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Reflecting on Death: the emotionality of the research encounter

Abstract

This paper considers some of the issues encountered when researching a particular space in which death is engaged: a cemetery landscape. Building on literature available on research and reflexivity, the paper addresses some of the challenges the author dealt with when both in and away from the cemetery field site. At the core of the paper is the recognition that emotional responses can both contribute *and* distract from the research process. It is the extent to which emotional baggage enlightens and/or diverts from the research process and the data being generated that underpins this paper.

Key Words: Cemetery, emotions, fieldwork, reflexivity.

1. Introduction

> "Walking up to the cemetery from Manor Park station for the first time with my supervisor, I feel really, really anxious. What would it look like? What would it feel like? Would there be lots of people crying? Would there be lots of 'death' around? I mean, I have experienced funerals before and been to cemeteries, but they were usually very modern, with small, rectangular headstones. I know of places like Highgate and fancier Victorian cemeteries, but don't really know what to expect with the City of London. And I've certainly never been to a cemetery that's so big.… Am totally overwhelmed by

> the size of the site and the (daunting) task of 'researching' it. How on earth am I going to do that? It certainly is very well kept though, and at times I realize I have to remind myself I am in a 'cemetery' rather than a garden or a park. And it doesn't seem like there is so much doom and gloom around. It was even a bit cheerful! My supervisor seems very happy to have seen the site, I am too, it's very exciting. We will have a lot to talk about in our next supervision I'm sure."
>
> (An extract from fieldnotes that documents my first impression of my fieldsite almost a year before I 'entered' the field to generate data)

And so began my research journey in the autumn of 2003, when I visited my fieldsite for the first time with my supervisor. Now over five years later, the memory of seeing the site for the first time, and the disconcerting mix of excitement, anticipation and outright fear, is one I can vividly recall. This paper considers the types of emotions that can be aroused within the qualitative research process, and details some of the challenges that I faced when in the field. Its aim is to highlight the complexity of the research process and contribute to ongoing discussions regarding the potential of reflexivity in research accounts.

Throughout the 2000s, scholarly research into death, dying and bereavement has been expanding rapidly, reflected in the establishment of the Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath in 2005 and numerous publications, such as Francis, Kellaher and Neophytou (2005), Garces-Foley (2006), Howarth (2007), Kellehear (2007), and Valentine (2008). Handbooks and textbooks from the United States have also been doing particularly well, with many now in multiple editions (see Corr, Nabe

and Corr, 2008 [in its 6th edition]; DeSpelder and Strickland, 2008 [in its 8th edition]; Kastenbaum, 2006 [in its 9th edition]). On the other side of the Atlantic in the UK, topical edited collections include Earle, Komaromy and Bartholomew (2008), Hockey, Komaromy and Woodthorpe (in press) and Olivere and Monroe (2004). Much of this momentum has been underpinned by empirical research into death, dying and bereavement, often evidenced and analyzed in the pages of this journal.

Within this growing field, empirical research into dying and end-of-life care has already gained a considerable foothold thanks to the escalation of intensive care (see Seymour, 2001) and the ongoing success of the hospice movement. Research into bereavement, both social and psychological, has also grown (see Genevro, 2004; Valentine, 2006). Studies into activities that do not fit neatly into these two categories, on the other hand, has still some way to go; empirical research about (for example) cemeteries, ashes, and how people perceive the afterlife and ghosts are still in the (relatively) emergent stages.

Within all these differing explorations of death, comparatively little, with some notable exceptions (such as Hockey, 2007; Howarth, 1993; Rowling, 1999; and Valentine, 2007), has been written about the methodological implications of undertaking research into this area. That is not to say that it has not been recognized that there is a connection between the research, the research problem and the researcher (Irwin, 2006); rather, that the majority of researchers in the field of death studies have chosen not to make a public 'song and dance' about their experience, or the potential messiness of their research encounter. A reluctance to disclose the research experience is not unique to the field of death studies; it is widely accepted

within the social sciences that researchers (especially qualitative researchers) tend not to publicly share their experiences as it may leave them vulnerable to accusations of bias, prejudice and partiality (Bryman and Burgess, 1994).

Evidence suggests, however, that the tide is turning. The growing branch of Sociology of Emotion has expanded enormously in the UK since the 1990s (Holland, 2007), sending emotions much further up the sociological agenda, which in turn have begun to infiltrate research accounts. Thus, within the last two decades there has been an increasing acceptance of emotions being part of the research process (Rager, 2005), reflected in the expanding body of work on emotionality and research (Valentine, 2007). Nonetheless, there still remains a general lack of consideration given to the uniqueness of the (human) researcher and their experience in methodological discussions (Hedican, 2006). This invisibility includes the more unsavory aspects of the researcher's experience(s) both before and during their research encounter (Hubbard, Brackett-Milburn and Kemmer, 2001).

Why this is perhaps surprising in the field of death and dying in particular is the intimate nature of the topic under the microscope, which as Riches and Dawson (1996) point out, effectively *forces* the researcher into reflecting on their own viewpoint. Despite this, and the fact that death is one of the binding facts of human existence (Bauman, 1992) that cannot be 'magicked away' (Lofland, 1978 as cited in Williams, 2003), what constitutes competence in reflection, both overtly in research accounts and privately in the researcher's personal life away from their writing, is open to debate. Indeed, in even the earliest studies of death it was questioned whether it was *ever* possible to intellectually reflect on such a delicate topic:

> We all believe we know what death is because it is a familiar event and one that arouses intense emotion. It seems both ridiculous and sacrilegious to question the value of that intimate knowledge and to wish to apply reason to a subject where only the heart is competent (Hertz [1907]1960:27).

The scope of this paper means that it is not possible to consider Hertz's point much further – that is a task for those sociologists and philosophers interested in rationality, reason and logic. What is pertinent here, however, is the extent to which the tensions stimulated by emotional responses in the research process are disclosed (see Blackman, 2007).

As a contribution to these ongoing discussions regarding research and emotion, this paper is one novice researcher's endeavor to recount their experience. Framed as an experience akin to a 'rite of passage' as a researcher (see Peacock, 2001), the paper builds on accounts already published (such as Valentine, 2007), and relies heavily on the argument proposed by Guilleman and Gillam (2004) that the act of reflection in research (commonly referred to as reflexivity) is a *resource* rather than a burden. At the core of the paper is the recognition that emotional responses can both contribute *and* distract from the research process. Rather than providing a wide-ranging discussion on the emotional component of the research process however (which has already been done in an excellent summary by Hubbard et al., 2001), the aim here is to take this as a starting point and explore what this actually *means* for the novice researcher.

Using data from an ethnographic study of a cemetery, this paper thus explores the challenges that emotions can create, and the depth they can add to the research experience. Structured around the chronological process of the research process of 'before' the field, being 'in' the field, and 'leaving' the field, it focuses specifically on some of the minute decisions that take place when doing fieldwork (see Mason, 1996) More than an act of introspection, navel-gazing or self-indulgence, the purpose of the paper is to draw further attention to connections between the topic and the researcher, and the relationship between the field and feelings (see Woodthorpe, 2007).

2. Being reflexive

Usually associated with qualitative research, being reflexive "… involves honesty and openness about how, where and by whom the data were collected and locates the researcher as a participant in the dynamic interrelationship of the research process" (Ryan and Golden, 2006: 288). Essentially, it is about critical self-reflection (see Rolls and Relf, 2006 for a very accessible account of two researcher's undertaking this). In recent publications, researchers have mused on how reflexivity is often related to gender (Lewis, 2008) and reflected on the importance of projecting the 'right' image in research (see Ortiz, 2005). Others, such as Allan (2006), have been very honest about how their research made them feel: in her case about her own infertility.

The growing popularity of reflexive accounts such as these has contributed to, and stemmed from, the growth of autoethnography as a research method (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). This is where the researcher turns their critical eye on their self, either using firsthand accounts or vignettes, in a bid to further knowledge

(Humphreys, 2005). Within this, however, there has typically been an emphasis on ethics (Guilleman and Gillam, 2004), reflected in publications such as Valentine (2007), who considered her ethical standpoint on what was 'inside' and 'outside' her remit. Furthermore, the spotlight has tended to rest on the interview, and interviewer/interviewee interaction, rather than the place in which the research takes place (Cylwick, 2001).

The stance that this paper takes is that the act of reflexivity goes beyond reflecting on methods and ethics; indeed, it is that:

> reflexivity has became much more than methodological visibility. It now provides a means of dealing with epistemological concerns about how our identities as researchers are multiple, contradictory, partial, strategic and located. It shows how all research accounts are ultimately screened through the narrator's eye (Kingdon, 2005: 623).

Reflexivity thus offers the researcher the opportunity to critically unpack their own assumptions and expectations, openly account for their particular interpretation(s) and reflect on their successes and failures. However, as I have already noted, publicly recognizing these can also leave the researcher exposed to accusations of partiality and bias. Consequently, for those that choose to disclose their experiences,

> "… embarking on reflexivity is akin to entering uncertain terrain where social ground can all too easily give way to swamp and mire. The challenge is to negotiate a path through this complicated landscape – one that exposes the

> traveler to interesting discoveries while ensuring a route out the other side. Researchers have to negotiate the 'swamp' of interminable self analysis and self disclosure. On their journey, they can all too easily fall into the mire of the infinite regress of excessive self analysis and deconstructions at the expense of focusing on the research participants and developing understanding" (Finlay, 2002: 212).

It is my hope that this paper negotiates this terrain and comes 'out the other side'. To do this, it is important that it is noted that the central purpose of this paper is not to provide an extensive, all-encompassing answer to 'how' to deal with emotions in research. Rather, it is to provide a contribution to the discussion about the reality of research in particular reference to a particular topic (death) and fieldsite (a cemetery).

My own desire to be reflexive comes from my experience of the gap between training and the actual undertaking of empirical research. As an undergraduate and postgraduate student, I was fortunate enough to receive substantial training in research methods. Furthermore, in my time as a doctoral student I also had the opportunity to teach undergraduates about research methods. However, all this knowledge did not (and generally does not, according to Batchelor and Briggs, 1994) prepare me for the emotional and interactive nature of undertaking empirical research on my own in the cemetery and the emotional challenges it would present. This has been noted too by Rager (2005), who has asserted how her preparatory groundwork did not prepare her sufficiently for the emotional content of her research. It is from my own experience of the gap between research training and firsthand practice that I agree with Louise Rowling's assertion that the "failure to acknowledge the possible emotional

interchange in the research process can be viewed as a legacy of the positivist position of detachment between researcher and subject" (1999: 168)

This positivist legacy that Rowling points to is the idea that the researcher objectively records, documents and analyses the social world. Throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century, and certainly in the twenty-first, this line of reasoning has come under severe attack, not least from feminists, who have (rightly) been given a lot of credit (see Wincup, 2001, as cited in Rager, 2005) for challenging the 'myth' of objective truth. Feminists have also been credited with promoting the need to recognize the researcher's assumptions and expectations that they bring with them to the research process itself (Hubbard et al. 2001; Rolls and Relf, 2006), or as Knowles (2006) puts it, their 'emotional baggage'.

The central point here, is that you, me, indeed everyone on this planet, has some kind of emotional baggage. In terms of research into death, however, it is the extent to which this baggage enlightens and/or distracts from the research process and the data being generated; indeed, it is this question that underpins this paper. In order to move this discussion forward, let me briefly give you some background to the piece of research from which this paper stems and the decisions that were made prior to 'entering' the field.

3. The project background and before the field

This paper comes from an ESRC CASE studentship that commenced in 2003.[1] It was a three year collaboratively funded study that – due to the requirements of the contributors – took place at the City of London Cemetery (CLCC) in Newham, East London. Opened in 1856 and run by the City of London Corporation, at over two hundred acres, the CLCC is one of the largest cemeteries in the UK, dealing with (on average) 3000 cremations and 1000 burials every year. At the time of my research, around 90 staff were employed at the site – a figure simply unheard of in other cemeteries around the country (for more detail about the CLCC see, Brooks, 1989; Francis et al., 2005; and particularly Lambert, 2006)

Aiming to explore the material consequences of the intersection of people, objects, practices, regulations and beliefs within the cemetery landscape, my project was structured around finding out about the views of visitors to the cemetery, staff who worked there, and members of the local community. My aim was twofold: to produce an intellectually sound and theoretically informed piece of academic work; and, second, to produce research that honoured the stakeholders, developed their understanding of what was taking place within the cemetery, and to produce work that would empower their policy and practice (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993). In total, over 100 people were interviewed and hundreds of hours were spent in the cemetery.

In trying to meet my two objectives, my research strategy had to be able to address both of these demands. In the earliest days of my project, my mission therefore was to incorporate these aims in a plan that would assist me in generating an up-to-date,

[1] This stands for the Economic and Social Research Council Collaborative and Scientific Engineering Scheme. It was co-funded by the City of London Corporation, and the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management.

empirically-based argument that would illustrate the complexity of managing a cemetery landscape; the results of which would be interesting, informed and stimulating to both academic and lay readerships.

So, I had to face three tasks before I could enter the field. First, I had to settle on the epistemological framework – that is, the underlying principles of how/what I was to investigate. This opening task was straightforward in as much as the study was an exploration of the multi-dimensional nature of perspectives. Shaped by the stakeholder's remit of wanting to know about how people *felt* about the cemetery landscape, the decision was taken early on that the project would be an inductive piece of research shaped by a constructivist ontology, as it was about how meaning in the cemetery was being 'constructed' through the daily intersection of different people, policies, practices and priorities. This was to be accompanied by an interpretivist epistemology, in that it was my *interpretation* of participants' understanding of the cemetery. Like I said, pretty straightforward.

Second, I needed to create a methodological strategy that would facilitate the generation of data. Based on the remit of the research, and with guidance from my supervisor, I determined that my research would be an ethnographic study that would examine the social world of the cemetery *as it happened* (Erlandson et al., 1993). Making this choice meant that I needed to be 'in' the setting, rather than researching 'it' as an external reality (Geertz, 1973). This ethnographic approach also meant that I would be in the field acting, as Hammersley and Atkinson have put it, "overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happened, listening to what is said, asking questions", in fact, "collecting whatever

data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned" (1983: 2). The actual reality of this 'collecting whatever data are available', whilst balancing the prevailing concern of being ethical and my emotional responses in the field, will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

Resulting from a caution from my supervisor, the third task I had to undertake before entering the field - recognizing how I personally felt about death - was more complicated. At this juncture, I had to learn to appreciate how *I* felt about the topic under investigation (see Coffey, 1999). That is, what did death mean to me? At this stage, I did not comprehend how powerful my feelings about death were. Indeed, as a novice researcher, I was not wholly aware of the weight of this task until I had actually undertaken the research – indeed, I am still reflecting on it now as I write this paper, some five years later.

More than an act of navel gazing (Whyte, 1996) or self adoration (Okely, 1992), it was during the time (before I entered the field) that I mused about how I had experienced death in the past and realized that experiences in my teenage years deeply affected how I perceived – and, being honest, *judged* – how other people grieved. Having not thought in any great depth about these events for many years, I found I was suddenly remembering things that brought to mind a lot of difficult and mixed emotions. In hindsight, this was a very emotionally draining time, not least for those people who gave their time to spend many hours going over past events with me. In hindsight, however, I only scratched the surface of some of my feelings about death, echoing Kreiger's (1996) contention that it is practically impossible for a researcher to *ever* having complete analytic distance from the social research they are producing.

After having realized this for myself, I would encourage new researchers to the field of death and dying to consider embarking on reflexive practices at an early stage.

4. In the field

At the beginning of this paper you read about my initial thoughts when I saw the CLCC for the first time. But once in the field, actually *doing* the research, what did 'being' a researcher *actually* mean? As I entered the field I was hopeful that – building on Hammersley's and Atkinson's quote earlier - I could 'go with the flow' in choosing on what to focus. This left me with an array of options, however, which at best were sometimes overwhelming (see Grafanaki, 1996), and at worse tremendously anxiety-inducing. In negotiating these feelings, I was plagued throughout the empirical research component by a nagging concern that I had noted the 'wrong' thing, could have done something better, or was missing something else crucial going on elsewhere in the cemetery.

Nonetheless, I was determined to generate as much data as possible while in the cemetery. As an ethnographic study, I decided I would principally use two methods in the cemetery grounds to do so: participant observation and interviews. Let me deal with these in turn, based on what I was prepared for and my reality.

4.1 Participant Observation

What I was prepared for: Largely considered to be one of the, if not *the*, most revealing methods in an ethnography (see Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994),

participant observation is based on the principle of immersing oneself into the participants' world in order to understand experiences and meanings through *their* language (Burgess, 1991). Situating the researcher *in* the field that they are researching, it thus enables the individual "to secure his data within the mediums, symbols, and experiential worlds which have meaning to his respondents" (Vidich, 1969: 79).

My reality: I discovered firsthand that the term 'participant observation' can be used too casually, as this umbrella phrase incorporates two techniques - participation *and* observation - which lie on a continuum with complete participation at one end and complete observation at the other. When in the field I undertook varying degrees of participation and observation, both covertly and overtly, reflecting the argument that 'participant observation' is not a homogenous method, but rather "a characteristic blend or combination of methods and techniques that is employed in studying certain types of subject matter" (McCall and Simmons, 1969:1).

Bearing this in mind, my experience of participant observation consisted of spending many hours wandering around the cemetery, moving between being a participant and an observer. A lot of the time was spent watching people and occasionally participating in what they were doing, for example in helping to carry watering cans for people tending to graves, or directing people around the grounds. Approximately half the time I was overt in admitting what I was doing, the rest of the time I was covert, in that participants were unaware of my presence and/or status as a researcher; the decision to inform people was taken on an ad hoc basis, depending on the situation (see Mason, 1996; Wiles, Charles, Crow and Heath, 2006).

What was absolutely vital however was that during participating and observing, I had to be extremely flexible according to the day, the time, the people involved and even the weather. The need to 'think on my feet' and respond quickly to situations using my instinct was a task that I had been (perhaps somewhat naïvely) unprepared for. It was not something that I had learnt (or indeed, arguably *could* have learnt) during my research methods training. In terms of ethics, while I had guidelines that assisted me in making judgments over what I could and should reveal to participants, in practice this was a challenging task that relied heavily on my intuitive ability to assess a situation. I did my best to adhere to the British Sociological Association's Statement of Ethical Practice (2002), ensuring that all data were recorded confidentially and made anonymous in transcripts. However, this anonymity did not – and could not - extend to the field site itself, as the venue of the CLCC was explicitly named as the research location. As a result, there were several occasions when I had to abandon some participation/observation because it was becoming too personal and easy to identify the people involved, or deliberately obscure my purpose of being in the field as a researcher. I can empathize strongly here with Blackman's (2007) honest account of socially drinking with potential participants and sexual attraction; while neither of these were applicable in my case, I did have comparable moments of real intimacy with some participants that I will never be able to reveal due to their highly contentious nature, or the ethical risks they may pose. This is one of the drawbacks of researching such a sensitive and intimate topic, and for me personally was something I found rather sad, as a number of these encounters were very powerful and enlightening.

4.2 Interviewing

What I was prepared for: Prior to entering the field I prepared myself through reading some of the 'classic' textbooks about interviews, their purpose, their structure, their scope and the techniques to facilitate them (such as Burgess, 1982; Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). Indeed, I only touched the surface of the mass of literature available on this topic; as one of the most popular qualitative research methods, there is a plethora of information available on interviews and their usage. From these texts, however, I determined that I would utilize a semi-structured approach to interviews (ie. I had a list of questions but would not stop a participant pursuing a particular topic if they wanted to talk about it), based on Burgess's principle that interviews are "conversations with a purpose" (1991: 102). In the end, however, the structure and content of the interviews themselves was not the principle problem; it was recruiting participants for the interviews that turned out to be the real challenge.

My reality: After a week or so in the field, getting used to the size of the CLCC, I set about arranging interviews with staff members and local community members. Rejecting unattainable ideals of mathematical strategies for sampling (Becker, 1998), participants were primarily recruited through a snowballing technique (see Fink, 2003). With input from the stakeholders, key members of staff were identified and interviewed, who then suggested other staff members to interview or areas of the cemetery to focus upon. In this respect, staff were the easiest to interview.

In terms of the local community, cemetery staff responsible for communicating with the public suggested a range of organisations, individuals, and groups that could fall

within the ‘local community’ rubric, based primarily on their proximity to the site. Initially I sought contact with all of them via a telephone call or a visit. However, most of these attempts proved to be futile – although communicating with the local community has been a persistent problem for the staff at the cemetery themselves, so in the beginning I was not overly concerned.

As time went by, however, I began to get increasingly frustrated by my lack of success in engaging with people who lived near the cemetery and so placed a generic letter in several local newspapers. To this, I received three responses. I then produced a leaflet outlining the project and requesting anyone who was interested to make contact. Left at various locations in the cemetery and distributed at the bi-annual Open Day in 2004, it motivated four people to get in touch.

It was at this point that I began to feel very discouraged and queried whether or not to continue putting time and resources into accessing potential local community participants that appeared to have little or no interest in the cemetery. Concerned with meeting the remit of my project and being a ‘good’ researcher, this decision was not easy to arbitrate, as it felt like admitting defeat. Questioning how much time I should devote to this part of the project, I spent a lot of time querying whether it my fault I was not accessing these people or if there was something else I could have done better. It took me a long time to reconcile these uncertainties, and it was only after lengthy consultation with my supervisor that I resigned myself to the fact that I had done all that I could with the resources and time available. Five years later though, I still feel, to an extent, that I could have done more.

Despite these difficulties in engaging with the local community, it was visitors to the cemetery who proved to be the most challenging group to interview, intellectually, physically and emotionally. Participants were recruited on an ad hoc, opportunistic basis (Burgess, 1991); on most occasions I approached people in the cemetery and asked if they would be willing to participate in the research. Throughout, a lot of the interviews were conducted 'thinking on my feet', responding to situations in a way that I thought I should, based (again) on my instinct. In some of these interviews with visitors I felt great conflict, as have others, in managing a professional detachment and a personal response of empathy (Rowling, 1999). Indeed, at times I even felt as if I were taking on a role of being a counsellor, rather than an academic researcher; perhaps this is unsurprising as research and counselling require similar skills of empathy and listening (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen and Liamputtong, 2006).

Usually, I spoke to people when they were either walking around the site, by a grave, or in the Memorial Gardens (the area in the CLCC where ashes can be distributed). However, it was an incident (and my emotional response to it) that took place in the Memorial Gardens that was to have a significant result on whom I approached, and how. On this occasion, I noticed a woman sitting on a bench in the Memorial Gardens and startled her badly as I began my conventional introduction and request for her participation. It was only then that I noticed how distressed she was, and it was therefore unsurprising that she declined to take part. Plagued with guilt, I exited quickly from the area, feeling dreadful for interrupting her. These feelings of remorse did not dissipate quickly and had a profound effect on my activities in the field, as I became reluctant to speak to anyone who was sitting or in the Memorial Gardens. It

felt far easier - and much more personally comfortable - to approach individuals who were tending to a grave or walking around the site.

What this encounter in particular reveals is the assumptions and expectations that the researcher can bring with them to the project. In this case my assumption was that a cemetery space is for quiet, uninterrupted contemplation; an assumption that I (at the time unwittingly) challenged when I approached the woman. This also reflects the importance of the place in which the research takes place, as Cylwick (2001) has argued:

> "… place in a physical sense does not produce emotions but rather it is the way that people, as individuals and groups, culturally and socially construct place and give it meaning that produces emotions…. These emotions have an impact on the research" (p244)

Overall, what I found from being in the field is the importance of recognizing and remembering that, as a researcher, your personal assumptions and talents are brought with you to the field. I had not appreciated the complexity of this, however, or the extent to which I would rely on my intuition and ability to judge a situation. The repercussions of relying on these skills were most apparent to me when I began to experience strong, and lingering, feelings of guilt observing people who had no idea they were being watched with a 'critical' academic eye. Such was the intensity of this reaction that it began to impact on my fieldwork, illustrated in the following extract from fieldnotes I made after witnessing a grave selection:

> When outside by the bus [waiting to be taken to look at grave plots] the man stopped just as we got on and said to me how it hit him sometimes that his wife had gone. He said he could not have done this a few weeks ago. Inside [when going through the options with the staff member] he had said his wife has always been quite philosophical about these things and he did think that once he was gone, he was gone. But by the bus he suddenly changed and became very sad. He said the worst was when he went shopping for one. I had no idea what to say, tried to look empathetic, but felt really sad for him and also quite deceitful as was using this situation as data. It was just awful, feel terrible now.

Literature on qualitative research had not equipped me for feeling so underhand. As time passed, and aggravated by these feelings, I found myself increasingly sensitized to other peoples' grief and it became increasingly difficult to prevent myself from getting emotional when in the site. Observing children's graves, particularly if they had been born in the year of my birth, or witnessing parents around my age attend a grave, often moved me to tears. On one occasion I was so touched by a man's intense nurturing of a flowerpot by a grave – he appeared oblivious to his immediate surroundings – I had to leave the cemetery for a short while. This again reflects the impact that the cemetery surroundings had – if I had witnessed this activity in a garden it would probably not have had such a touching affect (see Gibson, 2004, for a discussion on objects and their meaning).

As time passed, my emotional responses to the fieldsite, and the people and objects within it, progressed into an underlying unease that I was not fulfilling my research

objectives. This in turn began to deter me from approaching visitors in the grounds. I was convinced that I was not meeting the "conventional image of a researcher [as]… someone who neutralizes his or her… viewpoints while conducting research" (Kleinman and Copp, 1993: 10). Unfortunately, there was no easy 'answer' to these difficult feelings. Indeed, I had not anticipated that I would have such a strong emotional response to my research (Hubbard et al. 2001). Subsequently, I spent the remainder of my time in the field filled with a dogged determination to get the empirical component of the research finished.

5. After the field

It was with mixed feelings, therefore, that after months of going to the cemetery I agreed with my supervisor that I had enough data for the purpose of my doctoral thesis. However, I had yet to appreciate how issues in ethnographies continue to arise after the empirical data generation period (Roberts and Sanders, 2005). I have written elsewhere about the moment(s) that contributed to my realization that the data generation had been affected by my emotional responses in the field (Woodthorpe, 2007). What strikes me now though, as I write this paper, is how these issues did not fully occur to me whilst I was in the field itself – it was only once I was physically distanced from the site (see Cylwick, 2001) that I began to make connections between what I had done in the cemetery, what I had recorded, and *me*. If a developing confidence in approaching people was a rite of passage of becoming a researcher, then this realisation was a rite of passage away from the field in becoming a more competent analyst of data (van Maanen, 1988).

Once I had made the connection between the data and *me*, I returned to it with what felt like an 'enlightened eye' (Eisner 1993) and (re)read them with an appreciation of what I might learn from my own emotional responses in the field. For example, in the aforementioned instance of the man tending to the flowerpot, rather than being distracted by my emotional responses, I reflected on why I had been so moved, and (re)considered the way in which the setting made it so meaningful. It was, I mused, to do with his proximity to the grave that gave his actions such meaning (Gibson, 2004). The juxtaposition of the domestic and the deathly made his commitment to maintaining the grave so striking. This, I further interpreted, could signify his relationship with the plot and the person within it. This seemingly obvious point was something I had missed when sidetracked by my own emotional response when in the cemetery.

Further analytical insights into the CLCC and the people within it were as much about what went *unsaid* as to what was said, yet it was not until I (re)visited the data after my emotional awakening that I realized this. An example of this is how I began to realize that there was something in the silence surrounding the body in the ground and what appeared to be the concealment of its decomposition in conversation. Participants were not talking about the bodies in the ground as *we literally stood on top of them*, however it was not until I addressed my own emotional reaction to the site that I could recognize this.

6. Discussion and concluding thoughts

While going over my data again and commencing writing up my doctoral thesis, I was heartened to realize I was not the first researcher to have such grand awakenings during the analytic process. Confessions such as this one by Valentine (2007), have therefore been particularly welcome:

> … it was not until several interviews down the line that I became aware of just how much I had been unconsciously 'editing' myself out of them. I realized that this was because I felt embarrassed about my own responses, which seemed clumsy and intrusive, and not the 'real' data. Instead of listening to myself with the attitude of openness and inquiry that I was assuming with interviewees, I was quite shocked to discover the extent to which I seemed to be measuring myself against some idealized image of scientific detachment. Yet once I was able to take a step back and listen to myself more sympathetically I was able to acknowledge and cultivate my own role in facilitating the interview." (p 167)

Some of my points no doubt reflect the naivety that can come with being a novice researcher. What this suggests, for me, is how important it is that researchers, particularly novice researchers, do not put themselves under unrealistic pressure in fieldwork and analysis, and that others working with them (such as colleagues and supervisors) are aware of their professional experience (see Cylwick, 2001). For more experienced researchers some of the challenges presented in this paper will no doubt be familiar, or even trivial. For a novice researcher, however, as I was at the time, they were milestones that had to be dealt with cautiously. What the experiences

disclosed in this paper reveal, however, is the complexity and multiplicity of the qualitative research process, where data is generated from a combination of the researcher, their viewpoint, their research questions, their relationships, and their ability to communicate (Nunkoosing, 2005). I would also add to this, intuition, instinct, emotional maturity and the ability to 'feel'.

One of the disadvantages of this, as Hedican (2006) has argued, is that currently there are few methodological techniques to interrogate feelings; this also extends to the use of intuition and instinct. Most likely this is due to the difficulty in 'pinning down' intangible personal skills and talents, and the risk of suggesting that qualitative research is based only on intuition, rather than scholarly rigor and thoroughness. On the other hand, to omit these facets of the research process from accounts can leave the research impoverished (Hubbard et al. 2001) and lacking vital depth.

One of the most commonly cited solutions to this predicament is the use of fieldwork diary (also called research diaries/journals). These are the more personal accounts of the research process that the researcher is (usually) under no obligation to reveal. Researchers such as Valentine (2007) and Rager (2005) have both endorsed diaries as a way of documenting the challenges that can arise in the field, and as a tool through which reflexivity can be aided. Valentine also points to the importance of peer support groups; Rager highlights the significance of self care. From my own experience, I utilized a diary to varying degrees and found it beneficial. Ultimately, however, it was just a tool to help me – it did not provide the 'answers' that I craved at times in the field. It was only with the benefit of hindsight that the scribblings in my diary became something of real use.

In sum, if participant disclosure in interviews, and research more generally, is perceived as 'good' (Birch and Miller, 2000), then arguably researchers need to be 'singing from the same hymn sheet' and be prepared to disclose information about themselves and their experience(s). However, this can be a double-edged sword, leaving the researcher open to criticism about their rigorousness, ethical approach and methods (Blackman, 2007). The challenge is, therefore, to balance the act of disclosure with being astute and professional, while also recognizing that, as human beings, researchers *are* vulnerable and open to emotion that can inform, but also blur, their perception and interpretation of events; emotional responses can be as enlightening as they are distracting. However, they should remain at the forefront of the researcher's mind as they pursue their research; "rather than being ignored and marginalized and added on as an afterthought, emotions (past and present) should occupy a central position in the research process, or at least as central as possible" (Cylwick, 2001: 249). By doing so, the researcher can not only find out about their research problem; they can also use the opportunity to grow and mature as a person; certainly, I discovered much about myself through my research experience. Yet, for most of the time, personal growth is overlooked in the publication of scholarly activity.

Within this paper I have attempted to demonstrate this personal growth through disclosing some of the things I learnt while at the CLCC, while also signifying the centrality of emotions when undertaking research in a setting associated with death. The paper has considered the everyday reality of being in the field, suggested how much can be learnt from reflexive accounts of research into death, and highlighted the

potentiality of drawing on emotional responses in the analysis of data. There can be few other topics that share the universal and far-reaching consequences of that of death. Intimately connected with the emotional human being undertaking the research, death has an enormous potential to be a satisfying area of study, both personally and professionally. In order to garner the rich rewards that can come from this field of study, researchers need to ensure that they produce transparent and open accounts of the research process, and actively seek to recognize that when they turn their scholarly focus onto a topic such as this, they need to be prepared for what they might learn about themselves.

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