Too Close for Comfort? The Methodological and Practical Risks of Ethnographic Fieldwork

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Abstract

‘In the void’: Pitch black, my heart pounding, this is my worst fear, my complete claustrophobic nightmare. I can’t go on, the way ahead is blocked by debris which is too heavy to move. I just want to get out. Deep breath, need to keep the panic down, fight the tears. Perhaps one of the team is close by? I call out, hoping to hear a familiar voice, some reassurance that I’m not alone in this tiny void. Silence. I need to get out. No space to turn around, the only way out is back the way I came. Still lying on my stomach, cheek pressed against the cold ground, I frantically wriggle backwards through the maze of the collapsed building and towards daylight.

This paper is based on my ongoing doctoral research, an ethnographic study exploring the subjectively construed identities of individuals in a third sector organisation. The case organisation is a voluntary humanitarian charity that provides global emergency search and rescue services in the event of earthquake and other sudden onset natural disasters. Over the past year I have spent several months observing and gathering wide angled ‘long shots’ relating to this organisation, as well as four months of extreme ‘close ups’ during which I participated fully in the search and rescue training with the volunteers. This involved: sleeping outdoors in sub-zero temperatures, eating only military ration packs, and as the vignette above demonstrates, pushing myself physically, emotionally and sometimes psychologically to the limit. But of course this is ‘real’ ethnography, ‘living with and living like those who are studied’ (Van Maanen, 1988, p.49)...isn’t it?
Ethnography is a particularly pertinent research strategy for a study concerned with identity as Rosen (1991, p.2) argues ‘ethnographers study others in order to find out more about themselves’. As an inexperienced researcher, my primary concern had been about doing ‘proper’ research and being a competent and professional researcher and as such I was ‘engaged in a dual quest for self-identity and empathy’ (Humphreys et al, 2003). However during the fieldwork the question quickly became my own ‘Who am I?’ as I grappled with self doubts about being an ‘imposter’ and my competency in the team of search and rescue volunteers through simultaneously belonging and yet not belonging to this group. Reflecting back now I can see how this became an ongoing ‘struggle for credibility’ (Knights & Clark, 2014) as I attempted to secure myself both as a fully-fledged researcher and a plausible search and rescue volunteer.

The literature warns that doing ethnography is not without its challenges and for the researcher ‘handling the delicate balance between self and other in the fieldwork and in the writing’ can be problematic (Humphreys et al., 2003, p. 5). This paper discusses the precarious nature of doing ethnographic research, particularly of being ‘participant-as-observer’ (Sharpe, 1997) while trying to avoiding the risk of ‘going native’ (Gold, 1958). Reflecting on the challenges faced in the field, I consider how, like in the vignette, I found myself ‘in the void’ both emotionally and methodologically, feeling that I had gone too close for comfort and needing to find a way to resurface.

Grounding my discussion in theories of identity work and emotion, I offer both an analysis and discussion while sharing the agony of ‘reflecting’ (Harding et al., 2010) on the vulnerable self (Boyle & Parry, 2007). In so doing I draw from my case study to illustrate some of the unexpected consequences that emerged during my intense period of research activity.