

Methods matter: Anecdotalisation as knowledge co-creation

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Cities are ever-changing constellations comprised of built infrastructure, people, things, memories and ideas. They spring from deliberate actions and initiatives undertaken just as much as they are shaped by accidents, the soil on which they stand, and the weather that bends and moulds them. In return, the cities we live in shape our lives, and may grant us opportunities or restrict us. Given the reciprocal relationship between a city and its citizens, the question of who holds the agency to mould the city is socially, politically and environmentally imperative. This text draws upon a project from 2019, based in Malmö Sweden, where anecdotes were used as a citizen-led method of inquiry, sense making and research communication. The text will introduce the notion of *anecdotalisation* (Michael, 2012a) as an iterative process of telling and retelling stories based on empirical observations. The text argues that the inherent relational quality of anecdotalisation can support mutual learning between researchers and research participants, or between citizens and public sector workers. The collaborative anecdotalisation process functions as a collaborative sense-making process, and as such does more than merely define existing social realities: It creates new knowledge.

Background

In a bid to democratise the process of city-planning, many Swedish municipalities request the use of citizen-dialogues. Indeed in 2015, 83% of Swedish municipalities carried out dialogue processes as part of their work (Wiberg, 2016). While this initiative is laudable, it may also be problematic. It is laudable in the sense that it challenges the position of natural authority granted to architects and other professional “city-makers”, and invites voices of the people who live (or will live) in the city into the decision-making process. This could certainly be deemed as a step towards democratisation. In Malmö, the ambitious work of “*Malmökommissionen*” – the Malmö Commission – produced 31 background reports into the current working routines and systemic work of Malmö Municipality. Then, through a lens of health and social sustainability, the Commission produced recommendations for sustainable city development, including increased citizen participation (Stigendal and Östergren, eds., 2013). There is, however, more than a semantic difference between the notions of citizen “dialogue” and citizen “participation”, with the latter signifying far greater agency in a given process. In practice, the dialogue work put forward by many Swedish municipalities often becomes the responsibility of public sector workers with an entirely different professional training (I have met everything from architects to social workers, librarians, administrative staff and fire fighters tasked with conducting citizen dialogue). Many municipalities fail to recognise that speaking – meaningfully – to citizens is a demanding task, which requires a skill set separate to that of, for example, an architect. It also requires time and resources, which is often lacking (Boivard and Loeffler, 2012). The result of citizen dialogue conducted without the appropriate skills, time and resources is likely to be a tokenistic or fruitless exercise for both the citizens and the public sector workers. Often, the questions asked are merely there to confirm or refute an idea or suggestion owned by the professional party, or at worst it is a means to create public support for an idea or suggestion. Participation, on the other hand, is a far messier engagement, which requires a more open-ended approach.

Within academia a similar tension is palpable: The way that we *do* research matters: Our methods are conduits for pre-conceived ideas and ideological currents and are, in turn, instrumental in the shaping of the same. Scientific methods, within most fields, are advised to be replicable, transparent, and neutral. The merit of scientific results often rests upon the researcher's ability to defend the virtue of her methods with regard to these values. Replicable results prove that the findings were not serendipitous, but another researcher or team of researchers should be able to conduct the same experiments in a completely different part of the world, with new subjects, and still arrive at the same results. Transparency means that, for example, research has been conducted in such a way that the fair and ethical treatment of research subjects and participants can be ensured. Neutral research ensures us that the researcher has not conducted her study with pre-conceived biases, political or otherwise.

While most would agree that it is the duty of scientific and academic communities to continuously strive towards excellence, many have also questioned whether it is at all possible to achieve these markers of replicability, transparency, and neutrality. Within the schools of sociology of knowledge and science – Science and Technology Studies (STS), and Feminist Technoscience in particular – scholars have been raising critical voices about the performativity of research methods and the political implications of a faux neutrality. Donna Haraway (1991) has directed our attention towards the way the natural sciences are simultaneously shaping and being shaped by their contemporary socio-political milieus. In *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991), Haraway uses accounts from socio-biological research to question the notion of *nature* as a pre-existing category to be discovered. Instead, she stresses that science *is* culture: Man-made and something that is – and must be – constantly contested. In their book *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (2000), Susan Leigh Star and Geoffrey Bowker explore how the politics of categorisation operate within the medical sciences, following the International Classification of Diseases' (ICD) standardisation of health through symptom definitions. They describe how simplification and division in biostatistics is necessary for the international community of clinical practitioners to communicate and develop research and findings, while simultaneously creating an information infrastructure that is susceptible to interpretations. This leaves classification and standards open to moral interpretations (such as, for example, the influence of Christian morality on abortions, birth control, or suicides), to cultural misunderstandings, or political agendas (from individual misdiagnoses based on socio-economic status and class, to racial classification on a structural level as seen, for example, during Apartheid). The information infrastructures and their standards also require a lot of practical work and economic resources to create and maintain (Latour, 1987). And this is not unique to the natural sciences. In the social sciences, sociologist John Law has suggested that social scientists not only *describe* social realities, they also *create* them (Law, 2004). '[M]ethod in social sciences (and natural sciences too) is enacted with a set of nineteenth- or even seventeenth-century, euro-American blinkers. This means that it misunderstands and misrepresents itself. Method is not [...] a more or less successful set of procedures for reporting on a given reality. Rather it is performative. It helps to produce realities' (ibid., p.143).

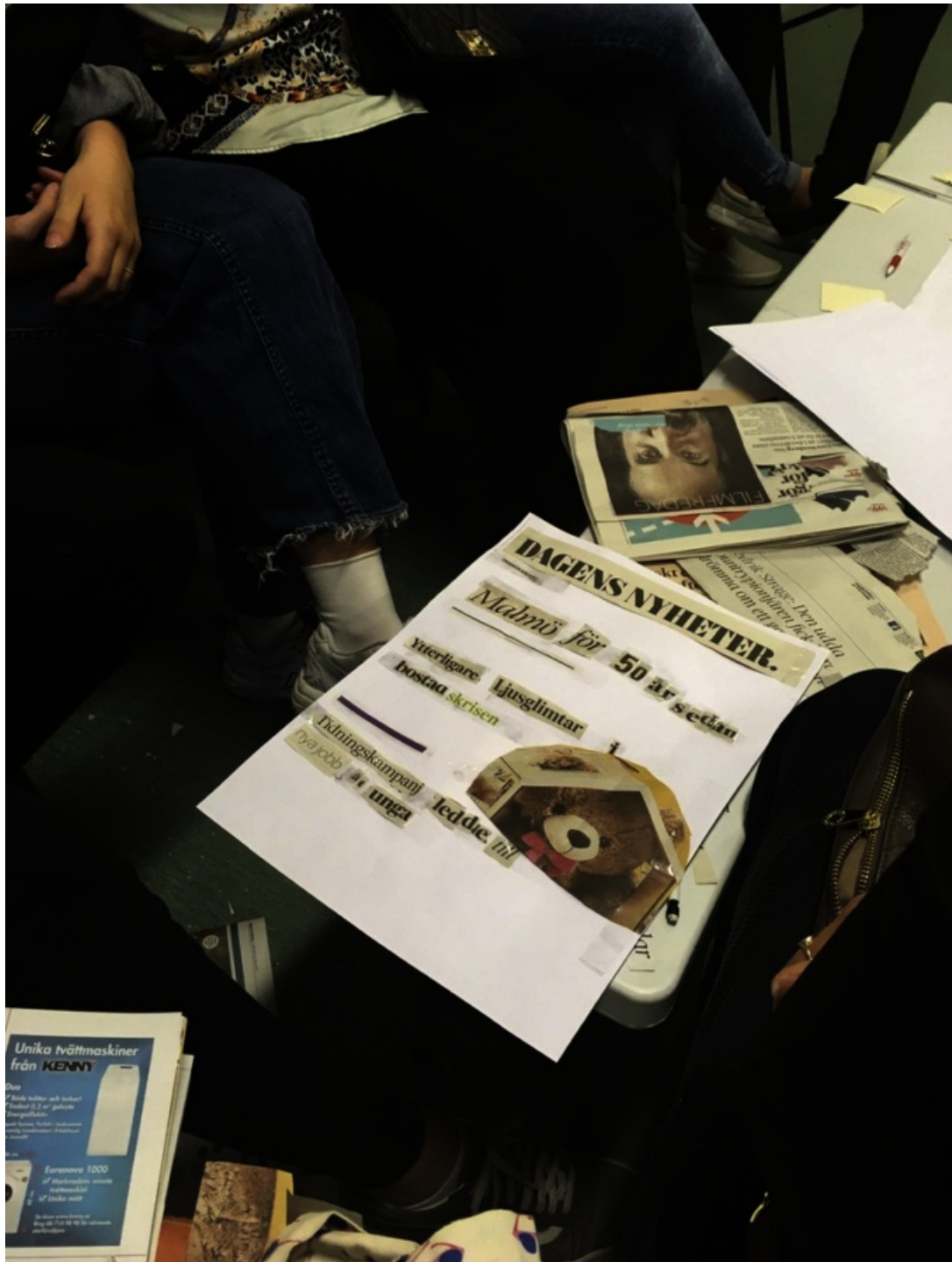
In sum, the way that we – the academic and scientific community – construct, define, understand, communicate and organise research matters. In this text I suggest that *anecdotalisation* (Michael, 2012a), the process through which anecdotes are circulated, can afford a three-fold methodological approach towards practice-based social science research: As a way of generating new knowledge; as a way of being with and within research; as a way of communicating research.

Anecdotalisation

The concept of *anecdotalisation* was coined by sociologist Mike Michael who writes – in the anthology *Inventive Methods* (Lury and Wakeford, 2012) – that the anecdote is more than just a narrative. It is, he suggests, a narrative *for the telling*, designed to be circulated and retold. And while, historically, the anecdote may not have been deemed to have a place within the sciences – the term anecdotal evidence does not bring to mind the academic rigour we ask of our scientific methods – Michaels argues that it has a natural place within scholarly practices of responsive and performative research. He writes that, ‘The point is that the anecdote, unlike typical forms of auto-ethnography, can serve as a means for tracing the co-emergence of research, researcher and researched’ (Michael, 2012a., pp. 26–27). Auto-ethnography, Practice-based Research, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) place the *researcher* within the *research*: From being a creature void of form, a fly on the wall, a muted observer to a person with a body and presence in the room. It is also worth noting that PAR, while applied research, differs from conventional applied research where the researcher is the professional expert who designs experiments, gathers and interprets data and communicates a conclusion, or a set of recommendations to, for example, an organisation (Whyte, 1991). Within PAR, and other practice-led paradigms, there is a greater focus on mutual learning and exchange which means that it is imperative to find methods tailored to relationality and dialogue. Practicing PAR often means that the researcher enters into situations candidly, and partakes in the work without being able to conduct clinical experiments. This places a heightened importance on the researcher’s ability to proceed responsively to the research participants and the relationality [mc1] between the two parts as it evolves and takes shape between the actors who practice it. Furthermore, this relationality also elevates the need to recognise the interpersonal politics: From the researcher’s standpoint, which in turn arguably poses an ethical imperative in recognising, speaking to and representing marginalised voices within the given situation. Michael argues that anecdotalisation moves beyond other kinds of auto-ethnographic approaches as it is ‘useful for explicitly incorporating the performativity of research – i.e., the way that research is not a mere reflection of something (e.g., one’s experiences in relation to social and cultural processes) out there, but is instrumental in, and a feature of, the ‘making of out theres’.’ (Michael, 2012a., p.26). He credits this to the anecdote’s ability of remaining somewhat fluid, ‘combing the real and the constructed, and holding them in tension’ (ibid., p.27); of transcending the historical account by not only reporting on but also acting on events; as a conduit for a lesson, or a piece of life experience, often of a more intimate nature. These descriptions resonate with Haraway’s understanding of *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988). If, as Haraway suggests, the *god’s eye view* is impossible, and we can never see the whole – then perhaps the anecdote can help

us engage with the partial perspective. The “god trick” demands to be the *only perspective*[\[mc2\]](#) , and renders all others invalid. The anecdote affords us to consider *multiple*, sometimes contrasting positions, made possible by their embodied nature.

To illustrate and concretise the process of anecdotalisation, this text will draw upon a case study conducted in 2019, where anecdotes became a way to engage with the city of Malmö’s many coexisting realities.



Malmö Berättar

The Malmö-based organisation *Tillsammans I Förening* (“Together in Unity”, abbrev. TiF) is

a politically and religiously independent organisation that strives to support local children and teenagers by organising events and projects. The organisation was founded around 2010 with an initial focus on girls in low-income families. This group was particularly vulnerable to being excluded from social, leisure activities and sports – even more so than their male counterparts (Blomdahl et al., 2017). Over the years, TiF developed a repertoire of approaches of engaging and educating young people in Malmö – most notably by offering them a mandate to build and organise themselves. As such the organisation was made up of young people with the skills and strengths required to identify their own needs, articulate them, and run projects accordingly.

Leading up to the Swedish general election in 2018, TiF organised a summer programme together with Malmö municipality where teenagers were hired to act as “democracy ambassadors”. The programme was open to any and all young people, between the ages of 15–18, resident in Malmö, and their task was to visit areas of the city where voter turnout was historically low. Conventionally, in the months and weeks leading up to a general election, party representatives will venture out into the streets to campaign, attempting to win the votes of the city’s residents. While these campaigners can be engaged in dialogue with individual citizens, the campaigns tend to be heavily dependent on one-way mass communication through leaflets, posters, advertising or on social media. Within the TiF summer programme, the teenagers were instead sent out on the streets and other public forums and tasked to encourage residents through one-to-one conversations to vote without advocating for any specific party or person but for democracy at large. And they could be said to have done good job at it, as the number of votes rose in each of the areas the Democracy Ambassadors visited.

The programme attracted attention from Malmö Municipality, NGOs, and from academia. Through their dialogues, the teenagers soon developed a kind of expertise in the areas they worked in. They gained insight into many of the area’s social, political, and infrastructural issues in ways many public sector workers could only dream of. For the teenagers themselves, being involved in the project afforded them a chance to engage with the importance of democracy, and the importance of making one’s voice heard. The programme sought to teach this in both theory and in practice. The programme did not, however, necessarily afford them their own voice. The 2018 programme was not designed to allow the teenagers to draw on their own lived experiences, or express political opinions. As part of a Do-Think-Tank hosted by Malmö municipality, I was invited to evaluate the programme. Together with TiF, we co-designed the suggestion for the 2019 summer programme, which, we argued, should afford the teenagers the opportunity to define their own social realities, and explore the act of articulation as a political act in and of itself. This, the second iteration of TiF’s summer programme was called *Malmö Berättar* (lit. Malmö tells).

In the summer of 2019, over 100 Malmö teenagers participated in *Malmö Berättar* and were tasked to gather stories over the course of 8 weeks. The teenagers were also encouraged to write down reflections around their everyday life, and the areas that they lived in; gather stories from residents in areas other than the one they themselves lived in; express their wishes for a future Malmö in the format of writing, audio recordings, illustrations

and postcards as cultural probes. At the end of the programme the teens had collected over 2000 anecdotes and observations. Through the gathering of stories, the teenagers began to learn about the many social realities that reside in Malmö, and it follows that they would turn to their peers after hearing a particularly interesting story.

Throughout the day the teenagers would “gift” each other with stories they just heard. Say, for example, that one teenager had heard an anecdote about encountering racism on public transportation. The other teenagers would then naturally engage with this anecdote by either asking follow up questions, or by offering up another related anecdote that they’d heard. In this way, when speaking of *collaborative* anecdotalisation, we may think of the anecdote as a *gift* (Kuokkanen, 2007) we offer up to our friends, foes, family or colleagues, hoping they will find its content entertaining or useful. Through the acts of gift-giving, we are building and maintaining a relationship. If the gift was to remain unreciprocated or unappreciated, we would soon stop offering it. Unreciprocated, here, does not mean to say that the receiver did not appreciate or agree with our account, but think rather that an unheard or unacknowledged account should be considered unreciprocated. If an anecdote is too commonplace, consensus would most likely kill it rather than reinforce it. Through disagreement and constant iteration, the anecdotalisation process was kept alive.

The collaborative anecdotalisation process may also function as a collective sense-making process. As the teenagers were sharing anecdotes with each other, they were bundling the stories together. As they were offering their peers *related* anecdotes as a response, the teenagers were making relations visible and by extension also categorising the anecdotes. While one anecdote might contain several lessons (crassly put: a story about encountering racism on public transportation may be a lesson about both racism and discrimination, or about public transport), this did not stop the teenagers from drawing connections. In fact, it could be said to have encouraged them to draw *more* connections, for example by relating personally familiar issues with new situations or vice versa.

In a reflection workshop held a few months after the programme had finished, I asked some of the teenagers if they found the summers’ activities valuable – what had they gained from the experience? I was concerned that they might feel like we had not “used” the stories enough, or that nothing had come from their hard work. One young woman then told me that she didn’t care what Malmö municipality, or academia, made of the stories. “We still use the stories. I use them in my work here [with TiF]; when I’m talking to my friends or my family. I’m still learning from them” (Author’s field-notes, 2019). This has encouraged me to think that the collaborative anecdotalisation process(es) that was(were) initiated during the summer programme still held momentum, which in and of itself is a generated value. However, in respectful disagreement with the young woman’s statement above, this paper argues that is *does* matter how the public sector and academia receive and listen to the anecdotes and stories the teenagers collected.

Anecdotes, in the case of *Malmö Berättar*, were a tool. As with any tool the anecdotes in and of themselves will not do the job, it is up to the craftsperson(s) who wields them to determine what it will make. When the craftspersons, as in this case, are public sector

workers or researchers trying to conduct citizen dialogues to better understand an area and its issues and tensions, anecdotalisation may function as a promethean effort: Relinquishing some of the power held by those in decision-making power in favour of a more levelled dialogue.

Three Affordances of Anecdotalisation

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper proposes that collaborative anecdotalisation is a three-fold concept. In the case described above, anecdotalisation comes forward as *a way of being in research*, and as *a way of generating new knowledges*. Practically, the work of the teenagers in the *Malmö Berättar* programme is an example of how anecdotes move between one actor to another, and how this circulation is both something which expands world views and affords a two-way co-creation of knowledges in a way that arguably transcends the conventional knowledge hierarchies. Anecdotes are not scientific interviews nor observations, rather they are, as mentioned above, *conduits* for life lessons and lived experiences. Anecdotes may be a tool to gain insight, but as with any other tool it is all about *how you use* it that makes it work. By this I mean to say that if you listen to an anecdote as if you were listening to a testimony made in court – an oath-sworn truthful retelling of events, boiled down to the most essential facts – you would most likely be disappointed. The anecdote is a constructed narrative, but the constructed element of the anecdote as a semi-fictional account is often more of an embellishment than an outright lie. If an event *feels* very scary we may embellish our retelling of the event to communicate the feeling of fear to the listener. Even in the “lying” there is a meta-data to be found (Fujii, 2010). To say that the value of an account solely rests on whether it is true or false, would be to detach it from its political, social and historical context. Political scientist Lee Ann Fujii (2010) conducted interviews in rural areas of Rwanda 10 years after the genocides, and found that the interviewees’ stories are often shaped by, for example, their socio-political belonging, and as such the lies told can be as informative as a truthful account. She writes:

“Meta-data can take both spoken and unspoken forms. They include rumours, silences, and invented stories. Meta-data are as valuable as the testimonies themselves because they indicate how the current social and political landscape is shaping what people might say to a researcher. By failing to attend to meta-data, analysts risk misinterpreting ambiguities, overlooking important details, drawing incorrect conclusions, and leaving informants vulnerable to reprisals for having talked to the researcher. Paying attention to meta-data is therefore vital to protecting informants and arriving at robust explanations and theories” (Fujii, 2010., p.232).

Similarly, the primary concern of the anecdotes that *Malmö Berättar* gathered, is not whether or not they were completely truthful. In the process of anecdotalisation, the teenagers were able sieve the accounts they’d heard and make out the embellishment from the reality which they portrait. Several accounts on a shared topic could reinforce one another, or dispute each other. Further, the process of collaborative anecdotalisation is generative: The teenagers would often subtract a deduction from the day’s anecdotes

that was more than the sum total of each individual anecdote.

Science and Technology Studies (STS) has in recent years taken a turn from transparency to participation. From *Public Understanding of Science* (PUS) to *Public Engagement with Science* (PES) (Michael, 2012b). A similar trend could be seen in the Swedish public sector where citizen dialogue is becoming increasingly popular, for example as an approach to city planning (Abrahamsson, 2013; Elam and Bertilsson, 2003). As mentioned in the beginning of this text, the Malmö Commission (Stigendal and Östergren, 2013) argued for the need to work with planning processes in a socially sustainable way. The use of citizen dialogue in city planning processes has been put forward as one way to prevent segregation (Abrahamsson, 2013). And yet, citizen dialogue is often reduced to very narrow engagement events: one-way interactions such as questionnaires. When the engagement events become formalised and standardised to such an extent, the citizens often “overspill” their intended role by performing or responding in unintended ways (Michael, 2012b). It has been questioned whether these kinds of citizen-engagement events are capable of engaging with citizens in a meaningful way. Sharon Beder (1999) has argued that citizen-engagement events historically has been used as a process of governance to silence protest actions, disobedience and dissensus and was a ‘process that sought public acceptance rather than public participation in decision making’ (Beder, 1999., p.169). The one-way engagement-event then becomes an exercise in power and does not *sui generis* erase inherent power imbalances between those with decision-making power and those without: Pacifying citizenship(s) rather than activating and encouraging engagements (Elam and Bertilsson, 2003). In this text, I seek to contrast the curated one-way citizen-engagement as a way of speaking *to* citizens, with the messy *being within* research of anecdotalisation. Because anecdotes have a tendency to “overspill” the format of most engagement-events, coming, as they do, with affect and embellishments. Perhaps, by treating anecdotes as something worth listening to, we may even push the boundaries of what “worth” means within citizen engagement?

The third leg of collaborative anecdotalisation, as it is proposed in this paper, is as a way of communicating research. The relationality of anecdotalisation affords a communication of research beyond publications and presentations to an international community of scholars. As the young woman from TiF said in the interviews: The anecdotes become bite-size lessons that can be used in everyday life. Like the question of the worth of engagement-events, this too challenges the value and purpose of academic publications. This is not to say that the telling of anecdotes should *replace* scholarly publications – which serve an important purpose – but rather act as a supplement to the academic discussion, as something that has value as well as academic publications. As anecdotalisation is a process by definition, it ceases to be as soon as it stops. This paper suggests that anecdotalisation could prolong the dialogue with the public, and surrender some of the control over who gets to take part in that conversation. If dialogue is to become an engagement with science, we need train ourselves – as researchers and practitioners – to work with the co-creation of knowledges in plural and use methods which open up rather than reduce.

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