The Role of the Anthropologist's Emotions in Constructing an Honest Field

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I grip the steering wheel tightly, navigating the mountainous roads. Our van screeches as I push hard on the accelerator, but it doesn't muffle out the phone ringing.

'Sí?' my partner answers. I know from his tone that the news is bad. As we feared, his grandmother has just passed away. Our rush was not enough to get him home in time to say goodbye. The feeling of guilt spreads across my stomach.

I'm at the beginning of my doctoral fieldwork, researching dementia and elder care experience in Andalusia. I'm exploring the strong family care networks this region is known for. My partner is Andalusian, and his grandmother was part of the inspiration for the research. I was interested in how, like many older Andalusians, she rotated her days between her children's homes. Her family believe this shared care helped her live well with dementia until the age of ninety-seven.

I'd been staying with my partner's family whilst conducting various scoping trips, visiting dementia day centres throughout Andalusia, seeking a suitable field site. My partner and I hesitated over this last trip, as his grandmother had been unwell, but thinking that she had improved, we decided to go. Then just after leaving a meeting with a day centre, we heard that her health was deteriorating rapidly, so we began the three-hour drive home, but didn't make it back in time.

Days later, writing field notes about the trip, I found myself drawn back to where we'd been when we received the call. The town fulfilled the research criteria: a small population; far from the tourist-filled coastline; a high elderly population; and a day centre willing to participate. Yet despite other towns meeting these criteria, I leaned towards this one. The guilt of the trip causing my partner to miss his grandmother's death influenced me to choose this town as the main field site as this would mean he had not missed her death in vain. My partner, who was accompanying me on fieldwork, said that choosing this place seemed somehow to honour his grandmother.

Could I claim to have made a purely scientific assessment of an appropriate field site in choosing this town? Or were my emotions invalidating the research process? Should the anthropologist's personal life really influence methodological decision-making? Taking this experience as an example, I reflect on these types of dilemmas that anthropologists find themselves facing in the everyday messiness that makes up ethnographic fieldwork.

Ethnography is about 'being there', yet the 'there' of 'being there' no longer relates to a concrete place but rather to an abstract 'field' of the phenomena studied. Anthropology's early conceptualization of the 'field' has been criticized as a 'taken-for-granted space in which an "Other" culture…lies waiting to be observed' (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 2). The concept has hence been transformed into an understanding of the 'field' as something anthropologists actively 'construct' themselves (Coleman and von Hellerman 2012), merging aspects of personal and professional fieldwork (Amit 2000: 3). However, this blurring of research with personal life raises certain questions around validity. If the field is no longer considered a concrete place, investigated objectively, how do we assess a valid field site? Rigid validity criteria designed for quantitative research have been critiqued for 'kill[ing] the spirit of qualitative work' (Sandelowski 1993: 2). Instead, ethnography's validity, by approaching the field as constructed, suggests a need to demonstrate how the anthropologist's own experiences influence methodological decision-making.

Unlike other disciplines, where familiarity between the researcher and the subject are considered an impediment to validity, anthropology considers intimacy 'a fundamental medium of investigation' (Amit 2000: 3). Moser has suggested that qualitative researchers engage in fieldwork suitable to their personality and interests, facilitating emotional connection with informants (Moser 2008). Having previously lived in and having a partner from Andalusia gives me an emotional connection to the research context. It was during my

time living there that I noticed an approach to elder care that appeared different from what I had experienced working as an occupational therapist with older adults in London. This pre-interest, with personal regional links gives me a closeness to the field. This has aided me not just practically in finding informants more easily through the use of pre-established regional social networks, but also through an emotional connection and investment in local culture. Such emotions filter into ethnographic engagement, and this closeness to the phenomena can facilitate productive questions and curiosities.

Including the anthropologists' own experiences can thus enhance validity by demonstrating how emotions influence inquiry. The use of diaries during fieldwork to reflect on how emotions affect one's research can reveal the 'often hidden struggles in the production of knowledge' (Punch 2012: 87). Anthropologists have utilized evocative descriptions of personal experiences to show how they generated understandings of phenomena. Rosaldo described how he only fully understood the rage of his Ilongot informants, who severed heads to deal with grief, when he became bereaved himself. He criticized ethnography for 'wiping away the tears and ignoring the tantrums' in excluding the anthropologist's own emotions, suggesting that the inclusion of personal experience can provide a vehicle to understanding (Rosaldo 1989: 162). Meanwhile, Ellis' piece about her brother's death makes use of emotional recall to generate cultural insights into grief and kinship. She argues for 'feeling and participatory experience as dimensions of knowing' (Ellis 1993: 726). The inclusion of anthropologists' own personal experiences and emotions can thus help us to better understand the range of processes involved in knowledge production, and through this transparency validity can be enhanced.

The personal experience of my partner's grandmother's death thus could be reflected on to convey its impact on the research process and knowledge production. Guilt affected the decision to select the town as the primary field site, as my partner and I felt emotionally connected to the place, as if by basing the research there we had not missed her death without reason and were honouring her memory. Yet this guilt also led to deeper empathy with informants as I felt an emotional connection to the phenomena of kinship elder care. Months later, discussing kinship elder care with informant family caregivers, the notion of guilt kept emerging in conversations. Informants spoke of intense guilt about getting on with their lives and not being constantly with an elderly dependent family member. One informant described feeling intense guilt around her mother's care, recalling how she had gone out with friends and returned home to find her elderly mother lying on the floor with a broken hip. The guilt, she said, came from prioritizing her own needs over her mother's. Her words resonated with me as the experience of causing my partner to miss his grandmother's death for my own academic ambitions made me feel intense guilt for placing my needs over those of my partner and his family. I felt an empathy towards informants, which led me to further scrutinize and explore my own emotions that in turn prompted new research interests.

Yet, I was very conscious of not wanting to transplant my emotions onto informants. Their guilt was absolutely not my guilt. As Beatty states, 'we cannot rely on our own emotions for insights into the emotions of people living very different lives' (2010: 432). In the case of my partner's grandmother, I was not immediate family; I had only known her for five years and was never her main caregiver. My own emotional experience of her death was entirely different from that of my partner or her children. Making any comparison between my experience and theirs could be deemed invalid and unethical. However, I am not arguing that my emotions afforded me an enhanced understanding of informants; rather, my own emotional experience allowed me to uncover new lines of inquiry. My partner's grandmother's death, by making me participatorily experience the emotional force of guilt, led me to delve into my own guilt and ask questions about it, asking myself what it was, why it was there, and where it had come from. I questioned whether my guilt resulted from an emotional indebtedness to my partner's family. They had welcomed me into their family, despite linguistic and cultural hurdles, and they had shown me warmth and care. By not being there and keeping their son from them when they needed emotional support, had I left this debt unrepaid? Was emotional debt something children felt in relation to their elderly parent's care? Delamont has distinguished between using reflexivity purely autobiographically and using the self in relation to research (2009: 60). Reflecting on my own emotions led me to ask myself questions that facilitated useful lines of inquiry with informants. Outlining emotions and the steps of thinking they cause can thus enhance the transparency of knowledge production, which strengthens validity in qualitative research.

Emotional experiences shape the self we bring to the field and the questions we ask. The inclusion of the anthropologist's emotions in ethnography can make more visible the complex processes that influence inquiry and lead to knowledge production, enhancing validity through greater transparency. Just as weather transforms landscapes – rain turns grass to mud, wind shakes leaves off trees – so our emotions affect the formation of the ethnographic 'field' we construct. Including emotional experiences in our research can uncover the processes at play in knowledge production, validifying ethnographic research by constructing an honest field.

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