


Sight, Sound, Touch: A Methodological Exploration of Ontological Effects in an Ethnographic Study

International Journal of Qualitative Methods
2015: 1–10
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1609406915618098
ijqm.sagepub.com


Vigdis Stokker Jensen¹

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explore an alternative to traditional meaning-making interpretive analyses in ethnographic work. Underlying the article is my own ethnographic work with adults diagnosed with autism. The autism theme forms an example of the methodological exploration at work. I am inspired by the ontological turn in anthropology and carnal philosophy, and the methodological exploration is driven by the question about what things and practices in the informants' lives can be seen as having ontological effects rather than epistemic value. The methodological pivot is three interview situations, extended into virtual meetings, all given extensive space in the article and where autism unfolds as various practices based on sense impressions. These practices are not seen as representations of an underlying static ontology but as performances that make worlds emerge through the relations they are part of.

Keywords

ethnography, qualitative inquiry, interviews, ontology, autism

The purpose of this article is to explore an alternative to traditional meaning-making interpretive analyses in ethnographic work. The background study of the article is my own ethnographic work with adults diagnosed with autism. The article is, however, more of a methodological exploration than an autism study. These two aspects are nevertheless closely linked in this article, and the autism theme forms an example of the methodological exploration at work. What is presented here as three fragments from the ethnographic work, based on interviews, mail correspondence with the informants, and field notes written under and immediately after face to face interviews, can be read as a shift in focus from an epistemic, interpretive investigation to a question and understanding of what “things” in the informants' lives constitute their world.

As a methodological exploration, the focus is on how things (humans, artefacts, and concepts) are related to each other in the particular ethnographic setting described here, and what ontological effects these things in their relatedness produce (Remme, 2013). When things have ontological effects they contribute in constituting a world. This approach is inspired by the ontological turn in anthropology (Castro, 2004; Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2009; Holbraad, 2009; Remme, 2013). This turn is challenging the understanding of one world (meaning nature) and multiple cultures and suggests the possibility of a plurality of worlds. This suggestion is not just a substitution

for cultural plurality or differences in world views. It is a turn toward the concrete materiality of things *and* the concepts describing them, “it turns attention rather to the relationship between concepts and things in a way that questions whether these ought necessarily to be considered as distinct in the first place” (Henare et al., 2009, p. 2). If concepts and things are not to be separated, the methodological consequence is that field work and analysis are not easily segregated actions. The methodological exploration in this article involves this consequence, as a continuing engagement with both the phenomena under study and the informants and the relation between them, as an alternative to the distinction between phenomena and their abstractions created through analytical withdrawal. The concepts emerging in this article are very close to the phenomena studied, and the phenomena studied are encountered with “purposeful naïveté” (Henare et al., 2009) and curiosity toward how they present themselves when engaging with the field.

¹ Department of Education, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

Corresponding Author:

Vigdis Stokker Jensen, Department of Education, Faculty of Psychology, University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway.
Email: vigdis.jensen@psyip.uib.no



The concepts then relate closely to the world-making effects of the things and phenomena in the lives of the informants. More precisely, it is the relation between humans and between humans and things (concepts thus included in things), which in this article has the interview situations as its pivot. The interview situations take place in three different rooms, all three either contrasting or affirming the informants' way of being. All of them also continue in a virtual room after ending the face-to-face situation. In these concrete rooms, autism unfolds first of all as practices, not as told and retold experiences of the past. These practices and their relation to the concrete, physical rooms open a possibility of dynamic relations between practices and the ontological effects they produce (Remme, 2013). Hence, one could rather, as I do in this article, talk about multiple ontological modalities rather than multiple ontologies (Nancy, 2008; Remme, 2013).

Focusing on sense impressions, which in this article constitute the ontological modalities, the text is structured around three interview situations. These situations are named after the fictional name given for each informant: John, Frank, and Jesse. Interwoven with these situations are reflections on what presents itself as producing ontological effects, introduced as subtitles within each situation: sight, sound, and touch. Following these situations, there is a discussion about the clinical diagnosis seen in light of the interviews and the ontological approach. The text ends with a Coda where the methodology is discussed further.

Interview Situations

John

John is sitting opposite of me, across the table in an office where the leader of the center who gives him education and training usually resides. Before the interview, I have been given a guided tour around the premises and found that a group of persons with autism diagnosis are located in a room with dimmed lighting, curtains drawn, and only the blue computer screen fluorescing through the soft darkness. All sounds were tuned down and talking permitted only when strictly necessary. All these efforts were made in cooperation with the group to suit their needs and create optimal working and learning conditions. In contrast, John and I are now alone in the brightly lit office and supposed to talk intensively during the research interview. Daylight seeps through the office window and sun-rays play with John's hair.

We have been in this room for around 50 min. I have asked John to tell me his life story, starting with his first day at school. Intentionally, it has been his school history that has guided my questions, but things have been going rather slowly. It is not from lack of cooperation or unwillingness to answer. He is eager to contribute to my research project. He confirms this in a mail after the interview is over, where I send him some follow-up questions. "I hope my response can help others," he writes. I hope so too. But here and now he has little to tell, mainly because he does not remember many details. I have

asked him about the teachers, if he remembers any of them better than others and if so, why. He does not but goes through his main teachers from each step of schooling. They were good, he says, they were fair, easy to talk to, about subjects and everyday things. His school days have been ok up to the first year of upper secondary school, and his results were high.

Then, we come to the difficult part. He shifts his position in the chair and looks down when I try to ask him more about the teachers and his contact with them. He says it is important that the teachers "understand the situation" and I ask him to elaborate what he means.

I think about my situation (. . .) I was harassed and bullied a lot. But I was not so conscious about it at that time. I rather found out in retrospect what it was," he says, and sends me a glance with one eye again before he looks down, again, with his face slightly turned away from me. I register this but go on with my questions: did the teachers know? "No," he replies, "I don't think so. It slipped out of the attention zone (. . .) it was very little physical harassment and mainly happened during recess.

We do not go deeper into that theme at the moment. It seems difficult for him to talk about. Or something is bothering him, I am sure. But we move chronologically forward in his story guided by my questions. I feel that it is going almost nowhere. "How was upper secondary?" I ask, while staring at him as if I want to wrestle his story out of him with my gaze. He continues his story that it went ok, at least the first year. "But how did it go?" I persist. Then it happens. His both eyes meet mine, he draws a deep but shivering sigh, shifts again his position in the chair, and I suddenly see how he is sweating. His hands are trembling. I see him, finally, and he knows. He relaxes, leans back, and looks straight at me with both eyes. I look down.

I suddenly remember the warning I was given beforehand that persons with autism spectrum disorder may have problems looking directly at others. I feel ashamed of my forgetfulness and afraid that I have offended him by my direct look while pursuing issues in his life that probably have caused him deep pain and years of suffering. It does not occur to me at that point that my ideas of particular vulnerability may be grounded in a cultural perception of persons with psychiatric diagnoses not being able to make rational choices or meet nondiagnosed others on the same ground, as it were. Still, my signature is on the document from the research ethics committee that the informant meets me with informed consent.

Later, I read in the diagnostic manual from the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013) about the autism spectrum disorder. The clinical diagnosis states that it is a neurodevelopmental disorder, manifesting itself in social interaction as a triad of deficits: social-emotional reciprocity; nonverbal communicative behavior used for social interaction; and in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (p. 50). It is a spectrum disorder, which means it can be manifest as light or severe or anything in between. It should be present from early childhood, but an impairment of everyday functioning can

become obvious at various ages “according to characteristics of the individual and his or her environment” (p. 53).

The interesting fact in the diagnosis for the interview situation is its focus on the “social.” The diagnosis can in sum be seen as a generalization of specific, normative perceptions about how humans relate to each other and where the diagnosed persons fail. With John, it is my impression that the interview has a slow progression. This perceived slowness could be due to a lack of memory or a different type of memory than mine or that my questions have their origin in an assumption that his memory, imagination, and intellect work more or less like mine. It is, however, the nonverbal deficits part of the diagnosis that appear as the focal point of the interview situation, and when John meets my direct gaze and I suddenly look down and away, his story takes off.

The school did not go on easily in the second year of upper secondary education, John says after this moment. I worked hard, and a lot of weekends went on with a lot of homework. Subjects were fine, but I grew more and more tired. In the middle of the second year I broke down. We had an essay assignment and I did not manage to write anything. There was no help; we were supposed to just write it alone. I could not imagine anything to write, it was total stop. I did not understand myself what was the problem and why I could not go through with it. It ended in depression and dropout from some of my classes. But it was not the assignment that was the problem; that was only a trigger. You could say that I was a little burned out.

First I was in contact with a doctor, who sent me to a child psychologist. We talked and tried to find some causes for the situation ending up like this, but I do not know how much it helped. I found no meaning in life at that time, and this continued through the next year. I was very depressed. There was no support from the school, but only a letter saying that if I did not attend classes more often they could not give me final marks. We had some meetings with them, but they had nothing to offer, actually.

This last year the psychologist ran some tests on me. They had begun thinking in line of autism at that time. The test results made it probable that this diagnosis was correct. I had never heard about it, but my mother had. We have searched on the net and know much more now. In the beginning I was very much in doubt about it. I felt . . . well . . . normal, so to speak. I have understood later that it develops very individually, and more often than not you cannot see it on a person that he has autism. There is a saying about it—if you have seen one person with autism; you have seen only one person with autism. I had mixed feelings about it and it took quite some time before I accepted it. Later I felt it was a great help because now I have something to connect all my troubles to.

Sight. John’s presence in the interview situation is first of all characterized by his body. When he enters the room, he is not only entering a space, but his body, like mine, *is* space, or *a spacing*, filled by itself and visible by the skin. The skin holds the body in place, so to speak, and makes it a place for

existence to unfold (Nancy, 2008). The ontology of bodies is the body itself, there is no prior *being*, or consciousness, or structures that inhabit a body once it is born. A body is the unfolding of existence (Nancy, 2008). The skin also marks a limit between one body and another, but this limit is not absolute. However, there is not something “outside” as the opposite of something else “inside”—it is part of what a body is: an assembly of parts and functions. Through its bodily functions and its composites, a body is always in contact with its surroundings and even “interacts,” endlessly, with these surroundings, by exchanges of parts and particles; a constant composition and decomposition (Nancy, 2008).

When John enters the room, I see him as this body walking in through the door and sitting down at the chair opposite of me. I see him as someone like me, yet not quite, but I am unsure of what the difference may be. I stare at him as if my eyes can make me understand (him), grasp him, in a way, but falls short because by looking at a body next to me, I only see fragments of the wholeness and not “the totality of aspects” (Nancy, 2008, p. 45). Nevertheless, the sudden movement when John shifts his position in the chair and looks at me with both eyes reveals a different aspect of him that also opens up for a revised understanding of the difference between me and him: It is troublesome for him to look directly at me and meet my eyes with both of his. When I look down, his story flows fluently from him.

The transition from the dimmed lighting of his work and education place to the rich brightness of the office where the interview takes place could be difficult for John. However, the darkness of the workplace tells something about bright light being unwanted by several of his education and work fellows. Not necessarily the light itself, although that could possibly be painful, but as much the fact that when there is light, there are also an enormous amount of things, colors, and shapes that rush into the visual range (Gasset, 1963). Usually, a lot of these sense impressions are filtered out almost automatically in humans, in order for us not to become overwhelmed. The deliberately dark and quiet atmosphere in John’s workplace indicates that efforts need to be taken in order to support this filtering of sense impressions for some persons with autism diagnosis.

There is a possibility then that John’s difficulty in meeting my eyes is not a difficulty with my eyes in particular, or eyes as such, but rather a different type of sensuousness than mine. This difference could be related to light or to the plurality of nonfiltered sense impressions. Whatever the explanation could be, his sensuousness to visual impressions in this room makes *sight* the thing that includes both the bodily sense and the act of seeing. Sight is then a corporeal sense and its meaning simultaneously (Nancy, 2008). Sight contributes to the constitution of a world order for John by the way it works in the interview room and in his workplace room. Sight has ontological effects in this case. But sight is not a thing that functions ontologically unrelated to other things. Sight has ontological effects in the relation between John and me. It follows from this that this thing—sight—constitutes a relation where vision is shared but

where the sense impressions are different. As a consequence, the world orders constituted for John and me are not exactly the same. If this is an acceptable argument, sight can be seen as a heuristic element in this relation, leading to different ontological modalities: The world orders have the same root and vision, but the difference in sense impressions lead to differences in world orders. It is the relation, established in this room, given its quality of sightness that constitutes the ontological modalities in this case. In this liminal zone of a corporeal meeting, we are both involved but in different ways. In the next section, I meet Frank, and the sensuous relation is expanded to include voice.

Frank

We are sitting in a meeting room, each on the opposite side of a large table. No sound from the outside reaches us; the room seems soundproof like a music studio. It is the two of us, our voices, and the recorder on the table between us. The ceiling lights are dimmed. Frank's face seems to be withdrawn into the twilight of the room, and his eyes seem unreachable. His facial mimics seem reduced, but I really can't tell, and his body, that shows traces of former intensive work out is like a massive force in the room. His body also serves as a resonance case for his masculine and sonorous but controlled voice. His voice has been a concern for him, initially in our conversation, as he was afraid it was not loud enough to be captured by the recorder. He is assured that it will be ok when I tell him it is so sensitive that musicians prefer this recorder type.

I have asked him to tell me about his present life and work in a specialized working place for persons with autism spectrum disorder. His voice runs quickly very dry when he sums up his everyday life without going into detail, so I ask him for how long he has known about his autism diagnosis.

It is quite recent, actually. It came like a . . . it was totally unexpected. It was my mother who told me that this could be worth while looking into. Until then I knew nothing about autism apart from the fact that some people were autistic. My mother told me more about it, and I agreed to consult a psychologist who specializes in this diagnosis. I told what I could remember from my childhood and mother told a lot, and then I was given the diagnosis shortly after. So I have been diagnosed as an adult.

"How did you experience it, being given that diagnosis?" I ask, in a light-hearted tone of voice, trying not to add stones to what I believe is the burden of being diagnosed. "It was . . . it turned everything around a bit. It is after all something that shakes the basics of all your experience in life." "Of course it does," I add, empathetically, and he continues:

it was a bit exciting, too, and a little unfamiliar, but it did not make me feel different, actually, I am myself anyway. And in the beginning I thought it might give me something concrete to hold on to in meetings with social services; that it might help in getting what I need. And it did, actually, it was a support to have

something on a paper. And it took a while to get used to it of course.

His tone is as concrete as what he has just told me. This is a matter of facts and papers, he seems to say.

"Do you think receiving the diagnosis has given you some opportunities, or, on the contrary, that it is restraining you?" My voice is tender and light.

Well, the limitations are there, for many it has more to do with social relations. In addition it is about extreme focus on details, and a narrow range of interests. At least this goes for many of those with the diagnosis I have learnt to know recently. I recognized the focus on details and my strong interests in computing and music.

His voice turns light and bright when he can switch focus on to interests instead of diagnosis talk. I follow-up and ask playfully: "do you make music yourself?" He replies quickly: "I am a musician, actually, and have played in several bands all my life, apart from the past five-six years. I was playing the piano before I started schooling between the age of six and seven."

"Did you have a piano teacher?" I ask with interest, having taken piano lessons myself at about the same age.

The first couple of years my mum taught me, and we had a piano at home. The same year I started school, I also attended a music school. But we were given only twenty minutes' classes once a week and that was not much. So back home from music school I trained and learned the home lesson that very afternoon, and then used the rest of the week to play all the music I had learned so far.

His voice is tender, almost like a whisper. My voice responds to his, softly, quietly, and mildly, while asking "how did you feel, sitting by the piano, playing?" "It was always fantastic. It was a reality escape, actually, without consciously knowing it at that time. But I could sit and play for hours."

He has given me a glimpse into what really matters to him, his main interests in life. But my interview guide says that my research interest lies with education and autism, and sadly enough, I do not follow him into his world. Instead, I try to make him follow me into what I am after, and at this point he accepts, reluctantly.

My memory is unlike that of others. I do not remember the general stuff, only details. Like from the first school day; I remember how many students we were in the classroom, the words of welcome written on the cardboard; where everyone was placed, and so on.

His voice grows steadier as he recalls these memories. Eager to know how exactly he did it in school I ask him how his marks were in lower and upper secondary school. "In lower secondary my marks were very high." He places weight with clear voice on "very high," and goes on:

in upper secondary I think I suddenly got very tired of school. I had some friends who had rather high absence rates, and mine grew high as well. May be I had ten or twelve days away from school with no good reason within those three years.

The former teacher in me raises her head. I have a lot of experience with young persons and their school absence. So I contradict him by saying that this is not much, really. My tone of voice must have been one of disbelief with his perceptions of absence and firm belief in my own experienced knowledge because he states loud and clear that it was not necessarily much, objectively speaking, but for him, it was a difference in attitude, underscored by the fact that he stopped taking further classes in what had been his favorite subject, math. He continues in an instructive and correcting tone that he felt that his interest in this subject and schooling in general was fading. “Do you know why?” I ask, letting go of the teacher in me.

It was not that it was more difficult, but rather that I found that I did not need much more of it, and that the themes were not interesting to me any more when moving from pure numbers to graphs and derivations and stuff.

Then he suddenly laughs: “I realize that my throat runs very dry by talking so much, I think I will fetch a glass of water or something,” and he resolutely leaves the room to have a drink. In the door, he turns and explains that the working place is very quiet, and no one talks much, so this interview is a break of routines. “We have an agreement that we shall not talk other than in the lunch break if it is not absolutely necessary,” he adds.

When Frank comes back after fetching a glass of water, he first turns practical and to the point with information. We talk more about school. He harks:

My teachers; I can't really remember anything special about them, but I was not at all the problem child, so to speak. There were never any extra classes or special education or personal counseling or anything like that. It was more in the private area that my mum and they meant that there was something quite recently.

Tenderly, I ask if he wants to tell what they meant to have picked up.

I do not recall all of it, as a matter of fact. My mother meant that I was much more alone at school than others she could observe. She told me she used to drive by school at daytime and watched me standing alone in the school yard every time. I remember it too, but did not think about it as being alone” he says, in a soft and tender voice. “I used to stand in a corner of the school yard with my eyes closed. And then I could hear the voices of all the children walking around there and I could recall all their names by recognizing their voices. I was very much into music and voices already at that time.

He continues, “the more she told me about her observations from her perspective the more I understood that she might be right. But these observed things had not felt unnatural to me, until I was told that others found it peculiar.” His voice is quiet, open, and soft. “But this was when I was smaller. As a teenager no one registered anything strange about me.” I support almost every word he says with soft and feminine sounds like hmm, yes, ok, exactly, and he goes on in a firm and masculine voice:

After school I started military service, after a long summer holiday. I had been training a lot for the academy, and I have never been in better shape. In military service everything was extremely well structured, well timed, every instruction written down and it worked very well for me. Many people ask how an autistic can make it in the military, but for me it has been the best place ever. Everything was planned; everything that happened had an explanation or a consequence. Everything was certain and it made my world much safer. I liked it very much. Later, when I came back, I was out of the routines in the military service, and I stopped doing workout exercises, lived on a very bad diet with little nutrients, and thus the bodily decay started. In the military service I was very good at doing what I was told and to be neutral. So I have been thinking . . . if I had joined the military academy as was my original educational plan . . . if any talk about diagnosis had come up at all. Military service was the highlight of structured working life.

I ask him if he can be more detailed about how he relates to others in social settings. I believe this will make me understand more of his story. So he continues:

I do not always understand how people feel, but people have told me that my way of being and my personality makes it easy for them to explain how they feel anyway. So I guess I am more an observer than a participant, socially. But when I get to know people, these things disappear, really. It has never been a problem for me to be part of a group or something. If I feel uncomfortable I take an observer position. That makes it easier to approach people.

Sound. Frank's voice, and mine, is not first and foremost what carry our words. Our voices are of a different source than our words. Voice is something that comes before words, before subject, it is presubjective, pre-naming, and pre-meaning (Nancy, 1993). Voice is sound in space with resonance through the bodies of both the utterer and the listener. It is what connects Frank's body in this situation to mine, as he throws his voice out from the opening in his body that is called his mouth, toward me, and I receive it with the part of my body that is called the ear.

When we listen, not to the message of the words, but rather to the sonority of a voice, it is to “lend an ear,” to listen attentively (Nancy, 2007). Listening is thus an activity, and with activity comes tension, intention, and attention but also concern, curiosity, and possibly anxiety (Nancy, 2007). Sensory organs are part of the animal nature of humans, used to

orienting oneself in a world with awareness of friendliness or danger. My voice is tuning up toward Frank's voice which again tries to attune itself to mine, but his voice is also protective, sometimes contradictory to my voice and sometimes evasive and tired of all my insisting questions trying to look for meaning, my kind of meaning, in his fragmented but very detailed memory. Our voices do not only come from a different place than where interpretation and meaning is made, they recognize each other as they fall into each of our ears. There is a bodily resonance here that we are not aware of on the level of perception but only on the level of impression (Gasset, 1963). To listen, to lend an ear, is thus to give birth to each other in a space where meaning has not yet entered (Nancy, 2007).

There is a possibility that this could happen only in the soundproof twilight of the room that Frank has chosen for the interview. Voices are given freedom in this room, at least when he is assured that his voice is strong enough and what is wanted on the recorder. With Frank, the force that is leading the contact is the musicality of the voices, echoing each other but also throwing themselves toward the resonance case called "the body." The words uttered are thus not the important and constitutive factors in this world order. It is the preverbal dance of voices, throwing themselves at and receiving each other in this particular room, which constitutes his story, and the way he sees himself, and thus also constitutes the ontology. But when I am invited into this dance by him, I am, by entering this relation, drawn into the distinctive zone of a world order where the resounding relation is constitutive and is itself constituted, again and again, by our voices. As with John, the shared space of sensuousness, but difference in sense impressions, does not necessarily lead to different ontologies but possibly to ontological modalities.

In the next and last situation, the connection points are different and more complex, as Jesse is a person who has learned how to regulate his sense impressions and prefers the touching of another person to be technologically mediated. Touching is nevertheless the constitutive element in his world.

Jesse

When I arrive at the place where Jesse and I have agreed to meet, I stand excited with anticipation in the hallway, waiting. Suddenly a man approaches me from a dark corridor and takes my hand to greet me. This is Jesse, a man in his late 20s. He is a bit busy looking with a touch of stress in his movements but with a mild and slightly surprised, almost overbearing, expression that never leaves his face during the 2 hr of our intermission. We walk into the corridor, to a meeting room at the end of it, where he has reserved time to talk with me. We are in his working place.

Before the interview, he has received an information letter about my project and what I want to talk with him about. I repeat the main topics and tell him that I will make a narrative from what he tells me and that it is common in research that interview material is put into a theoretical framework. He nods and replies that this is out of his control but that it is still

important for him to grasp this opportunity to tell his story. "It has been interesting to go through some material as a preparation for this conversation, because I understood that I had forgotten a lot. It already helped me to understand coherences in my life much better," he says. I am not sure what he means by "material" but do not go into it at the moment. Instead, I ask if we can go into his history chronologically, and he does that by starting with kindergarten. He remembers a lot, he says, but nothing particular happened. But once schooling starts, this changes. He was quite restless and that created a lot of noise around him. He did not come in after recess, and the teachers were running around looking for him. He finished assignments very quickly and got easily bored when waiting for the others to finish. He did not get any other tasks to the subject, only puzzles or activities to keep him occupied. "During these first years I was always best in class, but in the seventh year of schooling things changed. I had a fantastic teacher, the way a teacher should be, he treated everyone equally. I still get very high results, but the half-year comments from the teacher changes."

He reaches for a plastic bag on the floor beside his chair, and I realize what he meant by "material" and "preparation for the interview." He shows me a gradebook where assessments from the teacher are very good in order and behavior, and with top marks in all subjects throughout the years, and teachers' comments are very good. But from his seventh school year, teacher comments tell that he is fussy and dominant and without self-control.

I did not experience this change myself. What I experienced was that others started reacting differently to me. There was a lot of reproaching, at home and at school. The blame is on me for this, at least partly. The years in lower secondary were ok though, and the first year of upper secondary went ok. Toward the end of the second year I got fed up with some of the subjects, and I focused more on own interests, like programming computers. In the third year the slide downwards continued. I had none of the textbooks, I could not afford them. You can apply for financial support but I did not want to do that. However, the marks in science subjects were very good. Textbooks might not have helped actually, because I remember visually, not by reading text.

In a follow-up mail after the face-to-face interview, Jesse offers a further explanation of his visual memory:

I tend to remember how to get to a result rather than the result itself, like in math, I can follow the mathematical argument in my mind by visualizing it and then come up with the result rather than remembering just the result. If I am going to find a sweater in my drawer at home, I cannot remember which tray it is in, but need to visualize the distinct steps I took to find it last time and then physically walk these steps in order to find it. I call this a visual algorithm of memory.

In the meeting room he goes on:

There was a lot of stress during these years in upper secondary school. My absence rates went up (he shows me a diploma, with

a note of quite many hours absence the third year). I did not get marks in language (mother tongue) because of too much absence. It was a dreadfully long year. It was terribly boring and felt like a nightmare to walk into the classroom.

“Why did you experience it as a nightmare?”

That question has very complex answers. It was difficult, but what exactly was the difficulty? It can be difficult to walk into the room because you can be asked what you are doing. There is an anxiety involved in that type of questions. Such an irrational anxiety is exhausting. I did not understand that anxiety thoughts do not correlate to reality until I was past twenty years old. Next, I do not handle very well that many people together in the same room. We were 25–30 students in the same class. I turn restless and out of control. I comment a lot, well, I mean, to the subject matter, but a lot. I can only concentrate if I have something to do with my hands. After a while I programmed games into my calculator and played with it during class. I guess the teachers were stressed too, because this was during implementation of a large school reform. At least they did not understand where my intellect was. I never had any offers of special help or any questions about what mattered, never any meetings with specialists or teachers, nothing—I had such high results, you know.

In a follow-up mail, I ask Jesse what it would take for him, or what adjustments could be done, that would make him stay in the classroom without anxiety. He writes: “Your question is wrong. The question is: is the classroom the right answer for me?” His answer is startling in its directness and the insight in the opposition between my world and his and the awareness of differences it reveals.

In the face to face interview I ask: “How did you experience to finally be diagnosed with autism?” “I read about autism on the internet and it was like reading about my own childhood. It was good to finally get the diagnosis. It is a development disorder. All the misunderstandings I have experienced are not only my fault but belong to the autism. It can be much better to be open about it and then people can tell me what they find difficult about me. The main reaction is that I am not alone any more. There are other people like me.”

In a mail, I ask him later about stress and confidence in social situations—what causes most stress and what makes him confident? His answer is that the highest stress factor lies in the space between the deep focus he needs in order to learn something, whether it is education or work, and at the same time be aware of sense impressions from his surroundings—being “mentally available” as he calls it. His understanding of this term is that he is supposed, socially, to be perceptive of the nonverbal signs connected to what others say in order to interpret direct and indirect meanings in their interactions with him. He cannot fully cope with both these needs and demands, from himself and others, full time. Thus, tests have been run on his work capacity resulting in a present capacity on 50% of full time. Then, he can better change between deep focus and social focus without being exhausted by one or the other. He writes:

When I write this to you, I am watching a Japanese cartoon (in Japanese, with subtitles) and nobody would have been able to reach me now. I write, while having focus somewhere else. It can take me 20–40 minutes to change context when I am in such a state of “hyper-focus.” If someone disturbs me, I can get really grumpy, because the interchange between deep and superficial focus is intensely challenging. But I must admit, when I am here [in hyper-focus], all stress disappears and the world stops existing. It is extremely pleasurable.

He writes that nobody would have been able to reach him right now, when he replies to my request. But I do. He touches the keyboard on his computer when writing as I do when I open the mail because my eyes on the screen register a mail from Jesse. He writes to me and I am touched, as he is by the touch of my reading, already before I have even seen the mail. The virtual space of hyperfocus includes me, in this case.

Touch. Meeting Jesse is a two-faced experience. One is the face-to-face meeting and the other is by mail, often misleadingly categorized as “real life” and “virtual world.” For Jesse (and many others), this division is growingly artificial. With reference to the ontology of body as space, where this space is an assembly of parts where the skin is the limit, or the threshold, toward the environment, one could say that the skin is like in those drawings of a body where the line following the body contours is purposely made diffuse, in order to make the body gradually blend in with the environment. The body limits are shadowy and unclear, and one cannot quite decide what is body and what is the things surrounding it. This does not mean that the body is real and the things in the shadow are not, it is just that the limit between body and things are unclear and, in this case, it is the relation between body and things that is underscored. If a body is cells and even smaller parts, like molecules, a body is on this level not different from other things or objects in the world, and everything has this same diffuse limit, sometimes emerging and exchanging parts and at other times withdrawing, leaving the surroundings close back in on the space occupied by the emerging body or thing (Nancy, 2008).

A key toward an understanding is given by Jesse when he sits at home by his computer watching a Japanese cartoon while writing to me. He calls the state he is in “hyperfocus,” which is probably a good description. But this situation is more complex than his focus. In this situation, both the cartoon and the words he is writing and the computer itself disappears, as it were, in order to make space for the bodily touch that his writing to me and my reading his writing is. He writes me and I read him and we both emerge as contact (Nancy, 2008). This contact is temporarily interrupted and spatially distributed; it “*is technique—our discrete, potent, and disseminated contact*” (p. 53, emphasis in original). The technical and practical time delay, however, is suspended both when he writes and I read, and “somewhere, this takes place” that bodies are touching on the writing, the computer screen, or rather, that the screen/computer is a touch of his hand when he writes and my hands while I open the document on my own computer:

This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred—machines, vehicles, photocopies, eyes, still other hands are all interposed—but it continues as a slight, resistant, fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you. *Some-where*, this takes place. (p. 51, emphasis in original)

This contact-as-touching, as distributed corporeality, is thus the constitutive ontological element in this situation. A body, or a *corpus*, as an assembly of parts, means that the assembly corpus is a physical body but also that it includes other parts, quite different in time and space; character and texture; and composition and decomposition than what is usually called a body. A corpus includes things, words and history, senses and thoughts, and images. In the case of Jesse, corpus includes the material he brings to the interview, which consists of concrete parts of his history, his computer and the cartoons he watches during writing, the computer gaming, and all the sense impressions he experiences. There is no absoluteness or finitude of a corpus, it is always “configured according to cases” (Nancy, 2008, p. 53), and in Jesse’s case, body is configured to encompass some things necessary for him to communicate, make contact, touch, and to withdraw his physical presence when he needs to. This configuration allows him to not only dim the lights and dismiss unwelcome sounds. It also creates the possibility of tuning in and out of different modalities of self, a flexibility that enables him to attune himself to the world with varied powers according to his own needs. Touch, then, is here the distributed corporeality configured in an exact modality for the relation that Jesse has with his environment at any moment, and the element that constitutes the ontological modality of his world. That he experiences this element as a world of its own, not to be adjusted to a world with different sense experiences and other types of distributed corporeality, is clearly stated in his utterance: “The question is: is the classroom the right answer for me?”

Finale

All three young men have been through a deep crisis in their lives, leading up to the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. They seem to first have had the impression that their lack of adaptation; immanent first but painfully manifest during the crisis and that the crisis itself was due to a flaw in their personality. Going through the mapping and screening of the diagnostic process, this impression seemed to change. Later, postdiagnosis, it is seen as something belonging to the autism, as exterior to the person, but potentially harmful and destructive. Furthermore, the diagnosis, and the new insight into troubled experiences, paradoxically restores their lives again. In the diagnostic manual, the managing of life with autism is seen as merely a “masking of underlying disorders” (APA, 2013, p. 53). I would suggest, on the contrary, that the life trajectories told in the stories of John, Frank, and Jesse, and the meeting with me as interviewer, reveals a larger plasticity

of lives and bodies than the static features of the clinical diagnosis and evaluations are able to describe. In this article, this plasticity is understood as examples of ontological modalities, where each young man exemplifies one version that may or may not complement each other.

The clinical diagnosis also seems to have an underlying norm by which it measures what is deviant in social relations where persons with autism are involved. This norm contains several aspects of what is meant by “social” reciprocity, communication, and relations. Here I only want to address one aspect: that the norm is seen from the vantage point of persons without autism, and this vantage point assumes consensus on what should be interpreted as meaningful in the social space. Turning to the three young men again, their stories reveal that in the first part of their lives, they tried to adapt to this consensual social norm and gradually failed but then, after the insight into the “logic” of this diagnosis, could build their lives up on the same social markers mentioned in the diagnostic manual, but now not as deficits, but expressly as resources.

My suggestion is that these resources, with their Janus-face as possible deficits, are representatives of a logic that nevertheless has its vantage point outside the world of these three young men. In contrast, I suggest that each person’s world emerges as effects of what are meaningful practices in his life and that it is my task as a researcher to identify these meaningful things as elements in his ontological modality. I ask with Nancy (2008):

Why is there this thing, sight, rather than sight blended with hearing? And would it make any sense to discuss such a blend? In what sense? Why this sight, that doesn’t see infrared? This hearing, that doesn’t hear ultrasound? Why should every sense have a threshold, and why are senses walled off from each other? [...] And why five fingers? Why that beauty spot? Why that crease, there? That appearance, this gait, that restraint, this excess? Why *this* body, *this* world, absolutely and exclusively this one? [...] this world-here, stretched out here, with its chlorophyll, its solar galaxy, its metamorphic rocks, its protons [...] Cleopatra’s nose [...] the number of petals on a daisy [...]. (p. 32–33)

The suggestion made here is that of an ontology that is modal, one that is at its basis the plasticity of an assembly of parts, but is distributed in a diversity of ways according to this modality and with the ability to make contact in a variety of ways according to its distribution in each case. Moreover, it is a suggestion that what is taken to be one “world order” as the ultimate reference point for all, is a consensus among (some) humans, and that other possible worlds must, as a consequence of this consensus, be seen as deviant. In a different ontological perspective, not “absolutely and exclusively this one,” the difference in distribution is what contributes in constituting multiple worlds or world modalities. These modalities touch each other, sense each other, are in tension with each other, but do not merge into one. Neither does one appropriate the other as a deficit version of itself.

Coda

The approach chosen for this study first emerged as a focus on “presence” in the interview situations, after a breakdown in the traditional analysis of transcripts. The interview situations themselves seemed more potent with information than the transcripts of the life stories told by the informants. Presence in the interview situation is here seen as emerging through a meeting of senses, a corporeal communication that is preverbal and precognitive (Brinkmann, 2014; Gumbrecht, 2004; Nancy, 2008). In his book “Production of presence,” Gumbrecht (2004) attempts to distinguish between two modes of analysis: one he calls “presence” and one called “meaning,” the latter typically associated with the interpretive activity penetrating the human sciences. His highly readable book builds in part on Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy, extensively used as contemplative basis in the present text. I see Gumbrecht’s division as an attempt to turn focus over to what he calls the material, bodily, sensuous experiences, those experiences that cannot easily be interpreted but are characterized by extreme temporality and particularity and that moves and touches the experiencing person: “Presence *takes place*, that is to say it *comes into* presence,” as Nancy (1991, p. 7, emphasis in original) writes, it is an emergence of movement toward someone or something.

One typical text that opens for presence is the poetic text, Gumbrecht claims, because poetry is not interpretation but presence that attempts to evoke this presence in the one who listens (or reads). In my text, I approach this turn by focusing on the interview situations and describe them in their sensuous particularity in order to evoke in the reader an understanding of the experiences and the approach taken. Concretely, this approach encompasses listening to the audio-recordings again and again, instead of merely reading the transcripts. Furthermore, the field notes written immediately after the interviews have been of help. One exception is the interview with Jesse. The recorder broke down, and I needed to write the whole interview by hand at the place and thus could put some field observations into this almost stenographic writing, filling out the notes with more information afterward. Moreover, the approach had consequences for how the text is written. Writing became a part of the exploration (Richardson & St.Pierre, 2005), and the decision to leave large parts of the interviews, with their focus on the situation itself, within the article’s text body is part of the movement Nancy (2008) calls “touch”: I write you and you read me. “Somewhere, this [touch] takes place” (p. 53).

This focus on presence instead of interpretive meaning led to ontological reflections of the relation between humans, and humans and things. “Things” are not here predefined but what counts as things arises in each situation, when a (possibly counterintuitive) continuous questioning about what “*things might be treated as sui generis meanings*” (Henare et al., 2009, p. 3, emphasis in original) is answered. Meaning and thing are thus seen as identical, and I treat them as identical when they introduce their presence in a relation. On an ontological level, a relation is here seen as meetings between

assemblies of parts, like molecules, where each assembly has its limits constituted by what it limits against (Nancy, 2008). This liminal zone, or threshold, is another name for the relation between assemblies, corpuses, and bodies. These relations are thus meanings in their particular settings, that is, the concrete rooms where each relation is constituted by the sensuousness toward both the room and the other human being.

Things and their relations are therefore not without meaning or meaning potential. Meaning is just not seen as something one person or group of persons can attribute to others, their relations or actions. Meanings and things are the same, and, it is this meaning that, when taken seriously and not translated into a different interpretive apparatus, has ontological effects. In this view, the study is heavily influenced by the carnal philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy mentioned earlier. Meaning has, in other words, in this approach a double status. It is, as identical with things, associated with production of ontologies or ontological modalities. It is, however, also associated with an epistemic production but different from traditional interpretive approaches. In this status, where things and meanings are identical at an epistemic level, the study is positioned within new forms of realism emerging from phenomenology. Nancy’s philosophy represents this new realism, as do José Ortega y Gasset (1963) mentioned earlier in the text. Moreover, the philosopher Graham Harman (2005, 2010) is a prominent representative with his “object-oriented” philosophy, cutting himself off from the branch of this new realism from those who, like Nancy (and myself in this study), are more occupied with the relations between things than the things themselves (Harman, 2009).

The study is in addition inspired by the ontological turn in anthropology, a “quiet revolution” that takes ethnographic work to be focused on things and how they constitute worlds (Henare et al., 2009; Remme, 2013). This turn is thus a methodological change that leads to ontological reconsiderations.

In the ontological turn, the issue is not a plurality of world-views, which would merely be another name for multiple cultures or representations of a world-as-one-unit. It is actually different worlds, constituted by the things in it that probably cannot be separated from the meaning they embed. The questioning in this ontological turn, about world-reference dualism, reflects my experience:

the relationship between concepts and things (which broadly compasses other familiar dichotomies such as sense versus reference, signified versus signifier, etc) may be unhelpful, obscuring theoretical possibilities that might arise were the pre-emption of such contrasts by the artefacts we study taken seriously (Henare et al., 2009, p. 2).

It is exactly the preemption of the traditional conceptual, meaning-making contrasts emerging through interpretations that inspires me. Furthermore, that this leads to taking seriously what informants tell about their relationship to things in their world, things they use in their everyday life, and the bottom-up approach toward world-making processes is intriguing. Hence, it is used, possibly in some idiosyncratic ways, in the study

underlying this article. However, even if ethnographic work often has this bottom-up or inductive approach, it still entails an analysis that takes into consideration how the things, humans, and actions under study can be interpreted. Here, in the ontological turn, things are seen as heuristic rather than analytic, and the focus is on ontological practices in the everyday lives of the informants. These practices are not seen as representations of an underlying ontology but as performances that make worlds emerge through the relations they are part of (Remme, 2013).

This approach has inspired my work. The “things” that have been carved out have been located in the relation between me and the informants and between the informants and their environment, including what is usually called things—like computers, and what is traditionally not seen as things, like sense impressions. These things are the relational properties that reveal how the informants’ worlds are constituted, and I choose, in accordance with Nancy, to see these worlds as different ontological modalities. The consequences of this approach are that these particular informants are seen in a different light than severe or light versions of autism, that their current mastery of difficulties is regarded as something else than a masking of deficits, and that the constitution of their worlds or ontological modalities is not a deficit version of one single original ontological unit.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders DSM-5*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Brinkmann, S. (2014). Getting in touch with the world: Meaning and presence in social science. In M. H. Jacobsen, M. S. Drake, K. Keohane, & A. Petersen (Eds.), *Imaginative methodologies in the social sciences. Creativity, poetics and rhetoric in social research* (pp. 133–154). Surrey, England: Ashgate.
- Castro, E. B. V. D. (2004). Exchanging perspectives: The transformation of objects into subjects in Amerindian ontologies. *Common Knowledge, 10*, 463–484. Retrieved from <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ckn/summary/v010/10.3castro.html>
- Gasset, J. O. Y. (1963). *Mediations on Quixote* (E. Rugg & D. Marín, Trans.). New York, NY: The Norton Library.
- Gumbrecht, H. U. (2004). *Production of presence: What meaning cannot convey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Harman, G. (2005). *Guerilla metaphysics. Phenomenology and the carpentry of things*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- Harman, G. (2009). *Prince of networks. Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne, Australia: Re.press.
- Harman, G. (2010). *Towards speculative realism. Essays and lectures*. Winchester, England: Zero Books.
- Henare, A., Holbraad, M., & Wastell, S. (2009). Introduction: Thinking through things. In A. Henare, M. Holbraad, & S. Wastell (Eds.), *Thinking through things* (pp. 1–31). London, England: Routledge. (Reprinted from 3rd)
- Holbraad, M. (2009). The power of powder: Multiplicity and motion in the divinatory cosmology of Cuban Ifá (or *mana*, again). In A. Henare, M. Holbraad, & S. Wastell (Eds.), *Thinking through things* (pp. 189–225). New York, NY: Routledge. (Reprinted from 3rd)
- Nancy, J.-L. (1991). Introduction. In E. Cadava, P. Connor, & J.-L. Nancy (Eds.), *Who comes after the subject?* (pp. 1–8). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nancy, J.-L. (1993). *The birth to presence*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Nancy, J.-L. (2007). *Listening*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Nancy, J.-L. (2008). *Corpus* (R. A. Rand, Trans.). New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Remme, J. H. Z. (2013). Den ontologiske vendingen i antropologien [The ontological turn in anthropology]. *Norsk antropologisk tidskrift, 1*, 6–24. Retrieved from http://www.idunn.no/ts/nat/2013/01/den_ontologiske_vendingen_i_antropologien
- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. (2005). Writing. A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative inquiry* (3rd ed., pp. 959–978). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.