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5. CURATING AN EXHIBITION IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING

An Autoethnographic Study of an Autoethnographic Work

INTRODUCTION

> Autoethnography can be a way of doing something different with theory and its relation to experience. (Stewart, 2013)

Sometimes, as an academic, you find yourself in workshops on methods or research areas that are new to you. When these workshops are interdisciplinary they may make you think a little bit differently about your own work, and perhaps a new seed is planted and you find a new way to approach an old problem you have been working on. It may also inform the way you teach and interact with students.

In this chapter, we draw on experiences of curating an exhibition of curated photo albums as result of a workshop that was to become so much more than just planting a seed. The workshop was about participatory visual methods, and was organised by Forum for Gender Studies at Mid Sweden University in the city of Sundsvall, Sweden, and led by guest professor Claudia Mitchell from McGill University, Montreal, Canada. In this workshop, we were an interdisciplinary group of six researchers and teachers in higher education. All were connected to the Forum for Gender Studies at Mid Sweden University, which is an interdisciplinary unit within the university, and the participants came from different disciplines of social sciences: public health,[1] sociology, and gender studies. The group ranged from professors to doctoral candidates and the task at hand was to learn the method of personal, curated photo albums[2] on a specific theme (Mitchell & Allnutt, 2008; Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan, 2014; Mitchell, Weber, & Pithouse, 2009; Smith, 2012). Little did we know that the workshop would grow into a project including the albums themselves, an exhibition of the albums, and the writing of this very chapter in the book you are now holding in your hand.

The prompt for our curated albums was to find and work with pictures in our personal photo albums that somehow mirrored social change; these albums became the focus of the exhibition we describe in this chapter. At the end of the album workshop, the opportunity to curate an exhibition was given to us

(Lasse Reinikainen and Heléne Zetterström Dahlqvist). While we discovered that the act of curating our individual albums could be regarded as an autoethnographic activity in itself, here we focus on the experiences of curating the exhibition of the photo albums. In so doing, we describe and highlight the autoethnographic nature of this work.

For teachers, it can sometimes be challenging to find ways to teach about issues connected to complex and abstract societal structures to new students, especially if we want them to understand the connection to their own individual experiences. The curated albums were a way for us to learn how to visualise situated social change in our own lives. The concept of situated social change will be further discussed later in this chapter. The challenge for us as teachers and researchers was to create an exhibition and visualise the insights and the learning we did when curating the albums, and at the same time be reflexive on how we can use this new understanding in the classroom when meeting students.

As researchers, we usually study groups that are somehow disadvantaged—we are "studying down." In the last decades, social researchers have begun to embark on a "studying up" approach, that is, studying privileged groups (Colyar, 2013; Nader, 1972; Pelias, 2013; Priyadharshini, 2003; Stich & Colyar, 2013; Walsh, 2007; Williams, 2012). As academics, we may be considered to be a privileged group, but we were not studied by someone else but by ourselves. So, rather than studying down or up, the curated albums project became an example of "studying inwards" and hence, a self-reflexive autoethnographic work. The approach of studying inwards and looking at personal experiences became one of the central themes in the exhibition and something we wanted to encourage others to do as well.

THE AIM AND ORGANISATION OF THE CHAPTER

One of the main questions we discuss in this chapter is how autoethnographic data on different levels may be addressed and managed. As curators of the exhibition, we were also a part of the group curating the albums on social change. This put us in a position where we had to be self-reflexive on multiple levels as well as in different temporal dimensions. The specific aim of the present chapter is to describe the processes of the planning, producing, and reflecting of the exhibition itself, while at the same time collecting autoethnographic data in order to write about curating an exhibition. In connection with this, we discuss different dimensions of self-reflexivity related to these processes. We also discuss ethical issues regarding curating an exhibition throughout the chapter.

In the following section, we position ourselves methodologically and socio-culturally as well as in relation to our professional and disciplinary work. Next, we will present the actual practical curation of the exhibition as well as a more elaborate and critical reflection on the same curation process. Finally, we will provide some conclusions and implications of these experiences.

METHODS AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Our understanding of autoethnography draws on the work of, among others, Chang (2008), Ellis and Bochner (1996), and Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2012). Chang et al. defined autoethnography as "study of self, writing about individual experiences of life within the context of family, work, schooling, and society and interpreting the meanings of the experiences" (2012, p. 11). Autoethnography can be viewed as a method of introspection in order to investigate everyday life and by doing so, connecting culture and the individual. In recent years two different genres of autoethnography have been developed. One is the evocative or emotional genre, which emphasises the individual personal experience, and the other is the analytical genre, which instead emphasises the social world outside the researcher (Pace, 2012). In this study, we lean more towards the evocative genre because we focus more on our own experiences on an individual level.

Autoethnographic studies are often done as individual or group work, but this specific study is an example of collaboration between two people (more about different forms of collaborative autoethnography in Chang et al., 2012). It means that we were two individuals who reflected individually as well as jointly, which involved constant negotiation and discussion. This also implies that the selves were in focus in a very personal and intimate way. This called for a high level of reflexivity on behalf of the researchers and a will to use the subjective to analyse the objective. In other words, we used the situated and embodied experiences of our subjective selves to analyse the more objective social context. After all, as in most autoethnographic work, we were using very specific personal and individual experiences and perceptions in order to say something about the general (i.e., objective) culture (Chang, 2008). This also calls for yet another level of reflexivity where we had to reflect on our own reflections of the other person's reflections. Sometimes they cohered and sometimes they diverged but most often, our reflections were concordant. This was a result of us having the same theoretical and methodological framework regarding autoethnography and visual methodology. We did not work with duoethnography or traditional two-person autoethnography, which often involves presenting data in dialogue style as described by, for example, Chang et al. (2012) and Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang, (2014). Instead, we were two individuals who were co-reflexive, that is, we did self-reflexive work regarding an "us" or "we." Drawing on Mead's (1967) concept of "I" and "me" in his theory of the self—where the me is the socialised dimension of a person, and the I is the reflecting and active dimension of a person—the two of us discussed, thought, and acted together while, at the same time, actively reflecting on the acting, thinking, and talking.

Our collected data consists of field notes (Figure 5.1), photos, and short videos captured by our cell phones. In our field notes, there was text as well as drawings. We continuously sketched our ideas about the content and form of the exhibition, and we also drew mind maps regarding theoretical concepts as well as timelines.

We took pictures and shot short videos while searching for suitable spaces for the exhibition, during meetings, and during the actual mounting of the exhibition.
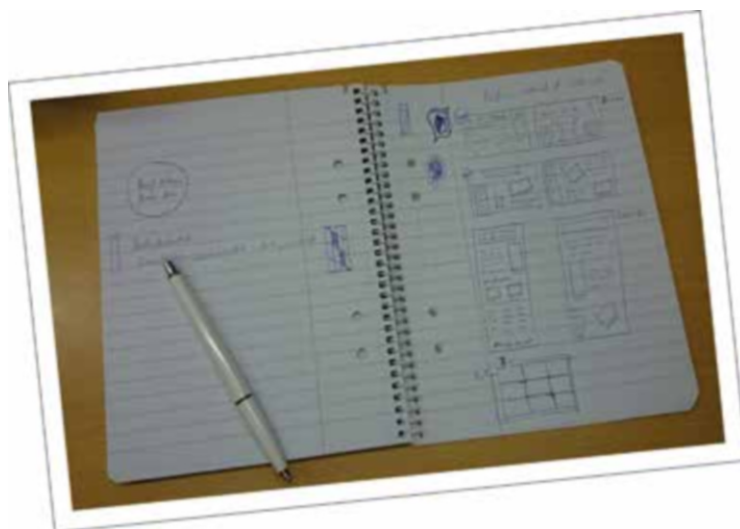

Figure 5.1. Field notes

PRACTICALITIES AND SELF-REFLEXIONS

The Curation of the Exhibition

Studies on curating an exhibition may be new to researchers outside of fine arts and art history although, as Mitchell (2011) highlighted, as more researchers engage in visual research (and especially photovoice), the curating of an exhibition (either by the participants or by the research team) becomes more common. Therefore it has become increasingly important to share experiences about the process of curating an exhibition, including planning, practical issues, and doings.

The following description of the practical process of curating the exhibition may seem to be a linear description of the order of how different things were done. However, some of these were parallel processes, which we will try to be explicit about. Apart from the practicalities of creating an exhibition, we were continuously thinking of how to transform the experiences of our own learning process in the album project into a visual expression.

Our curation of the exhibition started somewhat spontaneously from the group session where all the curated albums had been presented. The workshop facilitator proposed the idea of creating an exhibition of the albums in order to share the

experiences with others and to encourage other people to curate their own albums. The group jointly decided that we (the two authors of this chapter) would take on this project and everyone gave us permission to use their albums. After this decision the group was dissolved and the work continued as collaboration between the two of us—one researcher from the social science department and one from the health science department. We immediately began to talk about what an exhibition of these albums could look like. We then decided to collect all the albums and go through them to make sure we both had the same general understanding of them. At this point, we also decided that we would use the curatorial statements of each album and not change or interpret them in any way. It was not possible to display all photos from every album; therefore, we had to go through a process of selecting appropriate photos. Next, we started a brainstorming process on how to display the albums and their content in an exhibition. Simultaneously, we had thorough discussions about the aims of the exhibition—who would be our audience, where should we have the exhibition, and how do we present ourselves as the authors or producers of the exhibition itself and as individual contributors to the content of the exhibition?

We concluded that our aim was to inspire others to answer the thought-provoking question—"Is there social change in you?"—by pursuing the process of curating albums of their own. These others were primarily students at campus but also other faculty members, as well as campus visitors. We had several discussions regarding how we would formulate a phrase or a question that would catch the viewers' attention. We finally decided to use "Is there social change in you?" because this question captured the central theme of the title of the exhibition. Based on classical theories of social psychology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1967) as well as more modern social theories like Connell's (2002) theories on gender, we see an intertwined relationship between society and individuals. Just as individuals are integrated within society, so society is integrated within individuals. Hence, we all carry society and societal structures within ourselves; society is embodied in individuals. From this perspective, society can be seen as situated within individuals and as society changes, so do individuals. The way we understand society and ourselves as individuals, can be altered as societal structures, language, and cultures change. This is our main point in formulating the question "Is there social change in you?" and using *Situated Social Change* as title for the exhibition.

Thus far in the process, we started walking through the campus halls trying to find a space that would be appropriate for the exhibition. Simultaneously, because we were not sure about the size of our financial resources at that point, we were discussing whether to make the exhibition out of roll-up panels or posters or perhaps photographs? What would the different types of media cost? Also, the different spaces we found worked more, or less, effectively depending on the choice of media. We also discussed mobility issues: should this exhibition be mobile and able to move

from one space to the next? Another issue to consider was how long the exhibition should be on display. Curating an exhibition can be done in most settings and is not restricted to indoor spaces. Our choice of space was the university campus but could, for example, have been a community centre or something similar.

Figure 5.2. Finding and discarding a space

Once we decided on media (posters, 70 × 100 cm) and space (a space through which many people pass on their way to the cafeteria), the next step was to go back to our office and start sorting out themes and in what order to present the different albums. Some of the albums had a more explicit notion of social change where the connection between obvious societal changes, like technological changes, has affected peoples' everyday lives, while others had a more personal focus where the social aspect was embedded in a personal story. Also, an important decision that had to be made at this point in the process was which pictures from each album were to be displayed in the exhibition. Our first criterion was that the photos should be connected to the curatorial statement. Our second criterion was the visual and aesthetic aspects of the images in each poster as well as in the exhibition as a whole. Another issue to consider was the quality of the photos, some of which were digital and some of which were more than 20-years-old paper copies. We also considered ethical issues because some of the photos had very personal and intimate content.

First, as we as curators were deciding which pictures would work best in the exhibition, we had to go back to each participant for approval to use the chosen images. However, that approval was dependent on whether there were other people in the picture, who would have to give approval to being visible in an exhibition. In the end, we had to blur one person's face because she did not want to be recognised in connection with what she was doing in one of the pictures.

   We produced our posters in PowerPoint and when the first draft was finished, we sent it to the other album curators in the group so that they could approve "their" poster—we had decided to go with one poster per album. As we were not experienced in producing posters in PowerPoint, one challenge was to predict how different colours, fonts, and paper quality would look in a big format. Therefore, we decided to ask the university graphic designer to help us with these issues. Once decisions on colour and fonts were made, we also started to produce advertisement materials for the exhibition itself and for its opening.

Self-Reflecting and Producing the Exhibition: Past, Present, Future

As various researchers working in the area of autoethnography have observed, the very act of writing (and preparing to write) is key (Colyar, 2013; Pelias, 2013). During the preparation of the exhibition, as we took field notes and produced photographs and videos of the process, we reflected on how we would actually write about the production of the exhibition. This means that there have been, basically, three different temporal dimensions of self-reflexivity related to these processes. One temporal dimension related to the past, that is, the actual curating of the albums as an emotional journey to be considered in the curation of the exhibition process. Another time dimension related to the present—the curation (or the doing) of the exhibition and, finally, the third related to the future—how will we write about it? However, our point of departure was in the present, that is, in the actual process of producing the exhibition while, at the same time, reflecting back to the past and into the future.

Walking through the Halls

As we walked through the campus halls to find the right space for our exhibition, there was a point where we stopped and reflected on how we suddenly saw the familiar in a new way. Starting to be very sensitive about the size of a wall or how light a wall was and how many people might be passing by a particular space, we also found totally "new" spaces that obviously had always been there but that we had never really observed before. Walking around campus, we rediscovered how different spaces infused different feelings, and that the same place could feel different depending on what time of day it was. The same space can have different functions depending on who is occupying the space. We found places that were perfect considering lightning and aesthetics, but realised that it would be technically

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difficult (and probably expensive) to hang posters in those spaces. For example, a huge brick wall, part of the campus cafeteria and the library, would have been perfect for the exhibition. We found other places that were better from a technical point of view but they were places where few people passed on a daily basis.

As we began to really see our familiar everyday campus halls, we also started to become more aware of the fact that once the exhibition was up, the curated albums project group would be visible to others at campus in a way that none of us in the group had been before. Showing pictures from our personal photo albums and displaying our curatorial statement connected to the album for the first time, we would actually expose ourselves in a way we were not used to. This issue would be important for anyone who exposes their personal photos in a public space, but became even more pronounced because we all, as teachers and researchers, are public persons at the university. As this insight grew in us as curators of the exhibition, so grew our awareness of the relational ethics (Ellis, 2007a) regarding the other people in the group who were also to be exposed. According to Ellis, relational ethics "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and the researchers and the communities in which they live and work" (2007a, p. 4). Thus, there were several dimensions of relational ethics that needed to be addressed in this project. To begin with, every person in the group needed to consider relational ethics with respect to those represented in their curated album. Secondly, we as curators needed to consider our relation to the individuals whose albums we were to publically re-present, and the third dimension was the delicate matter of showing these re-presentations to an audience. This became especially important because the exhibition was on display in the same space where we spent most of our everyday working lives. What are our ethical responsibilities towards the audience and to our coworkers (Ellis, 2007a) in a setting that is our professional community? What happens when the students we meet in the classrooms suddenly get a different or new insight into our personal lives? These questions became central to us as we curated the exhibition and worked with the others' albums as well as our own.

"It's an Artwork, Not Public Relations"

When deciding to ask the university graphic designer for help with how to make pictures and texts on the posters readable, we were very pleased and grateful that he agreed to help us out. In the meeting with him, however, we realised that he viewed our work as part of an official public relations piece, and that he had very firm ideas about how things should look. In trying to make him understand that the project of ours was an artwork rather than official information from the university, we became very aware of how we as curators of the exhibition served as gatekeepers of the ethical considerations we had made when curating each of the participants' posters. For example, the integrity of the way we wanted to present the work with the curated albums became very important to protect. In the end, very few suggestions that the graphic designer gave us were actually implemented.

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Invading a Space

While hanging our posters (Figure 5.3) on the chosen wall in the passage between the social sciences building and the health sciences building, a few people stopped to look at what we were doing. Even though they never struck up a conversation with us, we understood they were probably undergraduate students on their way to or from the cafeteria. Some people did not stop to look but they definitely became aware that some sort of change was under way on the walls they were used to see empty; we could see how they slowed their pace and glanced at the walls. We realised that the presence of these images changed the space considerably. In many ways, we were not only invading a physical space in one of the campus buildings, but also invading the students' everyday familiar spaces.

Figure 5.3. Lasse making sure the posters are hanging right

Planning Ahead, Reflecting Back

When we got the posters from the printing department, we were surprised at what they looked like. Even though we had worked a lot with the posters in PowerPoint, and imagined how they would look as finished products, we were not really prepared for the visual experience of the images in the bigger format. It was a very different

thing to see and touch a big poster compared with seeing an image on a computer screen. Just handling the posters gave a sense of joy and fulfilment. It was an emotional aspect we did not think of beforehand. Also, these emotional and practical issues gave us new ideas of how to present the posters. For one thing, our initial ideas of the narrative logic between the individual posters that we outlined digitally, was changed and rearranged.

While hanging the exhibition we reflected both on how this exhibition would be received by the audience who would see the images in this particular space, as well as how we could show it in other places (both at physical places as well as on digital platforms). We also reflected on how this way of hanging differed from our initial plans and the sketches we made in the beginning of the process. This meant that we, at that specific moment, were reflecting on the three different temporal dimensions at the same time (past, present, and future), while also thinking of our own simultaneous positions as private and professional people at the university.

Taking notes during the whole process made it possible to be more self-reflexive, both at the time when things happened but also afterwards. When we went back and looked at our field notes from the beginning of the process, we saw that there were a lot of notes but fewer and fewer as we got closer to the opening of the exhibition. The more practical work we did and the more the ideas became physical objects, the less likely we were to take notes. We could also see that we were very creative and had lots of ideas in the early phase, while closer to the end the notes tended to be more like memos. On the other hand, we took more and more photographs as the process progressed. When a project starts there are many uncertainties, which can both promote creative ideas but also be limiting because it is not really possible to plan ahead because you do not know what resources you have.

Ethics in Autoethnographic Data Collection

Besides the ethical considerations we have discussed above regarding the creation of the exhibition, there were also ethical issues in relation to the actual collecting of autoethnographic data. At the time we collected the data and worked with the exhibition, we did not know if the data would be presented in a journal article or in a book, and asking people if they were okay with being in a picture that may or may not turn up in an article or book was a little awkward. This is an example of how ethical considerations become an issue in autoethnographic work when other people are involved. Autoethnographic work almost always includes other people, either as a part of a narrative or as a backdrop (Chang, 2008). Taking pictures of ourselves and of spaces, field notes, and other artefacts was much easier to handle ethically. We knew we were going to write about the process of curating an exhibition in the near future, starting right after the opening of it, but a week before the opening we did not know in what form it would appear. Collecting data became influenced by an attitude of "just in case," because we were not sure how we would end up using the data. The future was still uncertain.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

When images that we usually keep at home in an album or computer are transferred to a public space (and to another format), the meaning or reading of the images alters in different ways. Zuromskis (2013) wrote about the "contentious relationship between photography's vernacular culture [the snapshot] and the aestheticizing function of the museum." (p. 119). By creating our exhibition, albeit not in a museum but in a public area in a university where display is possible, were we too engaging in aestheticising the vernacular? Here we focus on two aspects. Firstly, there is the idea of aestheticising the vernacular, which means that the ordinary becomes art and is thereby laden with another symbolic meaning. When the value of a picture changes in this way, it will lead to a different viewing and understanding by the beholder. This also affects the judgment of the picture in the sense that the higher it is being valued, the harder it may be criticised. An everyday snapshot usually does not have an aesthetic value of its own, but may be valued as an aesthetic photograph if it is displayed as such. Emotional issues thus become built into this process. Secondly, emotional issues also become involved when the private becomes public, which could put us in a vulnerable position, especially as the images are on display in the same place where we are public persons as teachers. Suddenly students can see parts of our private lives as well as the introspection we did as researchers. On one hand, we are exposing our personal lives; on the other hand, we are showing them an academic research project. In this sense, we were simultaneously private and professional. This fact did inform us as we worked with the exhibition because certain photos were left out in the process because we considered them to be too personal. Central to our learning in this particular part of the exhibition process was that while we as teachers and researchers may use our personal situated embodied experiences in teaching and research, the boundaries to the private were elucidated very clearly. If we had chosen an off-campus site for our exhibition these issues would probably have been very different. The emotional aspects as well as the possibility of being in a vulnerable position are closely linked to the relational ethics (Ellis, 2007b) discussed above. We had several discussions with all workshop participants before the opening of the exhibition, but there was no way of discussing with the audience beforehand. This left us with a feeling of uncertainty in two major aspects. One was that we did not know how the exhibition and the question, "Is there social change in you?" would affect the audience. The other was the effect of students seeing very personal aspects of their teachers' lives, and whether that could affect interactions in classrooms.

As proposed by Pithouse, Mitchell, and Weber (2009), "self-reflexivity in teaching and teacher development can illuminate social and educational challenges that have resonance beyond the self" (p. 1). Clearly our own autoethnographic and self-reflective work has helped us to see the value of this kind of work in our teaching in the areas of public health, sociology, and gender studies. Understanding social change as a concept or term (or any other academic term) may sometimes

Figure 5.4. Heléne stands back: How will this be received?

become abstract to students, basically, because teachers find it to be a merely abstract concept as well. When curating the albums on the theme of social change, we found possible new ways to teach about social change and to make social change visible in individual lives. This theme also opens up the possibilities for a discussion about the role of individuals in social change. Hence, we believe our teaching skills increased in the process of curating the albums, and were even further enhanced when curating the exhibition. The process of trying to visualise a theoretical concept like situated social change incited us to start thinking of how we mediate and communicate knowledge to students when teaching. Furthermore, we had a rare opportunity to have interdisciplinary discussions about how to deploy this new knowledge. The autoethnographic work of both the albums and the exhibition became a new way of doing something different with theory and its relation to experience as put forward by Stewart (2013). However, only the future can tell how this actually affects our teaching skills in practice because no time has passed since the curation of the exhibition and the writing of this chapter.

The process itself also made us feel self-conscious about ourselves as individuals and as professionals, and the process of self-reflexivity was enhanced by actually conducting both the album and the exhibition projects instead of just reading, writing, talking, and teaching as we usually do as teachers in higher education. The fact that we were two teachers and researchers from different but close fields collaborating in this process also meant a great deal because teaching can be a very lonely trade. When giving students this kind of reflexive assignment it is important to think about their perspective, which might include that they want to "do it right"

and be prepared for the assignment because they know they will be graded on it. How can we make them do reflexive work without these constraints? The emotional aspects of reflexive work, as well as ethics, time consumption, and effort must be considered thoroughly in a teaching situation. Not all students are willing to invest emotionally in a course in this way. Despite these potential obstacles, the possibly joyous and surprising results of such a learning process are important to highlight.

In the emerging literature on visual methods and autoethnography, to our knowledge, there is no previous work done on self-reflective work when curating an exhibition of visual research. While the body of literature on curated albums is growing (Mitchell & Allnutt, 2008; Mitchell & Pithouse-Morgan, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2009; Smith, 2012) there is a need to bring self-reflection into the process of representing visual work in an exhibition.

Finally, we reflect on the relevance of this work in other university contexts and even in other country contexts. Universities in Sweden, South Africa, and globally are more and more affected by neoliberalist discourses and practices through the implementation of New Public Management (NPM; Dahl, 2012). Neoliberalism is a transnational discourse that also prevails in the South African context (Narsiah, 2002). In face of this it seems critical that we do not lose sight of the mission of universities to support teaching, research, and community outreach. Many universities in Sweden have undergone reorganisations and centralisations, which have led to the moving of many administrative tasks and assignments from administrators to teachers and researchers. Together with financial cut backs, which decrease the hours spent teaching in each class, this has put an increased pressure on the teaching and researching staff, which can seriously hamper the creative work we were originally assigned to do.

Coming to know ourselves better through this autoethnographic work in higher education in the way presented here, we realise that there is much more to our everyday life at universities than just teaching and research. We deal with a lot of creative work and with building and maintaining relationships as well as friendships, but this might get lost if the university becomes a more competitive environment. Doing this kind of self-reflexive work can help us find opportunities to promote interdisciplinary collaborative creativity as well, as in this case, to give a deepened understanding of social change.

NOTES

[1] The Department of Public Health at Mid Sweden University is closer to social sciences than medicine, which means that they share much of the theoretical and methodological perspectives that are found in social sciences and humanities (or sociology, gender studies, and education).

[2] The prompt for the curated albums was: Find 6–8 photos in your photo collection or album that reflect a theme of social change. Social change may be a change in social order, behaviours, or social relations. For each photo, create a caption that links the photo to the theme. Write a short curatorial statement (150–300 words) about your album in relation to social change. Give a title to your curated album.

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