

Waiting. Ethnographic collage round an intervening space

Introduction

This dissertation is about waiting. It's about what happens when an ethnographer goes into the field and asks people to fill a small and indeterminate word like waiting with thoughts, experiences and recollections.

The study is primarily based on twenty qualitative interviews with thirteen informants in Gothenburg. The informants were selected from this ethnographer's own circle of acquaintances and constitute a fairly homogenous group of individuals. All the informants are early middle-aged, were brought up in Sweden during the 1960s and 1970s, belong to a relatively well-educated lower middle-class, have artistic/cultural interests and work in the public/cultural sector. In an attempt to put the informants' narratives into a wider context, I have collected and used supplementary material in the form of different narratives communicated, for example, through the mass media, fiction, DIY-books, popular science and art.

A central point of departure in the study is that the words we use are filled with meanings that we ourselves assign to them, and that an interview is a form of narrative in which knowledge is constructed at that particular moment in time. In this study each interview begins with me asking the informant to associate with waiting, and is then left to take its own course; the idea being that the informants' narrations should be allowed to decide the direction of the interview. The questions that emerged during the study were: How do the informants respond to an invitation to talk about waiting? Which associations are made, and what kind of waiting is highlighted in the narratives? Which words, themes, images, characters and motifs are available to use and grapple with? What is the purpose of waiting, and which ideals, norms and perceptions connected with waiting emerge? Finally, what subject understanding do the narratives point out?

1. Concentrated time

In the first chapter the discussion moves through a landscape of narratives about time, the use of time and experiences of time. Here the focus is on which words, images, thoughts, perceptions and ideals emerge in the material, and which forms and purposes of waiting the narratives point to. During the interviews stress and a lack of time in everyday life proved to be the most common associations with waiting. Here the image of a person under pressure and in constant search of breathing spaces in everyday life emerges. He or she rushes around in an attempt to fit everything in, at the same time as they try to find solutions and alternatives to their often stressed and pressured lives, for example, by practising yoga. It's about a longing to escape – which often takes the form of nostalgic images of what life was like before or how other cultures deal with waiting. Here waiting is used narratively. Longing is directed towards an empty and undefined period of time in which it is possible to “find oneself”; an imagined genuine self. In the narratives waiting is constructed as a possibility or opportunity – for *something else*.

2. Gaps, movement

The informants' narratives are often about the expected or unexpected daily gaps – the brief pauses or intervals that sometimes appear in a day characterised by pressure and routine. In these gaps contact is made with oneself in a positive way, in that the self experienced as having been broken apart by stress and external demands is reunited. Gaps can be unplanned, like when the bus fails to arrive, or planned, for example in connection with a visit to the doctor. This kind of waiting is described as both a *productive* and *therapeutic state* in which one can order and gain control of life. In the gap one is freed from external responsibility and society's normative demands for activity and efficiency. Waiting rooms, railway compartments, bus queues and cafés are all made use of in order to realise and activate what the informants experience as essential gaps or intervals.

3. Delays, concentrations

This chapter discusses some of the recurring waiting situations in the material in which *delay* is central. Here the informants talk about waiting for other people, waiting in the health centre's waiting room, in telephone queues, and above all in front of the computer screen. In the delay a time-spatial gap appears that is filled with different feelings, motives and fantasies, depending on the context and the person experiencing it. The result of the waiting and how the waiting situations organise subjectivity are not given, however, and can either be experienced as *affirming* or *reinforcing*, as *dislocations of the self*, or as an *undermining* in which doubt and frustration become central. At a cultural level we learn how long things ought to take, what constitutes a reasonable period of waiting, and how we ought to feel and behave when waiting. Among the informants it is the waiting in front of computer screens and in telephone queues that give rise to the most unpleasant feelings. *Expectation* is a central element of the waiting. We wait because we expect something to happen, and in the waiting we activate the motives and feelings that are available for use from the cultural repertoire. Advanced technology like a computer is an example of an object that is surrounded by expectations of speediness and where frustration increases when faced with delay. We put ourselves *in position* for what is to come and in position to wait, and are surrounded by discursive matter or stuff that tells us how we can or ought to experience these delays.

4. Inside, outside

In the study men and women are often waiting for the same things – they wait for work, to have a moment to themselves or that life will eventually take off – although during the conversations the narratives often touch on the woman's *imagined* passivity and the biological functions of the female body. In art and literature women can be found waiting behind windows, on beaches and on top of windswept rocks. In other words, the image of the waiting woman allows the informants to charge it with new or old meanings and to use or

reject on the basis of personal experience and subjective strategies. I suggest that the image of the waiting women is a narrative that *is activated* during the actual interviews. Through the accumulation of fictitious material, an available cultural repertoire with descriptions of actions in actual cultural spaces confirms, nuances and develops the informants' ideas about woman as the waiting sex. The narratives point to how waiting both *disciplines* and *administers* people according to cultural norms and expectations.

5. Existence, the cocoon

In the fifth and final chapter interest is directed towards the linguistic figures, ideals and perceptions that appear in the narratives and that in a clear way point to waiting as an existential phenomenon, as a state of *deficiency* and *potential*. Waiting is narrated as a *productive force* that includes change and is a long drawn out and *subjectivating process*. The subject is created in the waiting because it is a movement between two points – a change from one state to another. Everyday life consists of many situational, recurring and often physically tangible periods of waiting. Existential waiting, on the other hand, is experienced as something that is constantly present but yet transparent and elusive, like a screen from which one can understand and live one's life. Certain metaphors and narrative elements that are common to all and that form different ideas around waiting also recur in the material. One central theme is the longing for life to be different and the release from waiting as a controlling and *organising state* – a longing for time out from self-reflection and to live in the present moment instead. This change is often described in terms of emerging from an enveloping skin or shell. It is about boundaries and invisible, but nevertheless impenetrable barriers behind which the informants, in different ways, say that they wait for life to take off.

Closing reflections

The study was based on a curiosity about what kind of narratives would be woven around a transient state like waiting. By listening to and studying the articulations of waiting I capture a time-dimension – that is partly about an everyday perception and organisation of time and partly about a central aspect of becoming a subject at a more existential level. The aspect of time that has been captured here indicates that waiting is about *change*. When subjectivity is understood as something that happens, an activity, an action or a process, movement is at the core. Being or becoming a subject demands transition and change – the movement from one state to another. Fulfilling oneself means moving between the different positions that one seeks to occupy. Waiting can thus be said to capture the actual *passage*, which means that this state that we usually define as something stationary and uneventful is actually an important *productive mechanism*. This then constitutes the actual effort, attempt and charging up involved in being able to attain *something else*. The driving force in all these processes is different kinds of imagined needs – the need to become a subject and be fulfilled.

I have chosen to present my results in mixed ethnographic form with elements of literary text strategies in which the informants, and even myself as researcher, have played a leading role. Asking the informants to associate freely with waiting has not only enabled me to construct my own research field, but has also helped to capture, ethnographically, how a time-dimension – a dynamic intervening space or gap – is slowly filled with meaning. The association method that has been used, and the material that it gave rise to, points to the possibility of researching undetermined states and elusive subjects like waiting in an open, scientific and unbiased way.

Translation by Sue Glover Frykman