The intimate insider

Dr Elizabeth Newman, Research Fellow, Health and Social Care, University of Essex, UK,
elizabeth.newmanearl@essex.ac.uk

Introduction

Standing in the supermarket queue in the overseas garrison where I was conducting my fieldwork, I saw someone who I felt intimately connected too. I know the idiosyncrasies of her marriage, the frustrations she has towards her husband's employer and the wider military institution, her thoughts on the community of women that she lives among. Yet while I smiled at her, she looked through me carrying on with her shopping. Whilst this ignoring of me takes me by surprise it is wholly understandable. This woman is not my friend, she does not share with me these things on a familial level. She shared them with me in my role as 'researcher'. The intimacy is completely one-sided as I have sat alone, with her voice in my ears, transcribing her interview. I feel intimately connected to this woman, but the boundaries of that connection must remain forever ringfenced and protected so as not trespass on her trust and compliance in my field of study.

Study Background

In 2015 I commenced a PhD in Sociology and Critical Military Studies exploring the impact moving overseas with a British army battalion poses to military wives. This included a six month 'field work' period interviewing these women, using their lived experience as my qualitative primary data to address my research questions. Yet, in reality, not only was I researching this community of women, I lived amongst them as a newly married army wife. Within the physical boundaries of this garrison I had a triumvirate position. I worked for a local charity in a welfare support capacity maintaining a visible presence within the wives' community. I had recently married a senior enlisted soldier with a clearly demarcated position within the battalion hierarchy at a particular social level. Finally, I was denoted as an academic researcher keen to explore the realities of this unique environment asking these women to explore their own reality of life behind the garrison wire. These positions coalesced in me, marking me both as an intimate insider (Taylor, 2011) yet, I was marked inherently as an outsider due to my researcher role and my late entrance into army wifehood.

Gaining ethical approval to conduct my research required seeking various permissions alongside my university's ethics board. The military itself had to be comfortable that I was not seeking out state secrets plus ensuring the women for whom they had ultimate responsibility, whilst overseas, were safeguarded if they participated in my research. A clear delineation was demanded between my welfare support capacity and my involvement as a researcher. Safeguarding was ensured through not interviewing any 'case' families with whom I worked. On paper these seemed eminently practical and achievable yet, the reality of the six months of fieldwork was a constant blurring between positions that I remained wholly cognisant of, requiring management both in my approach to the interviewees and in the reflexive analytical stage.

Discussion

The space of the interview had to be considered due to the uniqueness of my position. To some I was a completely new entity, never having met me before professionally or socially. For others, their husbands worked under my husband and I had the baggage of his rank and reputation to consider. A small minority I knew intimately, our friendships needed accommodating within the spaces of the interview. For all, I sought to examine their personal story, their intimacies, their responses to the realities of such a unique and militarily constituted way of life. All were defined as army wives, categorised by the rank and role their husbands performed within the institution, living a form of half-life, existing outside of the UK and outside of the wider civilian community of the overseas location. Each interviewee had unique responses to her ongoing positionality and her reactions to me as an insider, yet inherently an outsider, choosing to examine the reality of the quotidian of this community of army wives.

In negotiating the "ethical quandaries" (Stacey, 1996; Taylor, 2011) of conducting insider research, one clear advantage presented itself. Primarily, I understood the "we-talk" (Tedlock, 1991), the language of the studied community which stands as a gateway to belonging, that within this militarised environment results in non-serving wives peppering their speech with phraseology and acronyms that to outsiders sounds jargonistic and impenetrable. Such 'we-talk' encouraged a commonality within the interview revealing my insider credentials, moving beyond researcher into that of army wife. Through this shared language came the shared experience of

army wifehood encouraging a safe space within which to share our mutual experiences. We could lay bare our own struggles and frustrations, removing the outsider/insider dynamic that Oakley (1981), Finch (1984), Skeggs (1994), Reissman (1987) and Kelly et al. (1994) strongly advocated. These eminent ethnographers encourage the messy world of feminist ethnography, allow the interview to be a place of equals, engendering a "greater openness on the part of the participants" (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010, p.4). This intimate space of the interview revealed my vulnerability, my experienced subordinated position within and alongside my military marriage, the rich seam of intimate revelation that the participants shared, would not have been so easily proffered otherwise.

However, in seeking an ethical 'insider' methodological approach, the dearth of academic discourse on the intimate insider became apparent. Taylor (2011) and Greene (2014) independently reflect on this positionality, powerfully arguing for the value that such a position within research holds. Yet they caution the risks that the intimate researcher must negotiate. A key area of concern in their work and in wider academia is that of subjectivity. It is argued that the intimate insider's subjectivity is inherently biased (Workman, 2007; Greene, 2014, p.5), which in turn challenges the objective nature of the work, diminishing its validity and increasing the likelihood of compromising the researcher's ability to "engage critically with the data" (Greene, 2014, p.5). Greene advises that the "researchers' subjectivity must be open to intensive scrutiny and challenged on an ongoing basis" (2014, p.9; Van Heugten, 2004, p.208), because to be an intimate insider does not automatically guarantee "an absolute or correct way of seeing and/or reading the culture under investigation" (Taylor, 2011, p.6).

My own subjectivity and positioning needed acknowledging and reflection, as it is fundamental to be reflexive of one's own baggage (Clarke, 2006) when participating in the interview dyad. My field diary became a source of reflection and introspection as I grappled with the world I was learning about and the realities that some of these women faced. Whilst not crying with the interviewees, I noted my distress in my diary from listening to their secrets, commenting that I was a reluctant secret keeper (Newman-Earl, 2020, p.103) and that my desire to leave the community felt palpable. I struggled to negotiate the boundaries between academic, professional and wife, while the women's words were constantly rebounding in my head. At points I wanted to become an activist, wanting them to rise up and question the conditions of their oppression which is cautioned against in the feminist researcher literature (Kelly et al., 1994, p.37). However, to ensure my analysis was academically sound and viable for demonstrating the realities of army wives' experiences of their time overseas to the chain of command, the research had to be far bigger than the immediacy of my own reactions.

My research had to explicitly reveal their reality and not be perceived as a diatribe against the military overseers. It needed to reflect the strength this community of women consistently displayed in their peripatetic and often uncertain lives, and required privileging their voices, providing them with a platform to tell simply yet powerfully their own story. In doing so they were placed 'centre stage', a position within this environment they had never been granted before and this was achieved because they entrusted their stories to me. They did not deserve that I construct a narrative which placed them as nothing more than the subordinate sub-clause within their army marriage. Instead I needed to examine and analyse their achievements, their desires, their hopes alongside their positionality, not defining them as a group of women that needed to be spoken for. In following the flag and being seen as trailing wives, they must be acknowledged for the women that they are, supporting their soldier husbands, raising their children, often on their own for significant periods of time, making friends and surviving in a community of women that has minimal commonality – that of being army wives.

Conclusion

The role of intimate insider is a unique positionality. For those seeking to record the experiences of a community from this position, it must be used wisely and honestly and not to distort. The privilege of conducting such fieldwork demonstrates the underlying value that ethnography provides to those seeking to uncover the hidden stories within our communities. It demonstrates the fundamental requirement of listening with open ears to the stories being shared, of not constructing analysis based on the baggage we bring with us into the interview. The baggage of our own stories must be acknowledged and be allowed a seat at the table, yet if the research is not to reflect only the position and experiences of the researcher then it must, as far as possible, remain an observer and not dominate the voice of those we seek to hear.

References

Clarke, S. (2006) Theory and Practice: Psychoanalytic Sociology as Psycho-Social Studies, *Sociology,* 40(6), 1153-1169.

Finch, J. (1984) It's great having someone to talk to: the ethics and politics of interviewing women, in Bell, C. and Roberts, H. (eds.) *Social researching: politics, problems, practice*. London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 70-87.

Greene, M.J. (2014) On the Inside Looking In: Methodological Insights and Challenges in Conducting Qualitative Insider Research, *The Qualitative Report*, 1-13.

Kelly, L., Burton, S., and Regan, L. (1994) Researching Women's Lives or Studying Women's Oppression? Reflections on What Constitues Feminist Research, in Maynard, M. and Purvis J. *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor & Francis, 27-48.

Newman-Earl, E. (2020) *Patch Life: Army Wives Behind the Wire.* Colchester: Unviersity of Essex. Retrieved from **http://repository.essex.ac.uk/26753/**

Oakley, A. (1981) Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms, in Roberts, H. (ed.) *Doing Feminist Research*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 24-35.

Reissman, C.K. (1987) When Gender is Not Enough: Women Interviewing Women, *Gender and Society*, 1(2), 172-207.

Ryan-Flood, R. and Gill, R. (2010). Introduction, in Ryan-Flood, R. and Gill R. (eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1-12.

Skeggs, B. (1994). Situating the Production of Feminist Ethnography, in Maynard, M. and Purvis J. *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor & Francis, 72-93.

Stacey, J. (1996). Can There be a Feminist Ethnography? in Gottfried H. (ed.) *Feminism and Social Change: Bridging Theory and Practice*. Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 88-101.

Taylor, J. (2011) The Intimate Insider; negotiating the ethics of friendship while doing insider research, *Qualitative Research*, 11(1), 03-22.

Tedlock, B. (1991) Participant Observation to the Observation of Participation: The Emergence of Narrative Ethnography, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 47(1), 69-94.

Van Heugten, K. (2004) Managing insider research: Learning from experience, *Qualitative Social Work*, 3(2), 203-219.

Workman, D. (2007) 'Casing the joint' Explorations by the insider-researcher preparing forwork-based projects, *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 19(3), 164-160.