

# REVEALING ETHNOGRAPHIC MEDIATIONS THROUGH REFLEXIVE WRITING: A COLLABORATIVE EXPLORATION OF TAROT AND ASTROLOGY AS A NOT-KNOWING APPROACH

ADAM WIESNER and MÓNICA CORNEJO-VALLE

**Abstract:** In order to develop a collaborative experience of reflexive writing, this article explores the ethnographic process through two communication devices used by the authors in their respective fieldwork: tarot readings and evolutionary astrology. Reflecting on their distinct (if not opposing) backgrounds, the authors explore and interpret how their different backgrounds and conversational devices shape their ethnographic experience as a process of revealing the unknown, following the not-knowing approach (Anderson, 1997). The dialogic exchange also reveals how the not-knowing approach affects the collaborative aspect of the reflexive writing experience.

**Keywords:** collaborative writing; autoethnography; tarot; astrology; not-knowing approach; symbolic language; logic; postmodern therapy.

## Introduction

Ethnographic work is mediated by different language situations that scholars select as meaningful research plans and objectives. These situations are mediated by communication devices, including protocols and interview structure, the scripts introducing ourselves and, of course, the writing and outcomes of the situations and their consequences. In order to develop a dialogical collaborative experience of reflexive writing—in a sense a conversation—in this paper we set out to explore the ethnographic process by experimenting with communication devices that we have used in fieldwork: tarot readings and evolutionary astrology applied as the not-knowing approach.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> We would like to stress that our discussion remains within the limits of ethnographic practice and the use of tarot and astrology as conversational devices that provide some heuristic and epistemological leverage. We do not intend to discuss knowledge other than that related to ethnographic experience, although we accept that tarot and astrology can also provide knowledge relating to different fields of study outside the academic or scholarly environment. Being aware of the criticism often triggered in academic world by the mere mention of esoteric techniques, we recommend Hammer and Von Stuckrad's (2007) and Hanegraaf's (2012) brilliant studies about the history of esotericism and polemical encounters with the academic and scientific world.

These devices have proved helpful in providing abundant conversational or contextual information. When applied in a conversational setting, tarot readings with their distinctive symbolic logic help create space for unexpected conversations, while simultaneously enhancing trust and rapport with conversational partners. Evolutionary astrology can be applied by the researcher as a reflexive tool in an (auto)ethnographic context, as well as a symbolic language and highly potent meaning-making paradigm for searching for contesting interpretations that challenge normative disempowering discourses. When these mediating devices enter the ethnographic process via the researcher's philosophical stance of "not-knowing" (Anderson, 1997), that is, without the prospect of confirming what is already known and expected, through the multidimensional communication of symbols and metaphors, they may open up a reservoir of unique visions and unseen paths—a genuine collaborative space for co-creating and generating new meanings. Given that originally the use of the not-knowing approach in collaborative therapy was in principle a philosophical stance rather than a technique, one that assumes "humility about what one knows", it allows for a heartfelt interest in responsive listening and learning what our partners-in-conversation have to say (Anderson, 1997, p. 136).

As ethnographers and authors of divergent anthropological approaches, our goal was to go beyond a mere comparison of our fieldwork memories and experience. In an effort to perform the experiment as a dialogical scholarly exchange, we apply the not-knowing approach directly in our conversation so that the process itself enables a space to open up for collaborative reflexive writing based on our shared knowledge, sudden inspiration and continual analysis. Through our collaborative writing as a means of eliciting responsive process—a conversation—we also explore the tensions and convergences between our methodological and epistemological backgrounds. As authors we come from contrasting (if not opposing) schools of thought: autoethnography and postmodern therapy on one hand (Adam), and modern symbolic anthropology (Mónica) on the other. This dialogical account is therefore the outcome of our interest in contemplating how these dissimilar frameworks shape the experience of the ethnographic process, and how it can be revealed through the application of the not-knowing approach within the experiment of collaborative reflexive writing.

## **Symbols, Metaphors and Communication**

[Adam]: When reading *Symbol, Story and Ceremony*, an excellent work by the narrative therapists Gene Combs and Jill Freedman, I could not help but take screenshots from time to time so that I could share it with Mónica via our mobiles. I knew that she enjoyed musing about symbolism, yet I also really wanted to express my newly discovered passion for symbols and metaphors with someone who could resonate with such a creative and playful way of thinking. I consider myself rather "green" insofar as the field of symbolism is concerned, yet on the other hand, the fact that "Many more people use metaphor than know they are using metaphor" (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. xviii) rings true to me. The screenshot that started the whole conversation, excerpts of which we decided to take and use as an inspirational springboard for our academic exchange, read:

Any time we use metaphor we are communicating on at least two levels. Most really good metaphors, whether they be stories, paintings, statues, gestures, or songs, communicate in more dimensions than we can count. When we couch our messages to people in metaphors, we help to insure that those messages are perceived in many dimensions. (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 4)

Reading the words “perceived in many dimensions” made me hit the “send” button on my mobile screen. Given that both of us are avid tarot readers, I was wondering what inspiring associations such a quote would bring into our everyday conversation. I asked Mónica a peculiar question: “Are card readings metaphors?”. Her reaction was almost immediate:

M: They are metaphors, and more! Our words are metaphors. Everything! Our bodies...

A: Then it seems that the question we often ask “*What does it mean?*” does not make much sense...

M: All things mean several things in several dimensions and levels. It depends on where you are (one or several places) whether you can process those meanings. Well, that's how I see it. Perhaps the terminology around “meaning” could be improved, too, since it comes from a strong binary thought (structural linguistics) and may limit our comprehension of polysemy.

A: I understand meaning as generative and co-constructed, considering my rather postmodern philosophical background. Yet the question about the meaning of things suddenly seems strange to me. As if it was kind of empty of meaning, yet inviting us at the same time to create one. What does it mean? Anything. From the metaphorical multidimensional view, seriously, anything.

M: Yes.

A: Whatever you respond to, that is what it means at that moment for you.

M: Definitely.

A: Do you still consider yourself a modern thinker?

M: I have never been worried about whether I am modern or postmodern myself, it's just a label for others. I, too, belong in the postmodern era. What I am is a symbolist - whatever that means to you - and symbolism is alive through the ages. I see true potential in this approach.

A: That sounds very postmodern to me. Is there any particular topic from the symbolist realm you would like to discuss if there were no rules or limits?

M: I don't know. I like everything!

A: I did not expect that answer.

M: It is as if I could *feel through* to the symbolic realm. Everything is connected to everything. I see no boundaries or well defined topics.

A: Exactly. I believe it can be put down to words somehow, can't it?

M: Indeed, words are part of it.

A: It seems that this conversation is relevant to the way we use tarot readings and evolutionary astrology as a way of not-knowing in ethnographic practice, the topic of our collaborative paper. I would say that not-knowing is in fact all about Wittgenstein's language game.

M: Same as tarot!

A: So in fact, tarot = not-knowing?

This last and perhaps unusual equation is inspired by what Gregory Bateson explains as word structure “built on likeness”, which can be contrasted with classical logic syllogisms that follow the form “if this is true, then this is true” (as cited in Hoffman, 2018, p. 5). While

the classical syllogism says, “If Socrates is a man, and if all men die, then Socrates will die”, the contrasting word structure built on likeness says, “Grass dies, Men die, [therefore] Men are grass” (Hoffman, 2018, p. 5). According to Bateson, this “formula indicate[s] the way the natural world communicate[s]”, despite the protests of logicians that this sentence does not in fact make any sense (Hoffman, 2018, p. 5).

[Mónica] Your last paragraph has powerfully triggered something in my mind, an unexpected version of a classic challenge: Aristotelian logic versus symbolic association rules. Since it is unexpected, it raises the crucial question: are these poles really opposite? In modern formal logic, Aristotelian logic (syllogisms and its rules) is just a small part of the different sets of rules according to which we think and produce knowledge (Russell, 2004). For me, logic is *as symbolic as* tales, rituals and tarot cards are. Of course, the difference has to do with the rules, that is, the relationships among terms consuetudinary accepted as valid. Apart from that, in my experience as an ethnographer, the principles of identity, no-contradiction and excluded middle are useless in giving proper account of cultures and human reasoning, emotions and behaviour. The laws of symbolic association (resemblance and time or place contiguity) seem to be, on the contrary, very useful, and I have explored this in my work trying to make sense of rituals and beliefs (Cornejo-Valle, 2008; 2017; 2021).

How does it relate to tarot on one hand and the not-knowing approach on the other? I am not completely sure, yet I have an intuition that the links are many. After all, we are interested in revealing mediations, and logics—as relational systems and languages—are mediations, despite being symbolic like myths or symbolic like maths. Somehow, I have always felt that tarot is a kind of grammar, and in that sense it is both a language and a set of rules (in this line, Balharry, 2006). Thus, my experience of tarot is “logic”. Beyond my own personal experience of it, Michael Dummett, a logician and philosopher of language at Oxford, formally explored the logical nature of tarot as game (Dummett & Mann, 1980; Dummett & McLeod, 2004). Hence, the question is: when I say that tarot is “logic”, what “logic” is it about, and for what, and how, and for whom? Who decides what we call “logic”, and what are the valid relationships we call rules?

During tarot readings, the readers play the expert role and they are usually those who decide what “logic” of the symbols will be used for the interpretation. However, since the reading is also a social context, the sitters can contribute to making sense of the cards, helping to define or discover what makes sense for them, in other words, what is “logical”. In the tarot milieu (the field or domain of the experts), there are some commonalities and trends regarding the nature of the spread, the order of the reading, the meanings of the symbols, but there are many different styles too. There is not just one way of being “logical” and making sense, as is confirmed by the variety of books about reading the cards, the numerous different tarot decks, as well as the shared experience of the participants of reading sessions.

My point here is that logic—language and rules—cannot be the opposite of reading omens, storytelling or making sense of metaphors and juxtaposed images. Everything is about how socially effective communication is created by symbols and these can be words, images, numbers, objects and anything that is performed or read with a semiotic intention. In a Fregean sense (Frege, 1948), it is about how we establish the relationship between sense and reference. Doesn’t ethnography follow the same goal?

## Breaking with Academic Conditioning: Astrology, Not-Knowing and Epistemological Crisis

[Adam]: Your comparison of tarot to grammar and logic evokes in me an association with evolutionary astrology practised as symbolic language. Just as in China, where more than three hundred languages are spoken yet all people can read the same newspaper because of the symbolic character of Chinese alphabet, in astrology the Sun symbol (☉) always means the same thing in any language. However, there are multiple ways of interpreting it in the context<sup>2</sup>. Elsewhere I wrote about how evolutionary astrology can be applied in autoethnography as a valid reflexive tool, a meaning-making as well as therapeutic paradigm for searching for alternative contesting paths and narrative outcomes that will help us view our life experience in less pathological, more self-empowered ways (Wiesner, 2020a; 2020b). As a meaning-making tool, I find evolutionary astrology extremely valuable in fighting the shadow of contemporary Western psychiatry, namely its pathologizing discourse that constitutes “‘mentally ill’ subjects” (LeFrançois & Diamond, 2014, p. 39). According to White and Epston:

[M]eaning is derived through the structuring of experience into stories. [...] As this storytelling of experience is dependent upon language, in accepting this premise we are also proposing that we ascribe meaning to our experience and constitute our lives and relationships through language. (White & Epston, 1990, p. 27)

Hence, the use of language has a fundamental function in meaning-making, one that is especially significant in relation to power (Wiesner, 2020b, p. 119). The dangerous consequence of normative labelling and dehumanizing diagnostic practices of contemporary psychiatry is often a self-fulfilling prophecy of the diagnosis; one that causes more harm than good. As a parallel to your question above I might therefore add: Who decides what the term “sane” means, and in what context? Who lays down the rules for defining the boundary of sanity? If the number of diagnosed people in the Western world is constantly increasing to the point that the categories of pathology need to be revised every few years to include us all with our repressed shadows, isn’t it time to critically review the roots of society instead of putting labels on people? If Einstein was right and we cannot solve the problem through the same thinking used to create it, then it is time to decolonize our modern science. For it seems to be in desperate need of reconnecting with the heart it lost centuries ago.

Nevertheless, writing critically about biomedical discourse while offering astrology as a scholarly tool within the context of contemporary Cartesian academia poses a true challenge. As pointed out by Horkheimer and Adorno in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, “Reason and religion deprecate and condemn the principle of magic enchantment” (as cited in Willis & Curry, 2004, p. 93). In the eyes of modern science, astrology and tarot are often viewed as “scientific heresy” (Willis & Curry, 2004, p. 93). Yet, it is also the main reason I am

<sup>2</sup> This symbol can be read as an adjective (solar) or a verb (to shine). Yet it can also be read relationally, either from a binary perspective (outer, masculine) as oppositional to the Moon (inner, feminine), or holistically, representing a particular part of the zodiac system as its ruler, and therefore referring to the archetype of Leo and the fifth house (self-actualization, ego, etc.). From the perspective of medical astrology, it can even be a direct reference to the eye, the central organ of the visual system in the human body (Green, 2011, p. 170).

compelled to continue applying them in my research. Autoethnography for ethnographers, and for example White and Epston's narrative therapy<sup>3</sup> for therapists, allows for the creation of a safe space, a necessary "break from the imprisonment of categorization", a demand for the "centering of the personal in relation to the social" and, just as importantly, "the desire to change the world" (Bell et al., 2019, p. 1). The world that does not recognize us as mature creative beings. The world that constantly subjugates and disciplines us through its omnipresent systemic technologies of modern power (White & Epston, 1990), and hence, prevents us from engaging in the organic process of individuation and healthy difference.

As a therapist in contemporary Western society, I see that it has become extremely difficult to navigate our way around where everything that threatens systemic control is deemed wrong and abnormal rather than an unavoidable consequence of the desensitized distorted reality we are born into. As an evolutionary astrologer though, I am more optimistic. Despite the current global crisis, there are signs that as a collective we are waking up to the crucial need to unlearn what we have been conditioned to be, do and believe. In this process of deconditioning and unlearning that is never easy nor supported by our closest peers, let alone modern science (the very culprit, in a sense), one has to search for ways to discern right from wrong anew in their individual context—yet not this time in the sense of serving the normative systemic demands but their self-empowerment. As an ethnographer, I welcome all novel tools (or new ways to use the tools we already have) to critically reflect, re-construct and mindfully re-form what is left after the symbolic "Tower-effect" that every crisis of consciousness brings, as portrayed beautifully in the symbolic tarot journey of The Fool. As a scholar, I find the philosophical stance of not-knowing to be highly applicable in fieldwork as well as in writing. I believe it is genuine, responsive curiosity rather than the pursuit and promotion of our own knowledge (Anderson, 1997, p. 136) that helps us to enter into and slowly reveal the unknown as best we can.

[Mónica] You have expressed, more particularly perhaps, the biggest question of knowledge production: does curiosity about the unknown not lie at the heart of science? Could curiosity about the unknown lie at the heart of academic work? If so, then the process of unlearning and deconditioning is a critical aspect of the epistemological crisis that not only impacts on our knowledge but our methodologies as well, including tools and mediations. Knowledge and tools should therefore evolve not just through accumulation but via trying novel ways and approaches, despite the changes potentially ending in a blind alley (as we are unaware of where the path leads) or being provisional (until further research either confirms or proves them false). As you said, "we cannot solve the problem through the same thinking used to create it", and that is a very well established rule of scientific revolutions (Kuhn, 2012).

I also feel that epistemological crises can be a familiar aspect of ethnography since we have been dealing with "the Other" as the "unknown" as the subject of the very foundations of the fieldwork itself. At some point by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of us adopted the principle of epistemological surveillance (Bourdieu et al., 1991) or the practice of

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<sup>3</sup> Strongly influenced by Foucauldian thought, narrative therapy, founded by psychologist Michael White and anthropologist David Epston, provides important conversational tools for addressing crucial issues of control, power and ethics (White & Epston, 1990).

epistemological breakdowns (Agar, 1982) as part of our research repertoire. As I matured professionally with these ideas, it is seemingly intellectually easy for me to embrace the idea of the not-knowing approach, or the use of uncanny techniques (like Tarot cards), so as to become aware of our biases, deconstruct “common sense” knowledge and go deeper in exploring the unknown. However, intellectually easy as it may be, the theory of scientific revolutions says that the old paradigm and its champions will defend their honour bravely in university departments, academic journals, at scientific conferences and in all the possible scenarios of academic politics (Kuhn, 2012; Latour, 1987).

### **Not-Knowing: In Search of (Symbolic) Meaning**

[Adam]: Based upon what we have discussed so far, it seems that both tarot and astrology, when applied through the not-knowing approach as symbolic systems of logic or grammar have a clear relationship to openness and reaching the unknown, the relevance of which is indisputable in both ethnography and therapy. Also, your reference to the epistemological crisis brings me back to the importance and role of symbols and metaphors in human life. While a symbol or “a metaphor can point to an idea ... it can never be the idea” (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 31). It is the attractive open space between the idea and the metaphor that, as a source, allows for the emergence of multiple meanings (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 31). Through combining what both of us present in this written conversation that can be observed as a combined image, as two eyes in the metaphorical “binocular view” (Bateson, 1979, p. 133), new images and in-depth descriptions emerge. In Combs and Freedman’s interpretation of the Batesonian perspective, we humans are participants in the “larger mind of nature” (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 40), demanding that purpose and planning need to be “balanced by a respect for nonconscious processes and a willingness to lose ourselves ... in the larger pattern” (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 41). This alignment with the higher consciousness of the larger mind of nature, so well-known to shamanic experience, corresponds with the not-knowing approach as a philosophical stance. It is an active commitment to an open, respectful and holistic “dialogical interplay” (Anderson, 1997, p. 137) in the search for meaning; one that allows all particles of consciousness to speak to us through their own communication channels.

According to Bateson, “mere purposive rationality unaided by such phenomena as art, ... dream, and the like, is necessarily pathogenic and destructive of life” (Bateson, 1972, p. 145). I cannot agree more, given that the results of the destructive force of purposive rationality deprived of meaning, joy, compassion or self-worth can be observed with the naked eye in our contemporary world. While it is hard to argue against the fact that it is “the unique, particular, not-to-be duplicated subjectivity of the individual which is the real source of human meanings”, contemporary modern disciplines such as medicine and psychiatry remain rather depreciative of subjectivity and continue to apply the mechanistic view, treating the human psyche as a machine, a thing that has “no reality of its own” (Edinger, 1992, pp. 108–109). Yet, in the words of Carl Gustav Jung, “we are all badly in need of a symbolic life”, as “only the symbolic life can express the need of the soul—the daily need of the soul, mind you! And because people have no such thing, they can never step out of this mill—this awful, grinding, banal life in which they are ‘nothing but’” (Jung, 1976, p. 274).

[Mónica] I think that maybe now it is clearer how this conversational detour relates to uncovering ethnographic mediations like tarot or astrology as particular strategies of the not-knowing approach. Both tarot and astrology can be used in the context of ethnographic conversation—a term I prefer to interview—but perhaps the context is easier to recognize through the word “interview”, as a symbol in itself, one that evokes particular experiences that we all have as professionals. As ethnographers, sometimes we mine only data from conversations, although the conversational techniques in ethnography (which differ from surveys) specifically mine “logics”, patterns of thought, meaning frameworks. We then pursue, search and analyse what makes sense for the people we talk to, and how, and why it makes sense. In this process of searching for meanings and logics (the rules and languages behind the meaning), as researchers we assume a key methodological starting point: we do not know (or do not understand) the sense of a particular cultural experience, activity, belief, custom and so forth. We do not know enough, so we create conversations with others to access that knowledge or to understand the pattern, cultural logic, behind the facts. What is crucial about those ethnographic conversations, oriented not only towards mining data but exploring patterns of thought and meaning frameworks, is that they cannot be closed around predefined questions, created by us scholars in our ivory towers. We need openness in order to discover the unknown. That, for me, is the point of research, to reach out into the unknown. At some point in my research among spiritual seekers, I realized that tarot cards were excellent deliverers of open, unexpected conversations, the kind of fruitful talk that neither the interviewee nor the interviewer know where it starts or where it ends.

### **Closing Notes: Story, the Central Metaphor**

[Adam]: Your emphasis on the need for ethnographic openness in the exploration of thought and patterns brings me back to the very beginning of our conversation. In a circular fashion, I see that at the beginning of our dialogue, I was inspired by a quote about multidimensional communication through metaphors and I felt the need to share it with a kindred mind. We developed the topic further through a determined yet spontaneous, in-depth “moment-to-moment exchange” that may appear fragmented and unstructured to readers who might have a preconceived notion of what the conversation (i.e. the structure of a scholarly article) should look like. When applied to collaborative therapy, it is essential that in adopting the not-knowing approach the therapist does not control the interview by trying to follow a certain goal or direction. The key is to wait for the newness to emerge out of the collaborative experience within the conversation (Anderson, 1997, p. 126). For me the unplanned outcome of our exchange is the confirmation that through our continual analysis we have come to the same conclusion encapsulated in the unusual equation that initiated our conversation—the Batesonian structure built on likeness of tarot = not-knowing. It seems that when applied to ethnographic experience your tarot practice results in similar “deliverers” of great unexpected content in the same way the not-knowing approach does in collaborative therapeutic settings.

In any system such as tarot, astrology or even the human body, there are “common patterns that become a basis for recognition” (Bateson & Bateson, 1987, p. 35). From the Batesonian perspective, “each person is his own central metaphor” (Bateson & Bateson,

1987, p. 35). For Bateson personally, the best form of metaphor is the story, for “stories are how a mind connects individual bits of data” (Combs & Freedman, 1990, p. 42). If we consider the human need for narrative thinking, that is, to tell, retell or even untell stories of our own and the world around us, then tarot as well as astrology has its legitimate place in contemporary science. For it is the narrative, the story as a metaphor of multidimensional meaning and the need to “explore thought and patterns” as you say, that seems to be at the very centre of our ethnographic experience.

[Mónica] I would like to add a final thought about the magic of writing. As Jack Goody pointed out (and ethnographers know very well), writing improves the scrutiny of our own ideas, heightening our critical activity and awareness of them (Goody, 1977, p. 44). Through this written conversation we do not just reveal methodological findings from our fieldwork, we also expose the process of *collaborative thinking*. More particularly, we reveal how our ideas are entangled with one another, connecting different theoretical backgrounds, interests and topics until they form a single thread, even if it is frayed, or more frayed than it would be in a conventional scientific paper, where this whole process would be completely hidden. In this sense, we have also worked on collaborative writing as mediation in the final ethnographic task: scientific dissemination.

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Anthropology, Diversity and Integration Research Group  
 Complutense University of Madrid  
 Faculty of Political Sciences an Sociology  
 Dept. Social Anthropology and Social Psychology (Office 1214)  
 Campus de Somosaguas  
 28223, Pozuelo de Alarcón (Madrid)  
 Spain  
 Email: wiesner.ad@gmail.com  
 ORCID: 0000-0001-8071-2961  
 Email: mcornejo@ucm.es  
 ORCID: 0000-0003-1001-6666