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Source: *eSharp*, Special Issue: Special Issue: Critical Issues in Researching Hidden Communities (2009), pp. 28-50

URL: <http://www.gla.ac.uk/esharp>

ISSN: 1742-4542

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Emotional work: ethnographic fieldwork in prisons in Ecuador

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Introduction

Researching hidden communities often takes us to places which are unpredictable, unimaginable and unknowable.¹ Whether researching in a rural village in Africa for a year or across the other side of town for a couple of hours at a time, fieldwork requires that we step out of our usual milieu, put on the guise of an academic (for many of us for the first time) and ‘travel’ to unknown territory. This ‘travelling’ is explicitly intellectual, professional and academic but it may also be physical, personal and sometimes emotional.

In this paper I offer an ‘anatomy’ (Mintz 1989) of the personal and emotional aspects of my doctoral fieldwork in prisons in Ecuador. Examining the messy realities of emotions in my fieldwork speaks back to contemporary debates about the role of emotions in research. As well as gathering legitimate, intellectual knowledge in the form interview data, fieldnotes and budding theoretical ideas, I left the field with a collection of other knowledges which were personal, emotional, unexpected and sometimes uncomfortable. This paper is a product of the ambiguous knowledge that emerged from my fieldwork

¹ A number of people have commented on this paper throughout its development. Thanks to Alistair Fraser, Amy Chandler, Angus Bancroft, Michele Burman, Kim Masson and especially to Jorge Nuñez for encouraging me to write it all down. Thanks to Octavio Ycaza and Karin Andersson for helping considerably with the emotional fallout of fieldwork.

Fieldwork was a mixture of personal, professional, hanging out, observing, interviewing and often just waiting for something to happen. It is tempting to try and make rational sense out of the chaos of fieldwork and to present oneself in the best possible light. Since rewriting tends to further obscure rather than reveal, whenever possible I have used fieldnotes to capture the ‘messy reality’ of fieldwork.

The role of emotions in research: contemporary literature

Forty years ago there seem to have been more scientists; now there appear to be more selves. (Mintz 1989, p. 793).

Young and Lee (1996) trace changes in the role of the emotional in ethnographic research. They contend that the researcher’s emotions are almost entirely absent in early sociological writings, for example Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969). Although the emotional and personal life of the researcher was noted in studies in the neo-Chicagoan tradition, they were largely relegated to the appendices of ethnographic accounts (see for example Whyte’s appendix to *Street Corner Society*, 1955). Underpinning this ‘school’ is a conception that emotions are apart from scientific experience and knowledge. Although personal and emotional aspects of fieldwork were acknowledged, they were often understood as ‘fieldwork troubles’, an obstacle to be overcome or a problem to be solved.

More recently however, the role that the researcher’s emotions and personal life play in research has been brought to the fore by existential and feminist researchers. This ‘emotional turn’ contends that emotions are not extraneous to research but are an unavoidable

and integral part of social research and rejects the possibility of emotionally objective ethnography (Young & Lee 1996). In particular, feminist scholars have challenged hierarchical dichotomies of reason/emotion, public/personal and valid and invalid knowledge (Oakley 1981; Widdowfield 2000). Here, emotional engagement is seen as necessary to collecting data which is reflexive, embedded and therefore genuine and authentic (Coffey 1999, p.159). As a result, fieldwork has been widely recognised as a form of emotion-work (Hochschild 1979).²

Importantly though, the ‘emotional turn’ has not replaced traditional suspicion about the supposedly contaminating effects of emotions in research. For example, Kane notes that: ‘Introducing an observer’s subjectivity challenges the objectivity claims made on the basis of more systematic dimensions of fieldwork. On some level, this weakens our scholarly authority’ (1998, p.143; see also Hammersley & Atkinson 1995, p.115). Since an over-arching principle of detachment remains, discussing emotions alongside research reports remains risky. Coffey notes that: ‘all too often research methods texts remains relatively silent on the ways in which fieldwork affects us and we affect the field... [i]ssues of identity, selfhood and emotionality are often referred to and thereby understood in tangential and semi-detached terms.’ (1999:1).

This paper examines how my doctoral fieldwork affected me emotionally and personally to bring to light questions about doing and being an emotionally engaged ethnographer and doctoral student. I will describe what researching in prisons was like and examine key aspects in my fieldwork such as getting in, experiencing courtesy stigma, how working in a violent setting affected me and

² See also Bondi 2005; Davidson, Bondi & Smith 2005; de Haan & Loader 2002; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn & Kemmer 2001; Kleinman & Copp 1993; Young & Lee 1996.

lastly how respondents' accounts of violence affected me. I will show how being a doctoral student shaped my fieldwork, in particular how working for prolonged periods of time far from home on a project I designed myself produced specific emotional capabilities, pressures and concerns which shaped the research in important ways.

Researching in prisons in Ecuador

My PhD research was on women in the international cocaine trade and in particular on drug mules.³ I conducted fieldwork with imprisoned drug traffickers in prisons in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador. Ecuador is situated between Colombia and Peru where much of the world's cocaine is grown and plays an important role in the export of cocaine to North America and the rest of the world (Rivera 2005, p.233). As a result, prisons in Ecuador have a high concentration of inmates charged with drug trafficking (Nuñez & Gallardo 2006). Ecuador was therefore a suitable place to conduct research on the international cocaine trade.

Importantly though, my reasons for working in prisons in Ecuador were as personal as they were sociological. Fieldwork emerged from a chance encounter. I first visited prisons in Ecuador while I was studying Spanish in Quito. I heard that there were British nationals in prison who welcomed visitors. I naively arrived at the men's prison armed with cigarettes, chocolate and toilet paper which, after some limited deliberation, I decided were the essentials for surviving imprisonment abroad. Inmates welcomed me with generosity and encouraged me to return. We kept in touch through letters and phone calls and I negotiated their permission to return to conduct research for my undergraduate dissertation and later my

³ A person who knowingly physically carries drugs paid for by someone else across international borders. This includes different methods of carrying.

PhD. Since I had enjoyed living in Quito previously, I was excited at the prospect of making Quito my home for 15 months.

Fieldwork was fairly intense: I spent 15 months researching in women's and men's prisons using a mix of ethnographic observation and interviews. I was fortunate to receive an official research pass. This allowed me unsupervised access to most parts of both the men's and women's prisons four days a week.⁴ Guards searched me on my way into prison in the morning, I then passed through a series of gates which were unlocked to let me through, then locked behind me. At four o'clock, I knocked on the door to be let out. However, once I was inside the prison there were very few guards. Rather than being a physical presence inside the prison, they were most visible patrolling the roofs and walls with machineguns to ensure that prisoners did not escape. There was very little in terms of prison regime, education or training. As a result, prisoners had to support themselves and many ran small shops or businesses. On the inside, prisons functioned like small towns.

Given this unusual context, fieldwork was a bit like street ethnography. Rather than requesting interviews with prisoners through the prison staff, I instead hung out, observed and negotiated interviews where possible. Walking around in prison could be daunting, particularly at the beginning of fieldwork.⁵ It is difficult to

⁴ Formal access to the prison for my PhD research was organised through the Ecuadorian Prison Directorate through a local university: The Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO). Anthropologists Jorge Nuñez and Paco García requested permission for an official pass to work in prison on week days as part of the project 'Prison in Ecuador: daily life, power relations and public policies' being conducted by the Urban studies program where I was based as an Associated Researcher. I remain extremely grateful to the department for all their practical assistance, support and encouragement.

⁵ Working alone in prison precipitated a number of safety concerns that are too complex to go into here. Suffice to say negotiating the social landscape of prison and being aware of changes in climate were an important aspect of keeping safe in prison. I am grateful to a number of key respondents who 'watched my back',

be unemotional about prisons and imprisonment (de Haan & Loader 2002). Wacquant describes the carceral environment as ‘an assault on the senses [...] an other-worldly place [...] it seems like a bad movie, a nightmare, the vision of another world that cannot actually exist’ (2002, p.382). I would add that imprisonment is as banal as it is brutal and as boring as it is stressful. In addition, prisons in Ecuador are overcrowded and under-funded. Prisoners lived in physical conditions that breach any and all standards of minimum conditions of imprisonment set out by the United Nations (Knotzer, Ulbert & Wurth 1995).

Working in this environment was intimidating at first; nonetheless I soon became accustomed to the organised chaos which filled the hallways and patios where I spent most of my time. In spite of Wacquant’s bleak portrayal and in spite of the inhumane conditions of prisons in Ecuador, spending time on the inside was not always stressful, boring and difficult. Although the focus of this paper is the turbulence and violence in prison, it is worth noting that most of my time was spent ‘hanging out’: I drank gallons of tea and coffee, smoked more cigarettes than is reasonable in the name of research, cooked, ate, watched TV, sunbathed, played cards, swapped stories, danced, attended birthday parties and even the annual ‘Reina de la Cárcel’ beauty pageant in the women’s prison. At times it was tremendous, exhilarating work.

Getting in: acceptance and rapport

Working in a place that was hidden and physically separate from the rest of society shaped the process of ‘getting in’ and heightened good feelings about establishing rapport and acceptance.

accompanied me when walking around the prison and otherwise kept their ear to the ground for news of upcoming conflict.

Prior to conducting fieldwork for my PhD, I had spent a month in prison conducting research for my undergraduate dissertation. I had already established rapport with several key respondents. Furthermore, my longstanding presence in both prisons did much to assure respondents of my dedication and trustworthiness. Nonetheless, establishing a role for myself, building rapport and acceptance was time-consuming and demanded that I do various forms of emotion-work. As an outsider I was a neutral person to talk to and a shoulder to cry on (Bosworth 1999). I also provided a much needed distraction and connection to the 'outside' world (Denton 2001, p.9). Furthermore, due to my commitment to principles of reciprocity I was quickly adopted as a source of news and cigarettes. When I returned to commence fieldwork, my respondents and I were excited about my PhD project. I had secured funding from the Economic and Social Research Council. Respondents who had participated in my undergraduate dissertation were impressed that my government considered their experiences worthy and important. They reminded me of the importance of making their stories public and in particular 'telling the world' about the inhumane conditions of their imprisonment. As a result, my return and regular presence in both men's and women's prisons was warmly met by inmates. Getting in, establishing rapport and becoming accepted by respondents was not the difficult process that others had led me to believe it would be (similarly see Taylor 1993).

Becoming accepted and 'part of the furniture' (Wilson 2006, p.6) was a source of professional pride. This feeling of achievement was heightened by the fact that only a handful of ethnographers had ever successfully done ethnographic research with drug traffickers (Adler 1993; Zaitch 2002). In hindsight, I can see I was somewhat

‘romanced’ by the approval I felt from respondents and the easy rapport that we quickly re-established.

Establishing rapport had a special draw for me as a novice researcher. Being accepted by those I hoped to study was the first sign that the project I had designed, written and talked about might actually work. The ethnographers I admired (and which were the most lauded) were those who had established *entrée* and rapport (Bourgois 2003; Crewe 2006; Maher 1997; Nuñez 2007). It was also evidence that I might actually be a good researcher and did much to quell my fears about not being mature or clever enough to complete the task I had set myself. Furthermore, the ‘how-to’ texts I read reiterated that emotional engagement is useful, professional and good:

Emotional connectedness to process and practices of fieldwork is normal and appropriate. It should not be denied or stifled. It should be acknowledged, reflected upon and seen as a fundamental feature of well executed research. Having no connection to the research endeavour, setting or people is indicative of a poorly executed project. (Coffey 1999, p.159).

Following this initial phase of acceptance, I reflected critically on relationships with respondents. Aside from being hustled by inmates for cigarettes and occasional favours (which I accepted as an aspect of reciprocity in research) I was satisfied that I had achieved my goal of being an engaged researcher and acknowledged the emotional dynamic of this. It fitted with feminist researchers’ concerns about the balance of power: the emotional bond established between respondents and myself allowed them space to negotiate how we would do research together in a way that could potentially avoid exploitation and crucially help me access the kind of good data that was not easily accessible to the outsider. Nonetheless, good feelings

about becoming emotionally engaged with respondents were accompanied by uncomfortable feelings too. Respondents found imprisonment tough: they suffered depression, physical illness (temporary and terminal), were beaten up and spiralled into drug addictions. Witnessing this was difficult: at times I felt utterly helpless and deeply sad.

During my Christmas holiday (after 4 months of fieldwork) I heard that the four year old son of one respondent was killed in a road accident. Angela was a single mother who had made several trips internationally as a mule. By this time, I had known her for about three years. Although I was far from prison, this incident troubled me:

I walked home angry and frustrated feeling like I should phone her right away and tell her how sorry I am. I was angry that she had received such a long sentence and was so far from home. [...] Would we imprison someone who stole a chicken to feed their family? What about if it was kilograms of something that kills other people's children? It's morally ambiguous but I know that she'll be mourning right now: yet another Christmas in prison. I am deeply sad for her.

At this time I was thousands of miles away from the field. My tape recorder, notebook, pen and file of research questions were happily abandoned over the holidays. However I did not and could not simply disengage from the personal and emotional aspects of fieldwork. Unsurprisingly, fieldwork relationships, worries and emotions spilled over into my personal life outside prison.

Courtesy stigma

Goffman notes that those associated with stigmatised groups are subject to 'courtesy stigma' as a result of their contact with a

stigmatised group (1968) (see also Kane 1998, p.146). Several ethnographers have written about experiencing courtesy stigma (sometimes called a contagion of stigma) whilst researching stigmatised groups such as sex phone line workers (Mattley 1998), prisons (Liebling 1999, 2001) and drug traffickers (Adler 1993).

Due to the illegal nature of the drug trade, traffickers are a hidden and stigmatised group understood largely through stereotype:

One of the linguistic legacies of the 1980's was the transformation of the 'drug trafficker' into an ideological cue, a shorthand reference encompassing the menace, evil, greed, depravity and corruption (moral financial and political) required to ease the passage of repressive anti-drug legislation and policies (Green 1998, p.78).

Outside prison the subject of my research (and the fact that I worked in men's prisons) was often met with surprise. Being a foreigner, a woman and being in my early twenties no doubt added to people's surprise. Recent books and films about drug traffickers and prisons in Latin America (Marks 1997; Young & McFadden 2003) precipitated curiosity about me and my research. Furthermore, the assumption that 'you are what you research' (Kleinman & Copp 1993, p.6) led people to assume that my interest in drugs and imprisonment was driven by a personal drug habit, or perhaps imprisonment of a family member. Some people asked me for drugs, others asked to come and visit prison with me. I found these requests and assumptions awkward. Publicly displaying sympathy or emotional attachment to my respondents was usually met with awkwardness. Eventually I avoided talking about my research with anyone except my flatmates.

I became particularly aware of the problem of stigma when Nicky, a respondent, came to stay with me after she was released from prison. She had been detained for seven months before she was

released without charge. By this time her flight ticket had expired and she had no money. She stayed at my flat for several weeks while she waited to get her passport back and raised money to buy her ticket home.

Nicky was unwilling to tell people about what she was doing in Ecuador and I participated in the conspiracy. My flatmates knew she was just released from prison, but no one else does. It was easy to tell only the parts of the truth that we wanted to. When we meet friends they typically assume that she is here as a tourist and often ask typical questions like 'how long is she staying for? We would usually reply 'Until she gets her passport'. Since tourists were often pick-pocketed in Quito friends would usually assume that this had happened to her too.

It became clear that Nicky was very probably under surveillance (by police or Interpol⁶) while she was staying with me and that I probably also was as a result. I discussed this with my flatmates who were not particularly worried and probably considered me to be a bit paranoid. Nicky and I talked about it. We considered the possibility that my phone might have been tapped and even once thought we were being followed. Feeling paranoid and stigmatised was worsened by the fact I was a novice researcher and was working far from home. Aside from Nicky, there was no-one at hand that I could safely discuss my concerns with. Although it worried me that Nicky was possibly under surveillance, I enjoyed having her around. She could understand both the worlds which I occupied: prison and my life on the 'outside'. In many ways I found an emotional resonance with her that I could not with my contemporaries who had legitimate occupations and public lives.

⁶ Interpol is an international police agency.

Institutionalised violence and emotions

The prison environment was turbulent. Although nothing seemed to be happening the majority of the time, the peace was punctuated with violent events. Prison was often referred to as a 'time bomb' by inmates. In addition to the stress of being deprived of one's liberty, prisoners were constantly struggling to gain access to limited resources due to overcrowding. Petty disputes frequently broke out over meagre resources such as public telephones, communal areas and even food. Power and water strikes were common. In addition, drug trafficking networks extended into both prisons. Anyone suspected of informing on other mules or inmates was subject to violent retributions.

Violence was a culturally meaningful and institutionalised practice in both the men's and women's prisons in which I worked. One inmate in the women's prison was brutally beaten up by guards, guards had sex with female inmates in exchange for food, a guard was assassinated as she left the men's prison and feuds in the men's prison resulted in fights and murders.

I had little experience to inform me about how to interpret these experiences. As fieldnotes show, I increasingly adopted inmate's (self-protective) attitude regarding violence and became increasingly 'ambivalent' about the violence that surrounded me. After one inmate was shot a few cells away from where I had been, I wrote:

There's so much violence in the men's prison that I've become kind of ambivalent. Or perhaps just adopting the attitudes of the prisoners. i.e. 'it's not me. I'm alive. I don't know him. He got killed for a reason so it won't be me next. A kind of logical distancing perhaps. I don't know. Also perhaps I also feel like taking on someone else's trauma [...] is self-indulgent. It's not going to help anyone. Harsh but there you go. Today it wasn't my drama [...].

Adopting prisoners' way of understanding the pervasive violence in prison allowed me to roll with the punches and continue with research. Although I embarked on fieldwork with a goal of being an emotionally engaged researcher, it was clear that prison was not always a safe place in which to try and be engaged in this way. Nonetheless, as a researcher I constantly absorbed my surroundings and information about them. Although I tried to do this solely at an intellectual level, this inevitably affected me personally and emotionally. Even if I had not set out to be an emotionally engaged researcher, it is difficult to remain unaffected by an assassination or murder in one's place of work. Wacquant contends that researching in prisons demands that: 'you've got to anaesthetise yourself to pretend nothing's the matter and keep going' (2002, p. 378).

Problematically though, this numbness took some time to thaw after leaving prison. After one particularly tough day in prison, I wrote:

I came home feeling kind of shaky. I had a shower and tried hard to think and process all that happened to make sense of it all. Instead I ate crisps and played computer games until it got dark and cold and the adrenaline started to wear off.

Outside of the field of prison, my emotional response no longer fitted my surroundings. Dealing with these events (as well not knowing what would come next) resulted in emotional paralysis. It became evident that I could not do more than collect data and try and cope with daily changes and challenges. There was little opportunity (and it was not emotionally possible) to process the majority of experiences and knowledge I was absorbing in prison on a daily basis.

This ‘numbness’ was paradoxical: on one hand Wacquant’s ‘anaesthetic’ approach looks a lot like objectivity. My experience however, shows that it was not a lack of emotion but an overload of emotion. Lastly, my context outside of prison offered me little through which to make sense of the overwhelming level of violence.

Respondents’ violence

Towards the end of fieldwork respondents’ confessions of their experiences of being violent pushed my ability to engage emotionally with them.

Researchers have commented that violence is central to the functioning of the drugs trade (Hobbs and Pearson 2001). Respondents rarely brought up the topic of their own violence with me. When the topic came up it was mentioned in passing and usually between men rather than in response to my questions. As a researcher (and a woman) I was not expected to take part in these discussions and was rarely party to them. However, one day I was party to a frank confession of one respondent’s violence:

Paul told Ryan about killing a guy [...] who owed him for half a kilo (I presume of cocaine). He said that he’d killed him with a baseball bat to the back of the head. I continued to eat my pancake.

Several hours later when I wrote my fieldnotes for the day I was still unable to express any emotion in response to this confession or name what I felt. The shortness of account here is uncharacteristic and reflects how little I had managed to interpret this confession. At the time, I did not know what to think so I continued to eat a pancake Paul had just cooked for me. I quickly became aware that I should not show any ‘negative’ reactions since this might be important data

which I did not want to chance missing. At worst this could be seen as a form of car-crash voyeurism, at best morally questionable.

Towards the end of fieldwork, I decided that I should try and broach the topic of violence in the drug trade in interviews. Although I had anticipated this being emotionally difficult, it was nonetheless hard to deal with, especially since I was emotionally engaged with respondents by this time:

Hearing Ryan talk about violence shocked me. I think I was more affected by the interview than he was. I remember his disclosure of violence [a euphemism. Among other things he talked about putting an electric drill through someone's knee cap] and all the time him sitting there laughing [about it].

I wonder what I looked like. I just took my notes. I came home and cried. I'm not sure why: perhaps from relief that it's nearly all over. Perhaps also because of the sadness of the situation, Frank joked about how he'll be leaving the prison in a box [Frank had a heart condition, the box he refers to is a coffin: he later died in prison]....

I'm just too tired of the emotional strain, of having to pretend that Frank will be OK when I don't know if I really believe he will be. The tension between trying to balance up how I understand that guys that I like and have respect and are good to me are murderers and have a capacity for cruelty and violence that I have no understanding of.

These events forced me to face up to these contradictions between respondents as people that I liked and wanted to understand and the fact that they had committed violent crimes. This point in fieldwork marked the absolute limit of my engagement with respondents. Whilst I achieved 'cognitive empathy' (Kleinman & Copp 1999, p.38) and I could understand the logic of their actions, I could no

longer emotionally engage with respondents in the same way after this.

Reflections on dealing with fieldwork emotions

The emotional challenges that emerge from the particular alchemy of people, place and subject that compose each research project are individual and specific. Furthermore, fieldwork can be unpredictable. As a result the emotions that the researcher may experience can rarely be simply be planned for and coolly managed. The question of how to deal with fieldwork emotions productively is not within the scope of my experience or expertise. However in hindsight there are some things which I could have done better in the field. Looking at these briefly may be useful for post-graduate researchers about to enter or working in the field.

The first thing that may have helped was to recognise that the emotions I experienced in the field were a product of, and were governed by the ‘feeling rules’ of the field (Hochschild 1979). Hochschild notes that ‘feeling rules’ are conventions of feeling which, like social rules, are a product of, and belong to their context. Furthermore, like social rules, ‘feeling rules’ influence how we try to feel and designate which emotions are deemed appropriate or inappropriate in given contexts. Thus, using the intellectual tool of ‘feeling rules’ may be a useful way to ‘map out’ the anatomy of one’s emotions in the field.

After leaving the field I found it helpful to reflect on how the ‘feeling rules’ in prison shaped what I felt and how I could express it. I found this useful since it enabled me to unpack *what* I felt and importantly to understand how my emotions shaped the data I collected as well as how I felt about the data I had collected. This

was a useful tool in gaining sufficient distance to reflect on what prison and fieldwork were like.

Secondly, making space for the ‘self’ away from the ‘feeling rules’ of prison may have been helpful. Although I tried to do this in writing fieldnotes, this was perhaps unsuccessful since fieldnotes lie in the domain of academia’s ‘feeling rules’ (see Young and Lee 1996 for a concise analysis of academia’s ‘feeling rules’). One possibility might be to create and maintain a separate file for personal and emotional aspects of fieldwork. However this may be difficult since the personal and professional are intimately intertwined. Better still would be the opportunity to ‘debrief’ during or after fieldwork with someone unconnected to one’s department or academic life. I met with a counsellor to debrief after I returned from fieldwork and found it helpful.

Conclusion: criticisms of emotional ethnography

In this paper I have attempted to offer an ‘anatomy’ of emotions in fieldwork. Reflecting on my experiences as an emotionally engaged researcher throughout fieldwork has unpacked some of the practicalities and problems of emotional engagement in the field.

At the start of fieldwork I found it easy to engage with respondents. As subjects of penal power and pawns in international anti-drug politics and policies they were the ‘underdogs’ (Becker 1967). As I became more involved in respondents and their lives it became increasingly difficult to disengage myself from the research. Engaging with respondents and prison was demanding – not only professionally but also personally.

Being emotionally engaged with people and place for me entailed embedding myself in the ‘feeling rules’ of prison as a means to emotional survival in the field. I had little experience previously to

inform me about how to make sense of the ‘time bomb’ of violence, deprivation and stress that composed the prison environment.⁷ This was problematic though since it did not help me to process the emotional impact of working in a turbulent and sometimes violent place once I left prison each afternoon. This numbness was compounded by stigma, paranoia and isolation resulting from courtesy stigma and long periods of time in the field. Lastly, as a doctoral researcher, I had a number of fieldwork worries to contend with. I constantly worried that I did not have enough data for my thesis, or that the data I did have was not good enough. I had designed my research project and had fought hard for funding and ethical permission to do it. It was easy to think that I had backed myself into a corner through sheer stubbornness and stupidity. When I finished fieldwork I was burned out. In retrospect it is easy to see that I could have and probably should have done things differently. Nonetheless, that I chose to be an emotionally engaged researcher was a product of my personality, experiences and the aspects of social life that I privilege.

Now ostensibly out of the field for some time, I have had time to reflect on the emotion-work I was doing and the ‘feeling rules’ of prison and academia. I remain critical about the role of engagement in fieldwork and am unsure of what the value of such emotional engagement might be:

I am left though, with some doubt as to whether I am entitled to have felt the emotions and anxieties I have described. Have I just been indulging in a vicarious type of suffering to which I have no legitimate claim? (Stanko 1997, p.84).

⁷ Of course inmates had to deal with this situation (and the prospect of much of the same for many years to come). Next to their experiences, mine seem like trivial self indulgence. After all, unlike them I had chosen to be there.

In contrast to academic dictates which contend that engagement is good, genuine and produces valid data, becoming empathetic with serious professional criminals might not always be possible, personally desirable or even ethically justifiable. Furthermore, working in a violent place tested the limits of my ability to engage, as well as the academic appropriateness of such engagement.

The 'emotional' turn rejects objectivity and distance in favour of emotional engagement. However, my experiences researching in prison demonstrate the 'edge' of emotional engagement. Whilst distancing oneself from the subject of study has fallen out of favour in feminist and ethnographic research on crime (Ferrell & Hamm 1998), my experiences suggest that the principle (rather than the reality) of distance should not be lost. This may be particularly the case when research engages with hidden or stigmatised groups. This is not to say that we should avoid engaging with or conducting research on stigmatised groups, but rather that establishing distance from those we study may be an important tool.

Doing the emotional labour entailed in fieldwork is unavoidable and essential for the researcher in the field. As Whyte eloquently put it:

I [...] had to learn that the fieldworker cannot afford to think only of learning to live with others in the field. He has to continue living with himself (1955, p.317).

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