Doing fieldwork and the right not to be understood

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Abstract

This article looks at the concept and practice of reflexivity. It does so by drawing on Glissant's 'right to opacity' for the 'other', putting it into an ethically important plane. Based upon the author's experience conducting fieldwork in an immigrant squat, the article points to the central part opacity plays in the deployment of reflexivity and concludes by indicating that the 'right to opacity' helps us approach what constitutes ethical reflexivity in forced migration studies.

Introduction

In this article, I build on Édouard Glissant's advocacy of the 'right to opacity' (2010) in discussing research ethics in ethnographic fieldwork broadly and in relation to (forced) migration studies in particular. Recognising the 'right to opacity' allows us to act in a situation-appropriate manner: to seek a 'way of seeing' (Wolcott, 1999) that accepts the 'Other's opacity' (Glissant, 2010). Most importantly, perhaps, it might help to think about our motives for certain actions in the field and how these may hold potential harms to others. Drawing on my own fieldwork, I discuss how Glissant's 'right to opacity' plays a part in reflexivity literature and its ethical dimension.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the research conducted in an immigrant squat in Turin. The second section outlines Glissant's 'right to opacity' in regard to his critique of transparency. The third section focuses on the role of emotions and fieldwork. The final section discusses how Glissant's 'right to opacity' contributes to a reflexive approach by focusing on research based on fieldwork in forced migration studies. It is important to keep in mind that doing fieldwork requires thoughtful engagement and continuous critical reflection on our behaviour and presence in the field, particularly when the sites we enter are themselves traumatised and politically fraught. Glissant's 'right to opacity' offers a new way of thinking about and doing fieldwork from a reflexivity standpoint, and has important implications for data collection.

(Re)inventing home in exile

It is possible to picture what a vibrant place the former Turin Olympic village had been during the weeks of the 2006 Winter Games. After the event, however, parts of the buildings were abandoned for years. Immigrants squatted these empty buildings after a change in policy leading to the closure of accommodation facilities for refugees and asylum-seekers fleeing from the Libyan civil war in 2013. This immigrant squat, assisted by a solidarity-based movement, served as a temporary shelter known as 'Ex-Moi Occupation'. Many of the squatters, but not all, were framed as 'undocumented', 'unauthorised', 'without status' or 'unlawfully present' by the state-centred logics of bureaucratic distinctions and labels. In this research, the goal was to understand better the tie between displacement and search for home in exile, looking at the dialectic that emerges from the shelter (dwelling) and its political meaning content.

The research explored the psycho-social significance of domestic space for those (forced) on the move and who are precariously housed. By focusing on domesticity space in informal settlements as part of migratory experience, I had the chance to research, record, and photograph the diverse reality of informal housing in exile. The 'undocumented' immigrant's own search for home became a way to discuss urban politics that transcends the binary citizen/non-citizen divide in their struggles for housing rights.

Over months of ethnographic fieldwork, I connected with immigrant-squatters, activists, and residents, and elaborated ground-level observations about the daily life of immigrants' squatting movements within deteriorated buildings. Much recent research has been done on migration, displacement, and home (Belloni, 2019; Boccagni and Brighenti, 2017; Godin, 2017), but my research illuminated a less-discussed topic: undocumented immigrants' struggles for home and informal housing organising experiences. The immersion in the field was instrumental to unpack the diversity of the notions of house, home, and household in exile. Such lived experience with interlocutors involved not only a great intellectual effort but also an intense emotional engagement.

It was a challenging position to document immigrants' homemaking practices and do justice to the sense of intimacy one gains by entering people's domestic life, particularly at inopportune or upsetting moments. We frame aspects of people's life-worlds into visible objects of analysis. We portray the study of the social world from our participant-observer standpoint. Theoretically, we want to make sense of the fieldwork experience. This, however, has emotional implications. In my case, the fieldwork meant to access the domain of intimacy and privacy and squatters' ways of behaving at home.

Glissant's 'right to opacity'

In broad terms, Britton argues that Glissant's 'right to opacity' "is above all an ethical value and a political right" (1999, p.25). She suggests that Glissant's 'right to opacity' responds to 'transparence everywhere' and how the process of 'understanding people' implies in a 'reductive transparency' of the other. In Glissant's words:

> "If we examine the process of "understanding" people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgements. I have to reduce." (2010, pp.189–190)

We learn from Glissant's 'right to opacity' to challenge the 'transparence everywhere', which can bring harm to interlocutors; that in ethnography, 'being there' (Geertz, 1988) and 'seeing' the social behavior of others (Wolcott, 1999) is an essential part of our work, but this also requires accepting the 'Other's opacity' (Glissant, 2010). Glissant's 'right to opacity' helps us to establish a more respectful engagement with our interlocutors. In this respect, it recognises the power imbalance between researcher and interlocutors in soliciting/collecting/gathering data.

Britton discusses Glissant's critique of transparency and notes, "the inequality and lack of reciprocity of the relation, in which those who are seen cannot themselves "see" those who see them" (1999, p.23). For Britton, Glissant's transparency introduces an epistemic practice based on hierarchical power relations reproducing inequality and control over the otherness (1999). While in the 'field', I expected transparency from those who I was researching. That affected not only them, but also me. Experiencing a sense of awkwardness, I wondered to what extent researchers' presence itself could be invasive. The disappointment that I felt with the 'lack of reciprocity' with the interlocutors led me to explore the roles of emotions in the field, specifically the emotional background of the researcher's presence.

Most of the people I saw and eventually came into contact with during fieldwork did not understand my position fully. I witnessed aspects of their homemaking practices, for instance, housework, cooking, relaxing, or dining. However, I unintentionally witnessed unintended aspects of daily life, such as arguments, conflicts, and forms of intimacy. The researcher's emotional experience in the field shapes decision-making, especially in unplanned situations and encounters. We think and make sense of experiencing 'Otherness' through theoretical constructs in which social meanings are generated and reproduced. There is, also, a reflexive labour that informs fieldworkers in their ethical repertoire for acting in a situation-appropriate manner.

Reflexivity sheds light on this point. The term itself has at least two key definitions: first, 'reflexivity' signifies a kind of method or mode of analysis that incorporates the question of subjectivity in theoretical and research practice, broadly construed in the sociology of knowledge (Lumsden, 2019; Joy, 2017); and second, 'reflexivity' refers to a researcher's self-identification and how this influences their research topics, contexts, and relationships with their research participants (Lichterman, 2017; Gray, 2008; Wolff-Michael and Breuer, 2003). Reflexivity is also relevant to ethical issues as they manifest in the fieldwork. Fieldworkers need to think carefully about 'doing no harm' for both the researcher and his or her subjects. This means proactively prioritising the dignity, safety, and well-being of participants, including their privacy. I suggest the assumption of the priority of our research interests over people's privacy is problematic. I outline an ethical reflexive standpoint, therefore, which should never be restricted to the epistemological nature of subjectivity and positionality in knowledge production and its institutions, but can be seen as an opportunity to think about emotionally charged ethical issues in the research field.

Although I was seeking to inform the research with data from the field, my presence in the immigrants' domestic space gave me access to aspects of people's lives and experiences beyond my research subject. It was fascinating to see how dwelling in places, spaces, and buildings is both materially and socially organised but also forms a web of intimacy and privacy that regulates people's daily life. But at a certain point, my daily presence in the field seemed unnecessary, unjustified, and therefore I felt out of place. The 'ethnographic gaze' over the interior life of the immigrant squatting appeared potentially harmful to them, somewhat uncomfortable. The background of emotions while in the field played an important part in my reflexive insight into the dynamics between the researcher and the researched.

Britton explains that Glissant's 'right to opacity' "is a right not to be understood" (1999, p.19). Ethical reflexivity through the lens of Glissant's 'right to opacity' tells us how harmful our insistence can be when acting in the name of transparency. The requirement for transparency frames Otherness and the Other's difference merely as an object of knowledge under universalising and reductive humanism (Glissant, 2010). Britton's (1999) reading of Glissant's work is that the Other's opacity to the researcher is a 'form and active strategy of resistance'. She argues that Glissant's 'right to opacity' establishes "the principle of nonunderstanding to understanding of oneself" (Britton, 1999, p.21). I suggest we might benefit from emotions such as embarrassment, anger, or fear, in that they create awareness and preparedness for the research field and its emotional, trivial, habitual, and ordinary dimensions.

Emotions from the field

To challenge the silencing of immigrants' experiences of domestic space, I fleshed out the interplay of displacement and resistance. Of interest was how immigrants' search for home is actively envisioned, handled, and renewed by political solidarity within immigrant squatters' movements. For this reason, the challenge was to have a better understanding of the domestic space in its interpellation of materiality, space, and politics that, also, overlap with aspects of privacy, routine, intimacy, and friendship. The domestic space in the immigrant squat illustrates how people (forced) on the move find shelter in many multifaceted forms and distinct ways that become integrated into the materiality of the shelters themselves. People experiencing housing precarity use a wide range of coping strategies to deal with the lack of formal assistance as well as issues of abuse, violence, and exclusion, where safety issues and privacy may be difficult to establish.

As I spent more time with immigrant squatters, I integrated myself into part of their ordinary activities. With an abiding interest in how undocumented people on the move cope with the lack of adequate housing, my aim was to analyse the role of the domestic space of informal settlements in (forced) migration contexts. What I did was to make sure that immigrants' experience of domesticity was visible for analysis. I asked to see personal things, taking photos of domestic spaces and notes of events in the squat. On the one hand, the domestic space offers a meaningful channel for understanding cultures, peoples, and agency, but on the other hand, it reveals aspects of privacy in one's living space.

It is important to note that documenting immigrants' homemaking practices was touching me. As noted by Davies and Spencer (2009), researcher subjectivity and emotions play a relevant part in the field. The fieldwork experience evokes certain emotions and this has implications for method and theory-making (Davies and Spencer, 2009). The fieldwork as a lived experience allows us to observe and be observed, to ask and be asked. For Fabian, fieldwork is a praxis of ethnographic encounters, so that we can frame the "ethnographic inquiry as re-cognition, as cognizing and remembering" (2014, p.176). Furthermore, he notes that "[a]s ethnographers we experience others as our interlocutors; to experience them as strangers is not a logical, psychological, and certainly not a political requirement of ethnography" (Fabian, 2014, p.178).

The point to be made here is that research based on fieldwork "is a participant observation, in which researchers immerse themselves into the life-worlds of the persons, objects, and communities they study (with)" (Thajib, Dinkelaker and Stodulka, 2019, p.9). Here, I underline the need for navigating emotional dimensions in doing fieldwork, so that "[s]hifting emotions, oscillating feelings, and fluctuating ethical and moral viewpoints emerging from multiple role conflicts, call into question the anthropologist's positionality before, during, and after fieldwork regarding informants, participants, and readers" (Brocco and Rutert, 2019, p.24). Collecting data in the field has ethical implications. For Caplan, ethics in anthropology involve politics of knowledge and tell us about the 'relations between anthropologists and the subjects of their study and the responsibilities of anthropologists towards informants and others' (2003, p.27).

Consent is not enough to obviate the risk of witnessing intimate aspects of people's lives that are not the research focus. As my fieldwork progressed, I felt uneasy with people's reaction to my presence. The further I got into their everyday life, the more I understood that my gaze over their routines of cooking, cleaning, arguing, caring, and so on, could also be read as some threat. Also, I realised that asking questions may be invasive, resulting in embarrassment in socially awkward situations. That is to say, the researcher's presence in the field may be perceived as a source of stress, making people become upset, worried, offended, or ashamed of something.

During the first months in the squat, I realised how raw and intimate questions of home-related feelings and homemaking practices may be. I found myself surrounded by people who have experience of displacement and loss that I did not understand fully. I continued to have contact with some members of the squat and went back to them later to do interviews. The feeling of 'social awkwardness' in doing fieldwork in domestic spaces was, in part, because of the physical and emotional closeness to people's ordinary life under extreme precarity without giving back any more practical outcome of my presence. I imagined myself through their eyes and wondered about the point of my 'being there' in their domestic space. That feeling of 'social awkwardness' made me think how 'being researched' could be an uneasy situation, especially in environments of deeply entrenched inequalities. That leads us to the question of what is being made visible, and for whom.

Ethical value and political right

Ethnographic settings are multifaceted and if our research is concerned with 'hard-to-reach populations' – the most vulnerable and marginalised groups who lack access to essential rights and services such as health, education, and sanitation – it is essential to have an appreciation of the limits regarding the Other's privacy and intimacy. While in the field, we often interact with people of all walks of life and cultural backgrounds in politically and economically deprived contexts. To act on the 'right to opacity' may be to engage with the encounter by developing a conscious awareness of the ethical issues around privacy and confidentiality, and the emotional implications of accessing the interior social life of those in the field. As fieldworkers, our knowing draws on the interactional encounter between the researcher's self and others' selves. Glissant's 'right to opacity' is fundamental to ethnographic fieldwork that takes seriously reflexivity. The right not to be understood, as noted by Britton (1999), offers a reflexive standpoint on how the emotional and the political mutually constitute fieldwork experiences. That it is not about whether or not a researcher gets data, rather it is about the power dynamic within which ethnographic encounters occur in the field site.

My own experiences resonated with these reflections, highlighting that we need not resist emotions to tame our attention. Affectivity and emotions are in their own right part of how we learn about the research setting and interact with interlocutors. Emotional states alert us to reflect upon the multiple and fluid dimensions of a researcher's presence in the field. We learn in the field when to listen, what to look for and how to negotiate with our emotions. At stake is to ask if our 'being there' is exposing someone's opacity. There are a range of obscure and incomprehensible issues in the research setting. Nothing is worse than involuntarily and indirectly causing harm to our interlocutors. The point is to respect and sustain the webs of trust and opacity with which we interact with our interlocutors while in the field. To act on the 'right to opacity' helps us draw this line of respect.

Fieldwork is made of interactions and relies on interpersonal relationships. Doing fieldwork is both an intersubjective and embodied experience of thinking-feeling-interacting. The ethical complexities that emerge in the settings where research is being conducted are key concerns for reflexivity. The researcher's emotional experience through the lens of ethical reflexivity matters in defining what may be documented, analysed, and (not) understood. As fieldworkers, it is important to stand up for others' opacity, both as a right to our interlocutors and as an ethical standpoint. We would do well to go back to Glissant, to his vision of opacity as an act of resistance. Doing this is essential for a reflexive approach to understanding the field and its ethical implications at different stages of the fieldwork journey.

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