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Reflexive Essay

Dis_ability, Ethnographic Methods, and Collaborations over Distance: Intersectional Complications

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Dis_ability, Ethnographic Methods, and Collaborations over Distance: Intersectional Complications

Isabel Bredenbröker & Tajinder Kaur

Based on their chapter 'On giving, taking, and receiving care: Fieldwork and dis_ability,' collaboratively written for a handbook entitled *Inclusive Ethnography* (Procter and Spector 2024), India-based anthropologist Tajinder Kaur and Germany-based anthropologist Isabel Bredenbröker reflect on writing about dis_ability and ethnographic methods from their respective points of view and experience. Their conversation, conducted entirely in writing into a shared Google Doc over a period of two months, takes core methodological takeaway points of the chapter as a starting point to think about how we can write and think together over distance: Isabel and Tajinder have never met in person. What challenges do we face when writing and thinking from intersectionally different perspectives for a global academic publishing market? What solidarities can be learned anew and differently through these kinds of collaborations? These challenges, particularly when combined with disability studies and anthropology, require special attention. Working together, Kaur and Bredenbröker show that writing across intersectional differences—whether in lived experiences, geopolitical contexts, or disciplinary approaches—requires an ethics of care that goes beyond strategies of knowledge production.

Keywords: collaborative writing, disability, Germany, India, intersectionality

Listen to this contribution, read by Tajinder Kaur and Isabel Bredenbröker, here.

You are hereby invited to read and follow a written conversation conducted between us, Isabel Bredenbröker and Tajinder Kaur, between March and May 2025 over Google Docs. This dialogue emerged as part of our preparation for a joint presentation and as a continuation of our earlier collaborative work. Google Docs offered a medium to have a conversation in writing that was not possible to have on video or voice call most of the time while preparing our co-authored chapter (Bredenbröker and Kaur 2024). This was due to bad signal in one or both places in which we respectively were during the writing phase. So, our attempts to meet and encounter each other while making words and ideas match were also shaped by frustrations about distorted voices over WhatsApp and prematurely ended attempts at conversations. The chapter was authored by sending word documents back and forth via email, with additional commentary. Here, no

real time conversation was needed. As a platform for editing documents collaboratively, Google Docs offered a technology for written exchange outside of the back-and-forth of emailing. The fact that a product for co-writing offered by a big global tech company was the tool of choice for us is due to there not being a workable alternative that was easy enough to implement at the time. Google, as we are aware, does not guarantee data protection but also has moved far away from its initial motto 'do no evil' to actively profiting from the genocide in Gaza, according to a report by the United Nations (which is equally true of Microsoft, the company providing Word, another program that we used for writing our manuscript) (Albanese 2025). This lack of alternatives remains an invitation to create better co-writing platforms and programs (and some, like Proton, are on their way but fee-based and not fully fine-tuned yet). It may also show a need for support and education on how to access these alternatives, something that is time-consuming and requires a change of habits. When communicating across distance, these things become especially hard. While we prepared for a joint (hybrid) presentation[1] in the colloquium series 'Collaborations and Solidarities in Troubled Times'[2] at the Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in May 2025, we used this written mode of reflection and writing with/to each other to prepare our talk. Going beyond the chapter we had previously co-authored together, this exchange, which could only be referred to in parts during the presentation, examines the challenges and benefits of blind-date co-authorship across distance and between intersectional markers. Both of us were matched and asked to co-write, without having met or knowing of each other before, by editors of the textbook *Inclusive Ethnography* (Procter and Spector 2024), in which our chapter later appeared. Intersections that became meaningful during our collaboration were found at the crossroads of the co-authors being based in the 'Global North' and the 'Global South,' being female and gender queer, being regarded as white or racialized, speaking different versions of English and other mother tongues, living with a disability and working on disability, and, lastly, having different levels of experience and positions within the hierarchical structures of academia (and its locally different traditions). In discussing the specific case of their collaboration, Isabel and Tajinder touch upon core issues that remain a challenge in academic collaborative work. You are invited to follow the written conversation as it unfolds. It will not explain concepts and ideas in the way that an academic article does and is at times repetitive, in attempts to confirm the authors' own readings of a situation. As such, the conversation is a true record of getting to be on the same page and discussing collaboration as academics. The audio has been minimally altered and cut. Here, you can read the original text (with additional contextualization in brackets where needed), which at times slightly differs from the spoken version. Nevertheless, it also serves as a transcript.

Isabel:

Hi Tajinder! This is our space to have a conversation—in written form—about the process of collaborating on the article. I thought we may do it by asking each other some questions, which we also can respond to ourselves. Do you have any questions you'd like to ask or any observations to share?

From my part, I'd like to ask how it was for you (based in Delhi, India) to be paired with me as a researcher in a different country (based in Berlin, Germany) to co-author a piece? After all, this suggestion came from the editors of the volume, to which we had both proposed individual contributions on the topic of disability. So, we were in a kind of blind-date-academic-writing situation. What were your thoughts on and expectations about the article in general and on the collaboration as such?

I was quite unsure about my proposal for the contribution (as a single author) in the first place, for the text would reveal a lot of personal information about myself, pertaining to my chronic illness and something that I myself only reluctantly (and mostly with regards to rights in official settings) had come to view as a disability. Before, I had made sure only to share this information verbally and in confidential settings, as I was reasonably scared that my work environment and also even colleagues would treat me to my disadvantage should this information be public. I am still unsure, in case I would be offered a professorship position in Germany, what it would mean for my employment conditions, as 'Verbeamtung,' a permanent position as a state worker (which is standard for professors in Germany) does not always become available to people with health issues of this kind.

This was my initial proposal:

'Ableism and ethnography: Making fieldwork accessible

This chapter reflects on what a disability is and how, if looked at from a critical standpoint, thinking about disability and ableism is something that concerns everyone with a body facing an extended period of ethnographic research. Starting out by investigating the ableist history of ethnographic research and the narrative that it has produced, namely of the strong (although temporarily disgruntled) ethnographer-hero, the chapter connects this to the auto-ethnographic and phenomenological turn in research, which has also revealed the value in reflecting on personal abilities and the lack of them. Consecutively, the terms disability and ableism are discussed from an intersectional perspective. What defines a disability: legal documents, visible impairments, experience, invisible impairments? What defines ability in turn, and how may one's own subjective position be productively addressed in the tradition of auto-ethnographic reflection as a means of empowerment and deepening one's own analysis?

The chapter also addresses how institutional support networks in academia exist alongside ongoing structures that produce shame, discrimination, and fear of disadvantage or imposter syndrome around disability. Proposing

different ways of dealing with these difficulties, the chapter discusses the conundrum of whether to reveal or protect sensitive information about oneself when working with a disability. The chapter draws on experience of the author in navigating fieldwork and its institutional contextualization with a chronic illness and discusses work by colleagues with similar experiences. These reflections provide concrete examples from field research and the challenges that it may pose to working outside the ableist mindset. The chapter concludes by calling for different models of collaborative and supportive ethnographic research that leave ableist expectations behind—for every body.'

So, I was already feeling a bit unsure about the whole idea of writing about this in general. Hence, the idea of being asked to co-author with a person I did not know was something of a surprise to me, but not an unwelcome one. In the past, I have co-authored many different formats with larger and smaller groups of collaborators, from artist collectives to student groups to one-on-one formats. In all instances, though, there was a direct personal meeting and joint work on a topic that informed these collaborations. In our case, this was different. But given my prior commitment to doing collaborative work, I was interested in taking this challenge. My first and biggest question was how we would make up for the lack of being able to meet, talk, see each other, and so on.

As a reminder of how it started, this is the email I received from one of the editors of the volume, asking me if I would like to collaborate with you:

'Hi Isabel,
I hope you're well. Thanks so much for your patience while we came to a decision regarding your contribution to our textbook. We really loved your abstract for the chapter and despite the high number of submissions wanted to find a way to include yours. Our idea was to ask if you were willing to collaborate with another contributor to put your two pieces of work into conversation with each other. We were quite inspired by the quality of contributions and wanted to use them to add a conversational element to the textbook, namely centring the fact that we are not proposing the 'right' way to do fieldwork, but simply making the point that fieldwork is itself a collection of conversations and varied approaches.

With that in mind, would you be willing to consider co-authoring? I attach here the abstract of the author with whom we'd like you to work. Our idea for the chapter would be to host a conversation between your work conducting research with a disability, and with Tajinder whose work is about conducting research with people with a disability. The decision is totally yours, but we think the overlapping themes work well together.

Do let me know what you think.

All the best and thanks again for your patience.'

Ok, this was already a long first impulse and question as well as an answer to my own question. I leave the floor to you here.

Tajinder:

Let me rephrase your questions for myself... You'd like to ask how it was for me to be paired with you as a researcher in a different country to co-author a piece? After all, this suggestion came from the editors of the volume, to which we had both proposed individual contributions on the topic of disability. So, we were in a kind of blind-date-academic-writing situation. What were my thoughts and expectations on the article in general and on the collaboration as such?

This was my initial abstract for the book chapter:

'Disability and caregiving: An anthropological reflection on lived experiences of women with physical disabilities in Delhi, India

"Oh god, why are you giving me so much pain, my body is not taking my side" (an informant)
"Who will take care of our children or their future after us?" (a family member)

Care is a significant aspect of human nature because at some point we all need care or support from our family members or companions either because of biological needs or emotional needs. However, multidimensional nature of disability studies and caregiving situates disabled body in the domain of dependency, caregiving, and constant support from the family or caretakers. The article focuses on five case studies of women with physical disabilities, based on the ethnographically informed fieldwork in Delhi. (Intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships). The objectives of the study are, first, to examine the lived experiences of women with physical disabilities with their primary caregivers' using narratives and how they negotiate delicate power relations connected to their caregiving and childlike dependency on parents and other kinship ties. Second, it sheds some light on guilt, shame, or stigma associated with their disability; and which further hamper their interaction with able-bodied environment and third, physical and mental well-being of a person with disability is dependent on the support provided by the family members, as, according to Murphy (1990), 'distortion of interaction of the disabled with the family members may be frequent ... for it infects the very haven to which most people return for support protection and love' (p. 213). The role of state and civil society is crucial in this because there are no such formal segregated care systems in India and are mainly dependent on kinship ties. People with disability are already marginalised by society and can further be disempowered by the nature of care (Ghai 2018). The findings reflect on the restriction of their social inclusion in the mainstream and their contribution in the society. It also emphasizes on the narratives of disabled women that how they are vulnerable of feeling ashamed and guilty, which further tend to isolate them and their family members from community-based activities or formal settings.'

At first, I felt confused and surprised by the opportunity, but it was not unfamiliar to me. Before our book chapter in the SAGE volume, I had authored book chapters with my supervisor and engaged in many collaborative initiatives. It was limited to either within the department where I am pursuing my PhD or outside of it, not on an international level or involving the individual I cannot meet. Initially, it was challenging due to the online setting, leading to misunderstandings regarding our writing methods and network issues; however, Isabel always ensured that our discussions and notes remained accessible and memorable. We were required to stick to a sequence of emails, which was frequently frustrating yet essential. We ultimately adapted to these (written) forms of online communication and successfully authored our chapter.

Upon reading Isabel's abstract, I was uncertain about my ability to engage and contribute to the text. Isabel's narratives highlighted the significance of the ableist viewpoint from a critical standpoint, encouraging me to reevaluate my abstract and confront the ableist notions that I want to question and have always observed in both academic and personal contexts.

Isabel's essay was autoethnographic, incorporating personal elements from their life; sometimes, I had to take a step back to comment on any individual story, whereas Isabel provided exceptional evaluations of my writing as I worked with disabled women and reflect upon my fieldwork experiences. Initially, I was uncertain about how to respond to Isabel's text, as they were managing it personally, and I feared that my academically immature remarks could misinterpret their story. Nevertheless, we successfully concluded our chapter through our efforts and commitments. And if we got stuck somewhere, we usually left it for the editors to decide.

As one of the editors stated in the email included above, '[t]here's no right way to do fieldwork; fieldwork is a collection of conversations and varied approaches.' This collaboration illuminated the diverse methodologies available for sharing and documenting our experiences, even testing the research approach of 'anthropology at a distance.' This term describes a research method that allows us to interact or study any culture/society without being physically present (which was there in my mind in the initial phases). The Second World War, during which the term was coined, constrained anthropologists, but nowadays, geographical boundaries have been mitigated by technological advancements.

I have added some questions for you all at once to make it easier for us to communicate more. Let me know if that's okay or convenient for you! You can answer these questions, and then I will respond.

How did the fact that we didn't get to talk to each other in person change the way we built trust or had essential conversations?

Isabel:

We did get to talk to each other, but things that we take for granted these days, like undisturbed internet-based calls with video, proved harder to come

by than expected. Often, connections were not ideal, and we had to forego video while dealing with sound quality that was making it hard to understand what we were saying. This created an additional experience of distance for me. Other times, we were traveling or doing fieldwork, something that at times also meant that communication was harder than usual, as in certain locations, internet was not to come by at all. This, I think, just comes to show that the brave new world of a global technological utopia is only an illusion and, actually, location does matter—as do technical infrastructures and devices. This also partially relates to inequalities between what we term 'Global North' and 'Global South' countries, a perspective that we are actively addressing in our chapter. I guess there is another story that could be written about our collaboration, one which discusses the places we went to during writing and exchanging as well as the ways in which we were able to connect as we did (you can read more about this in Bredenbröker and Kaur 2024).

In terms of building trust and having essential conversations, distance and technological disruptions are a real impediment. An added challenge to speaking about personal experiences was putting these into text, merged with another person's experience. As an anthropologist and academic teacher, I am aware of the importance of experience and frames of reference that come with the many factors determining our personal background. Collaborating with a fellow academic and author based in India and working on India-related field research, I was particularly alert to try and offer as much space for possible differences in experience, expectation, and also academic convention. I myself have not visited India, hence I am lacking any real insights into what to watch out for in that regard—in other words, I do not have a frame of reference for being attuned to these things regarding that specific background. As a postdoctoral researcher, I was, in addition, also aware that I was asked to co-author with a PhD candidate, meaning that I may have more experience in conducting and editing writing projects. I felt some pressure on me to pass this experience on in the best possible way—without being a teacher and without reproducing academic hierarchies but still using my experience to elevate the quality of the text. Writing for a publication with a big international publisher is, despite the experience I just mentioned, still a somewhat stressful endeavor for me. Next career steps and tangible job opportunities somewhat rely on publishing on this level and doing it well. In our collaboration, we were both writing in English from a non-native speaker's point of view—or, rather, relating to different versions of the English language. I normally work and operate in English, having studied in the United Kingdom, but this comes with a specific understanding of how to write, how to use language as a tool, and how to structure a text—something that was essential in my training during my MA in England. The very nature of the conditions of our collaboration meant that different usages of language, in terms of writing and creating an argument, were happening: they were part of our different backgrounds. I did find this challenging, as I had the impression that the editors of the volume, who had arranged our tandem, had (knowingly or unknowingly) put me in a position where the

responsibility for streamlining our writing output—making it a piece that worked in an international volume by a large academic publisher—was with me. As my training in academic research and writing has largely conditioned me to think and write for exactly such outlets, it felt like I had been given the responsibility to look after this. That may not have been the editors' intention after all, but I do want to raise the question here of how we can practice care for each other as thinkers, people, and authors across such boundaries and facing what feels like high stakes in a competitive academic market. I did get frustrated about this at times, as I felt it was at the limits of my capabilities to fill this role. And I attempted to raise this with the editors—but am still unsure if there could have been a better way to figure out new forms of writing and collaborating between us two, ignoring the felt pressure of the system. I am glad that you, Tajinder, experienced the process as generally positive. This gives me hope that communication and exchange with these kinds of dis_abling conditions—difference of experience and distance in a hierarchical system—is possible after all.

May I direct the question back at you, Tajinder? How did the fact that we didn't get to talk to each other in person change the way we built trust or had essential conversations?

Tajinder:

Our limitation of not meeting in person shifted my trust-building process from physical interaction to a form of textual and emotional interaction across time. Our collaboration relied mainly on fragments: emails, comments, silences, and pauses. Poor internet connectivity, disrupted calls, and periods of complete digital unavailability—particularly during both of our fieldwork in-between (as I remember)—rendered communication difficult, as you also noted. Instead of perceiving these as limitations, I now think of them as 'gaps' that made me think and made us more sensitive to care in other forms: slowing down, rereading, reflecting, and keeping open to each other's silences and intensities. From my perspective, trust was not something that was automatically given; it was carefully and cautiously cultivated. Our field contexts and cultural backgrounds also mattered. While you were reflecting on chronic illness and writing in Germany,[3] I was moving through crowded streets in Delhi, navigating the city as an anthropologist and doing fieldwork with women with disabilities, enduring the temperature of 42 degrees Celsius at that time. Our embodied contexts shaped our dialogues, and this was evident not just in what we wrote, but how we wrote—slowly, messily, and with vulnerability.

As we argue in the chapter, collaboration must not be treated as a mere methodological add-on; rather, it should be reimagined as an intellectual and ethical endeavor, particularly when writing across 'Global North'/'Global South' divides. I agree with your observation that there is a need for an additional article to address further the issues and possibilities

that emerged through our collaboration. Your reflection on feeling positioned as the one responsible for 'streamlining' the chapter also prompted me to reflect on my own strengths and limitations. I became increasingly aware of the hierarchical dynamic between us, given our respective positions as a postdoctoral researcher and a PhD candidate. This awareness compelled me to exercise greater caution and sensitivity in each step of the writing process, recognizing the potential to inadvertently hurt sentiments, especially when collaborating with a scholar engaged in autoethnographic work.

Furthermore, linguistic dynamics shaped my engagement with the writing. English is not the first language in India; rather, it exists alongside a vast diversity of regional languages and dialects. In academic and professional contexts, however, Hindi and English are predominantly used. I was conscious of the expectations associated with academic English (dominated by British and North American use of the language), particularly in the context of contributing to an international publication (by a British-North American publisher), and I also tried to fit into that category. Although I sought to meet these standards, the process was often exhausting. Nonetheless, Isabel's constructive feedback and supportive engagement made the writing process considerably more comfortable.

Let me now ask the following. What compromises did we have to make when we tried to combine autoethnographic and fieldwork-based perspectives?

Isabel:

It took me a good while to come up with a narrative and structure that would bring these two things together. This seemed especially hard to me because I could not relate to the field context you were describing. I wanted to make sure that our respective material would speak to each other without erasing the important specificities of each of these narratives. I do think that we managed to do this well when writing in a shared Google Doc. But the territory covered—fieldwork in India with disabled women, experience of German academia and fieldwork in locations such as Ghana and South Africa—was really very broad. It was good to get the editors' feedback on our writing process; it was also really helpful to keep in mind that our target audience was, after all, students who were in the process of learning fieldwork methods and applying them. Hence, I was always guided by the idea that very concrete recommendations and examples were best to offer guidance and advice to our readers, who were in a process of learning.

The biggest compromise, as far as I can say, was the limitation of space. As we are speaking and reflecting here, there could have been much more said about the backgrounds and situatedness of our perspectives—something we managed to touch upon only in passing. I am also not sure we have fully explored things we have invoked. I, for example, identify as a non-binary person. While I believe this is mentioned at the beginning of our

chapter, where we attempt to situate ourselves somewhat, it is also easily lost in the processes of writing and of imagining another person. To me, however, it is very important to consider situated perspective and things relating to the body, such as dis_ability, and what that means in terms of conducting fieldwork. Tajinder's fieldwork deals with women specifically. There is probably more to be said in how gender identity and dis_ability need to be considered alongside one another. This and other aspects I addressed earlier are the reason why I proposed to talk about intersectional complications in this contribution. Intersectionality points to the idea that different marginalized perspectives may allow for a supportive practice of care and empowerment. Yet, they also mean difference, of course: as a white scholar based in a central European country, I have privilege that also needs to be considered. I also tried accounting for that in our chapter.

A question to you, Tajinder: how do you feel about including your own perspective and background in reflections on fieldwork and ethnography? Is this something you have been taught and encouraged to do in your training until now? Has this been a new aspect that the chapter and my contribution may to some extent have added to your writing practice?

Tajinder:

Bringing together our different ways of producing knowledge—my fieldwork with disabled women in Delhi and your autoethnographic reflections based on living with chronic illness and disability—was not easy. In fact, the challenges we faced also made our collaboration very meaningful. Unlike traditional writing, where people often work from the same field site or within the same academic discipline, we were working across different places and life experiences. This made writing our chapter a slow and thoughtful process.

The autoethnographic mode that you introduced, with its deep attention to embodiment and institutional care, prompted me to critically re-examine my own positionality: not only as a researcher but also as someone with limited training or awareness around queer subjects and non-binary identities. Your approach pushed me to reflect more deeply on the assumptions I carried into the writing process, particularly those shaped by my earlier academic and cultural experiences. In much of my previous academic training, these issues had either been marginalized or entirely absent. This gap became particularly visible, as you can see in the Google Doc where you thoughtfully corrected my use of gendered pronouns such as 'her' and 'she,' replacing them with more inclusive terms like 'they' and 'their.' These editorial interventions were not simply grammatical adjustments; they served as important reminders of the need for greater sensitivity and awareness in how we represent identities through language. I realized through this process that in many academic spaces I have been part of, especially within my regional and national contexts, there is still very limited exposure to non-binary and queer-inclusive writing practices. The conventions of academic writing

in which I was trained often continue to default to binary gender norms, leaving little room for representing the diverse ways people experience and articulate their identities. Working with you helped me see how important it is to challenge these norms and to cultivate a writing practice that is more inclusive, respectful, and reflective of the communities we engage with in our research. At the same time, I recognize that moving towards such inclusivity requires ongoing learning, openness to correction, and a willingness to step beyond the comfort zones that traditional academic training often establishes.

One of the biggest compromises we made, I also feel, was the limited space available in the chapter to fully situate our identities and contexts. For instance, I wanted to write about the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, or tribe, which plays a crucial role in the Indian context. In connecting to the colloquium's focus on troubled solidarities, I think what we practiced was not ideal collaboration—but a realistic one. One that recognized structural hierarchies in authorship but also tried to subvert them by making room for both your discomfort and mine, for both forms of writing and knowledge. In this way, our chapter became like a patchwork: not perfectly put together, but carefully made, with shared effort, honesty, and respect for each other.

My next question: what does our chapter do that goes against the usual rules of traditional writing?

Isabel:

I think we have a lot of relatively unconventional things going on in our text: first of all, the writing without meeting and ultimately making the text the encounter we are having. Then, the broad range of experience and perspective covered, combining many specific ethnographic and autoethnographic details into one narrative that aims to instruct anthropology students. Ultimately though, we are still sticking to the form requested by the editors of the volume, which includes, for example, boxes with definitions of terms or citations. We are also not going against the basic conventions of academic writing: that is, we are not using fictional narrative, a highly unconventional structure, or other forms of style that are beyond the scope of established academic writing. In total, though, I still believe that speaking about disability remains a topic that requires more work and public attention, especially when it comes to personal experience. And here, it does not really matter whether the personal experience is that of a person with a disability or a person working on and with disabled people. Ultimately, it was very interesting for me to try to understand Tajinder's perspective on working with people with disability, in a country that I have never been to and where the conditions for living with disability are different to Germany. The question of representation—and who can speak for whom—becomes relevant: a classic of anthropological thought in the decolonial-feminist school. Moreover, I was surprised to see that as a person with a disability, I was somebody

that a fellow scholar was seeking to represent adequately. Having done an important part of my fieldwork in Ghana as a white German person, I am very much used to being in danger of misrepresenting people while making myself as invisible as possible in order to be best attuned to other people's experience.

How is it for you? What does our chapter do that goes against the usual rules for traditional writing, from your perspective?

Tajinder:

While working together on our writing, we combined autoethnographic and fieldwork experiences in a way that challenged the idea of having just one field or one fixed research site. Instead of telling one single story, we made space in our chapter for different places, different time periods, and different identities. While adhering to some academic conventions, like structured citations and defined boxes for additional information (as required by the editors), our chapter foregrounded personal experience, vulnerability, and relational ethics in ways that often remain hidden in traditional academic texts.

While I have always known my fieldwork is shaped by who I am, I was not taught to write my experiences with disabled women into the text explicitly, in the way you did. In Indian academia and much of 'Global South' ethnography, the norm of 'neutral observation' or detached positionality still dominates. Additionally, my experience frequently mirrored the burden of having to 'prove' the ethnographic validity of my fieldwork. I grappled with the fear that my voice might be perceived as too narrative-driven, too emotional, too biased, or unintentionally reinforcing ableist perspectives. Your writing style encouraged me to foreground my vulnerabilities, not as distractions from analysis, but as sites of knowledge production. That was both empowering and unsettling. Thus, what our chapter did against traditional writing norms was not only stylistic but knowledge- and power-related, which can be useful for the students who will be reading our chapter. We allowed pluralities of experience without forcing them into a single coherent master narrative. We acknowledged and foregrounded power asymmetries within our collaboration itself, not just in the field.

So, let me ask you: have you ever felt like your voice or point of view was overshadowed or had to be changed for the sake of 'balance'?

Isabel:

I was and still am quite aware that, as a researcher who already holds a PhD and has more experience with publishing in international anglophone academic contexts, I have an advantage in that field. Yet, it is very important for me to meet collaborators on eye level and try to break with academic hierarchies, which are always present in the institutions where we work. Over

distance, this is difficult to address, tackle, and talk about, as it would require having an explicit conversation about this. At the same time, though, what we actually wanted to do was write an article, which is best approached by getting down to writing. I did mention this pressure of performing in a highly competitive market before, so I will not go into a lot more detail here or repeat myself, but I felt that the balance I had to keep in a very mindful way was between passing on my knowledge in terms of edits, suggestions, and corrections while not overwriting your own voice, Tajinder. In the end, this did not overshadow my own point of view at all; it just meant that I felt some responsibility on my shoulders that I did not really want there. You recently sent me a message reminding me to finish my work on our dialogue and on the abstract for the talk here. That message included a short notice that in Indian culture, one respects elders, and you here considered me an elder, which is why you wanted to wait for my final approval. I think I responded with something like a 'thank you,' because this is also a great compliment, but I also emphasized the wish to work on eye level. I think if we had been able to meet in person or even just have better face-to-face digital communication channels, we could have resolved this partially by having a stronger interpersonal relationship. Maybe we are something like academic pen pals with a task, and this forum gives us the chance to reflect on what else was part of completing this task. I also want to show respect for your cultural background and things that are important for you, such as respecting elders. At the same time, and I also practice this in teaching, I think that respect should be a given in any relationship we have, hence seniority should not play a role so much, as it then can stand in the way of speaking your mind, engaging in open-ended discussions, and asking questions.

I would like to direct this question back at you. Have you ever felt like your voice or point of view was overshadowed or had to be changed for the sake of 'balance'?

Tajinder:

You're absolutely right that it's tricky to unpack and negotiate hierarchy over distance, especially when our primary focus is rushing into drafts and deadlines with diverse backgrounds in academic and cultural contexts. We have also overcome the barriers such as who takes the lead on what sections, how we signal when we're offering a suggestion versus imposing an edit, and so on. This reduced the possibilities of overshadowing our point of view. And I agree about the engagements related to open-ended discussions and asking questions.

So, what problems did we encounter when we tried to put our ideas about disability and care into words that academics or students could understand?

Isabel:

I think a big challenge, at least for me, was to write general entry-level instructions for learners of ethnographic methods in the first place. We are usually taught to write academically, meaning to theorize, abstract, and argue. I can imagine that at the PhD level especially, you would be very focused on producing this kind of text, which is what is required when writing a PhD. It is, however, not required in such a format for learners. And most importantly, we had to keep our intended audience in mind while writing. Does this include our readers? Does it motivate them to read on? Does it provide hands-on support and practical recommendations for students and other practitioners? As we were merging autoethnographic reflection from my end and ethnography-based material with some autoethnographic reflection from your end, this consideration of our readers was a lot to think about. At the same time, it was also helpful as a perspective for editing and making our contributions speak to each other.

What do you think and how do you feel about this, and were there other problems we encountered?

Tajinder:

Yes, I agree with you. Too much theorizing from either of us could obscure the practical takeaway; too many anecdotes might lead readers to question the underlying methods. Additionally, another hurdle that we encountered during our writing process was striking the right tone. We wanted our voice to be supportive and encouraging, rather than prescriptive or authoritative. Academic writing often positions the author as an expert dispensing wisdom; by contrast, we aimed to position ourselves as fellow learners who have grappled with similar challenges. This required softening some of our language—changing 'one must' to 'you might try,' for example—and acknowledging uncertainties or variations in ethnographic practice.

In what ways can other people learn from the way we write together across countries and differences? How might digital collaboration keep changing or redefining ethnographic power?

Isabel:

I think it requires a guide for such kinds of collaborations, possibly written in the exact way in which we are communicating here right now, and possibly contributed to by more people than just the two of us. This guide, or these helpful points, can raise awareness and tangible advice for speaking from different backgrounds, methodologically addressing power imbalances in the writing and editing process, and overcoming distancing factors. I think it is also important to share the fact that, while you are saying that digital

tools have made us more connected these days, they are by no means always available to everyone and at the same quality. For example, we often struggled with bad signal and sound quality during internet-based calls. These barriers are very real and also require us to find other ways of building relationships of trust. I think that while we engage in a professional space, it is absolutely crucial that as a professional practice, we are able to establish such relationships. Otherwise, difficult writing projects—as those across distance are—suffer, and we end up with a frustrating experience. Instead, I think these are worthwhile endeavors, and it would be great to have experience and advice to build on that can then inform future exchanges of this kind. What do you think, Tajinder?

Tajinder:

Yes, I agree with you, Isabel. I think a guide based on how we actually talk and write together—like this contribution—would really help others, those who want to work across countries and differences. Working together like this has shown me that power in research doesn't just sit with one person. It shifts between us, especially when we're writing together and learning from each other. Even though we're not in the same place, we can still build trust and share ideas in meaningful ways. What makes our writing special is not just the topic, but the way we support each other and stay open to learning. That, I think, is the real strength of this kind of collaboration. And yes, we should write down our experience, so that others—especially young researchers—can learn from it.

1. There was no funding to pay for a trip to Berlin for Tajinder, very much a reality in the academic everyday, yet to be pointed out here as a general lack of support for 'Global South' scholars and student researchers (both MA and PhD students). This is, of course, also a product of recent funding cuts for disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, which make departments struggle to make ends meet.
2. 'Collaborations and Solidarities in Troubled Times,' colloquium SoSe 2025, organized by Alice von Bieberstein and Elisabeth Luggauer, Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/de/das-institut/instituts-kolloquium/institutskolloquium-archiv/copy2_of_institutskolloquium (21/10/2025).
3. Actually (which Tajinder could not be aware of due to distance and lack of direct means of communication), Isabel was writing most of the article during fieldwork in Cape Town, South Africa, while experiencing an uncomfortable MS attack.

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Author's bios

Isabel Bredenbröker (they/them) is an anthropologist working between academia and art. They hold a postdoctoral faculty position at the Institute for Anthropology and Cultural Research, University of Bremen, Germany. Isabel's work focusses on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics and synthetic materials, anthropology of art and museums,

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