Finnish equivalent for "wilderness" is *erämaa* (noun) or *erämainen* (adjective) – words that in the etymological sense refer to a "distinct" or "separated" land.

smell of mires—described as changing with the seasons and with the weather—stood out during the walks as a kind of "keynote scent".[3] When shared online, however, this sensory richness often becomes flattened and only encompasses the visual dimension. Yet even the visual representation is filtered in multiple stages: by the physical properties of the camera's optics; through the opaque algorithmic processing within the phone's software; in the deliberate corrections and edits made by the photographer; through the file conversion and optimisation that occur when uploading the photo to a platform; and finally, through the algorithmic curation performed by the photo sharing platform (Gillespie 2014; Bucher 2017; Zylinska 2017; Taffel 2020; Beer 2022). This curation attempts to predict and cater for the preferences of different users, suggesting content likely to captivate them and encourage them to scroll through endless feeds of visual stimuli.

The article is structured as follows: The next section introduces deterritorialization as a theoretical lens for understanding digital representations of nature, linking it to previous research on digital media and sensory ethnography. The methodology section then outlines the hybrid approach, which combines senso-digital walks with AI-assisted image clustering. The two subsequent analysis sections present insights from the computational clustering process and the ethnographic fieldwork, illustrating how different modes of perception shape representations of mire landscapes. Finally, the concluding discussion contextualises the findings in relation to the broader methodological and epistemological implications of using AI in environmental ethnography and visual analysis.

Deterritorialized Representations of Nature

In vernacular parlance, the growing use of digital technology in nature often elicits a gut reaction where technologically mediated sensory experiences are seen as inferior to their first-hand and "authentic" counterparts, and where the overuse of smartphones and excessive photography is seen as contributing to an "information overload" (Eriksen 2016, 117–130), as well as to difficulties in disconnecting from the online sphere and a "fear of missing out" on potentially interesting experiences. However, the mobile media technologies

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3   In *The Tuning of the World* (1977), composer and soundscape scholar R. Murray Schafer defined "keynote sound" as a foundational analytical element in describing a soundscape. Keynote sounds refer to the constant, often-unconscious background sounds of a particular environment, which create the backdrop against which other sounds are heard and interpreted. Similarly, the scent of northern Labrador tea—a low shrub plant commonly found in Finnish mires—serves as an olfactory counterpart to Schafer's concept (cf. Bendix 2011), acting as a sensory backdrop that incessantly accompanies and shapes the experiences of being in these landscapes.

used in outdoor recreation today are not only an alternative to, but (also) an *augmentation* of the elementary human sensoria, providing enhanced knowledge about nature, inspiring people to spend more time outside, and improving the sense of security while hiking alone. Notably, the rise of AI-powered apps aimed at outdoor enthusiasts has been significant in recent years. As examples: In Finland, a mobile app developed in the University of Jyväskylä for detecting birdsong through machine learning techniques has gained a lot of attention and users (Muuttolintujen kevät 2024). During the later stages of our fieldwork in 2024, another app *Satokausikartta* ("Harvest season map") was launched, offering map visualisations of the statistical likelihood of finding berries and mushrooms. In photography, also the increasingly widespread use of drone imagery is transforming the ways in which we simultaneously sense the colourful richness and the ecological diversity of fragile natural environments. The aerial perspective unveils the "mosaic-like appearance" of mires (P4, Maintenance worker), and makes it possible to portray them in ways that resemble colourful abstract paintings (see e.g. Elonen 2024).

In our research within the DigiFREN research project,[4] we have explored how the affordances of mobile and online digital media intertwine with emerging ways of aestheticizing fragile natural environments, simultaneously influencing everyday practices and the ethics of outdoor recreation. Recognising that much of this transformation occurs not only on the trails but also within online spaces, we have extended our methodological approach beyond ethnographic walks and seated expert interviews to include media and digital ethnography (Przybylski 2021; Luhtakallio & Meriluoto 2022). For this article, I experimented with machine learning-based image clustering to analyse a large dataset (n=6,648) of Instagram images tagged with references to Patvinsuo. By interpreting these images through an algorithmic process, I aim to examine both the practical possibilities and epistemological limitations of AI-based clustering (see Carah, Angus & Burgess 2023), as well as the unexpectedly creative and sometimes uncanny associations that arise when algorithms interpret landscapes. While algorithms lack sensory perception, aesthetic education, or cultural understanding in a strict (anthropocentric) sense, their outputs nonetheless reveal patterns in how people frame and represent nature through photography.

The current historical moment where place-bound and embodied sensory experiences of nature are increasingly dispersed and disseminated through the global online digital sphere, can be understood through the notion of *deterritorialization* (Deleuze & Guattari 1987): the detachment of phenomena from their original physical and cultural contexts, which consequently enables their *reterritorialization* in new configurations, from the convivial online communities of nature lovers to the commodification of nature as a commensurable object within the profit-making logics of social media platforms. Exploring such processes invites us to examine how the local and contextual particularities of specific ecological environments and embodied multisensorial encounters with them (Aula 2021) are adapted into broader aesthetic categories (Ngai 2015) for representing nature online. By combining algorithmic image analysis with ethnographic walks, we can gain a deeper understanding of how the translation of personally experienced unique landscapes into boundlessly shareable digital commodities is reflected upon, and how this, in turn, informs the practices of social media photography.

To more broadly explore how digital technologies mediate sensory experiences of nature, this study employed senso-digital walks (Abram 2025) – a methodological approach inspired by sensory ethnography and the fertile legacies of walking methodologies (see Pink 2007; Ingold & Vergunst 2008; Pink 2015; Springgay & Truman 2018; Koskinen-Koivisto & Lehtovaara 2020; O'Neill & Roberts 2020; Järviluoma 2023; Vannini 2024). Participants were invited to join a research walk in Patvinsuo, as well as in the Viiankiaapa mire which was another of our field research sites for the project, while engaging in discussions about their sensory perceptions and their use of digital tools for recording and sharing these experiences. The research walks were crafted to capture the interplay of embodied, sensory, and digital engagements with the environment. While we had prepared a list of topics to discuss during the walks, the flow of conversation did not follow a strict thematic structure, but was more shaped by the material conditions of the hike: walking in a row on a narrow route, often on duckboards, and stopping spontaneously when something interesting stood out from the environment or in the discussion.

For the twelve senso-digital walks that we conducted in Patvinsuo and Viiankiaapa, we recruited a variety of participants from different backgrounds, where some were selected for actively posting on Instagram about these places, and others were invited because of their professional activities related to the mire (see Fieldwork materials). Each walk lasted approximately two to five hours, and we moved through the mire with the participants, engaging in sensory reflection while considering our digital encounters with these spaces. The walks typically had one participant leading the way and wearing a

small camera on a chest harness, and between one and three researchers. The video recordings of the walks serve to provide a visual trace that can be used afterwards to multisensorially contextualise and situate the topics discussed in the walking interviews (see Pink 2007). During the walks, we discussed various aspects of outdoor recreation practices, such as choices in capturing and sharing images, and the ways digital tools influenced their perception of the landscape, seeking insights into the digital gaze through which sensory experiences are currently being reframed.

As digital aestheticization transforms nature landscapes into a profusion of shareable images, this article seeks to understand the methodological and epistemological implications of this shift for contemporary ethnology and the (digital) humanities more broadly.[5] By blending senso-digital walks with computational analysis (cf. Vasileios, Luhtakallio & Meriluoto 2024), this dual approach offers a lens on the tensions between embodied experience and algorithmic interpretation, constructing a methodological framework that actively engages with, rather than simply observes, the digital mediation of landscapes.

An Algorithmic Gaze on the Patvinsuo Mire

To explore how the Patvinsuo National Park is visually represented in the online sphere and how algorithmic processes engage with these representations, Instagram photos tagged with *#patvinsuo*, *#patvinsuonkansallispuisto*, and *#patvinsuonationalpark* were collected using tools from the data mining platform Apify.com.[6] Metadata and photos from posts were systematically scraped and downloaded for further analysis. A total of 6,648 images were retrieved from 2,217 posts from August 2019 to August 2023. Further processing of the dataset was conducted using Orange, an open-source data mining platform developed at the University of Ljubljana (see Demšar et al. 2004; Dobesova 2024). With a user-friendly visual programming interface where various data processing tools ("widgets") can be dropped on a blank canvas

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5   For recent contributions on the prospects of digital research methods and digital humanities for ethnology, see e.g. Taavetti & Heimo 2022; Koskinen-Koivisto & Kajander 2024.

6   Ethical considerations were carefully addressed in the collection and use of social media imagery in this study. The dataset was compiled using the Apify scraping platform, which extracts publicly available Instagram posts without requiring authentication or accessing restricted content. As such, the collected images are considered publicly accessible and suitable for research use, aligning with ethical guidelines for studying digital media (e.g., franzke et al. 2020; McKee & Porter 2009; Sveningsson Elm 2008). Furthermore, the analysis focused on aggregated patterns rather than individual posts, and any personally identifiable elements, such as faces, were blurred to prevent unintended exposure and decontextualization. The inclusion of images as screenshots in the analysis is justified under academic fair use principles.

to create an analysis workflow, Orange makes machine learning approaches accessible to a less technically specialised user base, including many researchers in humanities and social sciences. Thus, engaging and experimenting with machine learning approaches can be integrated as part of a "nonlocal" ethnographic approach (Feldman 2011), without necessarily having to resort to a conventional yet sometimes problematic division of labour that delegates digital (big) data processing exclusively to data science specialists.

The computer-assisted analysis aimed at creating a visual taxonomy of how the Patvinsuo National Park is represented on Instagram. By visual taxonomy, I refer to a multi-level categorisation which describes the content of the social media imagery at different levels of abstraction, from broad overviews to clearly defined topics. The analysis procedure utilised Google's Inception v3 computer vision architecture (Szegedy et al. 2015) combined with the statistical method of hierarchical clustering, both of which are available in the Orange platform. In the analysis workflow, thumbnail-sized images are first uploaded to a server, which rapidly transforms them into numeric representations or *embeddings*, where each image is described by a vector of 2,048 numerical variables.

The structure of the image embeddings is determined inductively by the process through which the computer vision model has been trained, so it is generally not possible to give a straightforward interpretation of all or most variables. Instead, an individual variable can represent a highly complex combination of features that the model "sees" in the pictures. Embeddings capture features such as colour, texture and shapes, but since the Inception v3 model used in Orange is trained on the ImageNet dataset which emphasises object recognition (Denton et al. 2021), the model tends to produce embeddings that lean towards the identification of specific tangible objects. Inception v3 was selected as the embedding model because it is the most widely used option available through the Orange platform. Previous research has also examined potential biases within the ImageNet training dataset that it relies on (e.g. Luccioni & Rolnick 2023).

After embedding, hierarchical clustering is applied to bundle images based on their statistical similarity. Although the embedder algorithm is originally trained to identify images based on pre-given textual descriptions of the image content (labels), the process used in this experiment does not impose predefined categories. Instead, it highlights latent patterns of resemblance that emerge solely from the algorithm's interpretation of visual data.

In interpreting the results of hierarchical clustering, the work of the algorithm can be followed in the form of a binary tree, or a *dendrogram*. This tree diagram begins with the dataset split into two parts (thus "binary"), with each

part subsequently divided into two, and so forth. The divisions can be followed as far as desired, even down to the level of individual images. The resulting subsets are not of equal size, but instead reflect the statistical closeness of the images to each other based on their embeddings. For example, when splitting a cluster that I have identified and labelled as *wooden structures and bikes* (n=463), the division results in a larger subset of *wooden structures* (n=399) and a smaller subset of *bikes* (n=64). This reflects the algorithm's aim to maximise the internal coherence of each cluster and their distinguishability from one another.

To interpret the resulting clusters, I began with the broadest groupings, systematically following the splits in each branch towards finer distinctions and identifying common themes or patterns within each cluster. For every pair of divisions, I examined the images associated with the cluster and assigned a descriptive label based on an intuitive, culturally informed interpretation. When further splits no longer yielded meaningful distinctions, I stopped the process, ultimately identifying 32 labelled, interpretably and contextually relevant categories. In some branches of the binary tree, this meant stopping at the depth of the third division, while in others, the divisions could be followed up to the eighth level.

Clearly, it is a subjective assessment to decide if a difference between two computer-generated clusters is "meaningful" or not. The process of AI-assisted clustering—a method based on machine learning with neural network technologies and further supported by statistical mathematics—crosses disturbingly into the domain of cultural interpretations. While the human subjects (here, researchers) attempt to interpret the results by labelling the clusters, they effectively reverse engineer a part of the cognitive and aesthetic dispositions of the algorithm (Carah, Angus & Burgess 2023). Approaching and exceeding the boundaries of cultural comprehensibility on the way is not a shortcoming of the method, but precisely what makes it compelling for a digital ethnographer. In other words, there are aspects of mires that can be "seen" by humans, but which elude machine recognition. Conversely, there are distinctions that computer vision can identify, but which remain enigmatic or unnoticed by the human interpreters.

Figure 2 shows the hierarchical organisation of the final categories. At the highest level, images are divided into *non-landscapes* and *landscapes*, further branching revealing both broad themes and specific visual motifs. The *non-landscapes* category encompasses human-built environments and activities, including subcategories like *duckboards*, *bikes* and *wooden structures*, as well as *flora and fauna*, all capturing various natural and human-made elements with cultural or aesthetic framing. At further levels of separation, finer dis-

tinctions emerge, even pointing out particular classes of material objects such as *bridges*, *signposts* and *tents*. As expected, the clustering process highlights object-based groupings and performs well in identifying which images to include and exclude from such clusters.

The *landscapes* category primarily features views of water, forests, and generally open vistas. Subcategories such as *lake views*, *sandy shores* and *winter landscapes* reflect the variety of places within the Patvinsuo National Park, as well as the seasonal and weather-related variations in its appearance. Within the *open views* sub-branch of the *non-water landscapes* branch, the category of *mire landscapes* (n=772) stands out as the largest non-divisible category of the dataset. This cluster captures the flat and expansive terrains that are emblematic of this environment, emphasising the distinctive character of Finnish mires.
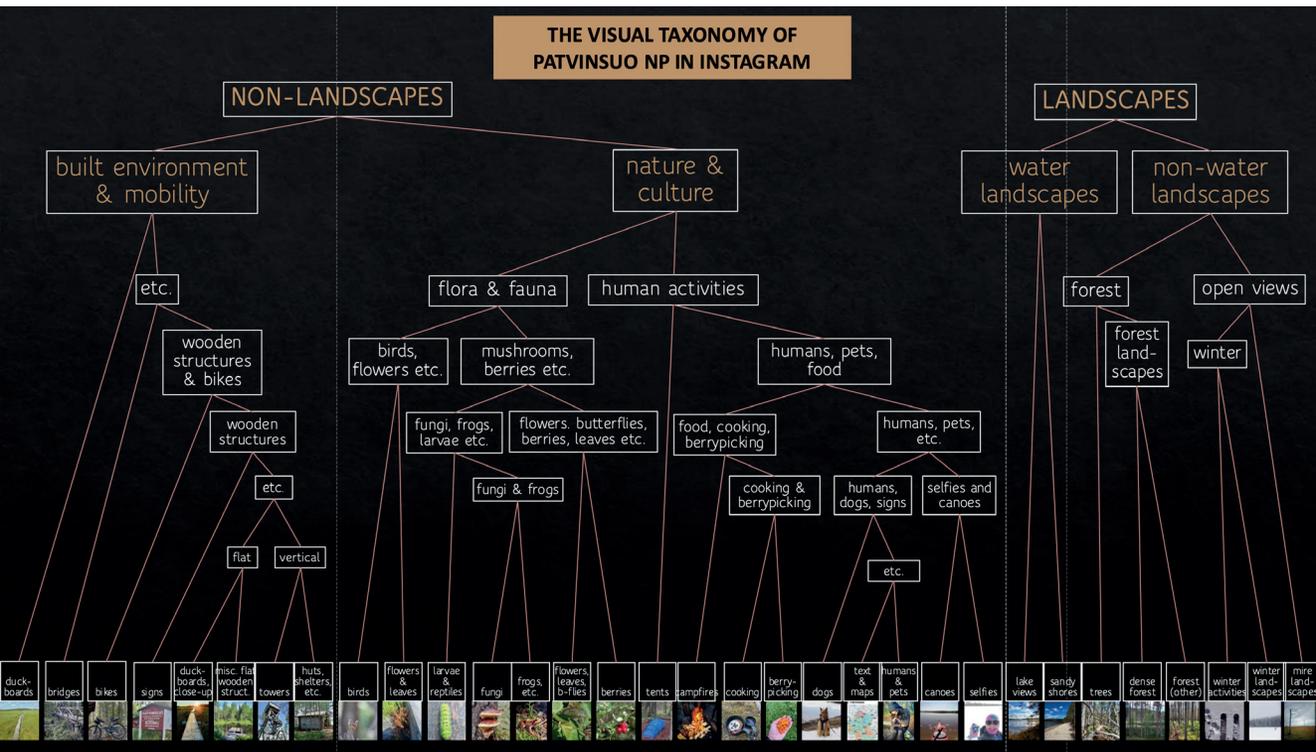

Figure 2. The visual taxonomy of the Patvinsuo National Park on Instagram illustrates the hierarchical organisation of image categories derived through AI-assisted clustering. Categories from left to right: duckboards; bridges; bicycles; signs; duckboards, close-up; misc. flat wooden structures; towers; huts, shelters, etc.; birds; flowers & leaves; larvae & reptiles; fungi; frogs, etc.; flowers, leaves & butterflies; berries; tents; campfires; cooking; berry picking; dogs; text & maps; humans & pets; canoes; selfies; lake views; sandy shores; trees; dense forest; forest (other); winter activities; winter landscapes; mire landscapes.

The categorisation process revealed interesting tendencies in how computer vision and algorithmic clustering engage with Finnish mire landscape imagery. First, some categories, particularly those related to human activities, emerged as intuitively clear and culturally recognisable. For example, the category of *cooking and berry picking* distinctly captures a well-recognised aspect of Finnish hiking and outdoors culture: the tradition of foraging berries—especially lingonberries, cranberries and cloudberries—alongside preparing food, grilling sausages over an open fire, and making coffee at campfire sites, often using portable stoves or traditional cutlery like the *kuksa* (an artisan wood-carved cup). The images within this category strongly resonate with shared cultural practices, closely aligning with insights from the ethnographic walks. This clarity highlights the algorithm's ability to connect culturally related images, even when their visual similarities are not immediately apparent. Despite the variation in colours, shapes, textures, perspectives and objects, the algorithm still succeeds in creating a coherent-looking compilation (Figure 3).

Besides producing coherent and intelligible reproductions of established cultural categories, the clustering occasionally yields unexpected results, particularly at higher levels of categorisation. For example, the category *humans, pets, etc.* (with "etc." in the label already hinting at a degree of perceived arbitrariness or imprecision) belongs to the broader *human activities* branch. Within *humans, pets, etc.*, we find an unexpected grouping of *selfies and canoes*. When following the division further, *selfies* (n=156) and *canoes* (n=85) are neatly identified as separate categories, yet the rationale for their bundling at the upper level of taxonomy remains unclear. Selfie images predominantly feature

Figure 3. A sample of photographs categorised in the *cooking and berry picking* cluster. Despite the visual dissimilarity of the images, the algorithm succeeds in creating an intuitively coherent compilation.

human faces, while canoe photos often lack visible humans, focusing instead on the canoe's bow and the surrounding lake (Figure 4). Interestingly, canoes are also positioned in an entirely different branch of the taxonomy than bicycles, another means of transportation, which fall under *built environment and mobility*. This juxtaposition of intuitively disconnected visual elements, along with the dispersal of intuitively similar categories across different branches in the taxonomy, raises questions about the reliability and the interpretive logic of the algorithm, highlighting both its capacity for coherent organisation of data and its occasional tendency towards arbitrary or inscrutable groupings. But whatever it does, and for whatever reason, the algorithm cannot properly "explain" itself (Ananny & Crawford 2018).

Broadly speaking, the algorithm tends to replicate enduring cultural dichotomies, such as the binary of "nature" and "culture" (Descola & Pálsson 1996, 2–9). The *non-landscapes* category, for instance, primarily captures human-made environments and activities, whereas the *landscapes* category focuses on untouched "wilderness". Within the *non-landscapes* branch, further distinctions—such as those between animate and inanimate elements—echo longstanding binaries so often critiqued in cultural theory. We might ask whether the algorithmic process inherently encodes such biases, or do these divisions originate more from the researcher's interpretative framework? While it is evident that hierarchical clustering, by design, produces binary and dichotomic divisions, it is the striking extent to which these divisions replicate enduring and deeply ingrained cultural binaries of Western thought (na-
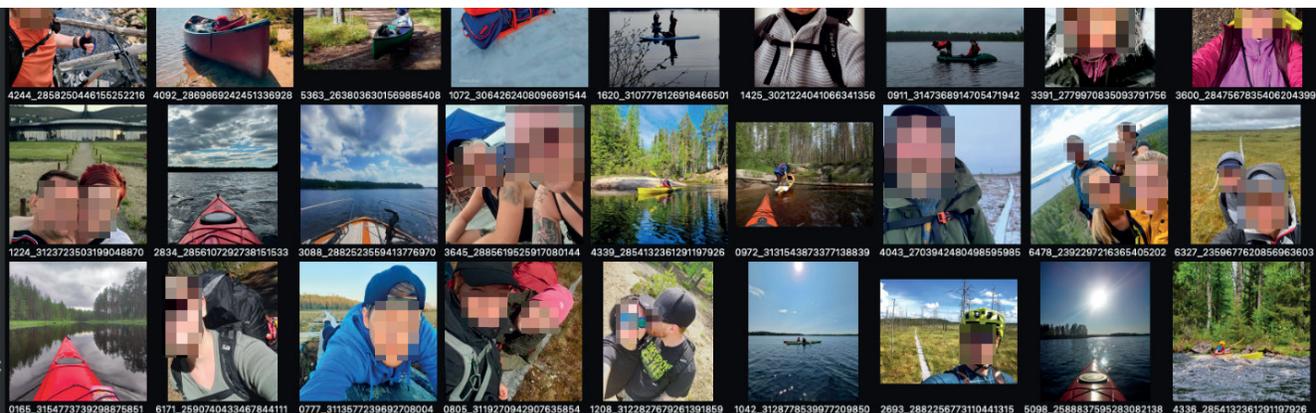
Figure 4. A sample of images categorised in the cluster of *selfies and canoes*. While the photos are scraped from publicly available posts, faces are blurred here to respect privacy and to protect the individuals in the images from unintended exposure.

ture/culture, human/non-human, etc.) which alerts us about the potentially conservative tendencies of AI systems of frequently reinforcing hegemonic patterns rather than challenging them (Campolo & Crawford 2020; Crawford & Paglen 2021).

Eventually, the analysis of landscape images reveals the interpretative limits of the algorithmic process. While the human interpreter's contextual knowledge aligns well with the practices and objects categorised within the *non-landscapes* cluster, the categorisation of the *landscapes* branch quickly loses interpretative coherence at finer levels of separation. For instance, the large set of *mire landscapes* (n=772) could not be meaningfully divided further, which implies that the features identified as similar or dissimilar by the computer vision embedder appear to diverge significantly from those that resonate with human sensory perception. This gap between algorithmic and human aesthetic sensibilities—and the latter also changing drastically in the context of the global environmental crises (Mikkonen 2022)— highlights the crucial role of human interpretation in contextualising AI-assisted analyses (Kitchin 2014), particularly when sensory and cultural nuances resist computational simplification.

Hiking with a Digital Lens

"I know there's this idea that you shouldn't always look at everything through a camera, and some people, even friends of mine, have said they're not taking any photos – they're just going to look at the landscape without the camera. But I haven't really noticed that for myself, because… I take a lot of macro photos, and you see details you often don't catch with the naked eye, like on a butterfly larva or a beetle. For me, it's wonderful that I can look at these beauties at home too [laughs], especially now in the digital camera era." (P2, Conservation specialist)

For many of our participants in the senso-digital walks, the notion of a *digital camera era* or even a *phone camera era* carries a generally positive connotation. The smartphone has largely replaced the need to carry a heavy DSLR outdoors, while allowing for an even more spontaneous capturing of moments spent in nature, either for sharing online or just keeping in one's archives (see Larsen 2013; Shanks & Svabo 2013). While it was recognised by the conservation specialist (P2) that the condition of "looking at everything through a camera" is a catchy cultural diagnosis, it is interesting that the people with whom we walked—who can all be described as genuine nature enthusiasts— had not seen this as problematic in their own practices nor in the uses of digital devices by other hikers. On the contrary, participants highlighted situations where photographic possibilities could be used to qualitatively augment

and temporally extend the embodied sensory experience. For the conservation specialist (P2), the ability to zoom in on fascinating insects allows one to see and capture otherwise invisible details of "these beauties". For the visual artist (P5), photographing the landscape with the mobile phone camera resembled the process of framing a view to paint being there on the spot (see also Järviluoma et al. 2023) – something she has done to produce more than a hundred mire paintings already.

> KL: "You were taking pictures just now—do you often take photos when you come here?"
>
> P5: "Yes, I do."
>
> KL: "Do you always bring a camera?"
>
> P5: "Yes, always. Today, I even had a bit of a panic because I usually bring my painting supplies too, but I left them at home. And you know, there's nowhere around here to get art supplies, not even in Lieksa. I was thinking, how could I leave them behind? It's like I walk around seeing these scenes as paintings. I'm already composing and planning them. Sometimes it's even frustrating, because I can't just be here – I'm always thinking, 'That would make a good painting' and 'This would be nice.'"

The visual artist, now in her seventies, has a longstanding, affectionate relationship with Patvinsuo. Originally from southern Finland, she had never visited a mire before moving to North Karelia, and held only negative, almost fearful impressions of these environments. Her first trip to Patvinsuo—a seemingly unpleasant journey with a lot of mosquitoes and an unexpected encounter with an ant hill—became a transformative experience. At that moment, as she looked across the open mire, a curtain seemed to lift, she recounts, and the mire revealed itself to her in a new light. Fifty years and over a hundred paintings later, this once "stupid place" has become a central theme in her life's work.

While discussing digital photography, the artist reflects on how her painting style has evolved into a more abstract direction, portraying not so much what is visible to the eye, but rather her mental images of the place that has been so important to her for decades. Even though she still sees sceneries "as paintings" and captures them with the phone camera, her artistic practice has already taken another path; one not constrained by any kind of optical devices, whether it be the human eye or the camera's lens. "I don't think there are many people in Finland who have been 'married' to one mire as long as I have", she affirms, lifting her mobile phone every now and then to take a photo of a landscape that she has seen countless times, and possibly painted multiple times.

Figure 5. The visual artist (P5) lifts her phone to take a photo during a walking interview.

As discussed in the previous section, the algorithmic analysis of Instagram imagery from Patvinsuo effectively highlights culturally discernible objects and categorises them relatively well, but struggles to distinguish open landscape views in ways that are intuitively interpretable. The clustering algorithm approaches flat landscapes without contextual knowledge or the kinds of aesthetic sensibilities that develop through repetition or long-standing cultural "belonging". In contrast, the walking participants' reflections revealed a more-than-visual relationship with the landscape, where the decision to capture an image might often be inflicted by a momentary, fleeting association.

> "I don't have a fixed idea, like 'I want to photograph this particular spot.' It's more about the moment, the atmosphere, you know? There's so much photographic material already because we often share photos collectively. So even if I didn't take a picture of something spectacular, I know someone else did. There's more than enough material, really." (P1)

The wilderness guide (P1) above refers to the abundance and inflation of beautiful photographs of beautiful places in digital contexts. For him, a good reason to take a photo would not be the "spectacularity" of the view as such, but more a particular moment and atmosphere that makes it personally meaningful. A similar sentiment comes from the maintenance worker (P4), a man in his forties who works as a subcontractor renewing the duckboards on the trails. As mire landscapes are "pretty much his everyday view", something special like a "really nice morning mist" is needed for him to share a photo on Instagram. On the other hand, the maintenance worker enjoys browsing through other people's feeds of photos from Patvinsuo, which he finds "captivating". Finding such content is easy, he notes with a laugh: "If

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you start following anything related to Patvinsuo or Tiilikka [Tiilikkajärvi National Park], pretty soon you're flooded with photos." (P4)

Colour and light—shaped by the season, the weather and the time of the day—play essential roles in framing how mire landscapes like Patvinsuo are perceived and represented, both in the ethnographic accounts (see Edensor 2017) and in the digital context. In algorithmic clustering, colour emerges as a powerful feature in the way images are sorted, especially in categories such as winter landscapes and sandy shores. This reliance on colour-based sorting simplifies the landscape into chromatic themes, prioritising abstract visual elements rather than capturing the sensory subtleties often emphasised by the participants. For instance, while the algorithm easily identifies broad patterns like the whiteness of snow or the dark green needles of coniferous trees, it falters when faced with the more intricate nuances of Patvinsuo's iconic yellow-red hues, especially during *ruska* (the autumn foliage period). As most of our walks took place in autumn, discussions often centred around the timing of *ruska*—wondering whether it had already reached its peak or might become even more vibrant in a few days.

One of our participants, P3, a woman in her sixties, is an enthusiastic hiker and a regular Instagram user who shares her trips both as *stories* on the go and as *feed posts* afterwards. She also mentions to us that she follows social media very actively to discover new hiking locations. "I've found nearly all my hiking spots through social media", she tells, and continues: "Yeah, that's mainly how I use social media. If I come across a new place name, I check the map to see where it is and what kind of route it's on." Although she discovered her interest in outdoor activities later in life, she now dedicates all of her vacations to hiking. When we met her in Patvinsuo on a Monday morning in late September, she had recently returned from a trip to Lapland, but had still found the time to visit Patvinsuo already two days before our planned research walk. Visiting Patvinsuo very regularly, she reflected on the gradual changes in the autumn colours with experience:

> P3: "When I was there last Saturday, the colours on the mire were quite muted. I don't know if they'll get more intense later, but…"
> JV: "So, not that red hue yet?"
> P3: "No, not yet. You can see a bit of it here, but not the kind of colour I usually come to see."

After just twenty minutes of walking, however, she concludes that the colours had indeed changed over the past two days, or were at least approaching their peak. When we walk on the duckboards from a small forest patch

Figure 6. The view which P3 tells she could "look at forever". Straightened and cropped screenshot from the body camera footage.

into the open mire again, she stops, looks around, and reflects: "These colours are starting to show now. They're stunning. And the duckboards that disappear into the distance... wow. I could look at this forever." (P3) The passing of time—twenty minutes, two days, or the consecutive years of visiting the place during the autumn—is not experienced as linear (Lapina 2023); rather, it unfolds as *sensed time* in the embodied and affective multisensorial encounters.

In the footage from the body-worn camera (Olympus Tough TG-Tracker; Figure 6), the colours *do* appear somewhat muted, as the hiker initially anticipated. The red hues around the moss hummocks are visible, but very subtle. However, something still seems to have changed from her last visit, and she reflects: "Colours of the mire are so beautiful now. I don't know if they'll get even more vibrant, but it's wonderful." (P3) In addition to the nuanced mélange of greens, yellows and reds, we can see the old and weathered duckboard trail stretching to the horizon and narrowing down to the width of a single plank. For many visitors, these planks are a defining feature of mire photographs, instantly situating the image within its ecological environment. As the maintenance worker (P4) explained, wooden duckboards are valued by many visitors who would never wish to see them being replaced by gravel, or metal grates, as has been done in some of the most visited national parks.

I asked the hiking enthusiast (P3) about how she feels about the reproduction of the mire colours in photographs and whether she edits her images

afterwards to enhance their depth. "It depends" she replied, and explained that while she does not do any editing, she actually chooses her phone based on the quality of camera. As a particularly avid mobile photographer, she keeps her files meticulously organised by deleting poor shots immediately and regularly reviewing her cloud-based photo collections.

Some participants noted the need to enhance colours to make their photos feel even more aligned with their first-hand experiences. In another of our field sites, the Viiankiaapa mire reserve in Central Lapland, a mother of a family walking with us—a hiker and journalist in her forties—reflected on the delicate balance between adjusting colours to bring the photos alive and closer to what she saw in person, while avoiding overediting:

> JV: "You mentioned that sometimes you post on social media after your hikes. What kind of practices do you have for selecting the photos, and do you edit them in any way?"
>
> V5: "A little bit, yes. I might tweak them—maybe enhance the colours, add some contrast, things like that. Just small, minor adjustments."
>
> JV: "Like increasing the saturation?"
>
> V5: "A little, yes, just a bit. But even then, I try to be modest, not overdo it. Sometimes, though, the photos can look so bland that I have to adjust them a bit—otherwise, they don't look like anything. For example, my mom will just post something, and then I'll look at it on Facebook and think, 'No, that doesn't look like anything.' It doesn't even look like it did in real life; it just looks worse. So I don't want to overedit and make something unreal, but at the same time, if you don't edit them at all, they might not look anything like they did in person. They can end up looking so bad that you just think, 'This doesn't look like anything.'"
>
> JV: "So too little editing can also make it feel unreal?"
>
> V5: "Unreal, exactly. Because it doesn't…"
>
> JV: "…but if you go too far…"
>
> V5: "…yeah, then it's too much. So yes, I do some editing.

This "small tweaking" of the colour space reflects an attempt to bridge the gap between the sensory experience of being in the mire and the expectations of a digital audience accustomed to vibrant, high-contrast images. Mobile phone photographers of nature—including our participants, but also ourselves as researchers engaging with digital media during the walks— try to navigate a delicate balance: enhancing colours enough to capture the landscape's essence while avoiding distortion that feels artificial or excessive. It is also likely that mobile phones automatically adjust colour balance, saturation, and contrast to align with specific aesthetic preferences; for ex-

Figure 7. Colours of Patvinsuo as captured and aestheticized by two of the project's researchers as part of fieldwork materials. Left: A foggy morning (9:42), photographed on 4 October 2024 with Sony A7 III by Juhana Venäläinen. Right: A sunny afternoon (15:26), photographed on 22 September 2023 with Samsung Galaxy Z Flip3 by Kirsi Laurén.

ample, enhancing vibrancy to capture the viewer's attention when scrolling through a social media feed (see Figure 7).

The senso-digital walks hint at how digital tools mediate the ways in which landscapes are seen, experienced, and shared. From subtle colour enhancements to capturing fleeting atmospheres, digital photography becomes a balancing act between personal sensory memories, the aesthetic expectations of imagined online audiences, and the negotiated notions of authenticity. Rather than diminishing their connection to the environment, participants such as the hiking enthusiast (P3) and hiker/journalist (V5) demonstrate how digital mediation can amplify attentiveness to detail, invite playful experimentation, and deepen appreciation for these unique landscapes. Ordinary mobile photography becomes an extension of the hike and elicits a creative dialogue between the embodied experience, the surrounding sensory environment, and the available digital tools and media.

Towards Aesth/ethics of Digitally Mediated Nature
This article explored two complementary methods for examining the digitally mediated and deterritorialized representations of nature, focusing on Finnish mire landscapes, particularly in the Patvinsuo National Park. First, AI-assisted clustering of Instagram images illuminated how the algorithmic processes

interpret similarities and dissimilarities in nature photographs. Second, the senso-digital walks conducted in Patvinsuo and Viiankiaapa with various hikers delved into the diverse, aesthetically and ethically nuanced practices through which on-site and online nature experiences are intertwined.

The AI-based clustering illuminated the recurring visual patterns and culturally recognisable themes circulating widely in social media imagery of nature and outdoor recreation. Resulting categories such as *duckboards*, *lake views*, and *cooking and berry picking* effortlessly aligned with shared aesthetic conventions of Finnish hiking culture. The clustering experiment also revealed how the algorithm's reliance on visual features like colour, shape, and texture prioritises certain aspects of the landscape, while marginalising others. As the difficulties in meaningfully subdividing the *mire landscapes* cluster demonstrated, the algorithm often struggled to distinguish the kinds of sensory nuances that were often emphasised and deeply reflected in the on-site ethnographic accounts. This reflects the algorithm's reliance on object detection, whereas the human participants emphasised the subtle perceived changes of colours and non-visual sensory aspects such as smells.

The senso-digital walks offered a counterpoint to the detached, abstract approach of the algorithmic analysis, foregrounding the situated and affective dimensions of encountering the mire. Participants described their experiences as being shaped by ephemeral atmospheres, shifting weather conditions, and sensory details that often elude digital representation. For some, photography served as a way to heighten attentiveness to these details, while for others, it became a tool for creative engagement and personal remembrance. These reflections challenge the vernacular assumption that mobile photography acts merely as a second-order substitute for direct sensory experience, instead positioning it as a mediator that can enrich *and* complicate our relationship with nature and its ecological fragility.

Juxtaposing ethnographic and computational approaches can be thought of as a non-reductive way of exploring the productive tensions and the complementarities between them. AI-based clustering, for instance, excels in scalability and efficiency, enabling the analysis of thousands of images in ways that would be impractical through manual ethnographic methods. However, its abstraction and reliance on pre-trained models flatten the complexity of sensory and cultural experiences, reducing the big data of flat mire landscapes to *flat data* stripped of its original context but still being permeated by the dominant societal values and power structures (e.g. boyd & Crawford 2012; Berry 2014; Beaulieu & Leonelli 2020; Klein 2020). Ethnographic methods, in contrast offer richness and nuance, but are inherently limited in scale. Following Karen Barad's notion of *diffractive reading* (see Geerts & van der Tuin

2016), we might imagine an ethnography-informed reading of the AI-based clustering alongside an AI-informed reading of the ethnographic insights into digital aestheticization. Together, these two perspectives could help to make more sense of how online, digital, and algorithmic mediations shape outdoor recreation and engagements with fragile nature environments. Optimistically, such a juxtaposition might even have the potential to push epistemological boundaries, fostering "respectful engagements with different disciplinary practices" (Barad 2007, 93).

Rather than just a technically effective method for image analysis, AI-based clustering can be understood as an uncanny yet productive methodological experiment that reveals insights into how visual and cultural representations of nature intersect with algorithmic logic. Instead of foregrounding human sensory abilities in contrast to algorithmic processes, it is important to interrogate how these systems of perception together mediate and co-construct our understanding of natural environments (Tiainen 2023), particularly in ecologically vulnerable sites where representing nature is inherently a political gesture. Sensory experience is never simply natural, but is always and already multiply mediated, whether through cultural practices, technological frameworks, or both (Kember & Zylinska 2012). As algorithmic systems increasingly shape our everyday engagements (Striphas 2015; Bucher 2017), exploring their logics becomes crucial to understanding how we perceive and value nature landscapes (Zylinska 2023).

The senso-digital walks similarly revealed the complex and mediated nature of sensory experience. Participants often struggled to articulate what made a particular moment or view significant, describing their responses in terms of fleeting feelings or spontaneous impulses. These moments of affective resonance (Mühlhoff 2019; Massumi 1995), shaped by both cultural knowledge and individual perception, highlight the limits of any analytical approach—whether ethnographic or algorithmic—that seeks to fully capture the richness of human-environment relations. However, these moments also stress the value of methodologies that embrace ambiguity and open-ended inquiry, allowing space for multiple, overlapping interpretations.

As digital and algorithmic technologies continue to transform how we perceive and value the world around us, researchers have an opportunity and a responsibility to critically examine these processes, not only to understand their implications, but also to imagine alternative ways of seeing, sensing, and representing nature. In doing so, we can move towards a more nuanced and reflexive aesthetics of digitally mediated landscapes – one that acknowledges the inevitable tensions between human and more-than-human perspectives, while remaining open to the unexpected possibilities they generate.

AUTHOR

Juhana Venäläinen is Associate Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu. His research engages e.g. with cultural analysis of digital media, sensory ethnography, economic transformation, and commons theory. Venäläinen currently leads the University of Eastern Finland's research team in the CHANSE-funded project "DigiFREN" (Digital Aestheticization of Fragile Environments) as well as another research project on post-ownership imaginaries. His earlier work has addressed topics such as changing cultures of work, everyday economic moralities, and urban sensory memories.

SOURCES

Fieldwork Material

Senso-digital walks in the Patvinsuo National Park
P1: 21 August 2023. Wilderness guide, b. 1975. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén, Tiina Seppä, and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration approx. 5 hours.
P2: 15 September 2023. Biologist, b. 1971. Interviewers: Kirsi Laurén and Tiina Seppä. Duration approx. 2.5 hours.
P3: 25 September 2023. Hiking enthusiast, b. 1961. Interviewers: Juhana Venäläinen and Sanni-Maaria Puustinen. Duration approx. 2.5 hours.
P4: 25 September 2023. Maintenance worker, b. 1981. Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Kirsi Laurén. Duration 1 hour 15 minutes.
P5: 22 September 2023. Visual artist, b. 1944. Interviewer: Kirsi Laurén. Duration approx. 3 hours.

Senso-digital walks in the Viiankiaapa Mire Reserve
V5: 10 September 2023. Joint interview with, hiker/journalist, b. 1978, and hiker, b. 1974 (accompanied by a child whose birth year is unknown). Interviewers: Tiina Seppä and Juhana Venäläinen. Duration approx. 2.5 hours.

Instagram photos
6,648 photos from 2,217 posts with hashtags #patvinsuo, #patvinsuonkansallispuisto or #patvinsuonationalpark. Collected on 11 August 2023.

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Yonas Tesema

Ethnicity as an Opportunity
Fieldwork Access and Methodological Practices in an Organizational Setting

Abstract

This research examines the challenges of gaining access to participant observation in two foreign factories pseudonymously named Blue Apparel Company (BAC) and Green Garment Company (GGC) located in Bole Lemi Industrial Park (BLIP) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Accessing foreign manufacturing firms that have employed thousands of local workforces is difficult because they do not want observers to know their "mysteries of the abode of production". Establishing personal connections and friendships is thus crucial in gaining access, particularly in settings where multiple approvals are required for fieldwork. In this piece, I will explore how my ethnicity turned a barrier into an opportunity, allowing me to gain access to BAC. I will discuss how the match between my ethnic background and the person who manages a foreign factory at BAC helped me get data for my PhD thesis, aligning the adage "birds of a feather flock together" and how a lack of co-ethnic connection hindered me from accessing GGC.

Keywords: ethnicity, fieldwork access, participant observer, organization, Ethiopia

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Introduction

This paper examines how I gained access to the factory floors of Blue Apparel Company (BAC) and Green Garment Company (GGC) in the Bole Lemi Industrial Park (BLIP) in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in order to collect data[1] for my PhD thesis (Tesema 2024a). BLIP is the first industrial park in the country designed for export-oriented garment manufacturing industries. It is a government enterprise managed by an appointed general manager overseeing all its factories. I conducted extensive fieldwork in and around BLIP for a year between 2021 and 2022, investigating the government's attempt to industrialize the country. Emulating the East Asian developmental state model, the Ethiopian government assumed structural transformation and rapid industrial expansion by lobbying foreign labor-intensive manufacturing companies and establishing industrial parks (UNIDO 2018). The Ethiopian government emphasized the importance of establishing industrial parks for large-scale manufacturing industries to accelerate economic growth and create job opportunities for its growing number of unemployed youths (Tesema 2024a). The past decade has thus seen the expansion of export-oriented, labor-intensive manufacturing industries in Ethiopia due to several foreign companies interested in searching for "cheap labor" for their labor-intensive industries[2] (Tesema 2024b; Whitfield et al. 2020). The industrial parks become the space where the interests of foreign companies who relocated their plants to make more profits and the young labor migrants from rural areas who moved to the city for a better life collide (Tesema 2024b). The dissertation sought to explore the everyday work lives of these labor migrant factory workers in two foreign factories pseudonymously named Blue Apparel Company (BAC) and Green Garment Company (GGC[3]) in BLIP.

The primary goal of accessing the factories was to explore the labor regimes, production relations and daily work routines on the shopfloors within the industrial park. Workers in this industrial labor force often report experiencing poor working conditions, such as exploitation, job insecurity, arbitrary layoffs, mandatory overtime and the challenge of adapting to a new industrial discipline and work ethic. To thoroughly examine the dynamics between foreign employers and local workers on the shopfloors, it was essential for an anthropologist to access the factory floors and observe the work rhythms on site. However, accessing the factories and getting data for the thesis would

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1 Ethical clearance for the study has been obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.
2 At least until the recent political instability and the outbreak of the war in 2020, Ethiopia attracted dozens of foreign companies to invest in its industrial parks.
3 BAC and GGC are foreign companies that relocated from Asia to BLIP and employed thousands of local workers.

Figure 1: Partial inside view of the BLIP. Photo: Yonas Tesema.

not have been possible without my ethnicity and the country's recent political turmoil, which begs the importance of sharing socio-cultural identity with the factory gatekeeper as a gateway in fieldwork access. As such, this paper explores the process of accessing factory floors in two foreign factories, especially how my ethnicity turned the accessing barrier into an opportunity at BAC, how being a co-ethnic with the human resource (HR) manager at BAC helped me build trust and how the lack of such connection and intimacy hindered me from accessing data at GGC. While the PhD thesis was based on participant observation and interviews, this article is mainly based on my own reflections on the fieldwork.

This article presents two main contributions: First, the article offers impetus for scholars to critically examine potential opportunities and challenges that may arise during the initial stages of data collection in general and specifically in ethnically divided societies, considering the advantages and disadvantages of ethnicity in building trust and cooperation. Second, it also helps to address the challenges of participant observation methods in large, labor-intensive industrial spaces by incorporating additional techniques.

The remainder part of the paper is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of the significance of sharing similar socio-cultural identities in building trust and doing fieldwork and how this phenomenon (re)shapes ethnographic practices. Second, I will examine the ups and downs of accessing factories in BLIP, including smoother access to BAC, the role of ethnicity in adjusting my fieldwork approach as an "apprentice cleaner" at BAC, subsequent ethical and positionality dilemmas, and the demanding access to GGC due to the lack of sharing the same socio-cultural identity with the HR manager who guarantees access to the factory.

Relating Trust, Ethnicity and Fieldwork

Scholars often focus on the importance of building trust as a necessary tool to advance cooperation in an organizational setting (cf. Leppälä et al. 2024), overlooking the context of trust and how to build it. To what extent can an ethnographer build trust with an organizational gatekeeper? Are there factors that ease or block trust between the ethnographer and the authority who admits the researcher into their workspace? As Sandra Bucerius (2013) argues, the similarities in ethnicity and gender between the ethnographer and research participants can help the ethnographer gain the trust to do fieldwork. It might be debatable whether ethnicity creates a conducive environment for building trust and cooperation (cf. Criado et al. 2015) because trust can also be built based on intimacy and friendship. However, in an ethnically fragmented society, especially where ethnic-based conflicts and displacement are at stake, people lean to confine and confide their trust in co-ethnics. As such, it is unsurprising to see ethnicity as a tool for building trust and accessing the fieldwork. Homogeneity and co-ethnicity can enhance trust and openness to gain access to the research participants and throughout the research process (Yip 2024; Merriam 2001).

According to Bucerius (2013), trust in the research process does not always depend on the insider status but depends on a more particular role in a specific context, such as sharing a similar identity with the researched community. Kokila Katyal and Mark King (2014) also observe the value of a shared cultural identity between the researcher and the researched in gaining access to the field as a tool to overcome different social-cultural inhibitors because "an ethnographer's ability to gain the trust of research participants is linked to his or her degree of similarity to them" (Bucerius 2013, 690). Having a shared ethnic background or being a co-ethnic insider can be beneficial for researchers in establishing trust and gaining easier access to their fieldwork (Chavez 2008). Yet, this trust comes with the responsibility not to abuse it. How should the researcher maintain the established trust? How can a researcher maintain the privacy of the data obtained under co-ethnic-based trust? Ensuring that the fieldwork is planned and conducted ethically and responsibly, safeguarding the well-being of everyone involved, is vital. Ethnographers suggest that building trust is a gradual process that requires consistent effort and does not happen automatically (Hosokawa 2010; McGranahan 2022; Pugh & Mosseri 2023). Against this backdrop, I argue that trust can be established differently across contexts, time and space. For instance, trust can be built outright with co-ethnics in ethnically divided societies, especially where ethnic-based conflicts are rampant.

Unlike other works that emphasize the importance of building trust between researchers and research participants, I believe it is equally crucial to es-

tablish trust with the individuals who authorize access to the research site. Following Daniel Tope and others (Tope et al. 2005, 489), who argue that "the key to understanding workplaces appears to be to build relationships of trust with people to gain privileged insider status", I would add the key to getting access to the workplaces lies in building trust with the gatekeepers who grant access to the working people. Without building trust with authority first, it is difficult to build trust with the workers on the shopfloor, even if admission to the workplace has been granted because "without successful entrée into the group of interest, a scholarly study simply cannot proceed" (Crowley 2007, 625). This illustrates that getting access to the workspaces is not enough unless the ethnographer secures the trust of the gatekeeper. In this context, as I will elaborate on later in this article, my admission to the GGC workplace was guaranteed but due to a lack of trust between me as a researcher and the GGC HR manager, my movements on the shopfloor were monitored and accompanied by an assigned person.

Ethnicity as a Gateway to Fieldwork

A primary barrier to practicing ethnography in organizations is obtaining access. Organizations are not fond of being observed and usually do not let the researcher access their working space to be a participant-observer (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992). Some organizations granted access to their workplace when they realized they would receive something in return for that ethnographic research or through personal networks/relationships. For instance, Richard Harper (1998) was allowed access to the International Monetary Fund's premises to conduct his ethnographic fieldwork. The organization's management granted him this access because they were interested in gaining insights into their knowledge production and information dissemination systems. On the other hand, Pun Ngai (2005) was granted access to a factory in the Shenzhen industrial zone in China during the late 1990s through personal networks/relationships. She gained access to the factory premises through her relative. In a similar vein, my "ethnic relative" helped me access the BAC's shopfloor. In what follows, I will elaborate on how ethnicity helped me access the BAC shopfloor, allowing me to use the participant observation method the way I chose to.

Ethiopia was ruled by imperial and dictatorial regimes until a coalition of Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) came to power in 1991. The EPRDF government adopted ethnic-based federalism in 1995, dividing the country into ethnic-based regional states. The adoption of ethnic federalism was aimed at resolving the historical grievances of different ethnic groups, offering them the right to govern themselves in the context of the

federation. However, there has been a growing frustration with the EPRDF's ethnically divided regional states and concerns about continued ethnic divisions (ICG 2009; Breines 2020). Despite the embrace of their culture, identity and language by different ethnic groups as a result of the implementation of ethnic federalism, some criticize ethnic-based federalism for exacerbating ethnic divisions (Abbink 2011; Breines 2020), as the ethnic division itself influences ethnic conflict (Esteban et al. 2012). The dissolution of EPRDF and the formation of a new Prosperity Party in 2019 under the incumbent government aggravated the ethnic strife further. Since the coming to power of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed in 2018, Ethiopia has become a simmering pot of violence due to ethnic divisions and war. Ethnic-based displacement, mob attacks and killings have become the new face of the country.

In this wake, I met a person who is an HR manager at BAC. I was introduced to the BAC HR manager by the deputy head of the BLIP's Investment Support and Follow-up department. It was impossible to get access to the factory gates if it wasn't due to the personal relationships between the deputy head of the BLIP's Investment Support and Follow-up department and the Blue Apparel Company and Green Garment Company HR managers. Due to the personal relationships between the deputy head and the companies' HR managers, BAC and GGC were selected, and a letter from the Investment Support and Follow-up department was received requesting ethnographic fieldwork inside their factories. However, having a letter from the department did not guarantee access to the factory shopfloors, as it was up to the factories to decide if they wanted to allow researchers. BLIP could not force the companies to grant access.

The first day I met BAC's HR manager after he received a letter from the Investment Support and Follow-up department, he was not welcoming. He told me that he manages a foreign company and cannot allow me to conduct research on the shopfloor. He said, "this is not my factory; it is owned and operated by foreigners. I do not have the authority to let you stay on the shopfloor. They [foreigners] do not want someone who is not a worker inside their factory" (Observation notes 16.09.2021). I found convincing the HR manager to grant me access to the BAC shopfloor more difficult than I had anticipated. His initial reaction was rejection: he and other managers felt that having me as an ethnographer on the shopfloor and working space would make their work more challenging because it is difficult to hide the "mysteries of the abode of production" (Mezzadri 2017, 1) in my presence. Though the HR manager claimed he did not have the authority to let me in, he and other managers had the power and authority to grant or deny access to the shopfloor. The manager's initial hesitation to grant me access could be interpreted as a fear of ex-

posing the dire working conditions and exploitation of migrant rural workers inside the factory (see Tesema 2024c).

I remember vividly my first meeting with BAC's HR manager when he insisted on redirecting me to other factories in BLIP. He asked me, "Why us? Why BAC?" to which I replied that I was sent to them by the BLIP and that there was no other reason to choose them out of eleven foreign factories operating in BLIP by the time of the study. He told me he was too busy to meet me again to negotiate my entry into the factory. Then, I kept calling[4] and requesting him to facilitate my access. Finally, he agreed to a face-to-face meeting as he suddenly realized I was from his ethnic group. From the beginning, I knew by his name[5] that we belonged to the same ethnic group. However, I did not realize that sharing the same ethnic identity matters to be welcomed, perhaps because I was absent from the country to study abroad for a couple of years amidst political turmoil and ethnic strife. I did not recognize the importance of my ethnicity being approached in good humor.

The day he showed up for a face-to-face meeting, he suddenly heard me talking to a friend in our native language. His grimaced face turned smiley and he said, "Where are you from? Can you speak Afan Oromo[6]? Are you an Oromo?" The smiley face I was looking at was a moment that made me confident about getting access to the factory floor. A person who was blocking me from getting access turned out to be an "ethnic relative." I confirmed to him that I am an Oromo and can speak Afan Oromo, and everything has changed for the better since that moment. He said in Afan Oromo, "*yoo siin hingargaarre eenyuun gargaara*?" which means, "If I do not help you get access, who will I help?" (Observation notes 23.09. 2021).

My ethnicity instantly helped me get access to the factory shopfloor at BAC and allowed me to adjust my approach as I chose (see participant observation below). The ethnographic approach often involves relationships of trust that require time to develop (McGranahan 2022; Pugh & Mosseri 2023), yet my ethnic-based relationship of trust with the BAC HR manager was developed abruptly. This state of affairs prompts us to explore several important aspects of ethnographic research. We need to consider the types of relationships that provide better access to organizations, the ways in which an ethnographer establishes connections with the gatekeeper of an organization and the development of relationships with its members. Additionally, it is essential to ex-

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4 While we met and talked on the phone, we used Amharic, the country's official language.
5 He has an Oromo name, but my name does not reveal my Oromo identity.
6 Afan Oromo is a language spoken by the Oromo people, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia.

amine how ethnographic relationships may differ across geographical regions and cultures, as well as the impact of social and political contexts on the formation of these relationships. Furthermore, we need to be mindful of other factors that create distance and hinder our access to fieldwork.

As Carol Heimer (2019) remarks, the challenges of studying organizations where an ethnographer needs permission from the gatekeepers to access the company's data and documents differ from the challenges of practicing ethnography in other settings (see also Tavory 2019). The HR manager granted me access to the BAC under the auspices of the deputy chief of operations (both Ethiopian nationals). My "ethnic relative" HR manager convinced the deputy chief of operations to admit me inside the factory. One afternoon, I was told by the HR manager that the deputy wanted to interview me the next morning. A deputy chief of operations briefly asked me about my research:

> He: What do you study? I mean, the discipline.
> Me: Social anthropology
> He: Isn't social anthropology the study of culture?
> Me: Yes, you are right
> He: What kind of culture do you study on the shopfloor then?
> Me: Work culture (Observation notes 03.10. 2021).

My "ethnic relative" HR manager continued facilitating a conducive atmosphere for my access. He first gained the support of the deputy chief of operations and then convinced the CEO with the support of the deputy chief of operations. The CEO (foreign national) of BAC met me as an apprentice student alongside students from a local university. The BAC HR manager and deputy chief of operations told the CEO that seven apprentice students from the Textile and Garment Engineering School were admitted to the factory for educational purposes. I was one of them, while six were from the local universities. One day, the CEO saw me at the front gate while coming to the office and asked why I was there. When I explained that I am one of the apprentices, I was told by the CEO: "This is an office area; go to the production department" (Observation notes 10.12. 2021). Except for the Ethiopian managers and workers (deputy chief of operations, my "ethnic relative" HR manager, production supervisors, workers in the HR department and machine operators on the shopfloor), other foreign managers knew me as an apprentice student. I did not arrange my access this way, but my "ethnic relative" HR manager did. I asked the HR manager what would have happened if they had known me as a PhD researcher and he said, "Nothing, but we don't know. It is the easiest way for us to convince the CEO" (Observation notes 11.10. 2021).

I attempted to present myself to everybody as a researcher, but the HR manager insisted that since the deputy chief of operations knew about it, it was unnecessary to inform the CEO. The HR manager remarked, "He [deputy chief of operations] is the second-highest authority in this factory. We don't need to inform the CEO of everything unless it is essential and related to business and trade" (Observation notes 11.10. 2021). Given my experience in GGC, where a foreign manager controls access to necessary data, I accepted the HR manager's proposal. The CEO's lack of knowledge of me as a researcher does not necessarily make this approach covert because the CEO's right-hand man, the deputy chief of operations, knew it.

At BAC, I developed a friendship with the HR manager. The type of relationship created between the HR manager and me was due to what Victoria Reyes (2020) calls a "visible ethnographic toolkit". According to Reyes (2020), the ethnographers' visible (e.g., ethnicity, race) and invisible tools (e.g., social capital) help them gather the research data. In a similar vein, the visible tool (e.g., belonging to the same ethnic group and sharing a similar sociocultural background with the BAC HR manager) opened doors to the fieldwork in BAC, which may not have been opened otherwise, while the invisible tool (e.g., friendship) kept the doors open and helped me finish the fieldwork. This ethnographic toolkit enabled me to adjust my fieldwork approach, navigate BAC's bureaucracy, participate in meetings in the HR department, interact informally with the operators and access the company's documents.

On the BAC Shopfloor: An "Apprentice Cleaner" as a Participant Observer

I became a participant observer on the BAC shopfloor to grasp the views of the organization's members and understand the working conditions and the production process synchronically on site. Being there for close observation was significant for "engaged listening" (Forsey 2010) and witnessing what people say, what they do and how they do it. Utilizing the participant observation method in the factories helps ethnographers gain a unique perspective on how to feel, sense and smell everyday working life and practices. This approach is significant in observing the course of action and interaction among workers and in understanding the work rhythms and conditions. For instance, if I were to simply ask the factory workers about their working conditions and report it in my ethnographic text, I would miss the true essence of their work. It is the experience of the work situation that helps the ethnographers challenge the taken-for-granted ideas and assumptions (Schwartzman 1993). Hence, I argue the insufficiency of "being there" and the necessity of "participating in there" to find out the true meaning of what ethnographers aim to study.

On the BAC shopfloor, I worked as "an apprentice cleaner". In the beginning, I planned to take the role of "apprentice folder" (Kim 2013), the duties of which would be folding the finished products. I planned this way because the job is easier compared to becoming a machine operator. However, the reality on the shopfloor did not allow me to get the required data if I worked as an apprentice folder. Taking the role of "apprentice folder" would have allowed me to see the working conditions only in the finishing department. Consequently, I took the position of "apprentice cleaner". After I was granted access to the factory premises and was given orientation about the company's rules and regulations alongside apprentice students from the local universities, I approached my "ethnic relative" BAC HR manager and requested him to be a cleaner to meet different workers across different production lines:

> BAC HR manager: Why don't you move from place to place and observe what and how the operators do, just like students from engineering school?
> Me: I am interested in sensing and feeling the job rather than just observing.
> BAC HR manager: The job is very difficult, especially for those who are new to the workplace.
> Me: Let me try, and I will notify you if I can't make it (Observation notes 6.10. 2021).

In BAC, my ethnicity played a paramount role in getting access and adjusting my approach the way I chose. After a discussion with the BAC HR manager, we agreed that I would take on the cleaning role for interaction purposes, not for payment. We also agreed on the number of days I should clean in a week. As per the company's rule, one person cleans three production lines in a row. Accordingly, I cleaned three production lines three days a week. This arrangement allowed me to move around while cleaning, listening and observing the workers across different lines. To ensure I met a diverse group of workers, I constantly adjusted my cleaning lines in cooperation with the HR manager. Being a cleaner included interacting with more workers and collecting essential data from different lines.

When using the participant observation method with a large group of research participants in a specific setting, it can be challenging to capture the perspectives of different participants. As a result, it becomes difficult to obtain a relatively comprehensive understanding of workplace activities. In order to overcome such an observational challenge, working as an "apprentice cleaner" gave me access to different lines and workers on the shopfloor. Many ethnographers who did fieldwork in the factories followed a similar approach to participant observation, such as taking the role of "apprentice folder" (Kim 2013), "apprentice trainee" (Ngai 2005), or "apprentice sewer" (Lamphere

1987). I found these approaches to be limiting the scope of my research since they would provide me access to a limited number of workers and thus limit my research material (Tesema 2024b).

If you work as a folder, your data will be about those who work in the finishing department, or if you become an apprentice sewer, you will focus on the member of the sewing line to which you are assigned. Suppose you are an apprentice sewer working as a machine operator on one line. How do you observe what happened at line 17 or 18 (let's say, a foreign manager nagged with the locals) while you are at line 3 or 4 due to the space of the production hall, which is built to accommodate more than one thousand workers? If you are cleaner, you can cover all departments, from cutting and production to finishing, and bring relatively balanced data rather than focusing on specific locations in the factory (Tesema 2024a). Being a cleaner observer allowed me to understand "who does what with whom, when and where" (Schwartzman 1993, 20).

In sum, factory workers on the shopfloor do not interact equally and do not do observable things simultaneously. This shapes the approaches ethnographers should follow to capture how and what the workers do on the shopfloor. The ethnographer's participant observation style should vary to explore what happens inside the workplace regardless of the size of the factory and the number of members of the organization. The goal for me was not just to know one aspect of the organization but to comprehensively know what happened in the cutting, production and finishing departments. How do workers across different lines relate to one another? How do line leaders and supervisors work across different departments? These facts about the structure of participant observation on the shopfloor of the factory inevitably affect the core aspects of ethnography in an organization.

Ethical Dilemma and Positionality

My friendship with the BAC HR manager, which started with my ethnicity, later helped me open the "do not touch" paper cabinet. I could access company documents after building a good relationship with the HR manager. Confidential documents were locked in a box with a "do not touch" sticker on it. All documents were accessed under the supervision of the HR manager and the deputy chief of operations, who shared the same office. While there were times when my access to privileged information from a locked box worked to my advantage, it also contributed to my feelings of vulnerability at other times, challenging my positionality in the research process and causing me ethical dilemmas. I started to ponder how I would be able to maintain the trust that the HR manager had placed in me and what would happen to him if the CEO

found out about my possibility of accessing the documents. I began to think about how I should protect the identities of the documents, the HR manager and the BAC when producing ethnographic knowledge. While the CEO's lack of familiarity with me does not *necessarily* render my approach unethical—since the HR manager and the deputy chief of operations (who oversee the work-force and the overall functionality of the factory, respectively) permitted my access—it's possible that the CEO's awareness of the document access could impact the relationship between the CEO, the HR manager and the deputy chief of operations. This requires severing the link between research partici-pants and the data collected, ensuring that the information cannot be traced back to the BAC or its managers and workers. Even before deciding to write this article, I needed to verify the presence of other co-ethnic HR managers across different factories in BLIP to ensure the anonymity of the BAC HR manager's identity. The practice of hiding the identifying information about research participants, places and organizations is a necessary aspect of eth-nographic research and writing (Jerolmack & Murphy 2019), especially when obtaining research material that involves multiple approvals and various po-tentially contesting interests.

The HR manager and the deputy chief of operations at BAC allowed me access to restricted company documents without the knowledge of the CEO because I am "ethnic-relative" and Ethiopian like them, in contrast to GGC, where I did not get such privilege because a foreign manager manages it. The documents I accessed at BAC were about work discipline, time management, and company rules and regulations. They were not sensitive as they did not include trade secrets. However, whatever these documents might be, is an-onymizing the people and factories involved enough to address the ethical concern? Should the CEO have to know whether the documents are accessi-ble? Is it unethical for a researcher to access these documents if HR manager and the deputy chief of operations guarantee access without informing their superior? I have had to deal with this ethical conundrum, and this situation inevitably prompted new ways of thinking about the nature of ethnographic research and relationships between the researcher and authority in organiza-tional settings, especially in foreign companies operating in one's own country.

The tension between being an ethnographer and co-ethnic and the subse-quent privilege to access documents is complex and dynamic, indicating that fieldwork is not merely a site for data collection but rather a process where data is obtained through interaction (cf. Bell 2019). Ethnicity and friend-ship with Ethiopian managers as a process of interaction eased data access in BAC, whereas, in GGC, I did not have this advantage. As Bob Simpson (2011, 377) observes, the ethical implications at stake are practical and procedural

about the production of knowledge and the practice of ethnography. Therefore, ethnographers must be prepared for the ethical issues that run through all stages of creating anthropological knowledge, from research proposal development to negotiating access to fieldwork and ethnographic writing (Caplan 2003; Simpson 2011).

According to Tom Clark (2011), gatekeepers' access approval does not replace the ethical responsibility to inform individual participants. Ethics in this approach are found not merely in the methods used and their effects, but in the anthropologist's primary responsibility to the people being studied (Faubion & Marcus 2009; Simpson 2011). In this sense, it was my role to maintain the balance between ethical responsibility, co-ethnic managerial consent to access the workplace and workers' autonomy within the factory. To make it more ethical, one might expect the HR manager or deputy chief of operations to take me to the shopfloor and announce that a PhD student will conduct interviews with workers and make observations in the factory. Unfortunately, this did not happen, possibly due to the large size of the production hall with over 1200 workers. As I mentioned earlier, the size of the production department prompted me to take the role of cleaning to meet as many workers as possible. Though the CEO did not know me as a researcher, my approach to the workers was explicit. I communicated transparently with participants about my position as a PhD researcher. For instance, when something happened (i.e., supervisors yelled at the machine operators), one of my informants continuously told me to remember to write it, saying, "*Yeh yemitsaf new*" (meaning, "this is something you should write about") (Observation notes 12.01. 2022). Similarly, university graduates who worked unprofessionally in a factory alongside less educated workers most often wanted to know how I could help them win scholarships in Europe (see Tesema 2024a).

Since they work in a foreign company with low salaries and an exploitative work environment, staff at the HR department and workers on the shopfloor were comfortable talking about their working lives and even gossiping about the foreign managers in front of me, which would certainly have been cut off in front of another "outsider" researcher. While some argue that being an insider benefits the development of trust with the research participants (Bucerius 2013), others stress that being an outsider does not necessarily preclude the development of trust between the researcher and the researched community (Ricciardelli 2024). Had my approach on the factory floor not been explicit, workers would not have shared their thoughts with me.

During cleaning on the shopfloor and informal one-on-one conversations and interviews afterward, I consistently clarified my role as a researcher. I ex-

plicitly stated that my purpose for cleaning in the factory was to understand the working conditions and organizational structures from a grassroots perspective. I refrained from offering unsolicited criticism about exploitative work conditions, even when workers asked for my perspective. Since I speak two local languages, Afan Oromo and Amharic, I was fortunate to witness and listen to workers on the shopfloor interacting in their respective languages. Although I was a co-ethnic insider on the side of the gatekeeper, I was also a *semi-outsider* with non-co-ethnic informants at the same workplace. I call it semi-outsider because I am not completely an outsider to other ethnic groups working in the factory since we all are Ethiopians and can speak Amharic, the country's official language. There have been debates over the insider-outsider dichotomy in ethnographic practices and knowledge production, and some call for ''uniting'' the two binaries (cf. Flores 2016). I aimed to balance my role as a co-ethnic insider, which helped me gain access, with that of a semi-outsider researcher. My bilingual skills and being of the same nationality as other research participants inevitably eased the insider-outsider tensions and enabled me to interact and establish a connection with a diverse workforce of different ethnic groups.

My social location as a Europe-educated PhD researcher, as someone with a high salary compared to the locals, and my appearance, rather than ethnicity, influenced the ways in which multi-ethnic workers (including those from my ethnic group) interacted with me at the beginning of the fieldwork. Being co-ethnic with some workers was not enough to make our interaction easier, demonstrating how ethnographic insiders must reflect on their insider status in the field (Flores 2016). This could be evident in the temporality of being an insider or outsider in the research process because there is no perfect permanency in being an insider or outsider; it is fluid. While trying to adapt to the demanding cleaning duties, I noticed that my presence on BAC's shopfloor as a cleaner had created a sense of confusion among the operators regarding my role. Initially, when the factory workers saw me cleaning between production lines, they were surprised. One of the operators remarked in Amharic, "*Ezih yemisera sew atmeslem, erasehn eyew egnan eyew. Alebabeseh wezeh yastewukal. Yeraseh fabrica lemekefet lemd lemekesem yemetah nw yememslew*". It means, "You don't look like someone who works here. Look at you and look at us. Your glossy face and fresh complexion make a difference. It appears that you are closely examining the work process involved in opening your own factory" (Observation notes 18.10. 2021).

I quickly realized that my presence on the shopfloor was strange to the rest of the laborers, which might affect my thirst for collecting data from the operators. My outfit, "glossing face" (to use the informant's term) and

relatively clean dress[7] inevitably confused them initially. Since the purpose of cleaning was for participant observation, not for payment, I was not fully committed to my cleaning duty in the beginning. As an unpaid cleaner, I had more freedom to move around and engage with people informally, which confused them since other cleaners were always occupied. Once I realized this, I began dressing in old clothes and shoes and working as a paid cleaner, which allowed me to get to know workers better and even form relationships that resembled friendships with some of them. In line with Glenda Flores (2016), I argue that ethnographers must recognize how identities shift throughout the research process in relation to the identities of their research participants.

As Michael Burawoy (2009, 201) points out, "Once inserted into a specific location, the competencies of the ethnographer play a crucial role in how she or he is viewed and, in turn, views others." Beyond Burawoy's argument about the role of ethnographer's competencies in re/shaping the fieldwork approach, I contend that the researcher's physical appearance and comprehension of the social and physical context in which they conduct fieldwork significantly influence how the ethnographer is perceived and how they perceive the research participants. Therefore, playing multiple roles and changing strategies in the field (as I changed my outfit and approach to work as a paid cleaner), shifting methods from observation to participant observation and changing physical positions help us obtain the required data (Tesema 2024a).

Accessing GGC: Observed Observer

In GGC, after the HR manager received the letter from BLIP's Investment Support and Follow-up department requesting my access, he asked me to provide him with the interview questions for approval by the head office in their home country. To avoid the risk of disapproval, I carefully selected and provided him with pleasant questions that addressed factory workers, avoiding inquiries related to worker exploitation[8]. It took a month for the approval process to be completed before I was granted access to the factory premises. In contrast to BAC, where my "ethnic relative" made the access process much smoother, accessing data at GGC was quite strange. The GGC HR manager told me he did not know me and had to assign someone from the HR department to observe what I do in the factory (Observation notes 20.09. 2021). This is what I call *observed observation*—someone from the HR department was observing my

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7   The workers do not have enough time to wash their clothes, and due to large crowds of workers in one hall, anyone quickly sweats or gets dirty unless you change clothes daily or every other day (e.g., Tesema 2024a).

8   Indeed, I informed the GGC HR manager that the questions were sample, not final.

movements, practices and actions on the shopfloor. I am an ethnographer who observes the rhythm of work while someone from the factory also observes me. The HR manager-assigned person patrolled me when I walked around on the shopfloor. Even though my observer could not influence the observable situation on the shopfloor, her presence indeed had an influence on the way the workers on the shopfloor interacted with me. The workers knew she worked with the foreign managers in the HR department and were afraid of her saying anything negative about the work conditions. Although I stayed for a short period on GGC's shopfloor, I observed exploitative and unhealthy working conditions, including forced labor and hidden practices of extracting surplus labor from the workers (Tesema 2024c). Yet, this sort of monitored observation caused discomfort to me as the researcher and disconnection from the means and objects of study (cf. Begueria and Beneito-Montagut 2024).

Despite being granted top-down access to the organization by the GGC HR manager, the practicality of my access was non-existent. This situation highlights the insufficiency of top-down access and the importance of "side-in" approaches to understanding the social life of an organization deeply (Heimer 2019). However, the workability of side-in access is cast into doubt when the one who granted top-down access is also the one patrolling the ethnographer in the organization. As Bob Simpson (2011, 382) diligently puts it, the ethics of engaging with those in positions of power—such as entrepreneurs, decision-makers and managers—who shape people's lived experiences more than the ones shaped require increasingly complex negotiations concerning ethnographic relationships. The GGC's observer repeatedly asked me the main point I picked from informal conversations with the workers. When asked why she did ask me, she replied, "Just to know for my own cause" (Observation notes 02.11.2021). This constant surveillance, even though the observer rejected the assumption that she might have reported to the HR manager who assigned her, left me feeling uncomfortable. In GGC, where I did not have an "ethnic relative", where ethnicity did not have a role because the HR manager at GGC was a foreigner, my proposal to become a cleaner on the shopfloor and do participant observation was met with refusal. My movement and communication on the shopfloor were under constant observation by the assigned observer.

The GGC HR manager allowed me to interview workers while at work and asked me what kind of workers I needed to interview. When the HR manager asked about the interview, it wasn't according to my original plan. Initially, I intended to stay on the shopfloor for three months and interview some workers afterward. I requested that we randomly select the machine operators, line leaders and supervisors, and he insisted that he must plan to allow workers for interviews. I agreed to interview some operators from all batch-

es from six months to two years of experience at the GGC because two years was the maximum employment period in the factory at the time. Then, the HR manager started to provide me with workers for interviews in a separate office while my observer sat with us.

I requested the observer to leave us alone during the interview sessions with the workers, but she responded, "My boss told me to follow you, what you do and what you ask. So, I will not leave" (Observation notes 03.11. 2021). She attended the interview session of the first five workers. After I realized that the workers selected by the manager gave me cooked information with the observer's presence, I decided to quit interviewing the workers before leaving the factory. The final blow came when, after one month of stay, they abruptly ended my research, citing Ethiopia's declaration of a State of Emergency. On November 05, 2021, three days after the government of Ethiopia announced a six-month state of emergency due to the ongoing war in the northern part of the country, the GGC HR manager called me inside his office and told me to quit my observed observation on the shopfloor. He said,

> Due to the security situation in the country and the state of emergency, we will not let you stay with us. The company's management team decided not to welcome anyone except our own workers to the factory premises. So, stop coming here until the situation normalizes, until the peace is restored (Observation notes 05.11. 2021).

As I mentioned above, it was merely due to the personal connection between the head of the department at BLIP and the GGC HR manager that I was allowed to get access. Other than admitting me into their workspace, they were unhappy with my presence. The HR manager once remarked,

> None of the previous researchers asked us to stay on the shopfloor. They come and ask us some questions, and they leave. But you want us to allow you to stay on the shopfloor; why don't you do like other researchers [those who do not use participant observation] (Observation notes 20.09. 2021).

This emanated from two reasons: unfamiliarity with anthropological methods and hiding the exploitative work conditions. The above account of access stories at GGC shows the challenges of accessing data in foreign-owned companies in one's home country, especially if a foreigner manages it. Even though conducting fieldwork in Ethiopia gave me a sense of being a home ethnographer, accessing data at GGC, where the foreign manager admitted a researcher into their working space, was not different from doing ethnography in another country. Though geographically home, my field site at GGC was controlled by foreigners, and I was not privileged to be at home.

Conclusion

The study underscores the critical role of ethnicity, intimacy, friendship, sharing a similar socio-cultural identity and belonging to the same ethnic group with the person who guarantees access in a hierarchical work setting in gaining access to the industrial workplace. In an ethnically divided nation like Ethiopia, one's ethnicity could help or hurt. If I had not been a member of the same ethnic group as the person who guarantees access to BAC, I would not have been allowed access. My social identity as an Oromo, which aligns with that of the HR manager, facilitated my access to shopfloor workers in a foreign company. A researcher who did not share this ethnic background would likely have faced challenges in gaining access, as I experienced during my time at GGC. Getting access to the fieldwork in such circumstances may raise ethical concerns and dilemmas about how to use the data obtained under a particular privilege. One way to overcome this issue is to allow the participating individuals to consent to the type of information that can be utilized in ethnographic writing. Ethnic favoritism can also manifest at a large scale in the country— to get jobs, promotions and other benefits. For instance, a recent study shows that some individuals in Ethiopia have engaged in what Monica Beeder and others (2025) refer to as "ethnic switching" to take advantage of ethnic favoritism in employment.

From BAC's access story, it is evident that sharing a socio-cultural identity with the HR manager advances trust and cooperation, contributing to the required data collection. This act inevitably showcases the magnitude of relational dynamics and shared identity in fieldwork, especially in a fragile and ethnically divided state. Conversely, the denial of data access by GGC highlights the disadvantage of not sharing ethnic and intimate bonds with the person who authorizes access. On the other hand, this study also contributes to participant observational challenges in a crowded labor-intensive industrial space, attempting to move away from the conventional type of participant observation in the factories.

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SOURCES

Fieldwork Material

All fieldwork material, including observation notes, interview documents and audio recordings, are in the author's possession.

Observation notes from participant observation at BAC 16.09.2021.
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Unpacking "Common Sense"
A Critical Folkloristic Approach to Narratives of Climate Change Denial

Abstract

The years of 2023 and 2024 reminded us again of the urgent need to mitigate climate change. Despite the warnings from climate science, narratives of denial continue to spread on social media. This article aims to explore how climate change rejection becomes naturalized through the construction of "common sense". Engaging with previous literature on critical folkloristics as an approach to contemporary folklore, I introduce Fredric Jameson's hermeneutic model for allegorical interpretation as a potential framework for understanding such narratives not merely as peripheral expressions, but as manifestations of broader cultural, social, and historical movements. In the empirical material, the figure of Galileo Galilei serves as a symbol embodying the climate skeptic community while framing the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as an authoritarian force driven by religious beliefs. This allegorical construct reveals a collective identity forged through exclusion and a defense of fossil capitalism, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities and injustices.

Keywords: Critical theory, climate change denial, social media, contemporary folklore

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Introduction

> The individual narrative is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution
> to a real contradiction.
> (Fredric Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*)

"We don't have a climate crisis. We have a crisis in common sense and honesty." The quotation, collected as part of my empirical research,[1] instantly received numerous likes in the Facebook group. In just two sentences, it also summarises the concerns that lie at the heart of the present article: How does the discursive struggle over what common sense constitutes take form in digital narratives of climate denial, and how might scholars in the fields of ethnology and folkloristics grasp what the narratives do? The years 2023 and 2024 broke many unwanted records in terms of temperature increase (Copernicus 2023; NASA 2024). The results of the measurements left the climate research community puzzled since the increase was higher than anticipated. In the spring of 2023, the sixth synthesising assessment by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (henceforth IPCC) was also released. The United Nations body, which assesses scientific research on climate change, concluded that, yet again, a vast shift away from fossil fuel dependency is needed to bend the curve. In the realm of social media, the reality of the climate crisis is portrayed in a vastly different manner. Climate obstructionist narratives, where the results of the report are rejected, tend to spread quickly in digital environments, adding to an already established phenomenon of denial. Despite previous attempts at regulating false information on social media platforms, such content continues to gain traction (Grotz 2023). Meta recently announced the decision to end fact-checking and restrictions on its platforms, claiming freedom of expression as an argument (Bobrowsky and Vipers 2025). As the owner of the social media platforms Facebook and Instagram, such a shift in policy illustrates the acute need to continuously and even more vigorously critically analyse social media content and its political and social implications.

Attempts by industries and political sectors to naturalise climate denial macro narratives have been researched to a great extent during the past fifteen years (see, e.g. Brulle 2013; Dunlap and McCright 2015; McKie 2018). Hultman, Forchtner and Ekberg (2022) conclude that "[p]olitical ideologies and agendas that build on conservatism and protecting ethnic/racial or class-based (real or imagined) hierarchies are the ones consistently linked to obstructing climate science and action". Though folkloristic research has for some

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1   This article has been written within the framework of my ongoing doctoral research project, which explores the shaping of common sense in climate discourses.

time focused on narratives of climate change, including vernacular expressions (Kverndokk 2018, 2021; Eriksen 2021; Asplund Ingemark 2021), the specificity of climate obstructionist texts still awaits more thorough analysis. Through micro practices in people's everyday life online, past historical events are transformed and used to denounce contemporary climate developments. At the heart of such efforts lies a construction of common sense argued both as a capacity and as a set of ideas.

Analysis of common-sense influence as a political tool has previously been conducted within related humanist fields, such as the history of ideas, cultural studies and anthropology (Hall 2013; Rosenberg 2018; Crehan 2018). Within the field of folklore studies, Gencarella (2011) has entered into dialogue with Antonio Gramsci, suggesting that folklore is a constitutive part of common sense.[2] While the commonsensical dimension of human perception is an inherent part of everyday social reality, analysis of common sense – including its political implications – is rare within the fields of ethnology and folklore studies. Knowledge of how narratives on social media form a naturalised rejection of climate change would contribute to attempts at identifying the political and cultural challenges involved in mitigating climate change. Given the increasing importance of social media as an arena for communicating political concerns, it is vital to identify how common sense is shaped online.

How might scholars in the fields of ethnology and folkloristics address these and other cultural expressions with respect to the multiple societal crises of our time? In this article, departing from Fredric Jameson's model for allegorical analysis as well as critical folkloristics, I ask how working with theoretical understandings can guide the analysis of empirical material. By engaging with previous reflections, as expressed by Gencarella (2009, 2010), McDonald (2020) and Buccitelli (2020), critical folkloristics offers a methodological approach where folklore is understood as politically charged and situated in relation to overarching societal discourses. In advocating for its development, Gencarella (2011) draws on various political thinkers and critical academic traditions. However, neither he nor other scholars have adequately addressed Jameson's analytical tools. This article continues the development of critical folkloristics by adding central parts of Jameson's theoretical framework to the discussion. Jameson's model for allegorical analysis may well prove useful for the discussion on theoretical choices as we approach the study of digital culture from the standpoint of both ethnology and folklore studies. The attempt

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2 Gencarella (2009, 2011) addresses the legacy of Gramsci, suggesting the development of critical folklore studies necessitates engaging with his understanding of the entanglement of folklore in the formation of common sense, and by extension, its role in upholding hegemony – or challenging it through counterhegemonic interventions.

to uncover how narratives are formed in relation to contemporary ideological changes and historical movements is perhaps especially relevant today, a time governed by vast political and social transformations.

Understanding the narrations as social media performances raises the question of how they are made socially desirable. In this article, I analyse the narrative constructs in relation to contemporary political climate discourse on a macro level. In addition, I trace the historical, cultural, and political movements that legitimise the position of such narratives. The empirical material for analysis centers around narratives of the Inquisition of Galileo Galilei by the Roman Catholic Church and the notion of authoritarianism to describe the climate sceptic movement's self-proclaimed relationship to the climate research environment. I propose the texts forge a dualist construct where the people as a political subject is embodied through the aestheticised historical figure of Galileo Galilei, in contrast to the climate research community, which is supposedly driven by religious belief and a will to power. I suggest that the Swedish societal self-image of secularism contributes to the narratives' power. The dismissal of – or doubt in – climate science is central, reflecting the broader contemporary epistemic crisis. Thereby, the narratives nourish distrust not only in climate science but also in the societal institutions that together uphold democratic values.

Critical Folkloristics as a Mode of Research

The term critical folkloristics, or critical folklore studies, was first coined by Stephen Gencarella (2009, 2010, 2011). Drawing from critical theory, critical folkloristics operates under a broader ideological framework that examines how established knowledge, values and beliefs are formed and altered. It aims to reveal the potential for change and transformation by closely analysing discourse and positioning and offering alternative narratives and action-oriented research methods. Gencarella emphasises the role of critique and interdisciplinarity in the development of critical folklore studies, stating that:

> "Critical" in this sense concerns the active pursuit of emancipation from oppression, the recognition and address of domination and privilege, and the promotion of democratic social change, akin to the intercessory work of, for example, critical cultural studies, critical ethnography, and critical pedagogy. (Gencarella 2011, 251–252.)

As a mode of research, critical folkloristics is thus a possible methodological choice both for contemporary ethnology and folklore studies. It is important to underline here that critical analysis within ethnology and folklore studies is by no means new. Thus, I want to highlight the significance of previous research that addresses experiences of marginalisation, racism, sexism, classism,

homophobia and the digital practice of hate speech (see Farahani 2008; Meder 2009; Deem 2023; Kodish 2011; Noyes 2018; Oring 2006; Pripp 2011; Svensson 2013; Sandell 2022). However, given contemporary political and social developments, Mills (2020, 384) concludes scholars are required "[y]et again to assess critical applications: the critical social impacts of our work, not to say the political locations and conditions of that work". Thus, there is an expressed need to evaluate the social and political impact that research has on the present-day political and cultural climate. Conversely, we must also reflect on how such work is politically situated.

Given the present social and political developments, where expressions of racism, speciesism or other ideological conceptions assert certain forms of domination through exclusion, new methodological and analytical tools are required. Aside from attending to the question on the necessity to assess the political impact of scholarly work and how this type of work is conducted, there is also a need to reflect on the chosen areas of interest. Buccitelli (2020) notes that attempts to analyse narratives that discriminate or take anti-democratic positions not only as cultural expressions but also as politically effective strategies have been limited. Scholars have instead focused more on initiatives aimed at uplifting and affirming marginalised communities. By underlining the importance of the latter , a lack of the former makes the academic discussion "incomplete at best, and counterproductive at worst" (Buccitelli 2020, 421). Narratives that reject climate change and, in the process, become part of our everyday reality are not just opinions that contradict an already established scientific conclusion but part of an actively constitutive discourse that nurtures the broader issue of distrust in academic society and democracy. Scholars need to study the narratives as enactments that contain expressions with political relevance, highlighting how they aestheticise contemporary political divergences. Attempts to not only shed light on the textual content but also its form – the process of transformation from idea to a naturalised understanding of the phenomenon – will yield nuanced answers that acknowledge its political influence. It is in response to Buccitelli's call to examine expressions of dominance that I explore what Jameson's model for allegorical analysis can contribute to contemporary understandings of narratives of climate change denial.

The Empirical Material

This research study is based on an analysis of posts revolving around the topics of climate change, Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church collected in a public Swedish-speaking group on the social media platform Facebook. The narratives first drew my attention because they differed drastically from other content shared in the climate group, both visually and in their textual com-

position; amidst a series of posts showing contemporary graphs and statistics and providing fact-based commentary, I suddenly found myself looking at an 18th-century painting of Galileo or photographs of the scientist's ink drawings of the cosmos on brown paper. The social media updates that drew connections between 17th-century and the present, arguing for a rejection of climate science through a somehow captivating reconstruction of the past to shed light on contemporary concerns. The material was collected using Facebook's search function in the group by typing keywords like "solar activity", "sunspots" and "Galileo". Central to my analysis were the texts likening the IPCC to the Roman Catholic Church and self-proclaimed climate sceptics to the scientist Galileo Galilei.

The corpus consists of approximately 60 posts gathered during 2024. The data collection process and analysis were evaluated and approved by the Swedish Ethics Review Board (Etikprövningsmyndigheten). The posts and Facebook page are publicly available without needing membership to visit the platform. To address further ethical considerations, I have chosen not to publish the name of the Facebook group or the original posts in Swedish. All quotations have been reworked to limit the risk that they can be traced to an individual, but have been treated with care so as not to lose their original tone and meaning. The posts selected for analysis were chosen based on how well they captured re-occurring formulations within the narratives, centering especially around Galileo, the Inquisition, authoritarianism and economy. When doing a close reading of the empirical material, I paid particular attention to word choices, metaphors and unarticulated assumptions. The structure of the analysis follows Jameson's model for allegorical analysis (1981), beginning at the textual level and then proceeding to the ideological, discursive and historical levels.

The Facebook group has about 4000 registered members. However, since it is public and the posts are visible even without membership, people registered on the platform can comment on or publish posts without being members themselves, making it difficult to estimate how many people consume the material. The group not only functions as a place where climate obstructionist narratives are reinforced; its stated aim is to facilitate discussions on climate-related concerns. Several of the comments call into question posts that contradict the understanding of climate change as caused by human influence as well as narratives that question climate research in other ways.

Jameson's Model for Allegorical Analysis

The literary scholar and philosopher Fredric Jameson provides ways to reflect on the roles of history and politics in relation to narratives. He does so without falling into the traps of a positivist understanding, where narrations are situated with "history" as a backdrop. Neither does he subscribe to a materi-

alist understanding of the aesthetic being the result of economic pre-conditions alone; there is a potential for aesthetic expressions to transcend their economic origins (Jameson 1990, 1991). This is not to say that history or the economy lack importance. On the contrary, decoding the narrative's relation to both history and the economy is fundamental to his hermeneutics. However, the cultural sphere develops alongside other aspects of society and is at the same time partly autonomous (Jameson 1981). In a continuous flow, people attempt to make sense of political and social reality as they perceive it through storytelling, regardless of whether the totality of the political reality no longer can be captured within the framework of a traditional narrative.

To understand how historical and material reality influence narratives, Jameson turns to the Ptolemaic system of allegorical analysis developed in medieval theological exegesis. Following this praxis, he views the text as filled with meaning and subject it to multiple levels of interpretation (Jameson 1981, 2019). "The political unconscious" refers to the ideological and political tensions conveyed in cultural expressions, albeit in an unconscious manner. The task for the scholar then becomes to unpack the layers within particular narratives, thereby making those meanings visible. It is this act of revelation, of discovering a hidden ideology that is made possible through the method of allegorical analysis:

> […] genuine allegory does not seek the "meaning" of a work, but rather functions to reveal its structure of multiple meanings, and thereby to modify the very meaning of the word meaning. (Jameson 2019, 18.)

Thus, the model does not explain the narrative in the sense that the different layers can be viewed as pieces in a puzzle seamlessly connected to each other. Rather, it aims to identify dimensions that together will allow researchers to see the tensions between them. For the analysis of the empirical material compiled for this article, such an understanding provides a key to unlocking texts that at first glance border on the realm of the absurd.

The allegorical model that Jameson developed includes four levels of interpretation. They can be illustrated as follows:

Textual: the Inquisition
Symbolic: Galileo Galilei versus authoritarianism and/or the Roman Catholic Church
Moral: the fate of Galileo
Anagogical: the fate of the people.

On the first level, it is the immediate textual content that is of analytic interest. Researchers identify what lies at the surface: concrete sequences of

events, characters and the (possible) storyline. On the second level, the narrative is analysed in relation to its immediate societal context, where it is considered *a socially symbolic act* attempting to resolve or make sense of an experienced contradiction.[3] Thus, at this level of analysis, researchers address the textual content's entanglement with the present and visible ideological concerns (Jameson 1981). The third level of analysis concerns exploring the texts' relations to discourse, ideas and worldviews and how they mirror, reproduce or challenge power structures and the dominant ideology. The ambition is to gain a deeper understanding of the ideological structures shaping textual meaning, including the researcher's own entanglement with the discourses. The fourth, *anagogigal* level, of allegorical analysis is the most abstract and at the same time the most extensive. Following Hegelian philosophy, it suggests that researchers analyse the text through reference to (our joint) history. Thus, the three previous levels are meant as interpretative levels that will open new understandings of the ways in which the narratives are formed through historical movements.

The Inquisition of Galileo Galilei – a Contemporary Tale of Heroic Intervention

This empirical part of the article explores the vernacular discourse on climate change denial through an analysis of references to Galileo Galilei, the Roman Catholic Church and/or the Inquisition in the 17th century. The reconfiguration of the historical event seemingly fills a void in the attempt to make sense of the stance against climate science while still positioning it as part of a scientific discussion. Central to the reconfiguration effort is a historic retelling of the Inquisition of Galileo and his theory supporting a heliocentric model of the solar system. The collected material cannot be considered narratives in the classic sense. Yet, they contain stories about the creation of the People[4] as a political subject while explicitly opposing climate research in general, and

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3   José Limón (1983, 49) has previously suggested that Jameson's concept of narrative as a socially symbolic act can serve as a possible starting point for introducing Marxist theory into folklore studies: "This emphasis on process, production, and aesthetic form would be highly compatible with performance – enactment- centered theories of folklore (Abrahams 1977; Bauman 1975) but it would entail the understanding of performances as fundamentally political acts […]."

4   Regarding the narrated construct of the People, I here follow Gencarella, who in turn refers to Laclau (2001), suggesting that folklore comprises two fundamental features of such a construction: the central role of the reference to "the people" and its stated opposition to the dominant ideology. As Gencarella (2009, 173) writes: "Folklore is not something that a folk does; rather, it is something that, in its doing, constitutes a folk, as both an immediate audience and a political category. Further, that doing constitutes antagonists or enemies to that folk."

specifically the IPCC, stories which are repeated in a similar manner. Turning to the role of the scientist in the 17th century as a symbol of the (rational) people might at first glance seem surprising. Several well-known contemporaries within the sphere of social media who are attempting to diminish the notion of the Anthropocene could have been chosen instead.[5] Historical events have, however, an advantage that the present does not: we already know how the stories are usually retold.

When first engaging with the empirical material, I identified many of the "tools" that have been addressed before, such as the cherry-picking of scientific reports or results and misogynistic portrayals of prominent figures within the climate movement, common within far-right digital media (Vowles 2024). One reoccurring theme was solar activity as the cause of climate change. The argument has long been part of the rhetorical attempting to diminish the impact of climate science. Conservative thinktanks in the US published material stating that global warming was caused by the sun already at the beginning of the 1990s (Oreskes and Conway 2010). Thus, the myth of solar activity prevalent in a macro-political context reoccur on a micro level, albeit narrated in a somewhat different manner, explicitly likening climate sceptics' position to that of Galileo. The narratives also revolve around the subject of the scientific conflict at the time: the insight that the sun did not revolve around the Earth, with the opposite actually being the case, thus decentring the perceived importance of the Earth. This realisation is highlighted in the empirical material in two ways, each dependent on the other. It is first highlighted through its concrete relation to the myth of solar activity in the style of statements like "Already Galileo realized that it is the sun that rules and not the other way around". Secondly, it is highlighted through a critique where the conception of the Anthropocene is likened to a geocentric understanding of the cosmos. The idea that the earth is at the centre of the universe and that humans were created in the image of God is equated with anthropogenic notions of climate change through accusations of megalomania, attempts at playing God and a lack of perspective. The posts are part of a digital flow, together with statistics and other visually engaging content, which appeal to the desire to communicate science and rationality but that lacks any human figure. Thus, the figure of Galileo gives identity to such a community; his role embodies the people as a constructed category.

Despite being rejected as plausible explanation for the climate crisis, the myth of solar activity has still lingered. It functions as a critique of climate

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5   For examples of such influencers and the digital content shared on social media, see the report *The new climate denial. How social media platforms and content producers profit by spreading new forms of climate denial*, produced by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH 2024).

research on multiple levels. The following two posts describe how Galileo even today must struggle against the contemporary equivalent to the Catholic Church in the form of the IPCC and political leaders. They are illustrative of an antagonistic relationship, deeply imbued with expressions associated with conflict through the use of such phrases as the need to "fight" and "hunt" down one's opponents:

> THE MIDDLE AGES IS REPEATING ITSELF AGAIN!
> Even today, Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) must fight against contemporary ignorant politicians, and this time the "climate church"! Galileo Galilei was in trouble with the Roman Catholic Church's authorities for pointing out that the sun's surface is marked by spots, among other things. Today, they are known as sunspots!
> (Transcript of a screenshot from social media)[6]

On a textual level of allegorical analysis, the above narrative constructs the people as a political subject through the aestheticisation of an historical figure. The narration is dramatic; the people stand alone against the political establishment and the climate research community, with the Dark Ages as a backdrop. To persuade the audience that climate research is unscientific, the post refers to the climate research community as a "climate church". The narrative is centred around a binary construct dividing reason and faith, knowledge and authority – symbolised by the struggle between the scientist Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church. Politicians who merely accept the conclusions of climate experts are called "ignorant", indicating a lack of knowledge because of a deficient interest in searching for the truth. Such a statement implies the existence of a truth that needs to be revealed, which would alter the conclusions drawn by climate research. Who, then, has the assigned task of revealing the truth? It is at this point that Galileo is transformed into a symbol of the climate sceptic community. The narrator positions himself as an archetypal heroic figure carrying forward the words of the 17th-century scientist. While not explicitly referring to the people, collective identity is forged through the dualist construct of the protagonist and the elite. Central to such a formation is an opposition to the stated dominant ideology. The above quotation is directed at an audience with the ambition to convince and to educate, urging the audience to claim this populist identity as the defender of a just cause. The struggle is portrayed as a traditional heroic tale: St. George in his fight against the dragon, or the battle between good and evil; the people against the

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6   To protect the anonymity of the discussants, due to research ethical considerations, I have chosen not to include any information that might identify the writer. The same decision has been made for all transcripts cited in this article.

elite. On a secondary level of allegorical analysis, the conflict is symbolically formed around the need to restore the popular will against an elite subsumed by "ignorance". It shapes the collective identity of a group opposing climate research, symbolic of Galileo's struggle, thus fostering a sense of community, purpose, insight and belonging.

The narrative claims that the people's role is that of a truthteller, just like the civilian scientist who – through his findings and readings of previous research – proposed a theory that challenged fundamental assumptions upheld by the most powerful institution at the time of Galileo. The suggestion that history is repeating itself frames the argument that the time has come again to fight against the hegemony of powerful societal institutions. The further suggestion that a rejection of climate research serves as a counterhegemonic intervention is an implicit idea underlaying the foundation of the narratives. On the third, moral level of allegorical analysis, it is climate science and the political sphere upholding the idea of climate change, both representative of cultural hegemony, that need to be subverted. Galileo's legacy in the Western tradition not only revolves around the types of conclusions drawn by members of the scientific community. Ginzburg (1989) argues that "Galilean science" is a form of cultural heritage that has shaped general understandings of knowledge and valuable scientific results, thus influencing how people perceive knowledge, education and not least rationality itself. Hence, the narratives involving Galileo in the empirical material make use of a central symbol of scientific knowledge to undermine contemporary (climate) science, thereby adding to the ongoing struggle over epistemological authority.[7]

The following example illustrates another positioning of the people in relation to the climate research community. The post comments on an article published in a Swedish newspaper summarising the IPCC's latest report, presented in the beginning of 2023. Under the heading "The importance of reducing fossil fuel dependency", the post claims:

> But this is a hunt for dissidents! The hunt carried out by climate believers today strongly resembles that of the acts by the Catholic Church against the scientist Galileo Galilei in the 17th century, including their Inquisition – where Galileo argued the sun had the "main act".

In the comments section, the first reply emphasises why Galileo's position is of relevance today, stating "And it [the sun] still does". As with the previ-

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7   Narratives referring to Galilei have also been identified in the Finnish media context and are discussed in an article concerning the media debate on climate activism (Kyyrö et al. 2023).

ous quotation, the narrative describes a conflict between those aligned with climate research, referred to as "climate believers", and those that question or reject it. The posts make an explicit reference to the Inquisition to symbolically liken the trial of Galileo to the relationship between those aligned with climate research, as communicated by the IPCC, and those who are not. On a textual surface level, it differs from the previous post in terms of positioning: rather than describing the relationship as a "fight", it is referred to as "a hunt" of those opposing climate research, transforming the collective into victims of a dogmatic struggle to maintain power. The writer, however, positions himself in opposition to this alleged persecution, resisting the attempts to be silenced. The climate research community is said to be harassing those who question the reliability of the research results. Nothing, however, in the article shared in the post revolves around climate change denial or a reluctance to cut carbon emissions. Rather, the writer of the post considers the publication of the climate research report itself a threat. Galileo is presented as an underdog, striving for a truth that is being suppressed through cultural hegemony in the form of religious beliefs and dogma. Thus, for the dualistic metaphor to make sense, those opposing the climate research – in this context, by rejecting the IPCC reports and politicians accepting the notion of human-caused climate change – do so because the research community has become an institution driven by ideology.

Narratives simultaneously mirror and create our social reality and might in this regard be considered ideologically produced (Jameson 1981). At the same time, they also aim to make sense of reality through symbolism, which gives the narrative its utopian dimension, what Jameson refers to as a socially symbolic act. On the first level of analysis, the narrative creates a tension between faith (climate science) and reason (embodied by Galileo). The delegitimisation of a supposedly religious institution and the people representing reason is a predominant facet of the texts. On the second level of allegorical analysis, it mirrors and reproduces ideas commonly expressed within authoritarian ideology. Posts claim that research publications pose a threat to "dissidents". Heroism is another common ideological trait. Here, the heroic position is embodied in the symbol of the people fighting back, much as Galileo did. The argument in the IPCC's climate report that states need to cut carbon emissions is described as a hunt after what has long been an integral part of societal culture and every-day life. The fact that the IPCC, as a part of the UN, communicates this requirement makes it a symbol of a foreign institution not unlike the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, the IPCC in the posts is transformed into a central power that threatens the nativist position, i.e. that of the Swedish people and their way of life. The people become the homogenous collective largely dependent on fossil fuels extraction,

who are being attacked by the establishment, whereas the 17th-century scientist symbolises the (rational) people through the reconstruction of cultural history.

The construct also reflects present-day political developments, where social conservative positions have gained traction on a global scale. The previous left and right divide has to a certain extent been replaced by another nexus revolving around cosmopolitical and progressive values, on the one hand, and nationalist and socially conservative values on the other (see, e.g. Tabellini 2019). A key feature of social conservative ideology is the positioning political stances as conclusions drawn from the natural order of things; they are self-evident or, in other words, commonsensical. Ideology is instead ascribed to those opposing such stances. By likening the IPCC to the Roman Catholic Church, the former becomes an ideologically driven institution that must be rejected in contrast to the more naturalised position of fossil fuel dependency.

A Secular State Under Siege

The climate research community is portrayed in the posts not only as a threat to the climate sceptic environment or the people. By continuously claiming that belief in climate change is akin to religious belief, the narratives reach beyond the question of the climate crisis. In the Swedish context, secularisation as part of the national self-image is tied to the idea of a well-functioning democracy. The process of secularisation gained momentum and spread through the influence of social democratic politics in the mid-20th century, influencing the Swedish majority culture in its understanding of the relationship between secularism and democratic values (Thurfjell 2015). The continuing discussion about secularism and its cultural influence indicates its social importance. An illustration of this point is the motion put forth in the Swedish parliament concerning state funding for religious organisations, where the political representative for the Moderate Party, Noria Manouchi, began her statement by declaring that: "The fact that Sweden is a relatively secular country is something to be proud of. That legislation, the application of the law, and the state are separate from religion is a prerequisite for a sustainable democratic system."[8] This understanding of the necessity of a separation between religious institutions and the state makes it possible for those opposing the climate change narrative to reject the climate research as a danger to multiple values. By likening the IPCC to a religious institution with political influence, they

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8   The original quote in Swedish was as follows: "Att Sverige är ett någorlunda sekulärt land är något att vara stolt över. Att lagstiftningen, rättstillämpningen och staten är skild från religion är en förutsättning för ett hållbart demokratiskt system."

are portraying it as a threat to democracy, including certain principles, such as a free press and free speech.

As portrayed in the following post, climate science is consequently deemed a danger to Swedish culture and political sovereignty:

> Here in Sweden, it has gone so far that radio, television, and newspapers all keep silent with everything that does not align with the IPCC. They censor everything that is said and written. No politician in the parliament in Sweden has yet dared to say that IPCC warnings are biased and false.

This post suggests the existence of "evidence" that contradicts the conclusions made in synthesising assessments by the IPCC. It also claims such knowledge is being deliberately dismissed through censorship. This claim, in turn, implies an awareness of a coverup both within the traditional media and the political establishment. The parliamentary politicians are afraid to publicly question the IPCC, with the post proposing that they lack the courage to tell the truth. Traditional media are not accounted for in the same way, though. The argument that the media is being controlled in order to hide the truth is a conspiracist idea with olds roots. By extension, the post also suggests the need for a heroic intervention where the people must rise up against repression. The immediate textual content and ideological concerns on the first and second level of allegorical analysis thus revolve around the relationship between the climate research community and traditional media and politicians, where the IPCC exerts control through censorship. Refraining from consuming traditional media material then also becomes a way of upholding sound rationality and protecting oneself from such propaganda. In the comments section, another user states that they no longer consume public service media at all, highlighting that the borders between the narrated reality of events and the world outside it have become diffused.

Despite the fact that the narrative contains no information that would suggest censorship occurs, the act of avoiding traditional media is still carried out because of such a belief. Thus, the writer has constructed a polemic confrontation with the stated inclination of existing power structures to uphold the open, uncensored societal milieu. Ideologically, the conflict concerns the contrast between the openness associated with democratic societies and the censorship associated with closed authoritarian rule. The narrative further nourishes the idea of the IPCC as an institution driven by a suppressive ideology. It helps the writer in positioning climate rejection as a commonsensical stance if one is concerned about ensuring a democratic and open society, free from totalitarian political influence.

In his argument for the development of a critical folkloristics, Gencarella (2011) enters into dialogue with Antonio Gramsci's writings on folklore as a constitutive part of common sense. Within Gramscian thought, common sense is a social and cultural construct that might legitimate cultural hegemony or else, through its possible distillation of good sense, challenge it. It is thus an inherent part of political reality. Herein also lies the main contribution that Gramsci can make to the continuing development of critical folkloristics: encouraging scholars to acknowledge the relationship between folklore and the formation of common sense and to reflect on how it counters or reaffirms ideology and cultural hegemony. If common sense, as conceptualised by Gramsci, argues for the need for a critical dissemination of folklore, Jameson's model for allegorical analysis provides a theoretical framework to reflect on how and why such specific commonsensical claims arise and gain influence in the present through analysis of its ties to historical and political movements.

Contrary to the above statement, certain public figures are openly questioning climate policy, and they assume a prominent role in the narratives on Galileo. Elsa Widding, a former representative of the far-right political party the Sweden Democrats and now an independent in the Swedish parliament, is referred to in another post, which states that: "Elsa Widding is the Galileo Galilei of our time!" Her educational background as an engineer, combined with self-published literature on common sense regarding the question of climate change,[9] has caused climate change deniers to equate her with Galileo in contemporary Sweden. This transformation suggests that some political representatives can fill important roles as experts in the narratives, embodying the type of resistance against climate politics and research that is claimed to be suppressed. She assumes the role in the online posts of an expert who is going against the political consensus on climate change and, by extension, the climate research community. The position in which climate change is rejected with references to common sense is shared by many contemporary political leaders, such as President Trump in the US and President Milei in Argentina. As a political tool, the reference to common sense has historically been more prevalent within the politically conservative strand of thought (Rosenfeld 2018). However, that is not to say that commonsensical claims are not

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9   Common sense is here used as the English translation of the Swedish equivalent s*unt förnuft*. There are, however, etymological differences between the terms, where s*unt förnuft* does not refer to a common or shared opinion, first and foremost, but rather emphasises a person taking a sound and healthy stance. It is sometimes called *sunt bondförnuft*, where the direct translation would be a "healthy sense or reason, like that of a farmer". The word Förnuft developed from the Low German (Niederdeutsche Sprachen) term *Vornuft*, which means *förnimma*, in English to sense or discern.

expressed by those on the political left, where a recent example can be found within the newly emerged left-populist party in Germany.[10]

In Gramscian theory, public intellectuals influence how common sense is narrated. Just as Galileo is transformed into a symbolic shapeshifter, first into a symbol of the people, then into that of an expert, and back again, he becomes the uniting figure and representation of climate denial as a common-sense stance. The narratives hold the utopian promise of a revival of the popular will, which carries with it the solution to the imagined problem of the IPCC exerting authoritarianism through censorship. The popular will reveals the experienced discrepancy between the people and the elite, where the increasing epistemic crisis has allowed common sense to gain traction as a type of political tool. Consequently, the narratives are not only part of performance as entertainment, repeatedly shared on social media, but are also helping forge a logic that – while being inconsistent and contradictory – provides answers and direction, thus further nourishing distrust in societal and scientific institutions.

Economic Insecurity and Dystopian Futures

A central dimension of using Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church as symbols in narratives of climate change denial concerns especially material conditions and economic inequality. It takes the form of an explicitly expressed fear of the difficult living conditions expected to result from the implementation of green industrialisation policies and practices. The fear is combined with the perception that decision-making on issues that directly impact everyday life has been centralised. This perception is narrated through a criticism of the funding of research on climate change. Ultimately, it also becomes a way of criticising expert society, which the texts have likened to a church that lacks scientific legitimacy. The expressed dissatisfaction over economic uncertainty is thus directed at climate research and the IPCC as a central UN body, which, as a symbol of the elite, has forgotten the needs of civil society. The tendency of the posts to reiterate economic concerns and a decrease in financial stability forces researchers to confront Jameson's (1981) foundational question: "What contemporary challenge does it attempt to make sense of or offer a solution to?" References to the medieval Inquisition as a symbolic representation of authoritarian censorship performatively stages a conflict between the people and the elite, in

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10 In a recent interview with the New Left Review, the founder of a new leftist political party, Sahra Wagenknecht, stated the need for "economic common sense", criticising the Green Party's climate policy for increasing the costs of CO2 emissions (Meany and Rathz 2024).

this way offering a narrative supporting the rejection of climate science. It is in this performed political landscape that we find the genesis of narratives that form an everyday rationality where rejection simply becomes a matter of common sense. The following post asks:

> Where does your money go … not to the welfare of the country. Not to your well-being. Where does my pension go … just a question! In case we have been deeply tricked by all these climate threats…

The post expresses a certain level of uncertainty, saying that people might be fooled by the climate reports, described as containing threats. Yet, the post is at the same time somewhat ambivalent, opening the possibility that if there is an ongoing climate change that requires measures being taken, then the (financial) cost might provide protection. By arguing that the conclusions drawn by climate research are not entirely certain, and that they should therefore be rejected or ignored, has been an effective tool of industry and thinktanks since the reality of climate change was first addressed (Oreskes and Conway 2010). The micro-narratives expressing doubt then align with a broader discourse of denial, upholding the idea of fossil capitalism as a necessity. Central to this post is the experience of how societal welfare has been dismantled, where well-being is conditioned by a functioning welfare system. The narrative creates a conflict between funding climate research, on the one hand, and the welfare state and the well-being of its people on the other. It implies that the funding of climate research is the reason for the dismantling of the welfare state. By extension, no longer funding climate research would allow again for a well-functioning welfare system and increased pensions. Another comment calls out the government and requests answers in a more expressive critique:

> The question remains to the government and Reichstag: what do we get for the money? Can we accept that the government taxes us without explaining where this money goes? What use is this enormous sum for the climate?

Both posts use expressions that imply the possibility of hidden truths or agendas. The question of whether "we", which in this context can be understood as civil society (the Swedish people), can agree to increased taxation without knowing where the money is going presupposes that a hidden agenda is already in place. The question is formulated in a way that urges the audience to realise there is only one possible answer. By stating that the question "remains" open, the writer is implying that it has been asked before but has

been left unanswered, thus suggesting a lack of transparency and honesty. As with the previous text, it suggests there might be a hidden truth and that the people are being deceived by authorities or an unnamed other through communication emphasising the need to address "climate threats". Both posts note that the costs of climate research and climate mitigation are significant. However, neither criticises taxation per se, though other strings refer to taxation as a means of control, bearing similarities to previous posts that call attention to authoritarianism:

> Political agenda steers the "likely results of the climate models" in the desired direction, which in turn gives legitimacy to create positions of power and control and tax people with an iron fist!

The phrasing "political agenda" suggests the existence of a (secret) plot that controls climate research, which in turn is used to exert power over civil society. Who or what lies behind the alleged political agenda is not stated. Not only does climate research exert power and control over civil society, such control is in fact its foundational purpose. Reference to the "iron fist" further underlines how power is being exerted in an authoritarian and suppressive manner in the case of climate change. The writer uses taxation as an example of how this power is wielded, suggesting that elites are using financial systems as a means to uphold power through the political legitimisation of suppression. The immediate conflict is between the people's interest in knowing the truth and the freedom from control by the state, from Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony based on the dominance of the ruling class.

The narratives analysed in this article not only function as stories but as tools to organise the world. As Jameson (1981) suggests, the attempts to find solutions by means of the symbolic at the same time reveal their internal contradictions. Departing from the belief in an accelerating authoritarianism and spreading religious dogma, the symbolic solutions offered in the narratives attempt to address this constructed reality: a reality aligned with a conspiracist dystopia. The focus on declining material conditions and asking where social welfare and tax revenues go if not directly to the people are illustrative of a concern with societal development, where climate research, or simply "the climate", becomes the scapegoat that caused the problem. Thus, while the narrative construct contains a critique of hegemony, the solution at the same time reinforces a certain type of hegemony in its argument for upholding fossil fuel dependency. The epistemological crisis of knowledge is transformed into a refutation of science through storytelling. The narrative construct of Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church legitimates a rejection

of climate science; in the reconstructed historical event, science assumes the role of faith and the rejection of science the role of the scientist.

While the posts claim that climate research and climate mitigation efforts are the reason for a loss in financial security and a decrease in state welfare provision, the opposite perspective is voiced in relation to the gains realised through fossil fuel extraction. The consequences of reduced fossil fuel extraction are accounted for in dramatic terms, often with references to crisis or the apocalypse:

> It will be a catastrophe! People will die, maybe in the millions! Because of this climateRELIGION. […] It was fossil fuels that gave us prosperity and saved the people from poverty and starvation.

Climate change is here equated with religious belief, and climate mitigation is described as a life-threatening danger. The narrator positions themself as part of the collective people by referring to "us" gaining wealth and salvation from a system based on fossil fuel extraction. By claiming a counterhegemonic position, for the writer the people become the organising principle in the argument for continued fossil fuel dependency. The post illustrates an exclusionary principle dictating who is considered part of the people as a collective entity and who is not. Not only does it express an anthropocentric perspective on the negative consequences of exploiting natural resources and nonhuman species, it also neglects to recognise how the Global South has suffered the consequences for prosperity in the Global North. Colonialism has been, and still is, a continuous driver of climate change. Today, an increasing number of people have a shorter life expectancy due to air pollution and climate disasters fuelled by global warming. The post reveals the unresolvable contradiction between accelerating CO_2 emissions and ecological and social sustainability.

Historicising a Utopian Longing

In the Swedish context, the move from a fossil fuel-based late modernisation to that of an ecomodern position began to govern the discourse on climate change at the beginning of the 1990s (Anshelm and Hultman 2014). Prior to this development, there were ongoing debates within industry, the political sphere and the media on the best possible way forward to developing a socially and environmentally sustainable energy system and way of life. As Hultman and Yaras (2012, 12047) conclude, the ecological discourse took second place in favour of market solutions, with an emphasis on technological development and financial growth, which "transformed the role of the nation-state into a green technology growth incubator". The previous political consensus

has now been challenged by the newly established Tidö government, a coalition consisting of conservative parties with support from the far-right Sweden Democrats. Climate policy is one of the six policy areas included in the Tidö agreement. In an analysis of the present government and the Sweden Democrats' reforms of Swedish climate policy, von Malmborg (2024, 24) has concluded that the reforms "are largely aimed at slowing down progress and systematically hindering and silencing critics". Furthermore, this aim is accomplished in part through manipulation of factual and scientific information and by redefining democratic concepts (von Malmborg 2024, 24).

The allegorical construct of Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church carry utopian dimensions not only in its attempt to promote continued fossil fuel extraction but also in its ideal to restore a lost rationality that would legitimate such a continuum. The narratives reaffirm and uphold the cultural hegemony of fossil fuel dependency through reference to an industrial past that justifies the extractivist position in the present. In a fragmented society, the political unconscious will always revolve around the struggle against its antagonist. It cannot be universal, as inequality results in conflicts legitimised by those who stand to benefit the most, or where those in subordinate positions find an antagonist in the groups that benefit from such a system. The narratives strongly emphasise that the constructed antagonist in this instance is the political and scientific elite, who stand in contrast to the reality of the people. Thus, the resulting cultural expressions are symptomatic of a crisis involving fossil capitalism, forging ideological defense mechanisms in an attempt to justify an unjustifiable system.

Material conditions securing the future of the welfare state model and where fossil fuels are upheld as a necessity are clearly entangled not only with the narratives on a macro level but also with the highly concrete reality of how modernity came into being through the exploitation of natural resources. When interpreting the narratives' responses to history, it is likewise clear they operate in line with a logic that supports the continuation of such an understanding of the welfare state as preconditioned by the use of fossil fuels, thereby upholding a culture of inequality through reference to a symbolic language. The slow and continuing violence of environmental destruction, by extension, help sustain the global injustices that nourish accelerating climate change,[11] which in turn are made possible by the global economy, where life

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11 I here refer to the sixth synthesising report by the IPCC (2023), which states: "Vulnerability of ecosystems and people to climate change differs substantially among and within regions (*very high confidence*), driven by patterns of intersecting socio-economic development, unsustainable ocean and land use, inequity, marginalization, historical and ongoing patterns of inequity such as colonialism, and governance (*high confidence*)" (Summary for Policymakers Headline Statements: B2).

itself has been capitalised. The attempt to identify and dismiss a supposed climate research ideology by likening it to the historical role of Christian Catholic Church as an institution is somewhat ironic: the Western cultural history in which the definition of humanity and civilisation was formed emerged from a particular interpretation of the anthropocentric human–nature relationship in Christian belief. The ideals were activated in new ways during the Enlightenment together with expanding industrial capitalism. They came to legitimise the exploitation of land through extractivism on a global level, where an instrumentalised understanding of nature laid the foundation of modern industrialisation (Merchant 2020). Thus, the narratives were in themselves formed through ideological influence whereby the contemporary financial system of exploitation rests on a legacy upholding global inequality.

Accepting the notion of human-induced climate change then necessitates taking measures on both a national and global level. For the Global North, it means accepting the reality that societal wealth and welfare during the 19th and 20th centuries was based on (and continues to be based on) colonialism and the exploitation of natural resources (see Ghosh 2016; Mahony and Endfield 2018; Chakrabarty 2023). Denying the effects of climate change then offers a possibility to continue with a certain lifestyle and everyday cultural practices without making any changes, sometimes referred to as upholding the status quo. It thus revolves around established roles and what an acceptance of climate change would require in terms of altering those roles. How we understand history is changing as the climate crisis, most explicitly in the form of carbon dioxide emissions and alterations to ecosystems, gains increasing attention and is altering the public consciousness worldwide. It forces us to come to terms with how we understand ourselves, our culture and historiography, and who has paid the price for Western material prosperity. Ultimately, the allegory maintains a prevailing hegemony, one where nature is regarded as a resource for extraction and where there is no incentive to take responsibility for the global injustices it makes possible.

Conclusions

In the current digital landscape, narratives that seek to deny or diminish the reality of climate change are not merely expressions of personal opinion, they are often rooted in deeper ideological frameworks that challenge the prevailing scientific consensus. Vernacular expressions rejecting climate science are not an isolated phenomenon but are closely tied to broader socio-political tendencies reinforced through reference to ideology and historical examples. Understanding how common sense is constructed in such narratives is critical, as it reveals how the rejection of the climate crisis becomes naturalised, which by extension informs the conversation and incites people to take political action.

This article opened with two questions, the first asking how the struggle over common sense in narratives of climate change denial takes shape in digital spaces and the second how scholars within the fields of ethnology and folklore studies can best capture its social and political influence. By suggesting a critical folkloristic approach, the ambition is not only to shed light on the material content of the narratives or explain the reasons for their attraction. The process of analysing the complex dynamics in the symbol of Galileo and the narrations of a lost rationality has also provided space for an intervention through critique, questioning the assumptions that lay at the heart of the texts' narrated reality. The fields of ethnology and folklore studies have an academic legacy of researching cultural expressions amidst people's mundane every-day realities. Combining this heritage with the practice of critical folkloristics offers ways to formulate counternarratives. Within the scope of this article, this has meant refusing to accept narratives that normalise continuing practices of natural exploitation and where the current epistemic crisis becomes a tool for legitimising them.

The material for analysis in this article could in many ways be considered eccentric or peculiar, therefore being easily swept aside. Yet, something makes the constructs socially desirable given the number of comments and online discussion related to the posts. Therefore, it is important to take them seriously since they have the power to influence how climate politics are perceived. With increased polarisation in society (Falkenberg 2022), the role of ethnology and folkloristic research in helping bridge this gap is even more needed. When seeking to capture and analyse the narratives, it is important to have tools that make is possible to dispute them. Thus, this article has continued the conversation on critical folkloristics as a mode of research by employing Fredric Jameson's model for allegorical analysis. It has applied his theoretical framework to trace the cultural, ideological and historical underpinnings that make a rejection of climate science a commonsensical position, serving as a frame for understanding the narrated attempts to make sense of a stance where the most pressuring crisis in our time is denounced as a false belief. The analysis has shed light on the texts' multiple meanings in relation to contemporary and historical phenomena: concerns about social welfare and macro-level narratives of climate denial, their entanglement with public figures and developments shaping a new nexus in political life. It has demonstrated how reconfigurations of a historical event help construct the people as a political subject and the importance of such reconfigurations as an organising frame for the narratives of climate change denial.

The narratives of climate change denial deploy Galileo Galilei as a cultural symbol of science, making him the embodiment of the climate sceptic community as an aestheticized historical figure claiming a popular identity. The Swed-

ish national self-image of secularisation contributes to the narratives, helping them gain traction, with the IPCC assuming the role of an institution akin to the Roman Catholic Church, driven by a religious-like belief in its cause. The posts depict the IPCC as an authoritarian, foreign threat, seeking to undermine established values, such as freedom of expression and the welfare state. Conversely, the posts transform the act of climate change denial into a guardianship of those values. The commonsensical protection of fossil capitalism, inequality and the status quo is reaffirmed by claiming the symbol of science in Galileo and arguing for a defense of rationality, democratic values and liberty against authoritarianism. While arguing from a counterhegemonic position, they nonetheless reveal a point of focus that strengthens and upholds ideas formed through historical processes that legitimise an anthropocentric, extractivist and unequal perspective while disregarding global injustices. This is the political unconscious at play, mirroring contradictions that evolved as a consequence of complex historical developments. Ultimately, the allegorical construct forms the people as a collective identity through the exclusion of others, revealing a nativist and authoritarian understanding of society that rejects the very values that the narratives claim to protect.

An allegorical reading of online climate change denial posts lets us as researchers see how the texts are entangled with the very concrete reality of broader discourses, societal changes and cultural hegemony. By submitting the texts to analysis on multiple levels, they can no longer be regarded only as irregular expressions detached from social context. To engage with this material is to encounter a world that is inverted; a world where science is faith and the reality of climate change is transformed into a figure of the imagination. In this article, I have demonstrated how the narratives manage to create such a reality and the cultural, historical and ideological underpinnings that answer the question of why they have gained momentum and influence.

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Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed, Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju & Aale Luusua

Seriously Playful or Playfully Serious?
Critical Reflections on the Interdisciplinary Use of the Cultural Probes Method

Abstract

Creative and visual methods have shown great potential to engender new ideas and (self) understandings in participants in research focused on topics that are hard to address via conventional qualitative methods such as interviews. Through their playful approach, such methods can open a whole new window for researchers to understand participants or research phenomena. However, engaging participants through these methods can be challenging, and the outcome can be more uncertain and unpredictable compared to conventional qualitative methods. Our article introduces three case studies that applied a method drawn from design research, namely *cultural probes*. By analyzing these cases together, we are able to highlight the strengths, shortcomings, and issues that need careful consideration when probes are applied to an ethnographic research process. We critically reflect on the ideas of playfulness behind the visual and creative approaches and contribute to methodological discussions on playful methods particularly with adult participants. Our findings emphasize the importance of profound understanding of the epistemological background of the method, *why* playfulness is employed in research, *to whom* probes are targeted, and *how* motivation is engendered in participants. Employed without these considerations, playfulness of probes can appear strange and as something that alienates the study participants rather than engages them in sharing their views and ideas.

Keywords: Playfulness, cultural probes, ethnography, visual and creative methods

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Introduction: Methodological Explorations in Interdisciplinary Research

In recent years interdisciplinary research has become more common in academia and in ethnology, including collaborations among methodologically and epistemologically diverse disciplines. While it has been typical for cultural and social sciences to adopt and use theories, concepts and methods from other disciplines quite flexibly, the current trends of inter- and transdisciplinary research have undoubtedly increased both dialogue and the application of methods across different scientific fields. There has been increasing interest in creative, visual, sensory and art-based methods and approaches to complement traditional qualitative research methodology. This also applies to ethnology and its related fields (see, e.g., Pink 2001; 2009; Wiles et al. 2013; Culhane & Elliot 2016; van den Scott 2018; Lähdesmäki et al. 2020). These methods have been used and developed to overcome some of the challenges that a rapidly changing world with complex political, environmental, economic, social, and digitalized environments have created for qualitative research (Wiles et al. 2013, 18; Koskinen-Koivisto, Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas 2020, xxi). Some of the challenges became particularly evident and widespread during the Covid-19 pandemic in the years 2020–2021 when many researchers had to take novel stances on how to access the field or conduct interviews or ethnographic research. The drivers for methodological development have also arisen from a need to enable the study of new areas of social life, or to examine aspects of social life that are not accessible by traditional methods (Wiles et al. 2013, 20; Mannay 2016, 47, 51–52; see also Lähdesmäki et al. 2020).

The above-mentioned reasons can also be found behind the methodological explorations that will be presented in this article. The article contributes to methodological discussions by highlighting the importance of epistemological considerations when applying experimental and potentially creative and playful tools across different disciplines and combining them with more conventional qualitative data gathering. While some visual methods such as photography and film making (e.g., Sinisalo 2005; Kupiainen 2022), participant-induced elicitation / photo-elicitation (e.g., Koskela 2018; Hänninen 2020; 2022), drawing and storyboarding (e.g., Siim 2020) and sensory ethnography (e.g., Koskinen-Koivisto & Lehtovaara 2020) have been applied in contemporary Finnish ethnology and cultural studies, this article focuses on examining the possibilities of a typical method in design research—*cultural probes*—that has, to date, been less used in these fields, except in design anthropology. Probes are broadly understood as a self-documentation method, including explorative activities and artifacts such as postcards or booklets to be filled out by study participants. They are used to evoke more creative and

playful thinking that can promote collaborative discovery and inform design processes. (e.g., Luusua et al. 2015)

In this article we will reflect on the strengths, shortcomings, and issues that need to be considered when playful methods such as cultural probes are applied as part of ethnographic research. Based on three different empirical case studies in which the method was employed, we examine *why and how playfulness was introduced to and stimulated in our study participants, how playful and creative assignments were received by them, and why probe-inspired tasks worked better in some contexts and study settings than in others.*

The case studies presented in the article are a part of three different interdisciplinary research projects which included close collaboration between humanists, social scientists (e.g., ethnologists and anthropologists) and designers. The Trust-M project (*Designing Inclusive & Trustworthy Digital Public Services for Migrants in Finland*, 2022–2025) is a broad consortium that aims to create practical digital and hybrid tools and solutions for public services to support migrant integration in Finland by enhancing the inclusivity of services. Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed and Johanna Ylipulli have been working on the project to produce social, cultural and contextual understanding of current integration services and trust formation by examining experiences of service encounters from the perspectives of both service providers and migrant customers, along with the role of digital technology in services. Knowledge produced by these case studies should inform solution-oriented design and technology development.

The other study was a collaboration between two projects funded by the Research Council of Finland—AICity (*Experiencing Artificial Intelligence in the Smart City: Co-creating applications for urban life*) at the University of Oulu, and DISC (*Digital Inequality in Smart Cities*, 2020–2025) at Aalto University in Finland—and a private research studio in Mumbai, India. Both projects focused on understanding emerging technologies in urban contexts, with the shared aim being to explore how digital technologies were used in everyday life in different urban places. This study was conducted by Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua in two very different locales: Finland and India.[1]

While the Trust-M project is distinct from the AICity and DISC projects, they share some commonalities[2]: in all projects the focus has been on studying digital technology use on an everyday level among adult participants and they have had the goal to apply research results later in practical ways (e.g., digital/hybrid technology solutions). The endeavor to produce practical solutions has led us to combine probes alongside other qualitative methods (interviews, observations, workshops) that could help us understand research participants' lived experiences and relationship to digital technologies in nuanced ways, to grasp abstract and complex phenomena from different perspectives (e.g., trust) but also to challenge, inspire and reflect practical design processes. By adding playful and creative elements into the research methods in the form of probes we aimed to afford flexibility and an explorative mindset not only for us but also for study participants to defamiliarize mundane phenomenon and to come up with unpredictable results or insights.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of both projects, the authors of this article also come from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (ethnology, design anthropology, education, design research, and architecture). We have included the perspectives of researchers who have a more in-depth understanding and experience of using probes because of their disciplinary and methodological background (Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua) and experiences of researchers who were applying the probes method for the first time (Anne Häkkinen and Avanti Chajed). This adds nuanced layers for scrutinizing both the possibilities and potential pitfalls of using probes in ethnological or interdisciplinary research.

In this article we first introduce the probes as a method and how that method relates to other visual, creative and playful methods that are more widely used in ethnology or ethnographic research. We also briefly discuss how playfulness is understood and defined in adult play research. Then we present the three case studies and how we have applied *activities/assignments inspired by the probes*: as reflective notebooks for city officials providing services for migrants; activities with migrants such as drawing storyboards; and booklets that were completed in long-distance collaboration with Indian participants and researchers in both Finland and India. The probes used in these case studies were applied in the early stages of gathering research material, predating the use of other methods such as interviews or workshops. Each case study illuminates methodological discussions and choices from disparate angles including both the challenges and advantages of playful approaches, particularly with adult participants. Finally, in the last section we draw col-

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2 Johanna Ylipulli has also been involved in all projects and thus has insight on all of the case studies introduced in this article.

lectively on our experiences to reflect on what we as researchers need to take into consideration when using playful methods as part of a study design. By sharing our insights, we hope to further promote methodological discussions of playful and creative approaches.

Probes as a Playful Method

Cultural probes are a research approach developed in design research around the turn of the 21st century (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999) which have become a well-known method of conducting participatory[3] design research. In general, cultural probes refer to a variety of methods that rely on research participants' self-documentation, and adopt a playful, creative, and interactive attitude; their goal is to explore people's unique viewpoints and experiences. Probes were widely accepted and employed by the Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) design and research community but also by social scientists (Gaver et al. 2004; Boehner et al. 2007). As such, they have been further developed, for example as design probes (Mattelmäki 2006), technology probes (Hutchinson et al. 2003) and evaluation probes (Luusua et al. 2015).

The cultural probes approach was originally founded on the philosophical thinking of artists-designers and thus, as a method, its central qualities arise from this origin. The method originated from the need to contact diverse and geographically dispersed groups by utilizing self-documentation tasks. As the metaphor of "probe" implies, they are material objects sent independently into research locations where participants complete tasks without direct researcher presence. It is important to note that the ultimate knowledge interest regarding probes was not to produce descriptive understandings *per se*, but to identify opportunities for design (Gaver, Dunne & Pacenti 1999). The probes were intended to spark the imagination and to provoke the novel thinking of both research participants and designers, as well as to disrupt traditional designer-user roles; the goal was to challenge, inspire, and enable reflexive design practice. Design scholars Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne and Elena Pacenti (1999, 27) openly stated that their "original" cultural probes were not intended to be analyzed. Rather, the researchers created design suggestions that represented what they had learned from the materials. Thus, the initial probes were intended to be interpreted as a creative dialogue between designers and study participants. The primary research question of design research is usually not "What is?" but rather "What could be?" In general, it has

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3   For participatory work in design research, see, e.g., Bratteteig et al. (2013). For discussion on positionality and power relations related to participatory practices in cultural research and social sciences, see, e.g., Gubrium & Harper (2013), Mannay (2016), Suopajärvi (2017), Koskinen-Koivisto, Lähdesmäki & Čeginskas (2020).

very different goals compared to cultural research or social science; it focuses on gathering insights to guide the creation of products, services, or systems, emphasizing innovation or practical application. Cultural probes, then, may represent an initial step in this process.

Usually, a cultural probe is a collection of artifacts that is intended to help researchers and research participants generate empirical and experiential data through creative and reflective assignments, as well as then collect this data as research materials from participants. The tasks and objects in the collection may include, for example, postcards to be filled out, single use cameras, or simply booklets with prompts for writing, sketching, and pasting pictures (Luusua et al. 2015). It is important to note that probes must be carefully designed, and design researchers strive to make them visually pleasing and enticing; this is part of the idea that probes invite the participants to play and create, not just to collect information for researchers. In addition, these qualities underline the reciprocal nature of interaction between the design-researcher and the participant—a probe is like a gift given to the participant, who, in turn, gives their perspectives back (Luusua et al. 2015).

After various research communities began to apply probes in a more scientific manner, these premises were significantly altered. The probes in their various forms have been used for analytic research such as design evaluation (e.g., Luusua et al. 2015). Probes have also been applied in design anthropology to complement conventional ethnography and to provide information on difficult-to-access settings (e.g., Ylipulli 2015a). For example, information and communication technology (ICT) has become ubiquitous—it is used in public spaces but also integrated into even the most private aspects of life. Engaging with individuals' ICT experiences through conventional qualitative or ethnographic methods such as participant observation can be unfeasible and perhaps intrusive. Probes have proved useful in ethnographic research examining sensitive topics (see, e.g., Hemmings et al. 2002); on the other hand, they can also be seen as useful in studying phenomena that are "everywhere" as they enable the participant to highlight personally meaningful moments and instances connected to technology use. They give participants more time to reflect on and craft more thoughtful replies. In interviews, by contrast, the mode of interaction requires reacting quickly though also enables views to be unraveled through conversation.

Cultural probes can be seen as occupying a position between diary studies and visual and creative methods such as participant-induced elicitation[4] (based

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4   In participant-induced elicitation the research participant is asked to create something, for example take photographs or draw pictures related to the research topics (Collier & Collier 1986; Harper 2002; Hänninen 2020).

on photography, film, drawings and artwork or other visual material), which are recognized techniques in the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Bagnoli 2009; Collier & Collier 1986; Elliott 1997; Pink 2001; Gauntlett 2007; Gubrium & Harper 2013; Padgett et al. 2013; van den Scott 2018; Hänninen 2020; Siim 2020). These methods share many similar aims and convergences with probes. They are used to enhance the collaboration, rapport and dialogue between researchers and research participants; to work as an icebreaker in the interview; to study topics or phenomena that are somehow hidden or difficult to verbalize using only traditional qualitative methods; to tackle (invisible) mundane and self-evident aspects of daily lives; to evoke memories and to help recall things; and to promote self-reflective discussions with research participants. (See, e.g., Harper 2002; Hurworth 2003; Padgett et al. 2013; Hänninen 2020; 2022.) Analogous to probes, for example in participant-induced elicitation interviews, research participants are "encouraged to challenge the preconceptions of the interviewer, provide unprecedented perspectives to the discussion, and experiment with different kinds of ideas" (Hänninen 2020, 63). While clear-cut distinctions between the above-mentioned methods might not even be fruitful to make, probes are characterized particularly by their creative, playful aspect and the emphasis on diverse means of expressions.

Defining Playfulness

The focus of this article is not on studying play *per se*. However, it touches upon aspects related to it as our theoretical understanding of *playfulness* is largely influenced by the interdisciplinary field of play research carried out in the humanities and social sciences, as well as in design research. As there exists considerable research literature on play, particularly on children's play, our focus has been on adults. This outline derives from our research projects in which selected participants were all adults, and from what is already known about adults having partly different views on play and playfulness in comparison to children (e.g., Guitard, Ferland & Dutil 2005; Lubbers et al. 2023).

Play and playfulness are closely connected to each other. We see playfulness "as an antecedent and precondition to play" (Heljakka 2024, 77) and as an *attitude* (Sicart 2014, 13). Playfulness as an intrinsic motivation and a frame of mind is perceived as spontaneous, individual, undisciplined, innovative and unpredictable but it is also tied to and conditioned by culture (Hänninen 2003, 105–106). Playfulness in adulthood has also been connected to a sense of humor (or a non-serious approach), openness to trying new things, and a positive outlook involving emotions such as joy and enjoyment (Guitard, Ferland & Dutil 2005; Lubbers et al. 2023). Play is considered to be in its essence ambivalent and vague, a self-directed and voluntary *activity* that combines the

player's creativity, imagination and skill to explore varied objects, environments, and ideas. It can be open-ended and unstructured or goal-driven and structured. According to previous research, playing increases curiosity, proactivity and flexibility to our minds, and thus can facilitate thinking and act as a transformative force. (Sutton-Smith 1997, 2; Henricks 2006, 185; Gray 2015, 125; Heljakka 2024, 24, 77–78.) It can help us go beyond the ordinary, moving us emotionally, mentally and physically (e.g. Huizinga 1970 [1938], 28; Sicart 2014, 3), but it can also make us deal with existing materialities and idea systems such as language, cultural and social norms (Henricks 2015, 115). Like play, playful attitude is part of social interaction and can enable individuals to make emotional connections with others (Henricks 2015, 101; Lubbers et al. 2023, 10). By stimulating study participants' playfulness, we have been particularly interested in activating creativity, imagination and self-expression. In the following sections we introduce our practical implementations, experiences and outcomes of bringing out playfulness through probes.

Notebooks to Elicit Reflections on Abstract Concepts with Professionals: What About Playfulness? *(Anne Häkkinen)*

My case study was related to the Trust-M project in which my role was to examine how service providers understood trust formation and the role of digital technology in service encounters with customers. The probes used in this study consist of notebooks—printed booklets with tasks. They were designed to be a part of ethnographic research that consisted of semi-structured interviews and observations with street-level service providers (13 participants).[5] The study participants were working in public services targeted for migrants, including guidance and counselling services (as service advisors), employment services (as personal coaches) and adult education (as career coaches and teachers). The notebooks were meant as a pre-task for the interviews. Nine participants completed the notebook.[6]

In the early stages of brainstorming with my colleague (Johanna Ylipulli), who was experienced in combining cultural probes with ethnography, we pondered possibilities of carrying out ethnography with other methods. One reason for this exploration was my struggle with approaching and introducing

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5   I also interviewed 13 service providers working at the administrative and managerial level but I did not use notebooks with them. Most interviews with street-level civil servants were in-person, typically in their workplaces.

6   All participants signed a written consent form regarding participating in the interview, completing the notebook, and the usage, dissemination and archiving of produced research material. I have not used the notebook as an illustration if the participant has not given their permission to present the notebook material in direct quotes or images.

abstract themes of trust and trust building in the interviews. Because of this, I wanted to try including more experimental and creative tasks for my participants to bring out some aspects of their work that might have been difficult to express only via interviews. In our initial discussions and notes between me and the design researcher (Rūta Šerpytytė), the role and the purpose of the notebook was framed accordingly: "Should not be central to the study but work as an inspiration for the interview (for helping participants to do self-reflection and paying attention to different dimensions of customer work)."

The tasks in the notebook were meant to activate unorthodox thinking and to help participants to recall customer situations afterwards in the interview. Ideally it could help participants with their work, for example with self-assessment such as promoting conscious evaluation of interactions with customers, and the role digital technology plays or *could* play in those interactions. The set of assignments could be interpreted and completed in multiple ways even when some of them were more structured through the given instructions.

When deciding the design criteria together with the design researcher, one important criterion was the possibility to fill the notebook flexibly, either during a workday or after or otherwise occasionally during five workdays, as this could be crucial for adopting a more playful and relaxed attitude characterized by a readiness to improvise (see Malaby 2009, 206). Also, based on the previous research on using cultural probes with professionals (see Lucero & Mattelmäki 2007), we wanted to be considerate of the limited time service providers could allocate to completing the tasks. Since it was difficult to evaluate how much time it would take to do the assignments, we offered different options for how to respond to the tasks. This simultaneously introduced participants to several creative ways to express their thoughts but also the possibility to stick with more conventional ways of self-documentation if more playful elements felt off-putting to them. Participants could choose to answer briefly or more in-depth in some open-ended tasks by writing a story/narrative, putting down short notes, creating a poem, or drawing something. We also added warm-up tasks that were quicker to grasp, such as marking the technological tools that participants used in their daily work.

We designed the visual elements to invite a relaxed and playful attitude towards the tasks (e.g., using emojis) as well as to help participants tackle abstract topics. For example, in one task we used building blocks and a wrecking ball as visual illustrations and metaphors to invite participants to contemplate what the elements of building trust could be and what might damage it (see Figure 1). In another task (Figure 2) we utilized the visual cue of a thermometer to "measure" their clients' trust, expectations, and confidence; participants could freely choose one or several situations they had with clients during the week and reflect on the encounters from these perspectives. As all

Blocks of trust

Every interaction with customers is different, but some feel better than other. Think what makes an interaction **good**, creates **trust** and leaves both you and the customer **satisfied** (blocks). Feel free to add more blocks if needed! Also, think what are the factors **destroying** trust (wrecking ball).

Prejudice
impulsivity (customers side)
Dishonesty

Mutual language for communication

Understanding of the customer's cultural backgrounds
Emotional intelligence

Calm space
Sensitivity

Clear instructions and explanation of what's going on / been done
Honesty (!!) (explaining rightaway, if something won't work out as customer wishes ..)

Measuring the atmosphere

As a service advisor, you can often sense "the temperature" during the service situation. Sometimes there can be too much, too little, or just the right amount of things like trust, expectations or confidence, **from the customer's point of view**. Think of one specific interaction, shortly describe it, and mark the levels accordingly. Feel free to use different colors or just draw a line. You can repeat this task three times, thinking of different situations!

Customer needed to know about the lastenvalvoja & elansturei process. She's been talking with me before Describe the situation
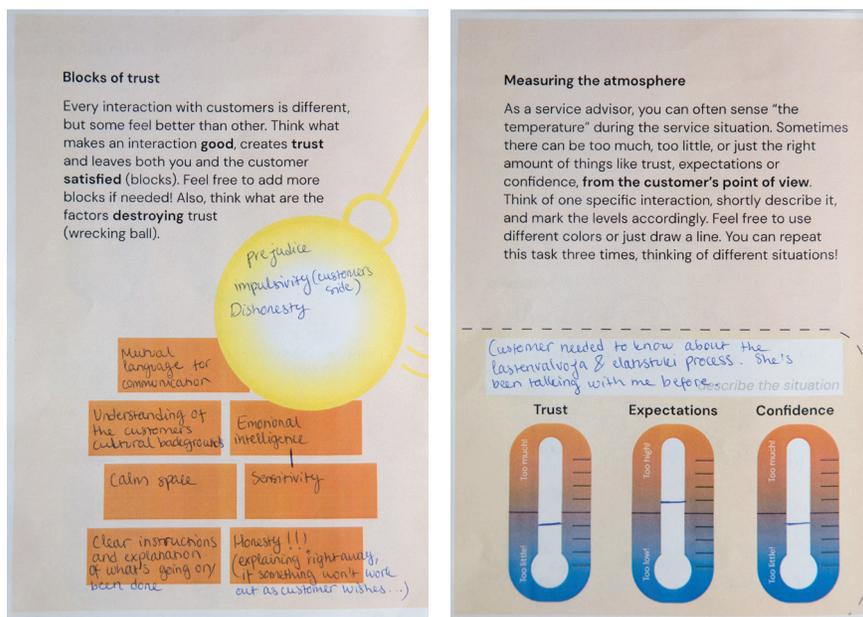
| Trust | Expectations | Confidence |

Fig. 1: Visual cues in notebooks to help participants tackle abstract concepts. The notebook task: "Blocks of Trust". Photograph by Tuomas Marttila.
Fig. 2: "Measuring the atmosphere" assignment caused confusion among participants. Photograph by Tuomas Marttila

participants used Finnish and/or English in their work, they could choose to complete the booklet either in Finnish or English. The notebooks were printed in color and stapled, enabling the participants to have them as physical objects and fill them in by hand.

When scheduling interviews with each participant,[7] I confirmed they had received their notebooks in time and would have at least two weeks to complete them. I also gave some general guidelines via email. At this point, some participants asked me for clarifications regarding how to complete the notebook as they worried whether they had understood the tasks correctly. The ambiguity of some tasks seemed to confuse and cause feelings of uncertainty in participants despite my attempts to alleviate potential discomfort both in the introduction of the notebook and in email correspondence. Participants also seemed to struggle to adjust their expectations and ideas about what

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7   Participants were recruited via managerial-level persons working in different units within the same city. I introduced my study and the notebook to teachers in their workplace face-to-face. With other street-level professionals we communicated first via email.

scientific research should look like, whether playfulness and the non-serious approach of the notebook fit with the idea of the scientific method. This has been reported in previous studies that have applied cultural probes (e.g., Mattelmäki 2008). During interviews I also asked for feedback[8] regarding the notebook, and received quite straightforward replies:

> One of the service advisors mentioned that she had difficulties understanding the instructions of the tasks (overly complicated instructions) during the hectic workday. It took time for her to get some kind of understanding of what the tasks were about and still she and other service advisors were not sure how their answers might help the research, or what they should write about. She said laughing that they (service advisors) should be considered as three-year-old children and instruct them in a similar way. (Field notes, 21.3.2024)

The above-mentioned "Measuring atmosphere" assignment (Figure 2) turned out to be perhaps too ambiguous and complicated, and without further explanations taking place in the interview it would have been impossible to interpret participants' answers (see also Mattelmäki 2008; Ylipulli 2015b). On the other hand, the purpose of the assignment was to recall certain customer situations, and in that sense the task fulfilled its purpose well.

Despite the ambivalent feelings which the notebook evoked in some participants, they seemed to be motivated to fill it, some of them even thoroughly. However, it is more difficult to evaluate how much the tasks were enabling a playful attitude, creativity or novel thinking. I did not ask this directly from the participants. We had added elements to the assignments that we considered essential for invoking playfulness, such as involving positive affect, having non-literal or symbolic elements to encourage the use of imagination and flexibility, and the tasks to be more ambivalent or vague in nature (see Sicart 2014, 31–32; Gray 2015, 125; Heljakka 2024, 73–78). However, most participants completed the notebook in more conventional ways—writing notes and narratives, even in the assignment in which we encouraged participants to generate ideas for potential future (sci-fi) technological solutions for their work. Only one participant drew a technological solution, none wrote a poem.

There seemed to be more problems engaging in imaginative tasks in the notebook. It is very likely that completing the notebook during the (potentially hectic) workday left participants little time and space for taking a relaxed and playful attitude or activating one's imagination. However, while the ideas, for example, for future sci-fi technologies were either quite ordinary or not necessarily suitable as real-world digital solutions, some answers highlighted other

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8   Some participants also wrote their feedback in the notebook.

important aspects service providers tackled in their everyday work. As such, these answers gave me a different perspective on things participants discussed in the interviews and, on the other hand, helped them to express these issues in unfamiliar ways. For example, one teacher presented an idea of technology that could enable her to read her students' minds to better understand them to bridge experienced language and cultural barriers. Her answer can be interpreted—based on the interview discussions with her—to emphasize the communication challenges she faced in trying to help her students, many of whom had accumulated a range of problems in their lives.

Regarding integrating the notebook with other methods, the most fruitful combination proved to be the one in which I was able to conduct observations before the interview, and/or when I had a chance to read the notebooks before the interview. This was not always possible, but when it was, I had a chance to ask more elaborate questions both related to my observations and the notebooks. However, the analytical potential of the notebook stayed rather modest apart from the task "Building blocks of trust". One benefit the task offered was the possibility for participants to contemplate a highly abstract concept beforehand, instead of coming up with something in the moment of the interview alone. Thus, as a pre-orientation for the interview and as a starting point for further reflections, the notebook worked nicely. While it is difficult to know whether more open-ended assignments might have engendered different outcomes, it is possible that the framework of some tasks *limited* the potential of expressions or unexpected insights of participants instead of expanding them.

As this method was new to me, it probably made me hesitant to apply the whole potential of creative and playful elements. The way I adapted the probes also showed some limitations in my understanding of the method even when I familiarized myself with it by reading and having conversations with experienced colleagues. For example, I could have explained the purpose of the notebook even more clearly to help participants orientate to the tasks. I also did not integrate the *social aspect* of playfulness and play (see Sicart 2014, 2; Henricks 2015, 101), such as the possibility for participants to explore tasks together for example in a group interview or in a workshop—which has proven to be a beneficial approach when using probes in design research (Ylipulli 2015b). Now each participant did the assignments individually which, on the other hand, enabled more private insights but left out the chance to discover things in collaboration with others. Doing things together might have also helped to evoke a more playful attitude within a group and individual participants.

Using Probes with Migrants: Facing the Complexity and Unpredictability of Visual Methods *(Avanti Chajed)*

Like Anne Häkkinen, I was also working on the Trust-M project. My area of interest was to study the experiences of immigrant women in using public services in Finland. I was drawn to the visual and creative methods to add materiality (Kuntz 2015) to my understanding of participants' experiences. For example, small points of connection with research participants, such as their WhatsApp profile photos, may provide a whole new window into understanding them (Chajed 2022, 97–98). Probes could serve a similar purpose. My reason for using probes partly differed from the original intention behind them (inspiring the design possibilities). However, I was drawn to their potential as objects of play, creating new ways for participants to explore and express their feelings about using services and their process of making Finland home. My intention was to use probes as complementary material with semi-structured interviews primarily to spark creative thinking and representation of experience that would tap into participants' emotional, mental and physical realities, much like play and playfulness has been thought to do in previous scholarship (Huizinga 1970 [1938], 28; Sicart 2014, 3).

I created three probe activities to capture the immigrant women's experiences. The first was to create a storyboard of the research participants' initial arrival and process of making Finland home. Sunok Lee, a colleague who works in design and Human-Computer Interaction helped with the templates and made a comic strip–like page that could be filled with drawings, cutouts and speech bubbles (Figure 3).

The second probe activity was a resource map (Figure 4) in which participants were given an empty box to draw and connect the resources they relied on the most while living in Finland. The participants could add services, smaller communities, religious institutions
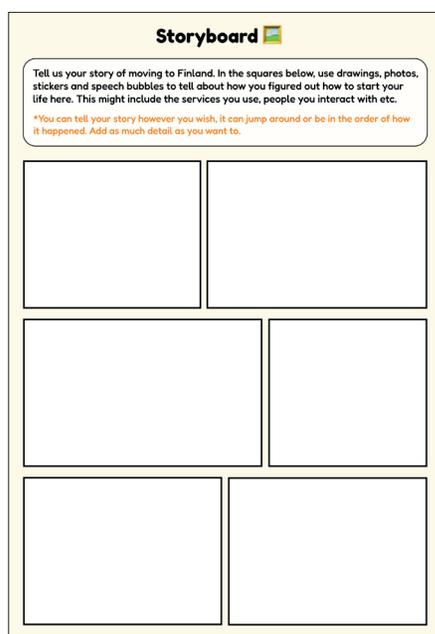

Fig. 3: Template made by Sunok Lee for the "Storyboard" activity. Photograph by Sunok Lee

Resource map 🗺

1. Draw a map of the services you use. Also include digital services (i.e. websites, technologies, etc). Draw each one. You can also draw connections between them if you want to.

2. Now use the emoji stickers to show how you feel about each of the services you have drawn.
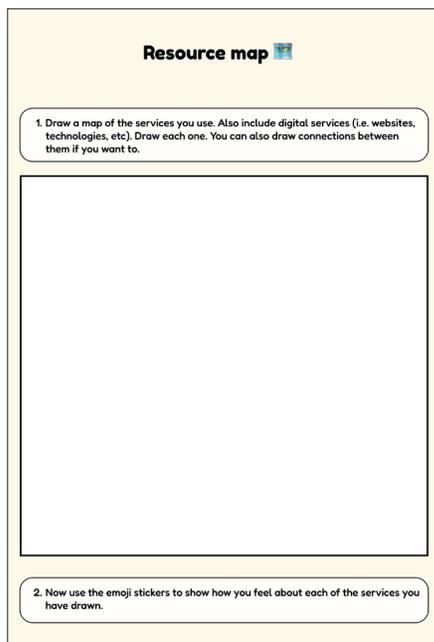
Fig. 4: Template made by Sunok Lee for the "Resource map" activity. Photograph by Sunok Lee

and spaces such as grocery stores. They were then asked to use emoji stickers to label how they felt about each resource. Finally, the third probe activity was a letter from an imaginary friend asking for advice on what to do after finding out she was pregnant. The prompt was to reply to this friend.

Making decisions on how to present each activity turned out to be challenging as I had no previous experience of using these methods or a thorough understanding of who my participants were. How would participants react to these prompts? What kinds of activities could I ask them to do? There was also a part of me that felt these were a bit silly. Thus, I decided to pilot the probes first with a group of six participants attending an obligatory class related to employment services. The class was held by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that, in their own words, promoted integration. Thus, the target customers in the class were generally migrants.[9] The teacher and I agreed that I would come once a week and pilot one probe a week. After completing the activity together, I would discuss with the class how the activity went and their ideas for modifying it. My colleague (Johanna Ylipulli) had told me about how her own experience of piloting probes had led to very fruitful and interesting results. Through her own pilot, she had discovered that a rather off-beat prompt was in fact the most thought-provoking and generative. I thus had high hopes for this pilot.

A day before starting the actual probes, I decided to do an introductory activity that would help the participants and I get to know each other. With the help of the teacher, I explained in Finnish that we would draw picture representations of ourselves. We could draw the things that were important to us, a portrait, and activities we enjoyed. I wanted to keep this as broad as possible

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9   The NGOs approach to integration was not exclusively on migrants and they actively worked to counter this belief. However, they did not have the power to decide who was assigned to this class.

to allow them the freedom to express themselves however they wished. As an American born to Indian immigrants but now living in Finland, I looked and sounded outwardly like them with my broken Finnish and brown skin. We were limited only by language, as we were all using Finnish and only one participant had relatively fluent skills in the language. Most of the participants seemed to be women in their 50s.

I sat next to one of the participants and drew along with her. She was uncertain about what to draw at first and was self-conscious about her drawing but as time went on, she grew more at ease with the drawing, taking inspiration from others to add more to her own. The drawings that were created were beautiful. Most represented the sun and nature in some way. Traveling was a common theme. I came away from this feeling optimistic about how the probes would go. Enthusiastic, the teacher and I agreed I would come again the next day, this time to try the first probe. The beginning of the session was promising, as was reflected in my notes:

> Feeling the lightness in the atmosphere, I started explaining my two goals for today… Karima[10] interrupted me and said my Finnish was much better today than yesterday. I laughed and said yes, because I had so much practice from yesterday…Kiran said I should come more often and my Finnish would get really good.

Things changed though when we started the storyboard activity (Figure 3) about how they made Finland home. They were unsure where to begin. With prompts from the teachers, they all started writing with the same sentence "*Tulin vuonna…*" (in English "I came in the year…"). One woman was writing each letter with precision and care. All three who were attending that day asked for help with spelling at least once. I made several attempts to encourage them to draw, almost pleading with them. It felt like a classroom, and I was a new teacher who had waltzed in. There was a change eventually that I documented in my observation notes:

> I asked Kiran more questions about how she found the Finnish class, she again said "sociotoimisto"[11] and I finally decided to ask what this was…we eventually shifted to having a conversation together. At this point, the atmosphere changed again, instead of *them* being the students, *I* became the student, and it became apparent that all of them were the experts. I was the only one ignorant of what they were talking about.

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10 All names are pseudonyms.
11 I later found out she was referring to *sosiaalitoimisto* (in Finnish), or the social services office that provided aid to refugees.

The activities I was asking them to do appeared even sillier when juxta-posed with the hardships their refugee background likely entailed. The pressure I felt in that moment—primarily from their incredulity at how oblivious I was—was too much and tears came to my eyes. Internally, I wondered at the strange turn of events.

After the class, the participants gathered around me and gave me hugs, offering their friendship and admiring a photo of my 8-month-old child. I became very aware of the imbalance in privilege between us and that I was likely to gain more from them than they would from me, a dilemma many other researchers have faced (e.g., Beeman-Cadwallader, Quigley, and Yazzie-Mintz 2012). I berated myself for getting caught up in the notion of creative methods for their own sake. I realized I could not prioritize collecting research material over the value of making research relevant to and for participants (e.g., Alcoff 2008, 8–11).

My next visit was buoyed by their compassion. We were connected by it as we chatted before the class began. Feeling less pressure to have something "interesting" happen, I went in to try the resource map (Figure 4). I decided to give an example this time, having realized I could not make assumptions about what the participants knew or understood. With six participants present that day, we discussed some services we may have used. I emphasized they could just write the name of each service and that no drawing was needed. As they made their own maps, I passed out the emoji stickers and was met with surprise, delight and gratitude as they realized the packets were for them to keep and take home. One man at this point stopped using the stickers, preferring to draw. I imagined him giving them to his children when he came home. They enthusiastically created their maps and marked how they felt about them.

We never did the last activity as writing a letter would not fit well with the setting and the group of participants who had limited language proficiency in (written) Finnish and/or in English. Instead, the first two probes served as a preface to form a relationship with participants as I stepped back and became an observer, a helper and a co-participant during their regular activities in the class. My pilot morphed into participant observation as I explored how this NGO carried out the controversial task of integration. From the pilot taking an unexpected turn, I could build a stronger relationship with all of them.

Would I do probes again? Probably not without serious consideration about who and what they were for or without having a deeper connection to design research in my study. The setting of a classroom where the participants were required to be present meant that the elements of playfulness were difficult to create as it did not promote spontaneity or feel self-directed (see Hänninen 2003, 105–106). In this case, the classroom environment, when it was not based on voluntary participation in the course, was at first adding power im-

balances between participants and me as a researcher. It is likely that participants felt obliged to engage in probe activities even when they were told the activities were voluntary. Thus, circumstances made probe tasks more restrictive to participants instead of broadening possibilities for self-expression and self-exploration for them. However, when I let go of wanting the probes to be fun and made the activities suitable for a classroom through modeling the resource map first and making it less "artistic" and more flexible, the participants responded more positively. By giving stickers to them, the research (or "playful") objects also became a gift (see Heljakka 2024, 60). This helped the participants feel at ease, which in turn probably made the research more collaborative and more connected to the original idea of the probe method (Luusua et al. 2015).

At its essence, my experience in the field shows how working with others and with methods that we are less familiar with is often messy and unexpected in nature and can lead to uncomfortable and vulnerable situations for both researchers and participants. It can, however, also make visible and shake existing power structures. For my study, this moment of vulnerability more than the use of playful methods was a pivotal moment, allowing me to put participants first and learn the value of care in our journey as researchers.

Cultural Probes as a Method for Long-Distance Participatory Research *(Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua)*

Our study was a collaboration between the projects AICity and DISC, and it was originally born as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented researchers from engaging in face-to-face contacts with participants. In and around the year 2020, public gatherings all over the world were viewed as physically risky as well as ethically problematic and were sometimes outright prohibited. As a response, telepresence methods were quickly adopted and developed globally, with academic work being no exception. This prompted us to ask the question if we, as researchers should and could do research differently in a post-pandemic world. Therefore, we decided to experiment with *probe-inspired* tasks that enabled in-person contacts to be minimized. We have successfully applied probes before in our studies, therefore exploring how probes work *per se* was not the focal point of our study but rather exploring how they work in such a long-distance context with co-researchers as intermediaries. In the study locations of Mumbai, India and Espoo, Finland, the researchers initiating and supervising the study (Johanna Ylipulli and Aale Luusua) did not directly interact with the participants, not online or in-person. The Indian portion of the study was carried out by a designer and co-researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) working in a private research studio based in India, and the part in Finland was carried out by a group of master's students acting as co-researchers.

BRIEF GUIDE
संक्षिप्त गाइड

1 Get to know the package/booklet
कार्यक्रम पैकेज के बारे में जानें

This booklet is based on the Cultural Probe method. **Using your own personality and creativity in filling out the booklet is allowed and recommended!**
There are no right or wrong answers to the questions – **we want to hear your unique thoughts.**

यह पुस्तिका सांस्कृतिक जांच पद्धति पर आधारित है। पुस्तिका को भरने में अपने स्वयं के व्यक्तित्व और रचनात्मकता का उपयोग करने की अनुमति है और अनुशंसा की जाती है! सवालों के कोई सही या गलत जवाब नहीं हैं - हम आपके अनूठे विचार सुनना चाहते हैं।

2 Complete the tasks in the package in a way that suits you
कार्यों को इस तरह से पूरा करें जो आपको सूट करे

If you run out of space, you can attach new pages or materials. **You can add pictures, text, drawings or even poetry to all tasks!** For your convenience, we have also included cut-and-past pictures, a gluestick and scissors. You can also send us digital materials to [Dani's email] if you wish.

यदि आपका स्थान समाप्त हो जाता है, तो आप नए पृष्ठ या सामग्री संलग्न कर सकते हैं! आप सभी कार्यों में चित्र, पाठ, चित्र या कविता भी जोड़ सकते हैं! आपकी सुविधा के लिए, हमने कट-एंड-पास्ट तस्वीरें, एक स्लूस्टिक और कैंची भी शामिल की हैं। आप चाहें तो हमें [दानी के ईमेल] पर डिजिटल सामग्री भी भेज सकते हैं।

3 Return the package to us
हमें कार्यक्रम पैकेज लौटाएं

We are available to answer your questions at any time through Whatsapp, text or email.
9567756586 or danikraju@gmail.com

हम व्हाट्सएप, टेक्स्ट या ईमेल के माध्यम से किसी भी समय आपके सवालों के जवाब देने के लिए उपलब्ध हैं।

Fig. 5: Instructions to fill in the booklet. Photograph by Dani Kalarikalayil Raju.

This created contingency that was also part of our study design and led to one of the questions we wanted to reflect on: How far can we go with erasing the presence of the researcher from the study setting, using probe materials as mediators and working with other people as co-researchers who are present in-situ?

At the same time, our intention was to collect materials with our young adult study participants[12] to understand different ways people engage with digital technologies in urban public locations as well as to inform the design of urban technologies. Thus, our study can be perceived as design research. Content-wise, our probes had the goal of playfulness, aesthetic pleasure and engendering creativity in our participants. These came into consideration in every aspect from the content of the tasks, the informal language used, all the way to the colorful art style and high-quality print work. To allow more creative expressions and various styles of communication, we offered the possibility to attach, for example, cut-and-paste pictures, drawings or even poetry to all the tasks. These were all meant to invite the participants to be part of our design research process—*to collaboratively create something that could be*.

The study design consisted of the probe, which included a *printed colorful notebook and its accompanying materials* (Figure 5), and a *video-logging* (vlog) task. These tasks were afterwards discussed in an on-site/

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12 The age group was chosen due to being the focus of the DISC project.

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hybrid workshop. In addition to reflecting on the self-documentation tasks, the participants collaboratively did a task on *technology as magic* in the workshop (described below). During the "probing period" before the workshop, participants were to complete the notebook on "technology in everyday life" in two weeks. In the notebook, we asked the participants to provide their basic information; perform a self-perception task; track their digital device use for one day; list all the digital devices they used daily; and finally, tell us about their background with technology and views on digital inequality. We intended to defamiliarize the participants with their everyday life by including surprising aspects in some of the tasks—for example, by asking them to match the devices they used with an animal from the provided image sheet.

Our probe included a vlog to track digital technology use outside the home by filming participants' everyday urban settings. The flexible video approach allowed spontaneous filming and commentary to determine what the participant are doing, why they are doing it, and how it makes them feel. We framed this task as a vlog, a popular social media activity, to create a mood of informal and relaxed playfulness through an intrinsically motivating activity, while allowing participants to reflect on their daily lives and self-document the results. The researchers also filmed their own vlogs, sharing glimpses of themselves and their values for the participants before they did the assignment.

With the final task, which was carried out during the workshop, the idea was to explore participant imaginaries of future cities and technology by using the metaphor *technology as magic* (Ylipulli, Luusua & Ojala 2017). Metaphors have great potential in producing "creative friction" and they can thus effectively work in research that aims to empower the study participants to imaginatively envision alternative futures (Lakoff & Johnson 2008; ibid.). In this assignment, participants were asked to first recount familiar magical stories they knew and use these stories while envisioning future cities and future mobilities (with the metaphor of a magic carpet). We held long conversations between the three researchers on whether these tasks were appropriate in the context, and eventually deemed that magic seemed to be a suitable touchstone for our participants.

The India study consisted of 14 participants, aged 20 to 29, and all were residents of a Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) in Mumbai, India. SRA buildings constructed by the government contain apartments for slum dwellers who vacate their homes in slums. The apartments are often very small with many family members living together. Our co-researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) led pre-workshop meetings in one such home and the workshop in a community space in the same building.

The community liaison—a longtime collaborator with the private research studio in Mumbai—presented the research team, project, data privacy eth-

Fig. 6: "Self-image" task creatively and playfully implemented by one of the participants. Photograph by Dani Kalarikalayil Raju.

ics, and probe assignments in Hindi during our pre-workshop meeting. All meeting attendees signed consent forms. All participants had smartphones and joined the researchers' WhatsApp group. The group also had an on-demand Hindi notebook task explanation video. Participants shared the "capturing daily digital encounters" vlog output in this WhatsApp group. Like in the first case study, we encouraged participants to complete the booklet using their own personality and creativity. Participants could write in any language. The community liaison was the researchers' "point of contact" and actively engaged in the group, answering task-related questions, encouraging participants to submit daily vlogs, and reminding them of notebook tasks.

The approach resulted in a rich cache of materials, in various forms: researcher reflections, participant writings in English and Hindi, video, and workshop materials.[13] Signs of playful engagement were evident in how the tasks were understood and approached. For example, in the self-perception task, "Draw yourself with things that relate to you," participants added color, used materials that were not provided, and extended their work creatively. One participant stood out by breaking free from conformity, drawing beyond the allotted space with a tree that included branches and roots, showcasing their involvement and imagination by using the metaphor of a tree (Figure 6; for more about the undisciplined and flexible nature of play/playfulness, see Hänninen 2003, 105–106; Heljakka 2024, 24, 77–78). The primary purpose for fostering such a creative mindset and out-of-the-box thinking was to enable the participants to engage in their daily life in a more reflective manner, which would, in turn, enable more in-depth conversations in the workshop.

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13 At the time of writing this article we have only performed preliminary analysis of these materials.

Participants reviewed notebook assignments and discussed in groups of four to five during the three-hour workshop. The co-researcher and community liaison led the workshop by communicating the agenda, keeping us on schedule, and guiding discussions. Audio recordings from each group were captured for analysis. During the workshop, participants spoke Hindi, English, or both, and the atmosphere was relaxed. The way participants interacted with each other showed a shared sense of humor, including joking and laughing.[14] The playful nature of the probes seemed to work to our advantage especially well in this context, probably at least partly because the group knew each other very well beforehand.

Furthermore, including vlogging as a part of the probe enabled us to see the city through our participants' eyes but also helped participants to see the city from different perspectives (see also Mannay 2016; Hänninen 2020). This was illustrated in a reflection by one of the participants:

> I travel from my workplace to home everyday but I have never observed people or watched them using these machines [digital devices like mobile phones]. I am very glad to see so many new machines in my area but at the same time I was wondering why I haven't seen those things even though I go through the same road everyday. (Audio recording, translated to English from Hindi)

Overall, the importance of rapport building was highlighted in this study because of geographical distance and non-existing direct contact between supervising researchers and participants. The local researcher (Dani Kalarikalayil Raju) was living in the same city as our participants, was a competent speaker of Hindi and English and a researcher with a background from a respected institution, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). He also participated in pre-workshops and the workshop in person. Consequently, these factors helped form a rapport between our local researcher and the participants. He also acted as a mediator and interpreter between the Finnish researchers and Indian participants, aiding with the design and explanation of the tasks and the subsequent analysis of the materials. However, probably the most important factor for the success of the study was that the local researcher was familiar with the probes method and design approaches in general. Thus, he was able to generate a playful atmosphere and explain in depth the nature of the probes to the participants. He acknowledged the intrinsic value of creating conditions that enabled the participants to project to the future, reflecting on different kinds of future possibilities.

It was not addressed in our study whether doing such work would be possible in a situation where *none* of the researchers would be locally present. Our study,

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14 For more on humor as part of playfulness, see Guitard, Ferland, and Dutil (2005), and Lubbers et al. (2023).

however, confirms that a hybrid model for long distance participatory research is a feasible strategy, and research methods such as probes could help overcome obstacles when researchers cannot enter the field physically—as long as everybody is on the same page about the deeper methodological commitments.

This point on methodological understanding is further confirmed by the study that we did at the same time in Finland to compare results gathered within different cultural contexts. In the city of Espoo, ten young adults aged 20 to 29 participated in the research. They all studied at the same university located in the capital region.[15] The study process and tasks were the same as those carried out in India, with the exceptions of the language used and some visuals: as mentioned above, we adapted the images used in the notebooks to reflect the study contexts. In addition, this study was realized without the Finnish researchers being in direct contact with the study participants: a group of three master's students carried out the practical parts of the study as part of their course assignment, so they acted as our "local researchers." We were not teaching the course but acted as advisors of the assignment. The two Finnish researchers held a few meetings with the students and advised them on cultural probes, on how to approach the participants, and how to facilitate the workshops. Cultural distance was not an issue within this context, and we also thought that having students as co-researchers who facilitated the study with other students would promote rapport building.

Overall, we can say that this part of the study also produced interesting research material. However, the recorded data demonstrates differences in the atmosphere and depth of the discussions compared to the material collected in India: the study participants did not seem to fully understand the playful dimensions of the tasks, and conversations stayed on a more superficial level. The master's students who facilitated the workshop also reported to us about this confusion, and the workshop itself was shorter, lasting less than two hours.

We deem that we underestimated the need to provide detailed instructions and background information on our research and especially on the probes approach to the master's students who acted as intermediaries in this case. Because we were all Finnish and from an academic background, —including the study participants—we thought we did not need to have as many meetings and negotiations as we had in the study in India. This proved to be wrong: we did explain the principles of probes as well as the aims and goals of our projects to the students, but as students inevitably had a more limited understanding and experience of the probe method as well as on design research in general, we should have reserved more time for discussions with students. We should have given them a better sense not only of the method itself but also of the

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15 Some, but not all, of the students that participated in the workshop in Espoo knew each other beforehand.

ideas of playfulness and creativity, potential challenges of the method and how to inspire study participants to engage in playful activities (for more on play as an attitude, see Sicart 2014, 13). We should have also established a more profound relationship with them to enable them to mediate and transmit our ideas to the study participants. Thus, the sub-study in Finland did not bring us as close to the digital worlds of the participants as the study in India did, despite the (assumed) cultural and geographical closeness.

Discussion: Applying Playful Methods as Part of Ethnography— Lessons for the Future

Our article contributes to multidisciplinary research on visual, playful and creative methods by discussing why and how cultural probes used in design research could be applied in ethnology or related fields. Probes can be particularly suitable for use alongside interviews and participant observation in *applied* and *participatory* research in ethnology or interdisciplinary work when a research goal entails developing practical societal, or design implementations and solutions. The main contribution to previous research, however, comes from our reflections on what needs to be considered when applying the (playful) method typical for the discipline (e.g., design research) that greatly differs from ethnology. Probes were eventually developed in design research to function as an instrument for supporting concrete design processes. Thus, usage of probes in design fields have different research aims, such as acting as a catalyst for creating speculative knowledge (how things could be), than they do in ethnology and cultural studies that typically thrive for in-depth understanding of studied phenomena.

In this section, we pull together the most important insights and lessons from our studies. We have chosen to openly share our experiences and reflect on when we have not been able to meet the intended objective of the study or have not been so successful with the method. By scrutinizing the features that cannot be regarded in advance when conducting research, we hope to increase understanding of the method, potential challenges and pitfalls but also the means of how to avoid them and how to develop the study design further. These lessons can also be applied to other visual and creative methods as they share many similarities with the cultural probes approach.

As brought out in our case studies and in previous research on probes methods, the benefits of using them lie in their potential to open new perspectives to understanding participants' experiences. Creative and visual methods have repeatedly shown the ability to engender new ideas and discoveries in participants and particularly have the potential to defamiliarize aspects of our lives that have become self-evident. Probes can work as a method for long-distance participatory research when researchers cannot directly attend or access the

field physically. These methods also allow participants to express themselves in alternative ways than with language although analysis of materials still requires further discussions between researchers and study participants to ensure adequate interpretations. Additionally, probes can help to verbalize more complex and abstract things that are difficult to explain immediately in words in interview situations. (see first and third case study; Gauntlett 2007, 3; Mannay 2016, 28, 32–34, 112; Hänninen 2020)

However, we argue that the method cannot be used without acknowledging its broader epistemological commitments. This argument is embedded in all the following insights marked in italics. Before applying the method from another discipline, *the researcher needs to have a well-grounded understanding of the epistemological background and research tradition of the method, how they are or are not aligned with the aim of the research and with other methods chosen for the study, and how they might need to be modified to fit into other kinds of research traditions.* Otherwise, what may seem exciting and fun methodological experimentation for researchers, can turn out to be something else for participants (see also Wiles et al. 2013, 18, 28; Mannay 2016, 7, 52, 87). All our case studies demonstrate challenges in these areas to some extent. Our examples show that the risk of lacking epistemological understanding of the method is likely to be higher with novices either lacking professional competence in conducting research in general or lacking experience of using the method. It is also more likely to underestimate than overestimate the time needed to acquire enough understanding to use the method successfully. We emphasize the importance that *the researcher needs to profoundly understand why playfulness is employed (motives, purposes), and what it is that the researcher wants to accomplish by using them (outcomes).* If the purpose of playful activities is not clear to the researcher, it will likely be unclear to the participants as well.

To achieve the best possible outcome, the researcher needs to carefully consider the following: *who playful and creative methods are targeted at, who they are suitable for, and how they could be implemented in the study in a way that accounts for, along with social and cultural contexts, the time commitments, artistic abilities and technical proficiencies of participants.* For example, engaging adults with drawing or storyboarding activities has proven to be more challenging than when used with children as illustrated in our second case study with migrants (also e.g., Richardson 2015; Siim 2020). There could be resistance and reluctance to engage with drawing. They can be "a site of embarrassment and discomfort" (Mannay 2016, 86) and they can be interpreted as being childish by participants or even by the researcher, particularly if the circumstances and the target group do not fit together. Our first and second case studies shed light on how the study environment —workplace or classroom—can shape the expectations of participants and set

limitations on their playful and creative expressions due to time limits, other people (teachers, other students) and/or a lack of familiarity with expressing oneself via drawing. Participants might end up feeling pressure to complete the tasks and even have a feeling that their assignments are somehow being evaluated (cf. the case study in India, in which participants were successfully engaging in drawing).

Adopting playfulness is also more intrinsic for some individuals than it is for others. Thus, playful methods may not work for everybody. As shown in the first and second case study, *it is important to stay flexible in the use of playful approaches*: to tailor or to adjust them to suit particular age groups, communities or circumstances, to offer alternative ways to carry on with the tasks or participate in the study, to change activities or more fundamentally the direction of the study if the approach is not appropriate to use with participants (see also Mannay 2016, 86–88).

Due to their being self-chosen and self-directed, a playful attitude or creativity cannot be forced out but only stimulated in different ways (Henricks 2006, 185; Malaby 2009, 205–206; Gray 2015, 125). These features make using playful and creative methods more complex and uncertain than conventional qualitative methods. All our case studies address the fact that *participants need to be carefully motivated for playful activities*—otherwise they can appear strange and as something that alienates the study participants rather than engages them in sharing their views and ideas. Playful approaches need to make sense or feel meaningful to research participants. Our experiences highlight that motivating playfulness requires reserving enough time for communication and rapport formation with participants and with different partners who have a role in the research. Explaining the purpose of the playful assignments might also require more effort with adult participants than it would with children.

We have encouraged our participants to engage in playful and unorthodox thinking by offering both verbal and visual cues in the form of written and video instructions of the probes but also in pre-workshops, email, and face-to-face conversations with them before and during the production of research material. In those conversations participants could ask for further guidelines and we had a chance to alleviate possible uncertainties related to assignments. Despite these efforts we ended up with different outcomes. For example, our third case study with university students (in Finland) entailed problems in creating a playful attitude with the participants while the same assignments worked well in the Indian context. While social and cultural contexts were quite different and might have played a part here, there was also significant difference in the level of in-depth understanding of the method among co-researchers between the studies, highlighting the importance of methodological understanding to further motivate study participants for playful approaches.

The outcome of the qualitative data gathering is never completely in the hands of the researcher, and this applies maybe even more when using experimental methods. Bearing in mind the above-mentioned remarks when using probes or other playful and creative methods, we still consider that the study might benefit from applying them. One option to overcome some of the challenges discussed in this article could be to involve study participants in the design process early on so that they are included in the ideation of assignments/activities. This strategy is used, for example, in collaborative ethnography. Then, the chosen activities could arise more from the daily lives of study participants and thus be even more participatory in nature—and most importantly, personally meaningful and satisfying to them.

AUTHORS

Anne Häkkinen is an ethnologist and works as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä. Her research interests cover a wide range of topics from transnational (marriage) migration, integration and the role public services play in it, to industrial and cultural heritage, including industrial know-how and skills.

Avanti Chajed (EdD) has a background in curriculum studies from Teachers College, Columbia University and did her dissertation research on the education immigrant families provide their children for their cultural identity and belonging. Her current work focuses on the experiences of immigrants in NGO's and with public services, particularly with digital services.

Johanna Ylipulli is a design anthropologist holding the title of docent in digital culture. She works as a principal investigator at Aalto University, Finland, researching digital realities and possible futures with qualitative, participatory, and speculative approaches. Her focus is especially on urban contexts.

Dani Kalarikalayil Raju is an alumnus of IIT Bombay, doing HCI research in India. He is a co-founder of Studio Hasi, a startup working with marginalised communities to facilitate their participation in the design and deployment of advanced technologies.

Dr. Aale Luusua is an architect who works as a University Lecturer at the University of Oulu, Finland. Aale's research revolves around the topic of participatory urban planning and design, especially in relation to digitally augmented urban places and spaces.

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Research Materials

Field diaries 2023–2024, produced by Anne Häkkinen and Avanti Chajed, materials are in the possession of Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed and Johanna Ylipulli.

Notebooks, collected in November 2023–March 2024, produced by the Anne Häkkinen, materials are in the possession of Anne Häkkinen, Avanti Chajed and Johanna Ylipulli.

Notebooks and Vlogs in Mumbai and in Espoo collected in March 2022, produced by Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua, materials are in the possession of Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua.

Audio and video recordings of the workshops in Mumbai (27.03.2022) and in Espoo (25.03.2022), produced by the Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua, materials are in the possession of Johanna Ylipulli, Dani Kalarikalayil Raju and Aale Luusua.

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Tytti Suominen

Everyday Creativity as Experienced by Work Counsellors

Abstract

This review deals with everyday creativity, which is considered central to success in current working life. Creativity is also central to the development of research methods, the theme of this issue of *Ethnologia Fennica*. The article examines perceptions of creativity by work counsellors, who are constantly on the lookout for effective methods in their work with clients. Work counsellors' understandings of creativity provide a basis for self-reflexion for researchers' aspirations in developing research methods. How can we provoke and enhance creativity?

Keywords: creativity, everyday creativity, work counselling

Introduction

Ethnology, like all research, requires creativity. Developing methods and new ways of analysis are part of the work of an ethnologist, whether their fieldwork takes place in the archives or amongst people's everyday lives. Though creativity has been discussed in connection to our work in recent years (e.g. Culhane & Elliott 2017; Karjula, Kouri & Mahlamäki 2024), we still have much to learn. Rudimentary changes especially, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Svašek 2023), the posthumanist turn (Hamilton & Taylor 2017) and sensory ethnography (Calvey 2021), have increased the need for finding new solutions. This article contributes to discussions on how best to understand creativity by focusing on the experiences of work counsellors, who use creative methods in their own daily work. As an ethnologist and a qualified work counsellor, I am interested in discovering how the views and experiences of work counsellors could benefit the work of ethnologists.

Work counselling (also known as work supervision) is a method growing in popularity, which aims to increase well-being at work and improve the smoothness and effectiveness of work. Different organisations and individuals buy the services of work counsellors, for example in a change-type situation. In some health and social services sectors, the employer must arrange regular work counselling for the employees. In practice, work counselling is a dialogue or a group discussion facilitated by a work counsellor. Various methods, such as visual stimuli, drawing or building blocks, can be used in work counselling meetings to encourage open-minded thinking. The work counselling process involves meetings lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, for example once a month for several months. (E.g. Hyrkäs & Paunonen-Ilmonen 2008.)

According to the definition of the Finnish Supervisors' Association, work counselling consists of the study, evaluation and development of work. Work counselling is used to simultaneously interpret and structure work-related issues, experiences and emotions (e.g. Roth 2019; STORY webpage 2023). Interpreting, structuring and finding new work-related solutions requires creative thinking. In this article, creativity refers to *everyday creativity*, which enables people to deal with the coincidences, changes and challenges of everyday life (Richards 2007; Runco & Richards 1997). Creativity is a form of thinking and action that combines things in a new way and modifies existing cultural practices (Liep 2001; Rosaldo et al. 2018). Creativity takes place especially in open points, change situations and in-between moments (Rosaldo et al. 2018). It is known as *ordinary creativity* (Ripple 1989), or *everyone, everywhere, everyday creativity* (Montuori & Donnelly 2013).

Today, creativity is often seen as a phenomenon central to working life and as a positive value in general (e.g. Rosaldo et al. 2018; Ministry of Education and Culture 2017). A creative individual is thought to possess deeper knowledge and expertise, more experience and the motivation and desire to develop and use their knowledge (e.g. Boden 2004). It is important for researchers to focus on the topic of creativity because it takes on different meanings over time and is linked to different forms of culture (Ingold 2022; Löfgren 2001; Weiner 2000, 5). Creative people are considered open and flexible and ready to take risks. Freedom, democracy and diversity are thought to feed creativity, and creativity in turn strengthens society. It has been argued that in post-industrial society, the emphasis on creativity has even become a substitute for religion (Weiner 2000, 9).

Various forms of creativity have also been addressed through such sub-concepts as historical and psychological creativity. *Historical creativity* refers to innovations that are new and significant to all of humanity. *Psychological creativity*, on the other hand, is the invention of new things for the individual (Lonka 2014, 202). Creativity occurs in all situations where people must face the new and unpredictable (Sternberg 1988). Work counselling encounters are almost invariably those types of situations. Even if the counsellor is familiar with the client, most likely the client has experienced something new since the last meeting. The combination of different working life situations and the client's and the counsellor's personalities and skills make each counselling meeting a unique encounter.

For this study, I analysed an online survey that I conducted in September 2023 before receiving my work counsellor studies diploma. I asked participants to complete the questionnaire using the University of Helsinki's e-form system and advertised it on social media. I tried to make the survey as short and easy to complete as possible so that the length or difficulty of the survey would not deter busy respondents. With respect to background information, I asked what type of work counselling the respondent was doing at the time and how long they had been working as a work supervisor (0–2 years, 3–9 years or more than ten years). Almost half (9) of the respondents had been working as a counsellor for less than two years. Seven respondents had been working at the job for 3–9 years and four respondents had been doing it for more than ten years. When defining their own work as a counsellor, a few respondents mentioned that they adopt a solution-oriented and resource-oriented approach. Almost everyone was involved in both individual and group counselling. The respondents' clients typically are professionals from many different fields, such as supervisors and those in management positions and

persons in the social and health care sector, education and various organisations in the arts and culture sector.

The survey included five questions on work counselling and creativity:

- What do you think creativity is (and can be) in work counselling?
- What can creativity achieve in the workplace?
- How can work counselling promote and support the creativity of the customer?
- What methods are used to promote creativity in work counselling?
- How can a work counsellor stay creative and increase their own creativity?

Nearly all the respondents answered all the questions, although the invitation to participate had indicated that it was possible to answer only some of the questions. One participant did not write anything in one text box, but they had already answered the question in a previous paragraph. In any case, it was common that several questions were answered in one text field. For reporting purposes, I have picked answers from different text fields based on the content.

Creativity is at the Core of Work Counselling

Defining creativity is not simple (e.g. Parkkola 2020). Therefore, the first question in the questionnaire, how to recognise creativity in work counselling, may have seemed challenging to the respondents. Most of the respondents wrote about different methods that can be used to promote creative thinking in work counselling. When taking a broader perspective than just viewing creativity as a method, respondents defined it as *alternative approaches*, *multidimensional thinking*, *flexibility* in counselling and thinking, and the *occasional flying of thoughts and disconnection from everyday life*. The most often mentioned response was the *discovery of new perspectives* and *thinking in a new way*, which corresponds to the definition of everyday creativity, i.e. the readiness to see every-day phenomena in a new light and to solve everyday challenges (Lonka 2014, 202). In the survey responses, the terms *reflexivity*, *intuition* and *state of ignorance* were also mentioned. Several respondents stated that creativity in work supervision means taking the customers' needs into account spontaneously, at the moment of supervision. One of the respondents pointed out that creativity is especially needed in problem situations. In general, the answers reveal that respondents consider creativity a key part of work counselling, at least from the counsellors' point of view. One respondent, who had been a supervisor for more than ten years, explained what creativity means to them in work counselling:

> It is knowing what to say, how to act in both predictable and unpredictable situations. That you always know how to be.

In some of the responses, creativity is described as a holistic skill or as a personal feature of the counsellor. Some of the respondents indicated that creativity involves using methods that enhance the creativity of the counsellor or the client. In her doctoral thesis, occupational health psychologist Tarja Vanne (2021, 149) emphasises creativity especially at the point in the work counselling process where different options are sought for solving a certain problem. Vanne emphasises that it is important to make use of imagination and to look for as many different options as possible, from which the best ones can be chosen.

The answers to the second question of the survey, what creativity can achieve in working life, reinforce the research results presented in the introduction to this text. It can be concluded that the respondents consider creativity an important issue in general because it helps people achieve different goals in ever-changing working life situations. The survey responses mentioned new innovations and practices most often. In addition, factors related to well-being at work and job retention received more mentions. The respondents' backgrounds as counsellors are reflected in the answers, meaning that the development of new products received only a few mentions. Instead, all the responses tended to highlight the need and opportunities for both individuals and organisations to develop themselves. In keeping with a social climate that emphasises innovation, one of the respondents wrote that creativity can achieve anything and that successful companies and entrepreneurs are creative (for more on the topic, see e.g. Laundry 2014). On the other hand, several responses highlighted aspects related to increasing the meaningfulness of work. They included finding joy in one's work, enthusiasm and the prevention of boredom. In the context of research, the creative development of methods might spark joy and induce passion and feelings of empowerment (Ylijoki et al. 2024). At the same time, resistance can also be understood as a form of creativity, as shown in prior anthropological and ethnological research (Löfgren 2001).

Creativity-Believers and Therapeutic Power

In the changing world of work, creative thinking is needed. Education psychologist Kirsti Lonka (2014, 121) has stated that creative thinking involves combining things that seemingly are not even related. Such analogical reasoning or metaphorical thinking may not be easy for an adult. Work counselling is one way in which creative thinking can be supported and promoted.

The counsellors who responded to the survey saw the effects of creativity in working life as very broad and positive. One of the respondents, who had been a supervisor for several years, provided the following response to the question of what creativity can achieve in working life:

> Good results, positive ways of working together, better atmosphere, new and different, change. Creativity can make the same old look completely new.

It is not surprising that new and innovative solutions to different working life situations are highlighted in the answers. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that enjoying one's job, the retention rate of an organisation and issues related to the general atmosphere of a workplace were also mentioned quite often. If we continue with Weiner's (2000) idea that creativity or some form of "worship" of creativity has perhaps been overemphasised of late, it is possible to take a more critical perspective on this point as well. Some people do not want constant change and the creativity that it requires; rather, they would desire an appropriate number of routines and a sense of familiarity that provides security and thereby strengthens their job satisfaction.

One respondent, who had been serving as a work counsellor for more than ten years, also saw the benefits of creativity in quite broad terms. According to them, creativity can be achieved in working life in the following ways:

> New perspectives, connection to self and others, more positive perspectives, compassion, coping, joy, clarity…

Looking at this answer critically, you might think that it shows not only a creativity-believer attitude but also the hegemony of therapeutic power. A more critical voice would ask why there is a need for positivity in working life, or a need to connect on a deeper level with oneself and others. Is it not enough to get the job done and have free time that is your own? The problem with so-called therapeutic power is that there are many structural issues in the world of work that are difficult, slow or even impossible to influence. Yet, workplaces tend to emphasise fixing such systemic problems (e.g. Fox et al. 2024) at the individual level through, for example, therapy, work counselling or coaching (Brunila et al. 2021). Should work counselling seek to force clients to spin those types of negative experiences in a positive manner, for example by emphasising creativity? Structural problems would still remain and exist in the background, but the "fault" would instead be transferred to the individual, who does not know how to be sufficiently creative or adequately practice the (self-)compassion mentioned in the above quote.

Better work engagement is often an implicit aspiration in working life-related creativity talk. Even though work engagement is being promoted as contributing to a positive state of mind, it should be scrutinised more closely since the line between positive work engagement and excessive workload may become blurred and difficult to spot (e.g. Hakanen 2011). Another perspective is that work engagement, relaxation and a good attitude are needed at work in order to find creative solutions and get the job done (e.g. Huotilainen & Saarikivi 2018).

For example, according to Goleman (1999), good humour increases creativity. Vanne (2021) even states that today, experts work and succeed largely based on creative thinking. According to her, innovation and creativity are based on well-functioning interpersonal relationships between individuals. Therefore, the appropriate state of alertness of an individual is not a sufficient pre-condition for creative thinking. Psychological safety, time and space for experimentation, humour and play are also needed so that the fear of failure does not restrain a person's thinking (e.g. Lonka 2014). Connections between community and creativity also emerged in the survey responses. In addition to the term communality, the same topic was also addressed by highlighting the need for mutual understanding, positive encounters and team spirit, connection with colleagues, better interactions, high-quality customer work and compassion.

It has become a common cliché to view a creative person as a singular misunderstood genius fighting against the world (e.g. Robinson 2011). Lonka (2014) has stated that going against the flow is often what creative individuals do, since creativity can mean being a forerunner, with the general environment not always offering others an easy way to understand such creativity. Interestingly, nowadays there is no great difference between network intelligence, i.e. interactive knowledge production, and creativity (e.g. Lonka 2014, 112). Emphasising the communal nature of creativity can even be an emancipatory and liberating idea because highlighting only the genius of certain individuals mystifies the creative thinking process (e.g. Boden 2004) and places unnecessary pressure on the shoulders of the individual.

One new work counsellor who responded to the survey (who had been acting as a supervisor for 0–2 years) viewed creativity rather broadly as a positive factor in working life:

> Creativity can bring new innovations to working life on many levels. It can produce new ways of operating and organising work and work communities. In this way, it can enable the renewal and development of work roles in the organisation and the tweaking of work to adapt it better to the individual/community. Consequently, it also strengthens well-being at work and "produces" better performing and more committed employees for the organisation. As a chain reaction, work becomes productive and profitable. The development of new services/products is also made possible through creativity. Creativity can also enhance employee interaction. It opens new perspectives on both oneself and others and deepens understanding of other people. Creativity is also an inexhaustible source of continuous learning at work.

Some kind of meta-level benefit is evident in the ideas of one counsellor, who responded that creative methods can be used to increase the client's self-understanding both at work and in other areas of life.

Communal Dimensions of Everyday Creativity

Most of the respondents perceived creativity above all as finding new solutions for doing various types of work tasks more efficiently, developing new products, marketing materials or the like, or otherwise as a matter related to the substances of the work itself. However, one respondent highlighted the importance of creativity in the development of social relationships in the workplace. According to them, one can be encouraged by creative means to put oneself in the position of a colleague or a manager, which enables the work counselling participant to view the activities of the work community or, more broadly, the organisation from the point of view of others. According to the respondent, this may have profound significance for the client:

> At best, such an exercise supports the professional identity of the client and also helps them to examine the perspectives or tasks of their co-workers in the work community.

According to Vanne (2021, 44), it is possible to create a "dynamic drive" for renewal and cooperation between the group members. However, in this kind of thinking, it is worthwhile to ensure that the atmosphere remains safe for all members of the group, including those in a minority position. Workplace situations requiring creativity may be a real test of workplace inclusion. Will everyone be able to participate in creative processes genuinely as themselves and from their own starting points?

One respondent, a person who had been working as a supervisor for several years, did not list the methods used in work counselling, but instead emphasised permissiveness as a thought pattern and method in itself.

> In every method, I see the opportunity to promote creativity – it's more about what is allowed than what is actually done. Permissiveness is probably the best method; creativity must not be stifled, but both the client and the work counsellor must be allowed to act in a variety of ways. Creativity is also fostered by leaving one's comfort zone, having the courage to do and experience something new.

From a theoretical standpoint, the connection between leaving one's comfort zone and creativity can be perceived, for example, as evidence of high levels of well-being at work, thus enabling the sense of a positive atmosphere and facilitating work engagement. Add to this mix a relaxed collective working space and permissiveness, and it becomes easier to reach the zone of proximal development, where one experiences a constant state of newness and an insecure working life (on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximate Development, see Lonka 2014). Philosopher Frank Martela (2009) has considered the zone of proximate development and the sense of community in a way that, according to my interpreta-

tion, also includes creativity. Lonka (2014, 196) has also highlighted the social nature of creativity. She has stated that different social and cultural processes affect human growth, development and creative work. Creativity is thus linked to the historical and social environment in which a person lives and thinks. In addition to Vygotsky, Lonka refers to creativity researcher Vera John-Steiner. John-Steiner (2006) has studied the collaborative creativity of artists and scientists who have worked in pairs or small groups. However, she stresses that *co-creation* can also be an everyday phenomenon accessible to anyone.

Summary

The work counsellors who responded to the survey understood creativity quite broadly, although some stressed the art-based methods often used in the work counselling process. The broad understanding of creativity and focus on everyday creativity might be an important insight for researchers in the humanities and cultural studies since our creativity seldom leads to revolutionary, historical innovations. According to previous research, creative thinking means using one's imagination, generating ideas, experimenting with different alternatives and evaluating both one's own and peer-to-peer ideas, outputs and processes (Lonka 2014, 217). Increasing the meaningfulness of work was one of the respondents' perspectives on creativity, which is linked to the idea that the outcome of the creative activity is not as important as the success of the process (Lonka 2014, 217). A successful process will support and increase the participants' agency in the future. There is still much to explore in terms of agency and creativity, but some interesting results have already been achieved. Experts working in the IT field have outlined the issue so that, on the one hand, agency is a prerequisite for creativity, while at the same time agency is the result of creativity. In addition, creativity and professional agency can be understood as synonymous (Collin et al. 2017). Such a holistic and all-encompassing approach to creativity may pose a challenge for future research. How can researchers break down and conceptualise a creative process that is difficult to verbalise and document? I believe ethnology, with its focus on everyday mundane phenomena, has a great deal to offer in the field of studying everyday creativity.

Creativity is the result of learning (Collin et al. 2017). This perspective was fundamental to the work counsellors' survey responses, which emphasised permissiveness as well as experimenting with various creative methods. Indeed, the creative process involves much tolerance for uncertainty (Collin et al. 2017), even as a research process. In the responses of the work counsellors, this belief was reflected in their own terminology, which included *intuition* and *state of ignorance*. The role of a work counsellor requires throwing oneself into a situation without any certainty of success. As for uncertainty, it is stressful (e.g. Nummenmaa 2019, 243). The connection between everyday creativity and

stress is an important area of study and reflects the situation in a wide range of workplaces and professions, including research. On a practical level, it is important to recognise creativity as a collaborative process, one that includes permissive and encouraging attitudes towards colleagues as an enabler of creativity.

To conclude, I would encourage us ethnologists to treat creativity more as a shared rather than an individual process. Different forms of collaboration and co-creation are already deeply rooted in our methods. As stated in previous research, our research material is not collected but *created* in communication and collaboration with the world (e.g. Davies 2008). Focusing our ethnological gaze on creativity would be beneficial for developing our methodologies and research processes from planning to publishing and the dissemination of our results. Our understanding of cultural factors, such as the norms, values and meaning-making processes embedded in creativity, has the potential to unlock and enhance culturally diverse teams' innovative aspirations.

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CONFERENCES

Resolutions
4th Artefacta Conference, Helsinki, Finland, 13–14 February 2025
Johanna Pohtinen

The fourth Artefacta conference took place in the University of Helsinki's main building in February 2025. The theme for the conference was "Resolutions", and it was organised by a network of researchers who engage in discussions about objects and material culture in their own work. The conference brought together more than 100 scholars from five different continents and 18 countries, and it offered 19 panels with more than 70 presentations and 8 posters. The international atmosphere fostered an interesting array of presentations and discussions related to materiality. The conference was well-organised, and this conference participant felt well taken care of even though the location, the university's main building, was slightly labyrinth-like.

I attended the conference as an ethnologist who currently conducts research on queer objects in museums and archives. We had an enjoyable panel entitled "Marginalised", where in addition to my presentation on the aforementioned topic, there were presentations discussing materiality of the Leather community by Timo Rissanen and the tactile meanings of clothes for individuals who are blind by Julie Gork. Even though the conference panels introduced many different topics, and even though my own research interests do not cover topics of sustainability, my path through the conference seemed to have a common thread related to the environmental impact of objects and materiality.

The conference began with the keynote speech by Ingun Grimstad Klepp, from the Oslo Metropolitan University, who discussed the environmental impact of clothes and the clothing industry. Her focus was on wardrobes and the lifespan of clothes in people's wardrobes. In the manner of a true ethnologist, Klepp managed to turn an everyday life occurrence into a phenomenon that is significant in society at large. One comment in particular that caught my attention was that even if the clothes of today were made to last, it would not decrease consumption: only one third of clothes are thrown away because of wear. Often the onus is on the consumer, which was Klepp's point of view as well. However, the solution to decreasing consumption would be to regulate the quantity of clothing being produced, not the quality. The most crucial aspect is the mass production of (especially polyester) clothing. It became clear, however, that the current political situation does not necessarily take research into account: even though we have plenty of research regarding the environ-

mental impact of the clothes industry, it does not translate into the political will to protect the environment.

A similar problem of overconsumption was presented/made the focus of discussion in a panel presentation by Aarti Latkar and Neelakantan Poomengalath, who introduced us to the fake lawns used in some Indian cities in many unexpected places – which even came as a surprise to the researchers. Latkar and Poomengalath pointed out that this "techno scientific product" is used in many public spaces, such as in front of buildings and sometimes even on walls. The perfect strips of plastic grass can be seen as reminiscent of British colonialism in India and of British parks, with their neatly cut grass, as well as the ideation of United States' consumer society, with mowing the lawn a core symbol or trope of the suburban American dream. The sad truth is, however, that on top of not being ecofriendly, fake lawns can actually destroy the natural areas where they are located. As was pointed out in the keynote speech, Latkar and Poomengalath likewise concluded that the circular economy just does not work with regard to plastics. The fake lawn was a surprising and refreshing take on the discussion about plastics and sustainability.

Similar to Klepp, Latkar and Poomengalath pointed out that even though it is a well understood fact fake lawns are not sustainable, they are still planted in abundance in many places. They are not just planted at the entrances to Indian shops and buildings but also in vast spaces throughout the world to provide nicer conditions for playing golf and football. Vast areas of the earth's surface are already covered in fake lawn, that is, covered in plastic that destroys everything underneath it and spreads microplastics that end up in rivers and seas. As a researcher, it can be rather depressing to witness how we have the knowledge and the solutions at hand, but nothing seems to be taken into account when creating policies regarding the environment. Again, the onus should not solely be on those individuals using fake lawns but rather on the industries producing great quantities of this turf.

Having already had a look at clothes during the keynote, another point of view on clothing was offered by Julie Gork in her presentation about how the tactile materiality of clothes is important to those who are blind. To enhance the message, Gork cleverly blackened the PowerPoint screen before starting her talk in a panel entitled "Marginalised". This act forced the listener to rely on senses other than their vision while listening to the presentation. It showed how materiality is more than just the look of things, and how the other features of objects become more important in different circumstances. It also caused me to think about fake lawns yet again: What are the affective qualities of the turf that we are so keen to plant and walk on? It seems "tidy" and does not require much upkeep. Does it *feel* good though? In the same

vein, just as Klepp mentioned the increasing number of clothes made out of polyester, one can ponder, is it the *feel* of the clothing or is it merely the look and cheapness of them that attract us? If we focus merely on the tactile sensations of the products we consume, be they clothes, lawns or, for instance, furniture – are these plastic products the ones we would ultimately choose? Polyester, just like fake lawns, does have its benefits and points of use; however, perhaps more mindfulness should be applied when deciding to produce, purchase or use the products. In addition, the impacts on the environment should be seen in policy making when deciding upon what actions to take to foster sustainability.

In addition to topics tackling sustainability, the conference's panel topics ranged from envisioning different futures to archaeology and architecture, from ethics to education, and from sensitive subjects to the dress collections of museums. The range of topics was also manifested in the participants' and presenters' multidisciplinary backgrounds. Some presentations, which took more of an artistic approach or discussed digital spaces, left one questioning just what constitutes materiality in the 2020s. Artificial intelligence and memes can be understood as constructing digital artefacts, which then brings to mind the very sustainability issues that they are creating: the use of AI consumes so much energy and water, in addition to exploiting people in the Global South, that its adoption is questionable at the very least, yet technological applications have their benefits as well.

Before the conference dinner at the Design and Architecture Museum, the conference participants were able to view a current exhibition by textile artist Maija Lavonen. After climbing the stairs to the exhibition floor, the visitor was greeted with a long strip of woven green rug – reminding the conference participants of the fake lawns discussed earlier that day, with the difference being that Lavonen's rug had been woven using natural fibres. Here, the conference day was brought full circle: highlighting discussions about natural versus synthetic and questions about the sustainability and tactility of materials and objects.

One way to define the conference's theme, "Resolutions", at least according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is the act of analysing a complex notion and dividing it into simpler ones, solving or determining, and a formal expression of opinion, will or intent. At the Artefacta conference, resolutions regarding materiality were definitely tackled, solutions were offered and opinions were expressed from many different angles. At a time when such issues as global warming and microplastics are known facts, one would hope that the multidisciplinary research that is being conducted in universities throughout the world would be taken seriously and taken into account by those who have

the power to change things on a more practical level. What cultural research can bring to these discussions are important points of view on the meanings that the materials are given at this point in time and how those meanings affect their use.

AUTHOR

Ethnologist Johanna Pohtinen is currently a Postdoctoral Researcher in the project "Touching Collections: Museums as Emotional Arenas" at the university of Helsinki. Pohtinen is interested in the affectivity of museum experiences and collections, the relationship of museum audiences to collections, and queer cultural heritage. In their previous research, Pohtinen has explored the kink community from the perspectives of everyday life, identity and affect.

Ethnos Spring Seminar 'Keepers of Culture: The Power of Partnership Between Museums and Ethnology' in Helsinki, 28th of March 2025
Helena Laukkoski

The biennial Spring Seminar of the Association of Finnish Ethnologists Ethnos ry highlights topical issues and debates in ethnology. This time, the theme of the seminar was "Keepers of Culture: The Power of Partnership between Museums and Ethnology" (in Finnish, Kulttuurin vaalijat: Museoiden ja etnologian kumppanuuden voima). The theme was well chosen, as ethnology is one of the traditional disciplines responsible for educating future museum professionals. During the seminar, we heard inspiring presentations on the relationship between museums and ethnology, which were followed by a panel discussion focused on enhancing the partnership between the two. The event brought together more than 40 participants from the fields of research and museums at the House of Science and Letters. The seminar was opened by the chair of Ethnos ry, Eino Heikkilä, who introduced the theme of the seminar and the first speaker. Before the first presentation, however, a moment of silence was held to commemorate ethnologist Jenni Rinne, who passed away in February.

The first presentation, "Engaging the Community: The Co-creation of Kalamaja Museum", by Kristi Paatsi, head of Kalamaja Museum, focused on including communities in museum planning and creation. Kalamaja is a neighbourhood near the old town of Tallinn, and the area has been described as communal, a village within a city. Kalamaja Museum was organised as a co-creation project with the local community. The project was started in 2018 and included surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, brainstorming sessions, creative research methods and field work. Some of the methods of co-creation are quite familiar to ethnologists as well. After the first survey, the community members engaged in brainstorming activities by visiting local schools, libraries, theatres and even the local public sauna, where people were asked what kind of museum they wanted in the area. The community also got to vote on the museum's corporate visual identity (CVI) and logo. The project faced some challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of funding and the fact that, at times, the city of Tallinn questioned the community perspective of the project. This changed as the project progressed and gained the support of city officials.

Kalamaja Museum opened in 2021, and the museum has continued the participatory approach initiated in the co-creation phase. The museum, for example, has an exhibition space where local community members curate exhibitions on themes relevant to the community. The example of Kalamaja Museum was truly inspiring and a great example of the power of community. It has been awarded the EMYA Stiletto Prize for Community Participation and Engagement. The example of Kalamaja Museum made me reflect on what ethnology can give to museums and what museums can gain from ethnology. One answer to this question might be found in participatory approaches in ethnology, which can support museums in developing their exhibitions and operations to better serve museum visitors. They might offer an insightful option for gathering feedback instead of more traditional visitor surveys.

The next presentation, "National Museum Comes to Visit — Tour 2024–2025: Experiences from the People and Collections Meeting" (in Finnish, Kansallismuseo saapuu kylään -kiertue 2024–2025. Kokemuksia ihmisten ja kokoelmien kohtaamisesta), focused on museum collections and was given by Hanna Forssell from the Finnish National Museum and postdoc-researcher Johanna Pohtinen from the University of Helsinki. The "National Museum Comes to Visit" project was started out of a need to maintain relations with audiences while the museum was being renovated. The museum's main exhibitions in Helsinki are closed from 2024–2026, but during this time the National Museum will visit six places around Finland for a weekend and exhibit some of the most fascinating objects in the national collection. The objects include, for example, Eetu Isto's painting *The Attack* (Hyökkäys), the Treasure of Halikko from the 11th–12th centuries, the pen used when Finland signed the NATO treaty and President Kekkonen's eyeglasses. In 2024, museum staff visited four different museums, and in 2025 it will two more. The visits have been quite popular, and so far, the five conducted visits have reached an audience of 10,500 people. The visitors have been of different ages and backgrounds, many of whom visited the local museum for the first time and had not visited the National Museum of Finland before. The size of the audience demonstrates the ongoing interest in museums and especially in museum objects. In the presentation, Forssell explained that this interest enhances the meaning of museum work and underlines why the work is conducted. If you lose connection with the audiences, there is a risk that the meaning of the work itself will be lost. One of the museum's core tasks is thus to present the nation's cultural heritage to the public.

The second section of the presentation by Johanna Pohtinen focused on the ethnological research project "Touching Collections" (in Finnish, Kokoelmien kosketus). This perspective aligned well with the theme of collections and their

relation to museum audiences. The research project gathered data during two of the National Museum's visits. It was done by collecting feedback from the visitors on a poster and on cards, and they were also given the opportunity to participate in an interview. The questions for the poster focused on how the visitors felt during the event and which object was the most memorable one. For the cards, the focus was museum memories and feelings during a museum visit. The collected data is being analysed as part of the "Touching Collections" research project. The question of how to gain knowledge about what feelings museum objects evoke is an interesting one. Affective research and ethnology could provide important answers to such a question. The information obtained on what kinds of feelings museum objects evoke can be useful for museums in the future, for example when choosing objects for new exhibitions. In the presentation, Pohtinen also addressed some of the challenges that they faced during the data collection process. They included encouraging visitors to participate, giving clear enough instructions, the role of the researchers and the usability of the data gathered. The challenges also included research ethics. The researchers considered making observations, but the method proved impossible due to the inability to obtain the informed consent of the participants. This problem highlights the central role of research ethics in ethnology, but also the creativity of ethnologists as researchers. If one method for gathering data is found to be unsuitable, others can still be used.

The presentation was an interesting example of bringing the museum and its objects to the visitors. The number of visitors shows that the museum and the treasures of the national collection do attract vast audiences. The fact that many of them had never visited the National Museum raises questions about the accessibility of museums. The National Museum's main exhibitions are in Helsinki, and for many people living in northern or eastern Finland the amount of travel needed to visit the museum may be overly long and expensive. Therefore, I find taking the National Museum on a visit an important practice that should be continued even after the renovation of the National Museum has been completed.

During the seminar, we also heard a panel discussion that focused on the collaboration work between ethnology as a discipline and different museums. The chair of the panel discussion was Johanna Enqvist from The Finnish Science Centre Association (Suomen Tiedekeskukset ry), and the participants were museology lecturer Maija Mäki from the University of Turku, research fellow Maria Vanha-Similä from the University of Jyväskylä, development manager Henna Ylänen from the Turku City Museum and student representative Karoliina Valalehto from the University of Helsinki. During the panel discussion, we heard about good practices for collaboration between museums and researchers. They included, for example, making clear agreements

about responsibilities during the collaboration phase and including the museum partner early in the planning stage of the project. Such inclusion is important because museums have sometimes faced situations where researchers contact them with ready-made plans that do not consider the needs of the museum. However, the speaker emphasised that ethnologists are often highly communicative and quite good at interacting with their collaborative partners, thus ensuring that both parties feel heard in collaboration projects and that the project serves the needs of both organisations. Museum workers are professionals at popularising science, and researchers collaborating with museums could benefit from, for example, learning how to better popularise their research results. However, it is important to note that research results should be published in collaboration with museums.

Towards the end of the seminar, the Ethnos Master's Thesis Prize was handed out by Päivi Roivainen from Lahti City Museums. The prize was given to Sari Kantinkoski for her master's thesis examining the parliamentary discussions on wolves between 1971 and 2021. The thesis has contributed to the ongoing debate about the role of wolves, with attention being paid to the influence of emotions in shaping the discussion. The Ethnos Spring Seminar was a motivating afternoon that spurred many thoughts on the possibilities of collaboration between ethnology and museums. Museums, for example, could offer opportunities for researchers to conduct research on the institutions' own collections, which would benefit both the museum and ethnology researchers. The seminar also emphasised the significance of ethnology as a discipline that educates future museum professionals. Overall, you could say that ethnology has much to offer museums, but museums also have much to offer ethnology and ethnologists.

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CONFERENCES

Digital Humanities in the Age of AI: Reflections on Opportunities and Challenges
Digital Research Data and Human Sciences (DRD Hum) Conference – Joensuu, Finland, 10–12 December 2024
Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto & Anna Kajander

The Third Digital Research Data and Human Sciences (DRDHum) conference was held at the University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, on 10–12 December 2024. The theme of the conference was digital humanities in the age of AI. The conference brought together scholars from such fields as archival studies, cultural studies, history, linguistics, literature, performing and visual arts, and philosophy, where novel approaches are being made available through digital tools. The topics of the panels focused on the use of artificial intelligence in different contexts, for instance AI-based practical solutions used in education, therapeutic practice or criminal research, the possibilities offered by AI for analysing textual as well as visual materials, such as social media content, and machine learning for different analytic purposes.

Keynotes and Panels

We attended the first two days of the conference and heard two of the four conference keynotes. On the first day, Dr Anna Foka from Uppsala University emphasised the need for "Societal and humanistic sensibility" in decision making that relies heavily on AI. She argued that the sector involving memory organisations, such as museums, libraries and archives, must collaborate with data scientists to identify, for instance, the presence or absence of informational bias in their data or metadata and support access. On the second day, Dr Katherine Bode from the Australian National University introduced different projects in which she was involved that had created large datasets. She discussed the performativity of data, reminding the audience that data is "a recorded abstraction of something to somebody", and that all abstractions are representations. Researchers should reflect on what the data represents, how reliable it is and what can actually be traced.

The panels that we attended during the two days included presentations about AI-based tools and case studies. The researchers reflected on their research trajectories, and some were also critical of the applied methods. In the panel "Sentiment and Forensic Analysis", we heard a presentation by Pyry Kantanen, Kati Kataja and Leo Lahti about the use of sentiment analysis for detecting sui-

cidal youths' positive and negative encounters with public service providers. In this context, the key challenges were ethical: how to avoid misclassifications, which in the case of sensitive topics and data could cause unintended harm, and how to avoid data leakage in different phases of the research process. In addition, the speakers emphasised that it may be difficult to apply exact definitions for positive and negative sentiments through simple polarity annotation (positive, negative, neutral), as linguistic expressions of sentiment can be complex and often based on colloquial language and metaphoric expressions.

Emotions were also a topic of interest in the panel "AI & Music", where William Randall discussed a research project and an application called MuPsych, which measures changes in a person's emotional state when listening to music. When research participants listen to music, the application asks questions about how they feel, their mood (positive, neutral, negative), their energy levels and what they are doing at the time. Once a day, the participants also complete a survey about their emotional state when they are not listening to music. The project aims to benefit both researchers and participants. Based on the collected data, the participants can obtain information about how music affects their well-being and also recommendations for a playlist tailored especially for them.

In the panel "A.I. & Eye", Juhana Venäläinen introduced a nature photography dataset from Patvinsuo mire nature preservation area posted on Instagram (see also Venäläinen 2025 in this issue). The dataset was created with the image downloader Apify.com, and a clustering process was created using the program Orange and its algorithms. Venäläinen reflected on the results of the clustering process, which created neat and tidy categories but also some unexpected results that seemed illogical. He characterised the clusters of landscape photos as "flat data of flat landscapes", which are not neutral or objective but heavily transcribed by the datasets used to create the algorithms. The audience suggested that the visual images could be linked with hashtags to analyse the motives of the social media users and their expectations of the mire landscapes.

Challenges of Developing New Tools and Methods

Our contribution to the conference was a poster, in which we introduced our current project, "Citizen Humanities", a subproject in a multidisciplinary consortium entitled the Finnish Digital Citizen Science Center (Jane and Aatos Erkko foundation 2024–2028, PI Otso Ovaskainen). The goal of this multidisciplinary centre is to harness new digital research methods and tools for citizen science by developing a mobile application platform that serves different research projects representing various fields (e.g. natural and health sciences, education and the humanities). The "Citizen Humanities" project will collect experiential data related to nature and sensory experiences using a mobile application, an automated interview tool and AI-based analysis. We wish to

record in situ experiences from various environments, not only trekking in the forest but also visiting a nearby park or waterside in an urban area. After the first request for participants to record their thoughts about being in nature, they will receive a second set of questions regarding the experience of participating in an interview through a mobile device.

As part of the "Citizen Humanities" project, the datasets produced with the mobile application's automated tool will be fully anonymised and automatically transcribed by an AI-based MyJYU AI Transcription tool. We will use an AI-based code book to analyse the transcribed textual data about participants' experiences in nature. We will not analyse their individual responses but will instead categorise the data in a way that illuminates how users described the environments in which they were using the applications and how they perceived and experienced different elements in the nature. The project aims to combine automated and quantitative research with qualitative research about everyday experiences related to nature.

In the conference, we met with colleagues and discussed the kinds of paradigms created by the quantitative analysis of digital datasets, e.g. the most common wordings and expressions in the text-based and visual materials: what kinds of clues do we follow when paying attention to masses and frequency, stereotypes and continuity, instead of exceptions and oddities? Do we return to something similar to structuralist and semiotic analysis, or do the algorithms take us in new directions? Can we find a means to combine qualitative analysis with quantitative approaches in a way that challenges the biases created by Anglo-American, English language-driven technological development and its hegemony? How can scholars in the humanities contribute to the development processes? As the conference showed us, scholars in the arts and humanities can benefit from and contribute to the development of AI-based tools for research. Ethical, emotional, cultural and historical understandings, which are at the core of humanities research, can help researchers develop relevant and ethical tools and also understand the methodological limits of using AI to interpret humanistically relevant questions. Further open discussions on different projects and questioning what tools are needed and what methodological choices have worked (or not) will be important in the development of humanistically driven approaches to AI.

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