

Research Emotions in the Field: The View from the Other Side

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Abstract: This article considers the significance of the emotions of the researcher in, and after, the “field”. It draws on fieldwork conducted for this book which constituted my personal “research debut” and the particular issues related to managing emotions faced by first-time researchers are considered below. Firstly, by forming close, trusting relations with respondents in the field, the researcher ceases to be an outside observer and becomes a full subject of the research process with all the emotional commitment that entails. Secondly, emotional engagement in the lives of informants generates problems that accompany the sociologist out of the field, and on their subsequent return to it. Moreover, the post-field situation itself becomes a source of reflection and emotion since revealing one’s feelings publicly means risks misunderstanding by work colleagues since, for many, emotional engagement continues to be understood as signifying a lack of objectivity.

Key words: Fieldwork • Emotions • Research • Reflexivity • Research debut • Emotions

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary sociological debate on research emotions turns on the question of whether to conceal or to seek to understand the role of emotions in the research process. Recent debates within sociology and feminist theory have identified a need for reflexive research and noted the importance of emotion in the researcher’s relationship to the object of research [1: 935] According to Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer [2: 132], “... the research process is not an emotion-free experience” and the recognition and management of such emotions can become important at various stages and in a wide range of contexts of research [2: 133]. Shane Blackman [3: 699] has described the recounting of emotions, not to mention, the revelation of more intimate relations with informants in the “field” as the “hidden” part of ethnographic research. While Blackman [3: 700] understands the burying of “empirical data” in this “hidden ethnography” to be a result of its controversial nature, however, Barter and Renold [4: 100] argue that such data remain hidden rather because, “emotion is deemed to be epistemologically irrelevant”. The “irrelevant” nature of emotion to research is particularly well illustrated by academic debate in contemporary Russian sociology in which “objectivity” is frequently considered as the key criterion for

distinguishing between the reflection and distortion of ‘real facts’. Il’in [5: 85] argues that the maintenance of “distance” between informants and the researcher guarantees that the material gathered will not be “subjective” or distort the “field” results while Semenova [6: 274] maintains that it is essential to adopt the position of outside observer if the researcher is to “conceptualise the actual experience of participants in the events”. Baranov [7: 27], meanwhile, argues that once shared feelings, emotions or intuitions become centre-stage then the individual researcher’s impact on the research increases and the data gathered lose their absolute objectivity. However, Shteinberg [8: 189], in contrast, calls the “objective and distanced position of the researcher” a myth. He argues that maintaining such a distance in the field is difficult and disruptive since “the researcher is unable... to experience the normal human desire to help, [and] support their interlocutor as they recount a tragic story or honestly share their feelings, [and] doubts” [8: 189-190]. However, surely the issue here is less the psychological burden borne by the researcher as they seek to maintain their distance in the field, or are frustrated in their desire to help, than the impossibility of realising this in practice. Concealing one’s emotions and maintaining that emotional control can be preserved in the field are incompatible with the authentic ethnographic

experience. This is, firstly, because, “it demands exceptional effort to distance oneself from one’s own body and maintain one’s distance in the “field” [9: 4]. Moreover, the artificial maintenance of distance can be detrimental to both the researcher and their work; for the “field” quickly stops being an imagined reality and becomes an integral part of the biography of the researcher [10]. Secondly, distance between informants and the researcher cannot be maintained because communication in the “field” is essentially subjective; the researcher cannot “appear” interested, concerned or sympathetic to informants, only “be” so. Thus, the very nature of research in the social sciences presupposes the close interaction of the object and subject and thus all research becomes subjective [11].

While the value of subjective knowledge has long been recognised in Western research, in Russian academic circles the understanding of research as a dialogic process in which the positioning of the sociologist is integral to the understanding of “the field” is relatively rare. According to Abashin [12 :15], subjectivity has either been driven out or discriminated against in Russian academic circles (For an exception to this rule, see the editorial introduction to the journal «Antropologicheskii forum», (2004, no.3) in which the positionality of the researcher is recognised and research is envisaged as a dialogue between researcher and informants). However, even in the West, it is recognised that this reflexive turn involves both power and risk since the sociologist exposes their origins, biography, locality and ‘intellectual bias’ [Bourdieu cited in Blackman 3:700] and thus not everyone is prepared to talk openly about work in the “field”. Emotional openness, on the one hand, allows a researcher to enter a group relatively quickly, develop relationships and participate in group practices but, at the same time, it opens the researcher to the scrutiny of others. This may be particularly difficult for young academics, dependent upon the appreciation of the quality of their data from others more established in the field, but even established sociologists, who accept that emotions are central to the research process, often choose to keep silent rather than risk their reputations. One of the key sites of such “risk”, according to Blackman [3: 700], relates to the “ethical demand, that storyteller and the narrative should be “clean”. The impossibility of fully controlling the degree to which relations between an informant and the researcher can be kept “clean” is illustrated below by my own personal experience.

I had left for the field to study a group of “skinheads” armed with little more than a set of stereotypes about their everyday life and with no expectation that I would feel any fondness for them or that I would, myself, become an object of study. Particularly close relations with one informant developed out of a growing mutual interest in and fascination with not only our work together but each other personally. Our closeness became evident therefore not only in displays of kindness in the “field” - providing a certain security and helping access additional respondents - but in some painfully honest commentaries on me as a person and a sociologist. Such situations naturally increase the emotional stress of the field; you begin to question your own competence. You cease to relate to the respondent as merely a source of information and perceive him as somebody close to you, to whom you bear your soul and, in so doing, become emotionally vulnerable. Sociological reflection is all that keeps the researcher’s sense of self intact. A range of different feelings experienced by the sociologist together with the unpredictability of events transforms the researcher into one of the key subjects of ‘the field’. In this way , as Omel’chenko [13:250] writes, “...the researcher - his/her professional skills, abilities, knowledges as well as their body with its feelings and emotions, physical and mental parameters and abilities, is transformed into a kind of instrument with whose help the research is conducted”. In this process, the researcher becomes the most “accessible and open informant” [5: 95] and, if accompanied by the necessary reflexivity - rooted in emotional labour - this transformation opens new possibilities for understanding social reality.

Reflexivity and the Research Debut: The fieldwork described in this book was my first experience of research in the field and a sense of fear and discomfort about conducting research into xenophobia seemed natural as I prepared for the field. In fact, however, I was less worried about what it meant to try to understand the everyday practices of people who consider themselves “skinheads” than I was about not messing up. Deep down I was thinking mostly about getting the research right, fulfilling the task set and being successful in the “field” [see also Chikadze 14:80]. At that time I didn’t realise that rising to the challenges of the project would mean not simply living in two worlds - my own and theirs - but taking certain research risks including emotional ones.

Prior to entering the field my main concern was that I might not find sufficient points of contact with people in the group and that, as a result, the fieldwork would fail and the faith my colleagues had in me would prove unwarranted. I thought the key to success was simply generating enough empirical material so, before leaving for the field, I tried to imagine a strategy for behaving within the group. I never imagined at that point that such “games” were impossible in ethnographic observation; the life you lead is a full, normal life, complete with its routine events, and the researcher lives it with no immunity to the emotional experiences it brings [3: 120]. Yet, it is not your life but some other life; this is an unavoidable risk you run when undertaking participant observation and one that needs to be reflected on. The desire to ‘see the world through the eyes of the respondent, in his terms, through the prism of specific interests, passions, prejudices, illusions, hopes’ [5] requires certain sociological skills. It requires making decisions in critical situations, following your intuition, being open to and ready for criticism and irony and being genuinely interested in understanding the lives of other people. Without emotional engagement none of this is possible. However, researchers need to reflect, question themselves, throughout the whole research process [1:133] and this itself is part of the emotional labour of the field. Emotional labour is connected not only with building communication with informants but also with diary writing when deep reflection takes place. The writing of a diary - during which your feelings and fears of the “field” give way to irritation, personal concerns for absent friends and family - presents a moral dilemma for the researcher. The degree of openness with which one writes the diary is a matter of personal choice but I was not conscious immediately of the fact that I was effectively writing a personal diary for research purposes; the choice about whether to describe everything or not thus only occurred later. During my first period of research in Vorkuta I wrote my diary with the maximum openness, describing and analysing everything we usually consider to be private. I didn’t stop to think that a research diary is essentially a public work and that sooner or later others would read it. Some researchers have resolved this by writing two diaries: one for public consumption and another for themselves. In other words, the researcher themselves decides what has academic value and what is better not to bring into the public arena. It is the individual personality of the sociologist that determines

whether to reveal what is usually hidden and thus ‘cross emotional borders in fieldwork’ [3: 701] or to play safe and not risk their reputation.

A turning point for me in coming to this realisation occurred during the first fieldwork in Vorkuta when one of the leaders of the group, whilst discussing ethnicity, turned to me and said that, “My philosophy doesn’t permit me to talk with you”. He was referring to my non-Russian ethnic background and went on to call me “virtually black”. I had come to Vorkuta to study xenophobic attitudes among young people in relation to some mythical person with “incorrect ethnicity” never imagining that I would become that person, that I would be one of those at which intolerance was directed. Experiencing this feeling was, in equal measure, unexpected, painful and instructive. It demonstrated, as Brannen [15] notes, that protection is necessary not only for the respondent but the interviewer as well.

Field experience taught me to be more sensitive to others, to learn not only to listen but to hear people. Personal experiences that grew out of feeling attracted, confused and hurt were additional important results of my “research debut”. The understanding that you yourself become part of the “field” and that the everyday life that surrounds you influences you and that you influence those you are studying, comes during the process of reflection. In my opinion, attempting not only to study and describe accurately what is happening, but to engage emotionally, allows the researcher to render the results of their ethnographic research closer to reality.

CONCLUSION

Two broad positions are evident in contemporary sociological discussion of emotions in research. The first recognises research experiences in the field to be significant for understanding the world studied and emphasises the necessity of publicly recognising this fact. The second suggests that emotions play an ambiguous role in the research process, impacting on the research results.

Whether one is prepared for these risks or not, however, the reality is that the researcher is only able to maintain an outside, “objective” position until the point at which they are drawn into the field situation [16: 131]. Once that engagement takes place, moreover, its successful management is achieved not by seeking to re-establish distance in relation to the “objects” of

research but by conducting emotional labour aimed at analysing one's own actions, feelings and relationships with informants. Only through the critical analysis of one's own actions, including research emotions, is it possible to come close to understanding the life trajectories and events that play out in the "field"; as Shchepanskaia [16: 132] puts it, "strong objectivity demands strong reflexivity".

It is not only the lives of informants that are changed by the researcher's presence in "the field" but the researcher is profoundly influenced by their informants; it is virtually impossible to "enter and leave a research environment with all pre-existing values unchallenged or unchanged" [17: 97-98]. The Vorkuta field undoubtedly allowed me to see myself differently and understand much that was not only around me but inside me, triggering deeply personal changes in my understanding and perception of love, trust and intimacy and causing me to act in a previously uncharacteristically decisive manner [18: 210]. Since there are no strict "rules of engagement" in the field and emotional shock and stress are experienced not only by informants but by the researcher as well, work in the field requires constant reflection on one's own presence in the field. The main aim of such reflection is, of course, to ensure "no harm" is done to informants. However, if we are aware that emotions are an integral part of our field work, then by working with emotions in the field - by discussing personal experiences with other sociologists, building trusting relations with informants, keeping diaries and engaging in profound reflection - it is possible to bring emotionally sensitive knowledge into academic circles [1: 135] and in this way broaden the capacities of qualitative methodology.

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