Exploring the lived experience of the 2008 Icelandic economic crisis through graphic elicitation

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Introduction

Ethnography has been the staple method of social anthropology since the discipline’s inception and, in more recent decades, a key methodological approach taken up in contingent disciplines (Ingold 2014). However, more than being just a way of collecting data, ethnography has widely been understood as a methodology that variously shapes fieldwork, writing and theory-work (Fabian and de Rooij 2008). For this reason, the ethnographic methodology informs both praxis and theory.

The nuance of this argument is not lost on any researcher who has undertaken ethnography, as ‘this kind of apprenticeship is all consuming and engages all our senses and body parts as we observe the smallest of detail’ (Astuti 2017, p. 10; cf. Pink 2015). Such interactions are facilitated through dialogic and participatory exchanges with participants (Mauksch & Rao 2014). The details of such collaborative work are then committed to memory and recorded in fieldnotes (Astuti 2017, p. 10).

Yet, as anthropologist Rita Astuti (2017, p. 10) argues, its through straddling the role of fieldworker and analyst that we begin to perceive a gradual distance between fieldwork and field notes, especially as we produce academic outputs (cf. Halstead, Hirch & Okely 2008). As she states:

This process comes fully into its own once we return to our academic institutions. No longer participants, we work at making sense of what we now call “ethnographic data”; we streamline its complexity for the sake of managing its analysis; and we start producing thesis outlines, draft chapters, full drafts, introductions, and conclusions that spell out our theoretical contribution (Astuti 2017, p. 10).
While this is no doubt common across a range of fieldwork contexts, I argue that this conundrum is commonly encountered in situations characterised by crisis as our experiences and insights often remain vivid in our thoughts, memories, notes and transcripts from fieldwork but come to appear somewhat distant and even lofty while seated at the desk top as we try to make pronouncements about the lived experience of complex phenomena. Indeed, as Astuti (2017, p. 10) goes on to argue, ‘All of us…have probably felt that we were doing violence to [fieldwork] experience just by putting it down on paper—by taming it, reducing it, simplifying it for analytical and theoretical purposes.’

In recent years, practitioners have argued that undertaking repeat visits to work with participants and using innovative techniques alongside ethnographic interviews and observations may well assist in maintaining the tension between doing and writing ethnography (Astuti 2017). While innovation can often be confused with novelty, competitiveness and newness, here I am arguing in favour of approaches that might strengthen the ethnographic methodology through added sophistication and an appeal to curiosity rather than re-designing it anew as a qualitative research approach (see Travers 2009).

In this paper, I share my experience of pairing timelining, a type of graphic elicitation, with interviews and observations to explore the lived experience of economic crisis as it has been endured over the last decade in Iceland.

The crisis context in Iceland

Following the collapse of Iceland’s three largest commercial banks in October 2008, many Icelanders underwent great economic hardship through job loses, periods of underemployment, the repossession of assets, and the doubling of debts that were linked to inflation. This motivated almost a quarter of the population living in the capital city of Reykjavik to demonstrate against government inactivity at preventing the financial crash (Bernburg 2015). While these demonstrations were successful, ultimately bringing down the government, corruption within the ranks of the political and decision-making elite class has continued over the last decade (Ingimundarson, Urfalino & Erlingsdóttir 2016).
Indeed, distrust of the political and decision-making elite class has only intensified in recent years, especially following the collapse of the government after the release of the Panama Papers Dossier in 2016 which listed some 600 Icelanders as having money invested in offshore bank accounts. In 2017 the government fell again after new accusations of corruption and secrecy were levelled against them.

Graphic elicitation and timelining in the field

To understand more about individual Icelanders’ experience of life amid economic and political instability since the initial collapse of the country’s banks, I undertook 7 months of ethnographic fieldwork across two visits and conducted semi-structured interviews and timeline activities with 18 Icelanders living in Reykjavik aged between 35-65. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling with the help of 3 colleagues. Before proceeding with the results, I want to briefly highlight the method of graphic elicitation and talk about how I used it in my research.

The overarching method of graphic elicitation facilitates participants completion of drawings, doodles, maps and diagrams during recorded interviews (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis 2011, p. 553). As a method, it encourages `participants to provide visual data representing personal understandings of concepts, experiences, beliefs, or behaviors, [and] can be especially useful in helping participants to express complex or abstract ideas or opinions’ (Copeland and Agosto 2012, p. 513). What’s more, timelining “encourages the construction of rich temporal narratives” and “provides opportunity for a deeper researcher-participant relationship to develop” through a focus on dialogue and the production of a timeline (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis 2011, p. 552).

Timelining “is a subtle and malleable research method. While keeping time in view, timelining documents, records, extends and deepens understandings of participants’ past experiences” (Sheridan, Chamberlain and Dupuis 2011, p. 552). While this is similar to the method of life history, in this research I wanted to go beyond verbally recording events and phenomena that participants feel have shaped their life into the present. Rather, in order to reduce the fieldwork and desk-top divide, timeline activities provided for the various details that immediately come to participants’ mind to be recorded on paper and then later integrated into an idiosyncratic sequence
through the ultimate completion of the timeline as the interview goes on (Hope et al. 2013, p. 24).

In published research on economic instability in Iceland, many researchers have sought to inquire into the collective memory of financial hardship, political disaffection and feelings of societal breakdown. Yet, this has meant that personal or individual memory has been under explored. This is most probably due to the fact that the population of Iceland is small and that everyone was seen to be affected by the effects of economic crisis. This was seen in various interviews. For example, 55-year-old Stína related that, the economic crisis was:

like a bad hangover….People were depressed - the nation was depressed….I think many people are very angry after the collapse, angry towards the politicians, to the bankers, to the system.

As such little attention has been paid by Icelanders themselves or researchers into personal narratives and stories that draw on one’s lived experience of crisis.

Yet, by touching on key questions related to the collapse, including life in the capital prior to the collapse, memories of the banks collapsing, active participation in protests, economic deprivation, perceptions of Icelandic politics, shifts in employment and housing, and the current financial boom period from an influx of foreign tourists, I came to realise that age, gender, sexuality, employment status and property ownership all bare upon one’s experience of economic crisis. The timelining exercise, therefore, was used to probe further into these aspects of my collaborator’s lives.

The timelining activity was completed in the last third of each interview. Participants were provided with an A3 piece of paper and several coloured pens. While many different templates have been used across published literature, including providing a blank page and asking participants to construct a timeline from scratch, each piece of paper given to my participants had a pre-drawn horizontal line (Chen 2018). Participants were asked to identify significant national and personal moments, events, feelings and experiences that they associate with the banking collapse. No end date or start date was imposed.
To pilot this method and to understand the types of significant moments that participants might offer across the duration of fieldwork, the first 5 participants were asked to only verbally identify significant moments, feelings and events, and the remaining 13 participants were invited to complete physical timelines (see Crilly, Blackwell & Clarkson 2006, p. 352). During this piloting stage, a couple of interviewees began to doodle on scraps of nearby paper, thus confirming early on the usefulness of incorporating graphic elicitation techniques into this project.

Indeed, one interviewee began, unprompted, to draw a rough family tree and map out the commercial interests of one of the most prominent families in Iceland. This family is widely known as being part of the Octopus, as they have notably prospered through having their tentacles firmly fastened around major industries in the country (Boyer 2009). Many members of this family also make up the central political and business elite in Iceland.

For this interviewee, illustrating the connections between family members and their business interests through graphic means was clearly a useful tactic, one that relied on her knowledge of Iceland’s history and the relationships between people in the community. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that this might stem from Icelanders’ proud literary history and record keeping practices which began with the Sagas in the 12th century and which continues today through their rich fields of literature and poetry and through maintaining up to date genealogical and census data.

Timelining the lived experience of political and economic instability

After completing the 13 timelines some clear themes emerged, both structurally, conceptually and methodologically.

Structurally, I noticed that participants created timelines that were either full of information, detail and colour, or timelines that only included a half-dozen short points. However, rather than this being a shortcoming in the exercise, the timeline acted as an external stimulus to help think through their experience, and this often prompted more verbal communication.

Further, timelining helped to settle a lot of research participants. For instance, during an interview with Sunna, a 35-year-old librarian and mother of two, I noticed
that she turned her body away from two women of similar age who sat next to us in a new café in Downtown Reykjavik. Her body language made me a little concerned at first as it became obvious that she was uncomfortable in this situation, although she kept talking throughout the interview. However, as soon as we began to complete the timeline, Sunna’s body language changed, and she began to lean over the table as she excitedly filled in the timeline, seemingly no longer affected by the situation around her.

Conceptually, the timeline activity was instrumental in probing deeper into participant’s experience of living through economic and political instability. To this end, the exercise helped me to understand individuals’ understanding of key democratic and economic moments during the period, including how the banks collapsed, how protests were organised, and moments of national significance connected to this period, such as a television address by the prime minister given to the nation on the eve before the first bank fell. Importantly, the exercise also helped me to understand how such key moments and processes were linked to, or narrated alongside, more personal moments in individual's lives.

For instance, Ori, a 40-year-old man living in Reykjavik, spent almost an hour completing his timeline, and made reference to several aspects of his personal life that featured prominently in his memory, experience and understanding of the collapse. While he was very forthcoming about key economic and policy decisions made by the government over the last decade, as well as the general vibe created by ongoing instability, my own understanding of his experience was bolstered when these elements were interspersed with his own personal life.

- Life-cycle events: Going overseas for college, returning home and setting oneself up by buying a house in a competitive buying market.
- Sexuality: Coming out as gay, getting first boyfriend, moving in together, and buying said property with the help of other family members. Grandmother refinanced her own house to help them buy a property.
- Assets: The burden of bad financial decisions through being stuck with said apartment for several years. Relationship breaks down but both partners are joint and severely liable for the debt, and so trying to make a go of the situation.
• Geography: Moving out of the capital to work remotely at a national park in the east of Iceland and renting out apartment to make extra mortgage repayments.

Periods of instability may therefore affect one’s decisions and options during crisis, strengthen relationship or lead to their breakdown, and show the embeddedness and indebtedness individuals have with larger family, as well as one’s connection to, or movement away from particular areas to make ends meet.

Indeed, time plays an important role in understanding periods of crisis and instability, and again the timeline exercise helped to cement the temporality of this period in my own mind and, importantly, my writing. While participants were only minimally guided in carrying out the exercise, I noticed that a lot of people completed the timelines in very idiosyncratic ways.

For example, one participant drew incremental lines along the timeline in order to indicate identical time periods so that he could then think through time sequentially before physically plotting any moments, feelings or events on the page. Two other participants didn’t use incremental lines at all to indicate time, but rather wrote down the number of each year. They also indicated particular changes that took place over the last decade, such as the rise and fall of the economy and individual salaries. In this way, distinct features were added to timelines that could be used as a codifying system to indicate moods, feelings and emotions, or actual or expected increase or decline in national or personal finance.

Different time periods can therefore be deduced: punctuated time in the near and distant past – often associated with events and speeches (see Guyer 2007); unfolding time, around election campaigns, employment precarity etc; and reoccurring time through the return to power of corrupt political parties and increased conspicuous consumption which reminded many people of the boom years prior to the collapse which acted as an indication that another economic collapse may be on its way.

Conclusion

By combining graphic elicitation with ethnography, this paper has tried to ameliorate a key challenge faced by many researchers: the divide between fieldwork and the desktop and the challenges this divides poses for writing ethnography, especially in
contexts marked by crisis. By pairing these two techniques together, this paper has argued that methodological innovation is not only apt for exploring larger social themes of crisis across the nation but that such novel pairings also enable a comprehensive account of one’s individual experience of living through crisis. This understanding helps to keep tension alive between doing, writing and theorising about ethnography, leading to positive rapport between researchers and participants through the production of timelines, layered data that boasts depth and inter-subjective understanding, and the conceptual and methodological development of understanding periods of crisis through a focus on experience and temporality.
References


Travers, M 2009, ‘New methods, old problems: a sceptical view of innovation in qualitative research’, *Qualitative Research*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 161–79.