Emotional dilemmas in fieldwork: traversing the division between the self and the other

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Abstract submitted to the Ethnography Symposium 2015

In the last two decades, researchers have moved toward a more reflexive and emotionally engaged ethnographic writing. Such an approach has allowed ethnographers to celebrate the complex, ambiguous and messy nature of the social world and reflect on their own positioning and relationships in the field. This move to reflexivity particularly focused on reflecting on how researchers’ ‘self’ impact upon the data generated (Punch, 2012, p. 87). More recently, authors shed light on the emotional consequences of research on the researcher (Kenny, 2008). This research acknowledges that fieldwork can have deep emotional impacts on the researcher during and after the fieldwork, especially when dealing with vulnerable groups in dangerous environments (Warden, 2013). These studies discussed various emotions experienced by fieldworkers, ranging from connectedness and belonging to the workplace and employees (Strati, 2000), to guilt (Punch, 2012) to horror and trauma (Warden, 2013).

Yet, despite the recognition of these various emotional challenges, incorporating emotions and personal challenges into discussions of the research process is still not fully accepted as a scholarly endeavour (Blackman, 2007; Punch, 2012). Engaging with emotions is seen as weakness or something that may obstruct the research in a negative way (Widdowfield, 2000). In contrast with this view, Scholars who promote reflexivity emphasize that all qualitative research encounters are emotional (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001), and thus we cannot tuck away the personal behind the professional in field research (England, 1994, p. 85). Subsequently, they suggest that being reflexive about one’s emotion in the fieldwork help improve the transparency over how researchers’ emotional and social competencies can affect the process of fieldwork and knowledge production (Moser, 2008; Rose, 1997). Taking this view further, Punch (2012) argues that these emotional experiences are legitimate and common, and even ‘useful’ experiences of fieldwork.
Building on this argument, I suggest that emotional experiences could be in fact an essential element of the process of ethnographic research. I draw on anthropological theories which suggest interrogation of cultural difference and production of otherness is the heart of ethnographic research (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Wilmsen, 1989). Taking a lead from this literature, I argue that emotional experience could facilitate an interrogation of the apparent “given” division between ourselves and others, and hence improve the quality of an ethnographic experience.

To show this, I draw on my ethnographic practice during my PhD research in a UK based children’s charity. I reflect on various incidents when emotional encounters helped the researcher to understand “what it is to be part of more than ourselves” (Taylor & Hansen, 2005, p. 1215). In particular, I highlight a situation when an emotional reaction (display of moral anger) helped re-construct relationship with field participants and re-situate the researcher within a community of workers at the workplace.

**Keywords:** emotion, fieldwork, moral anger, otherness


