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“Blending in”:

Participant Observation in Adolescent Fieldwork Informed by Music Therapy Improvisation

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Abstract

This article explores how competencies associated with music therapy improvisation may inform participant observation as a relational research practice. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in two school revue settings in Norway, the study examines how a music therapist–researcher built trusting relationships with adolescents aged 16–19 through participant observation over a six-month period. The material consists of field notes and audio memos, together with individual and group interviews. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings show that trust emerged through four interrelated relational themes: blending in, modesty, self-disclosure, and hesitations. Across these processes, the researcher continuously adjusted her presence and participation in response to subtle interpersonal cues, group dynamics, and ethical considerations. In the discussion, the themes are interpreted in light of music therapy improvisation, showing how competencies such as sensitivity to timing, responsiveness, and relational restraint shape trust-building in fieldwork. The article contributes to music therapy by illustrating how competencies developed through improvisation may extend beyond clinical settings and inform relational research practices. At the same time, it contributes to qualitative research more broadly by demonstrating how such competencies may function as methodological resources in participant observation.

Keywords: music therapy improvisation; participant observation; adolescents; trust-building; school revue

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Introduction

There has long been recognition of the similarities between therapeutic practice and qualitative research (Aigen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Thorpe, 2013). In music therapy, improvisation can be understood as a relational way of responding to others in unfolding situations (Bruscia, 2014; Stensæth, 2017). Participant observation likewise requires the researcher to engage with others while attending to the relational and contextual dynamics of the field.

Procter (2013) identifies several parallels between music therapy and ethnography, including the dual role of participating while observing, the role of documentation as a reflexive practice in both fieldnotes and clinical reporting, and an emphasis on meaning as emerging through situated action. Often described as systematically "hanging out" with people over time (Fangen, 2010; Lareau, 2021; Tjora, 2026), participant observation depends on trust, presence, and responsiveness rather than a fixed procedure (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). The researcher must participate in social interaction while remaining analytically attentive to what unfolds.

Despite these parallels, little attention has been paid to how competencies developed through music therapy improvisation might inform participant observation as a relational fieldwork practice. To our knowledge, this perspective is also largely absent in fieldwork conducted by music therapists themselves (Donoghue, 2017; Due & Ghetti, 2018; Hjørnevik, 2022; Klyve, 2023; Krøier & Ridder, 2022; McFerran et al., 2022; Metell, 2015; Ødegaard et al., 2022; Roaldsnes, 2017; Stige & Ledger, 2016). While such competencies may well be present implicitly in these studies, they are not explicitly explored.

In this article, we explore how competencies associated with music therapy improvisation may inform participant observation as a relational research practice. Drawing on a field study of adolescents involved in school revue productions, we examine how a researcher built trusting relationships over time and how these processes may be understood in relation to music therapy improvisation. More specifically, we ask: *How did one researcher, through participant observation, build trusting relationships with adolescents while creating a school revue, and how might these experiences relate to competencies associated with music therapy improvisation?*

This study forms part of the first author's (Høimyr's) ongoing PhD project and explores how her background as a music therapist may have supported her fieldwork with adolescents aged 16–19 during their school revue productions in upper secondary schools. Høimyr conducted the fieldwork, carried out most of the analysis, and led the writing process. The second author (Stensæth) contributed particularly to the development of the theoretical framing. While the article is primarily written in the first-person plural ("we") to reflect the collaborative nature of the analytical process, different authorial voices are used deliberately throughout. The first author's first name, "Guro", is used when analytically positioning her within the research context, while the first-person singular ("I") is used selectively in the findings to foreground the situated and embodied character of her fieldwork experiences. These choices help distinguish between lived experience, analytical interpretation, and methodological positioning.

Next, we briefly outline participant observation as a research method, present selected perspectives on music therapy improvisation, and address relational work and trust-building with adolescents. The research context and analytical procedure are subsequently described, followed by the findings, which are then developed in the discussion before the article concludes.

Participant Observation and Rapport

In this article, we use fieldwork as a broader term for the empirical practice of ethnography, with participant observation as the primary approach. Participant observation in

contemporary contexts is a qualitative research method that involves engaging with participants over time to understand social processes as they unfold (Fangen, 2010; Lareau, 2021; Pink, 2015; Tjora, 2026). Rather than relying solely on interviews, the researcher participates in everyday activities while simultaneously observing interactions, relationships, and practices *in situ* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The method, therefore, requires sustained presence and sensitivity to the relational dynamics of the field.

Gathering truthful information in fieldwork requires strong skills in building rapport and trust (Jorgensen, 2015). Rapport is traditionally described as the harmonious relationship between researcher and participants (Spradley, 1979) and is central to both qualitative interviews and participant observation. However, how rapport is established can be difficult to articulate and is therefore often described rather vaguely. Recent research further complicates this picture by showing that rapport is not unproblematically positive but involves a continuous balancing between distance and closeness, in which both insufficient and excessive rapport may shape the interaction, the flow of information, and the ethical dimensions of the research encounter (Schmid et al., 2024).

Traditionally, rapport has been understood as a gradual process through which trust is established between researcher and participants, moving from initial apprehension to participation (Spradley, 1979). More recent perspectives, however, emphasise that rapport is not a linear progression, but something continuously negotiated through interaction, shaped by moment-to-moment alignment, responsiveness, and mutual recognition (Prior, 2018).

An advantage of participant observation is that spending time with informants in their natural setting helps develop rapport, perhaps more so than in interview situations. The relationships may then move quickly to cooperation (Spradley, 1979). This type of cooperation could be especially important for children and adolescents before they engage in an interview setting, which could be potentially perceived as artificial (Bassett et al., 2008; Klyve & Rolvsjord, 2023). A long duration of fieldwork is seen as beneficial because it allows the researcher to understand the young people they are studying more deeply, potentially strengthening relationships (Tickle, 2017).

Elliot (2015) commented that participant observation "possesses a degree of considerable complexity not frequently explored or related to practice." Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that building trustworthy relationships in fieldwork involves communication, ethics and reflexivity. Reflexivity is key to qualitative research, requiring ongoing awareness of how the researcher's presence, interpretations, and actions influence the field (dos Santos, 2025; Esposito et al., 2016). It also involves a continual negotiation of insider–outsider roles and relational boundaries (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Fangen, 2010; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Fieldwork cannot be replicated mechanically; instead, it is intuitive, relational and reliant on the researcher's embodied judgment (Jorgensen, 2015). Such an understanding highlights that participant observation is not simply a data-generating method but also a relational practice. The researcher must continuously balance participation and observation, adjusting presence, engagement, and distance in response to the unfolding fieldwork situation.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) suggest that researchers conducting fieldwork may benefit from drawing on their professional expertise when forming relationships with participants—for example, by mobilising competencies that may be of value within the research encounter. In this study, we interpret this more broadly by suggesting that competencies from music therapy improvisation might also serve as such a relational resource in establishing rapport in the field.

Responsiveness in Music Therapy Improvisation

Improvisation is a broad and fundamental concept in music therapy, often described as an expressive approach, meaning that both the client and the therapist actively make music together (Bruscia, 2014; Wigram, 2004). Music therapy improvisation also draws on theories of flow and optimal synchronisation, where attunement and shared presence between therapist and client create a sense of absorption in the moment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wigram, 2004).

Bruscia (2014) describes the music therapy process as reflexive, in that the therapist uses various music experiences, the relationships formed between the client and the therapist, and their music-making as catalysts for positive change for the client. According to Bruscia, the therapist must simultaneously reflect on the spontaneous and creative ways they can develop their improvisation to keep clients interested in continuing it. Therefore, the therapist continuously monitors and modifies their approach through self-observation. Intuition is key in this and can be understood as "immediate experience and cognition without the use of rational processes and the perceptive insight gained by the use of this faculty" (Stensæth, 2007). Recognising and using intuition is a therapy skill that can be developed through experience and self-awareness, according to Bruscia (2005).

Stensæth (2017) argues that improvisation in music therapy involves musical-relational synchronisation, suggesting that improvisation is imprinted with both musical and relational aspects, which merge powerfully in music therapy improvisation. Typically, for it to become magnetically attractive to participants—as Stensæth suggests improvisators strive for—musical-relational synchronising is infused with joy, challenge, vitality, doubt, and risk-taking. If this is not the case, the improvisation will soon crumble and die, which is the opposite of what they want. Therefore, the music therapist's skill involves an awareness and ability to engage the other in synchronising. In many ways, synchronisation is an ongoing exploration of the relationship between the therapist and the client with the aim of building trust and discovering something new about the other (Stensæth, 2017).

This musical-relational synchronisation also resembles the first human interaction, which many music therapy researchers (see for example, Holck, 2010; Stensæth, 2017) recognise as the concept of *communicative musicality* (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). Communicative musicality is derived from research on early mother/infant communication that revealed noticeable patterns in musical parameters such as timing, pulse, voice timbre, and gesture (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). In music therapy, communicative musicality is used to illustrate how the therapist and the client, like the mother and infant, try to mirror and match each other's interactions. It also shows how they use unconscious and spontaneous responses in the here-and-now in similar ways (Holck, 2010; Stensæth, 2017). Rather than specific techniques, the therapist's flexibility, personal resources and ability to engage with different mental modalities determine the effectiveness of the interaction in music therapy improvisation (Aigen, 1993; Stensæth, 2017; Wigram 2004).

From this perspective, music therapy improvisation can be understood as a relational practice grounded in responsiveness and mutual engagement. The therapist must simultaneously participate actively and attend sensitively, maintaining a dual focus on action and perception as the situation unfolds. This form of attentiveness, including timing, responsiveness, tolerance of uncertainty and sensitivity to subtle cues, is highlighted as a core skill in music therapy improvisation (Bruscia, 2014; Stensæth, 2017; Wigram, 2004). These capacities are relevant beyond strictly musical contexts, particularly in forms of relational work that require ongoing calibration in dynamic interpersonal situations, such as fieldwork. We will return to this assumption soon.

Relational Work and Trust-building with Adolescents

Given that relationship building is of core interest in music therapy (McIvor, 2023; Skånland & Trondalen, 2024; Trondalen, 2008, 2016), it is unsurprising that we anticipate a link between what a therapist does and what a participant observer does to build trustworthy relationships. Stensæth (2017) interestingly describes the music therapist's role in improvisation as actually being a participant observer: "... to respond and interact empathically toward the client, the music therapist perceives attentively; she sees and listens carefully, whether to musical sounds, verbal language, bodily gestures, or facial expressions while participating".

These forms of attentive participation and observation are also evident in music therapy practices with adolescents. Bolger (2013), who has been actively engaged in music therapy with adolescents, suggests that an initial "hangout" period before active collaboration is meaningful, as is the continuous negotiation throughout the collaborative music therapy process. This aspect resembles the value of conducting participant observation prior to interviewing, where time spent in shared activities can support relationship-building and contextual understanding (cf. Klyve & Rolvsjord, 2023; Tickle, 2017). Fuhr (2022), who explored therapeutic relationships in his thesis, found that, aside from musical activities, conversations, secrets, and joking around together played a vital role in adolescents' relationship-building with the music therapist.

Other music therapists note that being authentic and transparent is critical to developing a trusting and safe relationship between music therapists and adolescents (Bøtker et al., 2024; McFerran, 2010). Authenticity can be seen as a state of mind to be sought and cultivated through professional, musical, and personal reflection and development over time (Bøtker & Jacobsen, 2023, p. 21). Authenticity can also be linked to self-disclosure, understood as sharing personal insights with clients, which is sometimes crucial to therapy (Lichtenstein, 2025). However, there is no common ground, and it is underexplored in work with children and adolescents despite being common in clinical settings (Johnsen & Ding, 2021). In some therapeutic orientations, self-disclosure is seen as a prerequisite for the client's openness, contributing to trust, mutuality, and intimacy in the relationship (Rolvsjord, 2010, p. 228). From this, we can see that being authentic and spending enough time with clients to foster an informal atmosphere is vital for the therapist to foster trustworthy relationships. Relational work with adolescents can, in the same way, be tied to authenticity, mutuality and appropriate self-disclosure.

Authenticity is also often discussed through related ideas such as honesty and openness. Honesty, for instance, has been described as a vital component in fostering trust (McIvor, 2023; Rotenberg, 1994; Smetana, 2010). In music therapy research, shared vulnerability is emphasised as a core relational mechanism (Rolvsjord, 2010; Strehlow, 2021; Trondalen, 2016). A related point is made in fieldwork research, where Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) argue that researchers cannot expect honesty from participants without offering some degree of openness in return.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that both music therapy and participant observation involve relational practices in which trust emerges through openness, responsiveness, and situated interaction over time. These insights inform our understanding of participant observation as a relational and temporally sensitive practice in this study. However, we do not argue that participant observation is inherently musical. Rather, we use concepts from music therapy improvisation as an analytical lens to articulate relational processes that are often described but less clearly conceptualised in fieldwork.

The Data Generating Process

The Context

The data were generated in the context of school revues (shows) in upper secondary schools in the Norwegian capital area. These revues are a student-led extracurricular activity with a tradition spanning over 100 years and involve students aged 16–19. A beneficial finding about this population is that they generally report being satisfied with their lives. However, bullying and school-related distress have increased (Bakken, 2024, 2025). Another important feature of the Norwegian upper secondary school context is the *Russ* celebration, a long-standing tradition for students in their final year. It involves several weeks of social events and parties associated with the completion of upper secondary education (Hansen, 2024). Preparation for and participation in the celebration can affect adolescents both positively and negatively (Danielsberg et al., 2024; Davidson, 2024).

Within this context, a school revue is a type of theatrical performance featuring a variety of acts, such as skits, songs, dances and comedy routines. The content usually revolves around popular culture or current events. The revues are coordinated into different production groups. These groups fill every function the revue production might need, such as cafeteria, props, costumes and of course the performers on stage: actors, dancers, singers and band. One or more students lead each group, and, in many cases, the actors receive supervision and direction from outside professionals. The revue gathers all grade levels, and an average of about 200 students at each school are involved in some way.

Approach

This study involves in-depth hermeneutic research where we, the authors, have moved in circles and spirals between pre-understanding and new understanding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Participant observation and semi-structured qualitative interviews (individual and group) have been the main approaches to data generation in the fieldwork setting. Spradley (1980) distinguishes types of participation along a continuum from observing to participating. In those terms, the first author, Guro, was a participating observer most of the time in the revue context. Over time, as the adolescents became more familiar with her and her presence in the field, her approach gradually shifted towards more active observation. However, the balance between participation and observation was never fixed; it was continuously adjusted across the field visits. In this sense, the term "interactive participation" is more precise, as it emphasises the ongoing interplay between engaging and observing (Tjora, 2026, pp. 78–79), and more accurately reflects how Guro conducted the fieldwork. The revues were not intended as therapy, and Guro did not enter the field in a therapeutic role. She was present as a researcher, not as a therapist.

Co-constructed Data and Analytical Approach

The data-generating process unfolded during the 2023–2024 academic year at two upper secondary school revues over a six-month period. Access was granted by school principals and student revue leaders (i.e., heads of revue). At one of the schools, a school-based youth worker played a key gatekeeping role in facilitating access and supporting the researcher's presence in the field. The fieldwork mainly took place after school hours, on weekends, and during the Christmas holiday. Guro spent time across several production groups (band, choir, actors, props, etc.), engaging informally with the adolescents and observing rehearsals and preparations. Guro's field jottings (cf. Emerson et al., 2011) were written discreetly during visits and expanded within 24 hours. Additional audio memos were recorded immediately after each field visit.

Participant observation was complemented by individual and group interviews. The interviews deepened exploration of observations, clarified ambiguities and supported rapport-building. Combining observation and interviews is widely recommended to provide a comprehensive understanding and reduce bias from single-method reliance (Noble & Heale, 2019). Kimber and Dairon (2023) argue that interviews conducted alongside participant observation might enable researchers to probe participants' interpretations of observed events and strengthen relational ties, which is essential for eliciting insightful data. We believe the interviews were easier to conduct in some cases because the adolescents had already met Guro in their own context, thus reducing outsider distance.

Initial analysis examined *when and how* Guro approached participants, how participants approached Guro, and their responses. Field notes, journals, and responses to an open-ended question asked in post-interviews (i.e., interviews conducted after the fieldwork had concluded)— "How was it to have Guro around?"—were compiled in a single document. The material was further analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexivity means that researcher(s) intentionally recognise and examine their role in shaping knowledge within their study, and they respond to these insights (dos Santos, 2025, p. 21). Also, reflexivity is an ongoing process. The identified and connected positions, along with what is reported, should never be considered as full self-awareness (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 15).

Following familiarisation, data-near codes (Tjora, 2026) were generated in Word using the "comment" function to stay close to participants' own language. These codes were informed both by participants' expressions and by Guro's field notes, reflecting Guro's position as a participant observer. Similar codes were then merged into broader themes, which were reviewed and refined iteratively as patterns of meaning emerged, resulting in four main themes.

Ethics and Data Management

This project was assessed by Sikt—the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research—which confirmed compliance with data protection legislation (12 June 2023[1]). The Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (REK) confirmed that the project did not fall within the scope of the Health Research Act. The audio recordings were collected and stored using an encrypted application (Nettskjema Dictaphone). Written and verbal information was provided, and consent was obtained, either verbally or in writing, from those actively involved. Because adolescents joined and left the revue throughout the process, the exact number of participants is unclear, but approximately 400 individuals in total were present at some point. Production groups generally consisted of 4–20 members. In the present paper, all informants are assigned fictitious names, and certain details, such as instruments played, may be modified to protect their identity. The schools are referred to as school Y and school X when relevant.

In qualitative research, especially ethnographic approaches, reflexivity is essential because the researcher is an unavoidable part of the data-generating process (Fangen, 2010). Drawing on dos Santos' (2025) conceptualisation, lens reflexivity foregrounds how Guro's background in music therapy shaped what was noticed and how situations were interpreted, while empathic reflexivity informed how relational cues, boundaries, and moments of hesitation were sensed and responded to in situations, without assuming a therapeutic role. According to dos Santos, reflexive empathy also involves employing respect-focused writing that honours the nuanced complexity of informants' stories in a non-pathologising manner. This resembles the current ethical emphasis on relational

[1] Reference number 420135.

responsibility and respectful representation in arts and health research (Stige et al., 2024). Moreover, this study also engages in relational reflexivity, in which meaning and knowledge are co-constructed through encounters between the researcher (Guro) and participants (dos Santos, 2025).

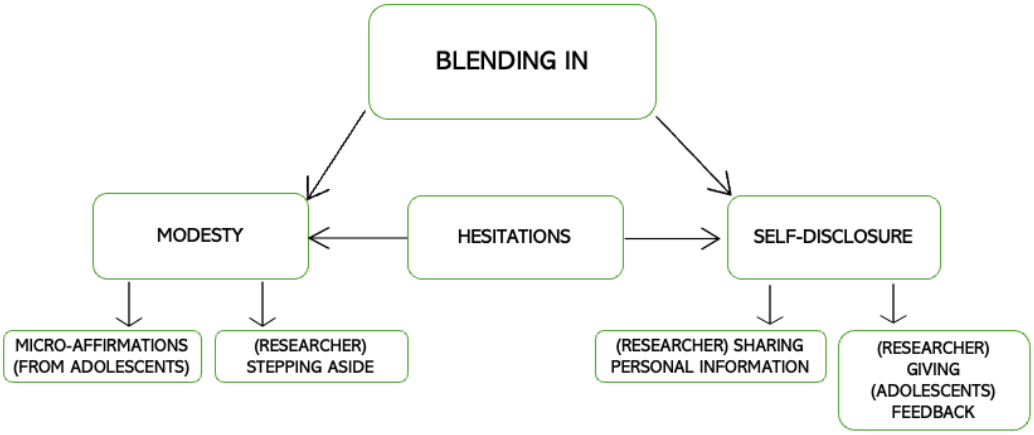
Findings

The following section is intentionally detailed to provide transparency and contextual richness and to illustrate the interpretative process through representative excerpts. Field notes are set in italics, while interview quotations appear in quotation marks.[2] All excerpts were translated from Norwegian into English by Guro.

The current study asks: How did one researcher, through participant observation, build trusting relationships with adolescents while creating a school revue, and how might these experiences relate to competencies associated with music therapy improvisation? The findings will relate to the first part of the question (How did one researcher, through participant observation, build trustful relationships with adolescents while creating a school revue?). The second part of the question (and how might these experiences relate to competencies associated with music therapy improvisation?) requires further theoretical reflection and will be addressed in the discussion.

The thematic analysis revealed four interrelated themes and four corresponding subthemes, as summarised in the illustration below.

Figure 1. Overview of themes and subthemes in the analysis.



In a post-interview discussion, Aron joked about his early impression of Guro: “Who’s that lady following us?” This remark illustrates the initial outsider position and frames the relational journey explored in this study. A modest approach and strategic self-disclosure characterised Guro’s interactions throughout. The theme “hesitations” is placed centrally, as moments of doubt frequently permeated Guro’s experiences and informed the other themes. Ultimately, “blending in” refers to the point at which Guro experienced a sense of integration into the adolescents’ community.

When presenting the findings below, we remind readers that the paper shifts from Guro to a first-person voice, “I,” to present the empirical material more directly.

[2] Single quotation marks indicate participants’ speech as documented in field notes, while double quotation marks indicate quotations from interviews.

Blending In

Revue work is an intense interpersonal process, especially in the lead-up to the premiere. During these intensive rehearsal days, I was present daily for many hours. For many of the adolescents, up to this point, I had become a "natural feature" in the setting; I felt that I had blended in.

In retrospect, several informants told me that it felt as if I was part of the revue. As one actress, Aurora, expressed it: "You are also a part of the revue team." After the premiere at school Y, I congratulated the head of revue, Christine, who responded: "Congratulations to you as well." Such affirmations suggested that I had become, in some sense, integrated into their social environment.

In a post-interview, Amalie (head of PR) reflected:

> "But you kind of blended in. I never felt that your presence affected what we did, or how we treated each other. So, it was okay. And we are very happy that you were such a nice person."

I integrated well into the PR group without overshadowing or withdrawing from group dynamics. Haakon (actor) stated the following during his post-interview:

> "You attended our rehearsals, right? I can't remember that, but you were just there. And I think that was a good thing, because you just did your thing. (…) It would have been different if you had been very loud and annoying. (…) Such as interfering, like; What if you make a skit about this and that?"

This quote indicates that my presence during rehearsals was unobtrusive and appreciated. Haakon acknowledged my quiet and respectful demeanour, highlighting the importance of not disrupting the creative process. He said he valued my ability to blend in and contrasted this with a potential negative scenario of being loud or overly assertive. Such careful "blending in" can be understood as a gradual process of attuning to the group's rhythms, expectations, and interactions, where presence is continuously adjusted in relation to others. My experience is that my modest attitude and selective self-disclosure (involving authenticity and honesty) contributed to my ability to blend in.

Modesty

The revue seemed to matter a great deal to the adolescents, who clearly took pride in it. To respect this, I aspired to not disrupt the processes by consciously taking a modest approach, as shown in the following note, one month into the fieldwork:

> I text Matheo [the band leader] to ask if I can visit the upcoming band rehearsal. It feels important to ask, even though I'm basically a natural guest by now.

Moreover, I found that my modest approach involved being sensitive to micro-affirmations and stepping aside.

Micro-Affirmations

This subtheme captures how I absorbed adolescents' micro-affirmations toward *me*, rather than the other way around. I was sensitive to bodily gestures such as (avoiding) eye contact, smiling, waving at me, walking straight past me, etc. I attuned to these signals, relying on intuition to decide when to speak, when to withdraw, and whether my presence was welcome. Such embodied sensitivity guided how and when I approached adolescents, or when it was better to hold back.

Rather than take their spoken words for granted as "true," I listened carefully to the tone in the adolescents' voices and to prosody (sentence melody) to determine whether these

signals could assist me in understanding their utterances. In this way, micro-affirmations served as relational cues that guided my participation. The following note captures such a moment, while observing the choir backstage during a performance:

> The choir is getting ready to enter the stage for their act in a few minutes. From the monitor, we hear one actor singing a familiar song. Both the choir and I lip-synch. When he reaches the high note, choir girl Ada and I make eye contact, smiling while lip-synching.

This moment may be understood as a form of spontaneous coordination, in which alignment was established through shared timing and embodied participation rather than through verbal interaction. Ada and I shared the same "history"; we had heard the song many times during rehearsals and knew it by heart. In this brief moment, a shared musical history and mutual recognition emerged. Our intersubjective sharing created a sense of mutual understanding and connection. Ada and I had already had several conversations in the dressing room. Still, this micro-event assured me that we could continue our conversations, and from this we elaborated on our participant–researcher relationship.

The band gave me several micro-affirmations during my visits, such as when I joined them in circle games. One day, the group suggested a game that I had not heard about before. I chose not to participate because I did not want to bother them in explaining the game. As I sat down on a chair, Lucas (bass) approached me and said:

> 'Don't you want to join us?' – like that was a given. I said that I didn't know this game, and he then explained it to me.

Lucas might have wondered why I suddenly placed myself on the sideline. I interpreted it as him genuinely wanting me to join them. Later, I became quite good at the game and once reached the final round with Michael (trombone). I felt it was a draw, but some of the band members said that:

> 'Guro won.' I say that Michael won. Then Michael says to me: 'Let's share the victory between us.'

During the post-interviews, I expressed gratitude for such gestures verbally:

> "I didn't know what to expect. (…) But you included me."

Such experiences embodied the power of inclusion and small affirmations within me, so I left the band with a greater appreciation for their kindness and camaraderie, feeling confident about continuing to build our relationships. These moments also illustrate that participation was not static but was continuously negotiated through subtle, often non-verbal exchanges. I interpret this as an improvisational process in which inclusion and distance were co-regulated through interaction.

Stepping Aside

Modesty also meant stepping aside when appropriate. This involved recognising signals indicating when to withdraw, such as lowered voices or shifts in attention. Stepping aside can be understood as an active relational choice rather than a passive withdrawal. Much like pauses and silence in music therapy improvisation, these moments created space for the adolescents' own expressions and interactions. I learned to interpret such cues and to adjust my presence accordingly. For instance:

> On my way out of the library, I pass Jens [head of revue], who is carrying a one-and-a-half-litre bottle of soda filled with water. I smile and mumble something. He doesn't look at me and walks quickly past.

I chose not to approach Jens too often after this situation, interpreting his physical response—not looking at me and walking past me—as a sign that he was not particularly eager to start a conversation, even though he had signed the written consent for project participation. This interaction may be understood as a form of non-alignment, in which coordination did not emerge, and the absence of mutual responsiveness shaped a relational distance between us.

Early on, I learned that their bonding with the group leaders could provide younger participants with benefits, such as invitations to parties and opportunities to work on ticket sales during performance weeks. In my notes, I wrote:

> Bendik, a first-year upper secondary student on the PR team, is sitting by himself, painting the revue logo on a piece of cardboard. I ask if he knows who I am, and then I introduce myself a bit. (…) Then Amalie [head of PR] comes over wanting to give him a message, but when she sees that I'm talking to him, she says: 'Oh, sorry. I'll do it later'. Then I say: 'No, please chat with each other, I don't want to disturb you.'

This situation happened during one of the first visits. Bendik had already told me that he had joined the revue for the social aspect. When the head of PR wanted to talk to him, I was mindful not to prioritise my own research needs above his.

The youth worker at School X once advised me to speak to one of the group leaders in the cafeteria group, since the leader had experienced some difficulties forming the group. I entered the kitchen and asked for Sandra, a tall, blonde girl. Sandra was cooking in the cafeteria while the other group members surrounded her. I introduced myself and asked what it was like to choose the group members. In my notes, I describe that:

> … Sandra responds, shortly, that it was not that easy. I choose to stop it there, not to ask follow-up questions. Perhaps it would feel uncomfortable to her, since there are many people around us.

Later, I conducted a post-interview with Sandra, who spoke willingly about this matter. I believed my assumption about this being a sensitive topic for her was correct.

Stepping aside also involved giving space to those with whom I developed more substantial connections. After all, I did not want to overly bother them, and while, for instance, the band, props, and choir invited me in, I was mindful of the need to take a step back when appropriate. This sometimes meant deliberately moving to the back of the room during rehearsals, joining other groups, or occupying myself with notetaking to avoid interrupting their flow. Such small acts of withdrawal helped me maintain a balance between being an insider—trusted and included—and an outsider who could observe with some analytic distance.

Moment of Hesitation 1

A few days away from the premiere, the youth worker at School X advised me to let the actors be alone. But then I met Aurora, one of my key informants, in the hallway:

> 'Guro, now it's just chaos. We don't have a final skit, so we must write it right now! It's probably good for you to see that it's not all nice, but also chaos and frustrations.'

I was hesitant as to whether I should accept her invitation or not. Aurora's argument was that it would be interesting for me to observe the frustration, which was, of course, a good one for the research part. I weighed the youth worker's advice against Aurora's invitation, ultimately seeking group consent before joining. Aurora then asked the group, while I waited in the hallway. This moment of hesitation can be understood as a form of relational timing, where knowing when to act—and when to wait—became part of

responding to the situation. Thus, hesitation helped me navigate competing relational expectations, with action unfolding gradually in response to the situation rather than through immediacy.

Despite being hesitant, I chose to follow her into the rehearsal room. In retrospect, I remain unsure whether this was the right decision.

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure involved sharing personal information to build rapport, foster mutual understanding, and strengthen relationships. While I was unaware that I had actively self-disclosed, the analysis showed that my sharing of personal information and my opinions enriched my relationships with the adolescents. However, I was cautious about when and what to share, and with whom. Such decisions involved sensitivity to timing and situational appropriateness, in which knowing when to share—and when to hold back—became central to the interaction.

Sharing Personal Information

Early on, the adolescents were curious about whether I had ever participated in any school revues myself. My answer was a sincere no, making my role as a "naïve" novice easily applicable. At the start, I did not reveal that I had formerly been the singing instructor for a high-profiled revue, assuming that doing so may have made the adolescents more cautious about me making comparisons. However, after eventually telling them about my previous role, I felt that this brought me closer to the adolescents: we had some common ground in that we all knew "the deal" with school revues, and I was not a complete outsider after all. The adolescents then started to ask me which upper secondary school I had attended. They asked about my family and about my personal preferences in areas such as humour and music. In my notes, I describe the following interaction taking place:

> Birte comes over to me and says: 'Isn't Britney cool, Guro?' I reply, 'Yes! And you know what? I gave her autobiography as a Christmas gift to my sister.' 'Cool gift!' she responds.

This interaction highlighted my self-disclosure through sharing personal information: Birte initiated the conversation with a comment about Britney Spears, creating an opportunity for connection. I responded with a personal anecdote, which added depth to the interaction and made it more meaningful. Birte's positive response— "Cool gift!"—reinforced our connection and showed appreciation for the shared experience. This exchange illustrates a moment of reciprocal interaction, where a small personal contribution invited a response in return, creating a sense of shared rhythm in the conversation.

The actors and the band usually started their rehearsals with "check-in" (a brief round where participants shared something about themselves) and playing circle games. Such rituals were an easy way for me to participate. I was always invited to join in. This enabled me to share personal fun facts about myself, which sometimes surprised the participants and prompted laughter. In these situations, I was not an observer but, in some sense, a part of the group. One of the first times they asked me to participate, I noted:

> I find it really nice to be included once again, and I notice that it makes me happy. I feel seen.

In this regard, Lucas, the bass player, said to me during the post-interview:

> "I feel like with check-ins and check-outs, it was nice having you there. It seemed like you, in a way, became a part of the band."

Sharing personal information appeared to help me establish my role in the group, making it easier for members to identify me as a researcher and develop trust. Through such exchanges, participation unfolded as a coordinated process in which contributions were offered, received, and responded to in ways that shaped the interaction over time. These exchanges also served as opportunities for mutual alignment, in which shared participation —rather than observation alone—shaped how relationships were established.

Giving Feedback

I had intended to refrain from commenting, sharing my taste, or offering advice on the participants' artistic work process. However, over time they started to ask me, and once they asked for my feedback on a skit they had written. I felt a little surprised by the question and was hesitant about whether to give my honest opinions or sugarcoat them. As they asked, I planned to offer something constructive since I guessed it would have seemed "fake" if I had only complimented their script. However, I felt that there was a fine balance. Responding in these situations required careful calibration of tone and timing, where the form and delivery of feedback became as important as the content itself. I also felt valued as they sought my opinion, deepening their trust and my sense of inclusion. Over time, I started to give my opinions unsolicited, as indicated in my notes:

> 'I felt that I didn't nail my song today,' Molly (choir) says to me. I tell her that I disagree, and I really mean it.

Molly may have expected my support as she said this. This situation made me reflect on *when* it is appropriate to express one's opinions and *how* to express them. I asked myself how I would have responded if I agreed with Molly. Earlier, I had told her that I could hear that Molly enjoyed singing R'n'B. Thus, before this event, I had already complimented her singing. This could explain why Molly felt safe enough to share her disappointment. We already had common ground: I had seen her, heard her, and recognised her. In this sense, the interaction unfolded as a responsive exchange, where prior moments of recognition shaped what could be said and how it was received.

Moment of Hesitation 2

After the participants had learned that I was also a vocal coach, one of the revue actresses, Aurora, asked me to help her with a solo song for the revue during one of my visits:

> I tell her I'd be glad to help if she needs it. 'But maybe that's not allowed. We're not supposed to use instructors,' she responds. The choir leader, Ulla, interrupts, 'Knut [the youth worker] has said we can use her for that.' I say we don't need to tell anyone. If anyone sees us together, we can say I'm interviewing her, I suggest.

Until then, I had consciously kept a low profile regarding my professional background. This was because I wanted to enter the field as curiously and non-judgmentally as possible. Primarily, the adolescents at this revue oversaw their artistic outcomes and had traditions of not being coached by professionals. However, just before the excerpt of the field note described above, I considered the pros and cons by providing Aurora with some coaching. To transform my role from a novice into a teacher role, some questions arose: Would that blur our participant–researcher relationship? What if other adolescents learned that I had helped Aurora? Did I invade the adolescents' territory in a non-wanted way? On the pro side, which ultimately led me to say yes, I saw Aurora's question as a sign of trust. Since she had willingly shared her experiences as a key informant, I also felt it was natural to give Aurora something back, as a way of expressing gratitude. My decision reflected a negotiation between ethical boundaries and reciprocity in a trusting relationship. This

negotiation involved an ongoing calibration of roles and responses, where I adjusted my actions in relation to both explicit and implicit expectations in the situation.

As mentioned, the youth worker also approved my use of my professional skills if needed. In the end, I made an ally with Aurora and even suggested keeping the vocal coaching a secret. Singing is personal and vulnerable, and Aurora's sharing her vulnerabilities with me was seen as an important sign of trust between us.

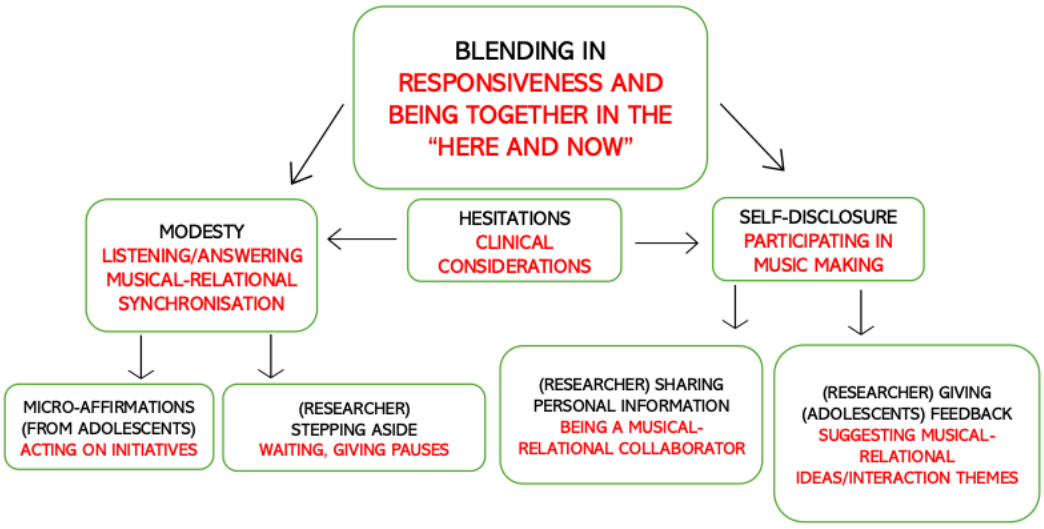
Discussion

The findings show that trust was built through a set of interrelated relational practices: blending in, modesty, self-disclosure, and hesitations. In the following, we interpret these processes in light of music therapy improvisation, focusing on how Guro adjusted her presence, participation, and responses in relation to adolescents' cues. Across the material, these processes reflect a pattern of ongoing coordination in interaction, where trust emerged through continuous calibration of when to step forward, when to step back, and how to respond as situations unfolded.

One way of conceptualising these processes is through the much-referred grand theory in music therapy, namely communicative musicality (Malloch & Trevarthen, 2009). Here, communicative musicality does not refer to music as such, but to the temporal and relational organisation of interaction. It highlights how meaning and trust emerge through responsiveness and mutual adjustment in the here and now. In this study, communicative musicality is not used merely as a metaphor, but as a way of specifying micro-level relational competencies that can be actively developed and enacted in fieldwork.

The findings also align with broader perspectives on music therapy improvisation. In the following sections, the empirical themes are revisited in light of these perspectives. The themes (Figure 1) are therefore integrated with concepts from music therapy improvisation.

Figure 2. Thematic model integrating the study's findings with concepts from music therapy improvisation.



Blending in 2

In fieldwork, "blending in" can be understood as what Spradley (1979) describes as "participation," the final stage in building rapport. However, in the present study, rapport was not experienced as a linear progression, but as something continuously negotiated (cf. Prior, 2018). Importantly, not all adolescents interacted with Guro to the same extent.

Accounts of "blending in" stem primarily from participants who articulated such experiences, suggesting that these reflect particular relational constellations rather than the field as a whole.

From the perspective of music therapy improvisation, "blending in" may be understood as a felt sense and mutual responsiveness (cf. Stensæth, 2017). Rather than a fixed state, blending in reflects a dynamic alignment in which the researcher becomes attuned to the group's timing, expectations, and forms of interaction. In this sense, "blending in" may be understood as moments of relational alignment within specific interactions, rather than a general or stable condition across all participants. While this point came quickly to some participants, it took longer for others, and for some it did not occur at all, such as with Jens. This points to blending in as an ongoing process of responsiveness rather than reaching a fixed stage. Adolescents later reflected in interviews that Guro seemed to blend in, suggesting that her presence became part of this shared "here and now" interactional dynamic.

Modesty 2

Modesty in this study is explored as a relational attitude characterised by restraint, careful listening, and sensitivity to others' cues. While it involves attunement, it also entails deliberately holding back to avoid disrupting adolescents' ongoing interactions. In music therapy improvisation, such modesty may be understood in terms of supporting musical–relational synchronisation by following and shaping interaction without overpowering it. In this sense, modesty reflects a reciprocal form of engagement in which both parties actively contribute to the interaction (Bruscia, 2014; Stensæth, 2017).

While modesty concerns the researcher's attuned stance, the micro-affirmations subtheme highlights the subtle signals adolescents offered Guro. Here, communicative musicality is particularly relevant in drawing attention to the importance of timing, gesture, gaze, and affective contours. This also aligns with perspectives in sensory ethnography, where knowledge is understood to emerge through embodied and situated engagement rather than through spoken language alone (Pink, 2015).

In the present study, Guro noticed small signs of acceptance and distancing, and responded by adjusting her behaviour accordingly—for instance, through eye contact, initiating or withholding conversation, and offering verbal or non-verbal acknowledgements. These micro-affirmations functioned as relational cues that guided her involvement and supported ongoing interaction.

The stepping aside subtheme further illustrates how modesty operated in practice. In music therapy improvisation, pauses, waiting, and holding back are not absences, but meaningful communicative acts that create space for the other's expression. Similarly, Guro stepped aside when she sensed that adolescents needed space or when further engagement might have been intrusive. Such moments were not failures of engagement, but expressions of relational sensitivity, in which restraint functioned as an ethical and interactional resource.

In this sense, stepping aside may be understood as an improvisational stance, where giving space allows the other to lead, explore, or withdraw. The situation with Sandra illustrates this: Guro recognised that discussing group challenges might be uncomfortable in the given setting and chose not to pursue the topic at that moment.

Self-disclosure 2

Self-disclosure is best understood here not simply as the sharing of personal information, but as a relational process through which closeness, trust, and reciprocity were negotiated. While such sharing may support authenticity and connection, it also raises questions of

appropriateness, boundaries, and the shifting focus of interaction. It is therefore not inherently beneficial, but situational and relational.

In the present study, selective self-disclosure appeared to support the development of trust and mutuality. By sharing personal experiences and preferences, Guro established common ground with adolescents, which enabled more open and meaningful interactions. At the same time, such sharing required careful judgment regarding what to share, with whom, and when.

Being invited to give feedback and responding honestly may also be understood as an expression of trust within the relationship. For instance, when Molly shared disappointment about her own singing, the situation raised questions of how to respond. Although the context was not therapeutic, Guro's response—shaped by her music therapy background—was to attend to Molly's strengths while remaining sincere. This aligns with Strehlow's (2021) observation that adolescents often value honesty, and that sugarcoating may weaken trust.

In music therapy, mutual exposure may also unfold through nonverbal or musical interaction (Rolvsjord, 2010; Trondalen, 2016). This perspective broadens the understanding of self-disclosure, suggesting that openness may also be communicated through stance, response, tone, and participation. In this sense, self-disclosure may be understood as part of a relational rhythm, in which what is shared—and when—shapes how trust develops over time.

At the same time, self-disclosure remains ethically complex, particularly in work with adolescents. In this study, it appeared to function because it was selective, situational, and embedded in an already developing relationship. This suggests that its value lies less in disclosure itself than in the researcher's capacity to judge when openness supports—rather than burdens—the interaction.

Hesitations 2

Hesitations are explored as moments of improvisational decision-making in which Guro paused to assess how best to respond to unfolding situations. Rather than signalling uncertainty alone, these moments reflect ethical and relational sensitivity to boundaries and participation. Placed centrally in the thematic model, hesitation informed Guro's fieldwork approach more broadly.

In relation to music therapy improvisation, such hesitations may be understood as parallel to clinical considerations of how and when to respond to the other's initiatives. Hesitations reflect a form of reflexive attentiveness in which the practitioner remains open to multiple possible responses and does not move too quickly to action. In this sense, hesitation can be understood as a resource rather than a weakness, allowing Guro to slow down, question her role and presence, and remain responsive to participants' cues and the ethical demands of the situation—an approach that is also central to improvisation and dialogical responsiveness (cf. Stensæth, 2017).

This also resonates with fieldwork literature that emphasises the ongoing negotiation of insider–outsider positions, as well as with dos Santos' (2025) distinction between perspective-taking and perspective-getting. Rather than presuming access to adolescents' experiences, Guro's hesitations often reflected an openness to asking, listening, and adjusting in response to participants' own expressions and invitations. Understanding, in this sense, was not pre-formed but emerged through interaction.

Some of these moments, such as offering vocal input or feedback, may also be understood as instances in which Guro influenced the field. Although such actions were experienced as reciprocal and trust-building, they may also have shaped participants' behaviour and the unfolding social dynamics. Hesitation, therefore, functioned as an ethical safeguard, helping Guro consider whether participation was supportive, intrusive, or transformative.

In this regard, hesitation resembles improvisational practice, where delaying action—or choosing not to act—can be as meaningful as action itself.

Transferable Skills and Ethical Reflections

Building trusting relationships between adolescent participants and researchers is crucial for generating rich and contextually grounded data. In both fieldwork and music therapy, informal and relational settings may foster rapport, emotional engagement, and mutual recognition. These conditions may be particularly important when working with adolescents, for whom trust often develops gradually through shared activities rather than formal questioning.

While relational sensitivity is widely recognised in qualitative research, the present study suggests that music therapy improvisation offers a distinct repertoire of embodied skills that may function as a valuable relational resource in fieldwork. Such skills support the researcher's ability to respond sensitively, adjust to unfolding situations, and navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. Thus, communicative musicality not only describes how interaction unfolds, but also points to how it must be attended to in order to become meaningful in research. As our findings suggest, participants' contributions were not always articulated verbally, but emerged through timing, gesture, and relational engagement. Attending to these dimensions was therefore central to recognising how knowledge was co-constructed in the field (cf. relational reflexivity, dos Santos, 2025).

At the same time, this perspective raises important ethical questions. One concerns whether "blending in" should be regarded as an indicator of trust. While Guro's gradual integration appeared to benefit the study, it also calls for critical reflection. Being included may fulfil a fundamental need for belonging, which may in turn shape how researchers interpret events and position themselves in the field. Rapport in qualitative research involves a continuous balancing of distance and closeness, and both insufficient and excessive proximity may influence interaction, the flow of information, and the ethical dimensions of the research encounter (cf. Schmid et al., 2024). Acknowledging this tension is essential for maintaining reflexivity.

This also raises questions about insider–outsider positioning and researcher influence. As an adult in adolescent communities, Guro could never fully become a participant. However, growing familiarity led to mutual adjustment over time. Being perceived as supportive or easy to be with may have facilitated access and trust, but may also have shaped how adolescents interacted with her. These dynamics cannot be separated from the data themselves and should not be treated as a methodological weakness, but as an inherent aspect of qualitative fieldwork. While distancing is well established in ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), the present study highlights how it may be enacted through micro-level, embodied timing and responsiveness rather than only as a positional stance. Thus, fieldwork relies on interpersonal sensitivity and improvisational judgement rather than fixed procedure, closely linked to intuition developed through experience and relational attunement (Stensæth, 2007; Bruscia, 2005).

A further consideration is whether a strong orientation towards empathy and relational attunement may also obscure other important perspectives. Guro's background in music therapy may have sensitised her to moments of connection and responsiveness, while potentially making conflict, resistance, or non-alignment less visible. This underlines the need for reflexivity as an ongoing process through which researchers continually evaluate how their backgrounds shape both interaction and interpretation.

Finally, ethical responsibility also concerns representation. The adolescents shared experiences, relationships, and vulnerabilities that they might not have disclosed to others in formal institutional roles, creating specific ethical obligations. As Haakon noted, he

sometimes forgot that Guro was present, raising the question of whether participants would have acted differently had they remained more aware of being observed. In response, careful and respectful representation was prioritised (cf. Stige et al., 2024). Potentially sensitive material was therefore excluded, and no member checks were conducted because re-contacting participants after two years was considered inappropriate. These decisions reflect an effort to balance ethical responsibility with the integrity of the research process.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that the relevance of music therapy improvisation to participant observation lies not in claiming equivalence between the two practices, but in showing how competencies developed in one domain may inform another. In this study, music therapy improvisation has been shown to provide a repertoire of relational attentiveness, ethical calibration, and embodied responsiveness in fieldwork with adolescents.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored how a music therapist-researcher built trusting relationships with adolescents while creating a school revue, and how these experiences might relate to competencies associated with music therapy improvisation. We suggest that selected concepts from music therapy improvisation can help illuminate how trust was negotiated through timing, responsiveness, restraint, and relational adjustment in fieldwork.

We conceptualise participant observation as an embodied and relational practice in which knowledge emerges through interaction. Guro's engagement can be characterised by a continuous calibration of when to step forward, when to step back, and how to respond in the moment. More specifically, we therefore suggest that competencies developed through music therapy improvisation—such as attunement, sensitivity to subtle cues, tolerance of uncertainty, and responsive timing—may serve as valuable relational and methodological resources in fieldwork with adolescents. At the same time, these competencies are not automatically transferable, but depend on context, relational judgement, and ongoing reflexivity. The article, therefore, highlights both the possibilities and the ethical tensions involved in trust-building, including issues of rapport, self-disclosure, researcher influence, and experiences of "blending in."

The study thus contributes in two ways. Within music therapy, it illustrates how competencies developed through improvisation may extend beyond clinical settings and inform relational research practices. At the same time, it contributes to qualitative research more broadly by demonstrating how such competencies may function as methodological resources in participant observation—highlighting the importance of embodied responsiveness, relational sensitivity, and ongoing ethical judgement in fieldwork.

Future research could further explore how such competencies may be developed, articulated, and critically examined across different research contexts, as well as their implications for relational and ethical practice in fieldwork.

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