“And you didn’t tell them that they were getting robbed!?”

Emotional Labour, Ethnography and Danger

Introduction

The effects of the afternoon’s alcohol consumption are now starting to fade, giving way to an incipient hangover. My throat feels dry, the hazy feeling in my head begins to dissipate, replaced with the first flashes of what will eventually become a headache. My partner talks to me from across the table as we eat. I try to listen and follow the conversation, but I struggle to give it my full attention. Knowing that she will be concerned if she detects my thoughts are elsewhere, I glance up at her more regularly from my plate of food in an attempt to avoid this; but my head is filled with memories of the fieldwork completed only hours ago with Tommy. The nauseating smell of alcohol on Tommy’s breath still feels palpable; his face, contorted with anger and anguish; his words, shouted in my ear amid the noise and chatter around us, and the image those words now conjure of his dad retrieving the belt from “*the cupboard*”:

“My dad wouldn’t hit me with the belt if I pissed myself in fright first”.

As the words and images keep replaying in my mind I watch my own 18-month-old son for a moment while he plays on the floor with his toys. He happily pushes his toy car along and I feel really overwhelmed suddenly by his innocence and vulnerability. I feel a tightness start to develop in my stomach and I have to look away for a moment, blinking as I feel the sharp prick of tears developing in my eyes.

(Reflective notes after a period of fieldwork)

In an article addressing the emotive aspects of prison ethnography, Yvonne Jewkes (2011) suggested that criminology has tended to minimise the significance of researchers' emotional experiences during their fieldwork. As a result, Jewkes argues,

...there have been few attempts by criminologists to account for...how they *feel* both while carrying out the research and afterwards (ibid: 66).

Jewkes raises a number of important points in this article, but very often with reference to the context of prison ethnography. In this short chapter, I seek to address the significant absence of emotion in criminological research that Jewkes identifies, with a particular focus upon emotional labour during ethnography. To illuminate the discussion offered here, I draw specifically upon my experiences of several years spent conducting in-depth fieldwork in de-industrialised communities in the north of England with men who possess reputations for violence and who were also involved in other forms of illicit activity (see Ellis 2016; Ellis et al, 2017). My emphasis here then is upon emotional labour in field research outside of organisational settings and their inherent demands – the context to which the concept of emotional labour has most often been applied and which is the focus in some contributions to this volume (see introduction to this volume and Hochschild (1983)). Emotional labour in the case of my ethnographic research, as others have found (McQueeney and Lavelle, 2017), has been influenced to some extent by participants and the specific demands of the field sites, with some personal autonomy involved too. Quite often, given the nature of the environment and those present, this regularly consisted of the need to present what Mastracci et al (2006) refer to as 'hard', traditionally masculine, emotions, alongside the suppression of fear.

As the reflective notes that open this chapter attest, ethnographies of violence evidently generate immediate and lasting emotions that can be deeply troubling and may demand ongoing management in, and out of, the field. Hochschild's (1983) concept of 'emotional

labour', which ties together the various contributions to this volume, considers the ways in which emotions feature in various forms of work. Emotional labour, as Hochschild conceived it, involves the instrumental 'management' of one's feelings in return for payment, in a similar way that one's capacity to engage in physical labour is sold. Just as workers must utilise their physical bodies to perform labour tasks, Hochschild recognised the increased demands in advanced economies that are placed upon workers to utilise their emotions in various ways. Emotional labour frequently involves the inducement or suppression of certain feelings depending upon the type of work the individual engages in. This raises important questions about the implications for, in this case, how criminological researchers' carryout their fieldwork, the emotional impact of this, and how this is managed, particularly when entering environments that contain various possible dangers. However, criminologists tend to 'share few of these experiences and when we do so, we do it privately' (Liebling and Stanko, 2001: 424).

In response, this short chapter aims to make some of that private emotional labour public and is divided into two substantive sections. The first considers briefly how emotive experience is relevant to doing 'dangerous' ethnography. Specifically, this first section highlights some issues common in dangerous ethnographic studies to set the context for the second section. The second section focuses upon my own emotive experience and resultant emotional labour during and after research encounters in potentially dangerous settings. A brief conclusion follows the second section to draw together the main points I raise in this chapter.

Emotional Labour and 'Dangerous' Ethnography

Offline ethnographies of the human world require an established physical presence and a period of immersion over time in the field that is being studied. Ethnography represents a deeply embodied practice. Ethnographers must place themselves within the everyday

physical locations of those they seek to understand and will have to, in all likelihood, partake to varying degrees in the activities that are performed routinely by the individuals or group being researched (Pearson, 1993). The ethnographer will inevitably have to fulfil a variety of roles during this period. Rarely can an ethnographer simply 'sit and watch' what is going on, nor will participants always be able, or willing, to sit and talk about themselves and their lives (ibid). It may not always be appropriate or safe to openly ask questions. Some of the roles that will have to be adopted, as well as the typical demands of the field site, will be known by the researcher in advance. Although some demands and pressures will only become clear as relationships with participants and gatekeepers develop. The inevitably unpredictable demands placed upon the researcher by the field and those individuals within it, means that roles may have to be adopted immediately, and decisions made instantly, with little forethought, time to plan, nor fully consider the possible implications (Lee, 1995).

Emotional labour is fundamental to these predictable and more serendipitous aspects of the ethnographic method. Drawing upon insights from interactionist sociology, Hochschild (1983) identifies 'surface' acting to describe occasions when individuals feign emotions in an attempt to disguise how they really feel. This is contrasted with 'deep' acting when the individual actually exhibits the particular emotion or attempts to experience it. Both methods of 'acting' are relevant in the context of dangerous ethnography. Researchers may have to feign particular feelings depending upon the circumstance: amusement or happiness, surprise, or anger, may be required at those times where these emotions are socially expected.

Similarly, an ethnographer's role is to immerse themselves, as much as is practically and ethically possible, in order to 'tell it like it is' (Pearson, 1993), part of which will entail attempting to some degree to experience the emotional lives of those being researched. In such instances though, the ethnographer may not have to 'act', but might experience and display 'genuine' emotions that are expected in such social encounters (Ashforth and

Humphrey, 1993). It is possible, as the reflective notes that introduce this chapter indicate, during immersive encounters within the field that the researcher will genuinely feel emotions as they seek to understand their participants' lived experiences. These feelings may be managed through a technique like surface acting, but outside of the social expectations and constraints of the field, researchers of dangerous places may be left with what will likely be negative feelings that may have consequences for personal well-being.

These elements of serendipity and unpredictability that characterise immersive ethnographies that examine sensitive issues, arguably make it the most emotionally demanding and challenging method available to criminologists. For such emotive experiences to be routinely extracted from research and not subjected to subsequent reflection is then, as Jewkes (2011) has suggested, an issue for the discipline. This is especially so given the potential impact these experiences can have upon researchers' psychological well-being (Liebling and Stanko, 2001). However, this is to be expected within a disciplinary environment that tends to 'train researchers to be rational and objective to...not disclose feelings of anxiety, confusion, vulnerability or anything else of their selves' (Jewkes, 2011: 64). Likewise, ethnographer Steve Wakeman (2014) points to the inevitable, but so often unacknowledged, synthesis between ethnographic encounters and the researcher's own emotional and biographical experience. Wakeman describes this aptly as an 'absent-presence' in which physical, rather than emotional, selves are present in accounts of research:

...instrumental researchers seeing and recording things rather than emotive beings feeling things... the self is and always has been present in criminological research, but it is infrequently acknowledged and rarely if ever prioritized to the extent that it can be considered virtually absent (706-707).

The methodological and research literature often reflects this absent-presence, affording little concern for the emotive. However, there is a, albeit small, body of work within that methodological literature that by virtue of its critical engagement with practical, empirical and ethical issues, highlights some of the important emotive dimensions of ethnographic fieldwork in dangerous settings (see for instance Ancrum, 2011; Calvey, 2008; Jacobs, 1998; Liebling and Stanko, 2001; Wakeman, 2014; Winlow et al, 2001).

It is perhaps worth re-iterating the very simple and obvious point that exposure to danger will likely take a considerable emotional toll upon the researcher. Liebling and Stanko (2001) offer a pretty exhaustive list of the potential emotional impacts of researching a difficult topic like violence. Their discussion also considers the potential difficulties researchers may experience afterwards with academic colleagues, the media, and wider society. This may also induce difficult emotive experiences as researchers encounter and must navigate the nuances of ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild, 1989) often specific to these various contexts. I will consider examples of this from my own research later.

On the issue of working directly with potentially violent individuals, Bruce Jacobs (1998: 162) rightly points out that the threat of ‘danger, it must be remembered, is “inherent” in fieldwork with active offenders’. Jacobs himself provides a frightening but important example when he describes being robbed at gunpoint by an individual participant that he trusted and who had also acted as an initial gatekeeper. Management of danger represents a central aspect of such ethnographic work and a reason why it is perhaps sometimes regarded as ethically unpalatable by some sections of the wider research community. On the subject of ethics and ethnographic work with active criminals, Ancrum (2013: 113) perceptively notes that:

In unpredictable research environments the engaged ethnographer has no choice but to marginalise the formal world of ethics committees and methodological guidelines and proceed under the somatic guidance of his or her own ethical code as it interacts with the ethics and values of the researched community.

Ancrum continues by suggesting that such an approach is not necessarily ethically ‘wrong’, but is rather grounded in ‘an emotional concern with what is right’ (2011: 113). What is significant here is Ancrum’s allusion to the role of ‘emotional concern’ in deciding what is, and what is not, ethical while in the field. The key point being that an emotive ‘feeling’ for what is right or wrong while present in that community should inform the researcher’s conduct, rather than the well-intentioned, but often naïve and idealistic instructions of social science ethics committees. This suggests an individualistic, more instinctual approach based on the need to act as ‘ethically’ as possible. However, as Ancrum points out, this is highly context-bound and means researchers may have to, for the benefit of the research, engage in or bear witness to practices they find ethically and morally repugnant. The opposite consequence is that some researchers may be unwilling to cross such boundaries, which in itself can have potential issues for them and the research.

David Calvey (2008) identifies the necessity to practice what he terms ‘situated ethics’ – a process of managing ethical issues as they arise within what is an unpredictable and potentially dangerous research field. What is crucial to acknowledge here is that depending upon the particular situation the ethnographer is confronted with, the situated practice(s) they ultimately engage in may not necessarily reflect what is routinely defined as a rational and ‘ethical’ course of action endorsed by University ethics committees or that would necessarily be accepted by non-academics located outside the field. Rather, it is highly probable the practice(s) will be, as Ancrum (2011) has suggested, instinctual, habitual, spontaneous and,

crucially, highly emotive. They may involve little forethought or planning, reflecting what the researcher judged to be 'right' at the time. This may require a resort to surface acting (Hochschild, 1983), as researchers may know that what is 'right at the time' does not necessarily fit with their organisation's expectations, nor perhaps even their own emotive sense of what is ethically and morally right. Yet, the social pressures or expectations (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987) of the specific ethnographic encounter and immediate setting may require particular emotional responses and surface acting to effectively disguise this. In addition, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) suggest that social identity may be relevant here and actually mitigate against the negative impacts of intense emotional labour through the individual's level of 'identification with the role in question' (p.89). They contend this can reduce the negative effects on well-being through the use of 'various behavioural and cognitive defense mechanisms' (p.89). What this suggests is that some researchers, who by virtue of their biographical experience and ability to identify with the field under study, may be more appropriately equipped to manage the negative impacts of emotional labour in particular types of research settings. This is an issue that I will consider in the second section in relation to my own ethnographic work on male violence.

While these points are important, what must also be considered are the consequences of such an individualised, autonomous, and sometimes highly reactive, mode of emotional labour that is, nevertheless, largely unavoidable if one is to successfully gain and maintain access. Indeed, as Liebling and Stanko (2001) have rightly outlined, those conducting research in potentially violent places often have little choice but to rely on their instincts, displaying courage and fortitude in the face of various dangers. However, they also highlight the potential for harm from engaging in these practices, which will likely result in emotional exhaustion.

Steve Wakeman's (2014) ethnographic research with substance users on a housing estate in the North West of England provides a useful illustration of some of these points. Wakeman's 'biographical congruence' with this community furnished him with an important emotional awareness of its inherent dangers that served him well throughout the fieldwork process. Wakeman comments upon the positive aspect of this congruence, which enabled him to avoid being victimised as his keenly honed emotional sensibilities provided early warnings of danger that enabled him to better identify with the pressures of this research and the roles he had to fulfil. In this sense, Wakeman's experience seems to confirm some of the points raised by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) in regards to identity and emotional labour. However, previous connection to the community under study can provide an ambivalent experience, which Wakeman also acknowledges. The negative underside to the positivity of biographical congruence was the return of difficult memories from Wakeman's past, as well as re-awakening a desire to consume the substances he observed his participants using on a daily-basis. As the research progressed, Wakeman's emotional labour appears to have increasingly involved suppression of these feelings and desires, or what Hochschild (1983) called surface acting – pretending he was 'okay' to colleagues and family in order to complete the fieldwork. However, as he candidly acknowledges, Wakeman eventually reached a point at which he felt:

no longer able to face the constant effort required to maintain an outward appearance of control, of being 'ok', no longer able to face the fear that my present circumstances were harming me to the extent they were (714)

The brief insights provided in this section demonstrate how embedded emotional labour is within potentially dangerous criminological research that is undertaken outside of

organisational contexts. The next substantive section will consider my own experience in relation to these insights.

Giving ‘them’ the ‘time of day’

During the initial stages of my own ethnographic research on male violence, I was mostly concerned with how best to act and manage potential ethical issues: what should I do if I am made aware of something ethically problematic? What should I do if I am being threatened? Will participants accept my presence? It was the practical and ethical issues that were at the forefront of my mind. The role of emotion in potentially guiding my engagement with matters of ethics and practice, as well as the immediate and subsequent emotional impact of decisions I would have to make, were not issues I considered much, if at all, at the outset. I began to realise though that I was fairly adept at managing practical difficulties. It also became quite clear as I ventured further into the field that my adeptness came not so much from research training, nor simply from an ability to surface act, but a deeper emotional intuition acquired through a specific gendered and class-based socialisation. Aspects of social identity, grounded in biographical experience, were significant in this respect then, as they provided some of the behavioural and cognitive defense mechanisms that Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) suggest are crucial for mitigating against negative emotional impacts and to operate competently within a given setting.

Despite initial reservations I held concerning my abilities as an ethnographer, I instinctively knew how to act, how to talk, when to keep quiet, when I could ask questions, and could engage in such surface acting (Hochschild, 1983), with a particular emphasis on the display of certain ‘hard’ emotions (Mastracci et al, 2006) expected amongst the individual men I encountered (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). I do not possess a violent or criminal history, but I knew enough about violence and crime to be able to act fairly competently, even if I was not

always comfortable doing so. I found that I could quite effectively suppress the regular feelings of fear and trepidation, something I had learned to do in my formative years while in the company of potentially violent young men. I could induce amusement at inappropriate or offensive jokes. And, could summon the emotional energy required to engage in various bodily performances typical amongst this group of men. My upbringing and experiences had also taught me how to walk in a particular way and formulate physical appearance to look like I was capable of taking care of myself, but not in a manner that would appear contrived or over-exaggerated. Outwardly obvious displays of physical 'hardness' and masculine credibility: walking with a swagger; boasting about one's physical prowess; taking the 'piss' out of others; can, and does, attract attention from individuals who may seek to test these credentials or perceive threat that requires a reaction. An intuitive awareness of these complexities was vital, but emotionally tiresome to engage in and manage.

When one participant became involved in a confrontation with a group of young men in a nightclub during fieldwork, I felt deeply conflicted over how to react. Given he was outnumbered as well as my positive relationship with him, I felt obliged to back him up, and did so, standing by his side trying my best to look and act 'hard'. My decision did no harm to my relationship with him, especially when the three young men backed down. However, the experience was uncomfortable given that I am not someone who considers himself to be a competent fighter. This raised some significant questions about the extent to which I could act in particular ways while in the field. As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (see Ellis, 2016), this research re-opened memories of past experiences of some confrontations that I had tried very hard to suppress because they are humiliating. The words and actions of participants who stressed the importance of never backing down from physical confrontation, compounded my existing feelings of guilt and humiliation from those times when I did. My decision to back up my participant seems, upon reflection, to be partly related to my ability to

act, manage, or summon emotional displays that accord with the feeling rules of this milieu and that were necessary to maintain a credible presence. Yet, genuine emotion (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) was felt during this incident too, which I suspect partly motivated a response deemed appropriate and in accordance with, particularly masculine and working class, cultural injunctions that shape those specific emotional displays (see Ellis et al, 2017; Hochschild, 1983). Perhaps as a result of this kind of emotional labour, participants evidently liked me: I was invited into their homes; introduced to their family members and friends; invited to social events; offered illicit substances (which I always politely declined); and, via gatekeepers, regularly received informal 'feedback' from participants who reported I was a 'sound lad' or a 'good kid'. One particular participant became visibly concerned when I, rather naively in hindsight, confided in him about a personal issue I was experiencing. I had to quickly diffuse the developing situation as the participant indicated a preparedness to help me, insinuating that violence would be a suitable means of resolving the issue.

Despite the rigorous and lengthy research training I had undertaken within my discipline that emphasised, as Jewkes (2011) has suggested, the qualities of objectivity and rationality, I could not view these personal connections that I formed with participants and the experiences I had with them in such an instrumental and objective manner. In truth, I developed emotional connections to some individuals I worked with, I formed relationships with them that were friendly, and, as controversial as this may sound, I found myself caring, and still do, about them and their welfare despite the horrific things some of them had done to others.

When I reflect back on the years I spent collecting data, I remain genuinely elated that I had formed positive relationships with my participants. I am proud of the detailed data that I gathered from these individuals, and of the fact that I had been able to enter the spaces they occupied and acted appropriately. Ethnographer of crime Dick Hobbs (1993) referred to the 'muck' that ethnographers often bring back from their time spent in the field. This 'muck'

offers the possibility of an academic career and an accompanying celebrity-like status for ‘the ethnographer, who was nearly arrested, almost beaten up, and didn’t quite go crazy’ (Hobbs, 1993: 62) during their dangerous fieldwork. Upon his return from the field Hobbs confessed that:

...audiences assumed...I had actually been involved in the crimes that I described...for a period of about six months I wallowed in this minor celebrity and did nothing to disabuse my audiences of the darkness of my soul (1993: 50)

I too accepted and admittedly enjoyed the plaudits I received from some academic colleagues, particularly my status as an individual that had earned the trust of a notoriously hard to research group and had the emotional strength and resilience to research them. However, this ‘muck’ from the field has not always generated a positive emotional experience. Like Wakeman (2014) discussed previously, I too have found it ambivalent in several respects, particularly when my research has intersected with aspects of my life outside of that setting.

My partner, in particular, has always found this aspect of my vocation challenging. The title of this chapter are her shocked words when I explained that I once witnessed a robbery take place during the course of research and did not intervene. Upon learning I had spent time with an individual who had been involved in the torture of a rival criminal, she did not hesitate to express her moral repugnance at him, while also making clear her bemusement at my ability to, as she put it, “give him the time of day”. Her bemusement related to my aforementioned ability to ‘act’ and conceal the emotions that feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983) dictate I should feel about an individual who has inflicted extreme suffering upon others. In

particular, it was my ability to put aside feelings of repugnance and disgust and give to participants other emotions, like empathy, that their behaviour and lifestyle are felt to not deserve, that was the issue. And my abilities of emotional suppression, management and presentation have generated conflict and difficulties on other occasions since completing fieldwork. As I approached the end of a live interview on national radio, the presenter asked me: “Did you like the guys?”. The truth was I actually did quite like them; after all they had been kind enough to allow me a considerable insight into their lives, and, as highlighted previously, I was obviously prepared to put myself in harms way for one of them. What immediately crossed my mind was whether I could openly admit in a public forum to feeling that way. Could I publicly air those private feelings? What should I ‘feel’ about my participants, who, despite their kindness towards me, still engaged in very harmful behaviour towards others? To tell the truth in response to the interviewer’s question would risk incurring the wrath of a society that affords little understanding to such individuals. As the encounters with my partner discussed already demonstrate, it would in effect have breached the feeling rules that broadly pattern emotional engagement on matters of crime and justice. Under these feeling rules, criminals are clearly felt to not be ‘owed’ some of those private emotions that I was feeling. To surface act in this case would betray my own feelings and to an extent I felt this would constitute a betrayal of the men who were actually kind enough to share so much with me and help me to forge a career as an academic. It was difficult to just conveniently forget, upon exiting the field, that it was my time spent with them, their stories, as well as their various misfortunes that became the ‘data’ that was the springboard for the – relatively – secure and well-remunerated academic career I now have. The fumbled response that I eventually gave perhaps indicated that despite my evident ability to act, this was a performance that, on this occasion, I could not fully deliver.

Conclusion

It is evident when studying highly emotive issues like violence that there are ‘inherent uncertainties in the way we choose our allegiances in the field’ (Liebling and Stanko, 2001: 424) and also in the decisions that criminologists make, sometimes in considerably pressurised circumstances. However, as I have hopefully begun to demonstrate in this short chapter, and in following the general point raised by Jewkes (2011) at the beginning, ‘the extracting out of emotion...from the research process...at the very least, represents a missed opportunity’ (p.72) for the discipline. The emotional labour undertaken in the course of ethnographic research on issues of crime requires a willingness to ‘induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain...the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983: 7). In my experience, this regularly necessitated engagement in surface or deep acting to enable not only effective and continued access to participants, but the maintenance of my own personal safety. And those acts have to, and had to in my case, be cognizant of the specific social expectations that govern the expression of emotions in those spaces. Biographical experience, or congruence, and an ability to identify with the field, are relevant and evidently provide a basis from which to act in ways that conform to these requirements and that aid the, at times arduous, demands of the emotional labour involved. As the field notes that open this chapter, and some of the other examples provided, indicate, exiting the field does not conclude this labour process. Researchers encounter further nuances and complexities, particularly in regard to what Hochschild (1983) identified as societal feeling rules, around how and which emotions are expressed or suppressed. Managing these often-competing demands effectively requires that labour continues long after vacating the field. Importantly, this chapter brings into focus the immense and sometimes conflicting emotional pressures that researchers who study sensitive issues up-close must face and manage.

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