Understanding Emotional Experience in Fieldwork: Responding to Grief in a Northern Aboriginal Village

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Abstract: In this article, the author explores the experiential aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, especially in terms of a fieldworker's emotional response to the hardships faced by local people. He presents an ethnographic example concerning fieldwork in a northern Canadian Aboriginal village that evoked an intense emotional reaction from him. He explores this reaction in the context of the epistemological implications of emotional experience in qualitative research and argues that such introspection is a necessary yet understudied component of exploring subjectivity in ethnographic fieldwork.

Keywords: reflexive ethnography, introspection, emotional experience, Aboriginal studies, First Nations

Author's note
To protect the privacy of the people involved in the ethnographic research discussed in this article, pseudonyms have been used for the name of the village as well as for the individuals mentioned herein.

Introduction: Reflexivity and experience

In contemporary ethnography, there has been a considerable concern with the personal experiential aspects of qualitative research. In particular, various terms have been used to describe this phenomenon, such as reflexive ethnography, autoethnography, or personal narrative (Davies, 1999; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Hedican, 2001; Macbeth, 2001; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Overall, this work demonstrates that the ethnographer's experience has become a matter of particular interest. However, although it might be said that descriptions of the various dimensions of the field research experience have become more plentiful in recent times, an analysis of the core aspects underlying and shaping researchers' experiences have only begun to receive specific attention. It is also an interesting matter that despite the importance of the role of experience in fieldwork, there nonetheless is a dearth of critical or analytical discussions of it in the literature, aside from the various descriptive accounts of this phenomenon. This would suggest that the importance of experience as an epistemological factor in qualitative research should be a matter of greater concern in the qualitative methodology literature.

There is much to ponder here, as experiences in the conduct of ethnographic research comprise a complex and varied mixture of feelings and emotions, reactions, and personal demands. These reflexive understandings accumulate and are transformed over time the more they are thought about in the context of the continued social interaction with the people in the field of study. There is also the complex process of organizing the ethnographer's thoughts, putting them down on paper (or laptop), rethinking them in the context of future events and situations, and then eventually drawing conclusions in the form of the final ethnographic account.

Fieldwork, like psychoanalysis, is capable of facilitating an understanding of who we are as people and, in a wider sense, about the cultural milieu in which the ethnographer works and lives. For example, it has been noted that "Fieldwork or participant observation has led many anthropologists to struggle with epistemological problems related to understanding other cultures as part of a dialectical process of self-understanding" (Ulin, 1984, p. xi), or, as Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein have noted, fieldwork makes you

> consider your everyday experiences in new ways . . . but most of all [helps] you understand why you react and respond in the ways you do—based on your assumptions. [It] will encourage you not only to watch others but also to watch yourself as you watch them– consciously. (1997, p. 2)

If autoethnography describes studies and procedures that connect the personal to the cultural, then an important aspect of the introspection process that would serve to illuminate more fully the ethnographer's personal experience would be a focus on the emotional aspects of qualitative research. As Ellis (1991) has explained,

> Systematic sociological introspection provides a way to look at the lived experience of emotions, but it requires that we . . . study our own emotions. (1991, p. 45)

As such, a focus on the emotional aspects of fieldwork allows the researcher more in-depth insights into the process of meaning and interpretation, "by studying their own self-dialogue in process" (p. 29).

In this article, an attempt is made to explore the subject of emotional introspection in field work by examining my ethnographic experience while conducting a study in an Aboriginal community in northern Canada, some 200 km north of Thunder Bay in the province of Ontario. An incident occurred during this fieldwork, involving the death of a young man who was killed by a Canadian National Railways (CNR) passenger train, that I found very troubling, yet I was at a loss to put it into the perspective of my so-called "scientific" study. My hope is that a discussion of this incident, and my emotional reaction to it, will initiate further dialogue on this perplexing and complex matter of responding to grief and personal introspection in qualitative methods.

Ethnographic research in northern Ontario

The research described in this article is part of a wider study conducted into the social and economic life of a remote Aboriginal community of Ojibwa-, or Anishenabe-, speaking people who live in the wooded hinterland north of Lake Superior called "Wolf River." The local population comprises about 150 people who live in small log cabins, for the most part still speak their Native language, and continue a traditional economic pattern of hunting and fishing. They also work seasonally as guides for tourist operators in the area or on the CNR section crews conducting track maintenance and other related jobs.

The incident that is described in this article involves the death of a young man named Elijah Redbird, whom I had known previous to my fieldwork while working in tree-planting camps in the Thunder Bay area when I was an undergraduate student. Elijah's death affected me in a very profound way, filling me with feelings of intense sadness and remorse, yet my academic training left me largely unprepared to deal with the emotional consequences of such an event. The Redbird family is one of the core centers of population in Wolf River. Its members originally came from Fort Hope up on the Albany River and, like so many others in this area, began to drift down toward the CNR line after World War II. Two brothers eventually settled in Wolf River. One, Joel, died in a house fire while I lived in Wolf River. He left two adult sons, Elijah and Adam, and four older daughters. The other brother was married to the former Alice Drake, who died the same year as her brother-in-law Joel. Alice had two sons, Mike and Luke, and a daughter, Sally.

As foreman of the CNR section crew, Mike is one of most successful men in Wolf River. He commands considerable respect in the village, as he controls access to the only source of full-time employment in the community. His income allows him a standard of living that is quite a bit above the norm. Mike's brother, Luke, in contrast to Mike's favorable position in community affairs, has led a troubled life. Luke has been plagued with psychological problems of undetermined origin, which led him to have all sorts of delusions. Many people fear him, thinking him possessed in some way. When his mother (Alice) died, he lost his home base and has tended to just wander around the village late at night, which adds to people's sense of apprehension.

Luke's cousin Elijah has shared a similar position on the periphery of the village social order. At the time of my fieldwork, Elijah was in his mid-20s, had never married, and lived with his married brother, Adam, in the home of Adam's wife, Harriet Wobagon. There was a constant state of trouble between Elijah and Harriet, which added, no doubt, to Elijah's sense of being an unwanted outsider, living as he did with his brother's in-laws. Once Elijah came to me seeking help for a stab wound to his hand inflicted by Harriet during one of their quarrels. He had heard that I was a "doctor" of sorts. There was not much that I could do for him under the circumstances except to clean up the wound and encourage him to make peace with his in-laws. During the course of my fieldwork, Elijah was killed by a passenger train about 20 miles from Wolf River while attending a "bush party." There were those who contend that Elijah was pushed onto the tracks when he was drunk by members of the Wobagon family who lived nearby, but none of these allegations ever surfaced in a court of law.

I came to see the Redbird family as somewhat typical of the large Aboriginal groupings that formed the core centers of population in places such as Wolf River. Such families have many diversified kinship links tying its many members together and also provide a series of connections through marriage with other such "clans" in the Wolf River area as well as "back home" at Fort Hope. Like many such families in the northern bush country of Ontario, they have many unfortunate deaths at relatively early ages, caused by such accidents as house fires or other occurrences of suspected foul play. I will now proceed to describe in more detail the unfortunate circumstance of Elijah Redbird and some of my further thoughts on the effects that men such as Elijah have had on my understanding of fieldwork in the context of emotional experience as an introspective account.

Elijah's homecoming

It came as a shock, although not a complete surprise, when we had learned that Elijah had been struck by a passenger train and killed. There was an article on this tragedy in a Thunder Bay newspaper, and I remember reading that the accident occurred in a rock cut. The engineer stopped the train and had to go out

and the view the gruesome scene of Elijah's mangled body. The passengers on the train were justifiably horrified to witness such a dreadful sight.

Details of the incident were quite sketchy. The newspaper recounted that there was apparently a small group of men engaged in an overnight drinking party. Elijah had wandered away from the group and was sitting on the railway tracks when the accident occurred. The story that circulated around Wolf River was that the other members of the drinking party were old enemies of the Redbird family and that Elijah had been pushed out onto the tracks in retribution for some past incident. There was not much of an investigation, and in a few days there was hardly any mention of it.

Peter, the Métis storekeeper, told me once that it was his theory that the numerous deaths on the railway tracks were really a covert suicide cult. The diesel engine represents the power and destruction of the outside world over which the Anishenabe have no control. As an act of defiance, they give themselves up to the monster, not willing to live another day under its oppression, somewhat like the Bali nobility who, while being shot to death by the advancing Dutch soldiers, defiantly threw their jewels at their oppressors. In this light, Elijah was a courageous warrior, taking a stand against the indomitable Goliath.

For several nights in a row, Peter and I waited for Elijah's body to arrive by train. We could not find out where his body actually was, as there was some mix-up at the funeral home in Thunder Bay or when he was put on the train. It took about a week, but eventually Elijah came home. I remember that it was a pitch black night. The casket was hurriedly hauled from the train and hoisted onto the men's shoulders, and a strange procession wound its way through the trail in the bush leading away from the railway tracks. From a distance, it looked like a long snake carrying a box, with flashlights beaming this way and that as the casket was carried down to the Catholic Church. There was no clergy in town, so the people conducted their own service, a combination of Christian and Native spiritual elements, led by one of the village elders.

Introspection and emotional response

I can still picture that dark, eerie cavalcade of figures carrying Elijah's casket along the bush trail from the railway tracks. I can also remember my own feelings of ambivalence—the fieldworker part of me felt that I should get involved in the procession in some manner to gather information, whereas the "ordinary person" part of me felt that this was a solemn event and that the family's privacy should be respected in their time of grief. Over the years, I have spent some time reflecting on the meaning of this sense of ambivalence and what it meant to my fieldwork experience.

The event itself happened quickly, and if I was to participate in the procession and subsequent ceremony, I would have had to make a hurried decision. It was almost as if this event was one of those tests of judgment that is bound to occur sometime during one's research. As it was, Peter urged me at that crucial moment to go along and attend the service, citing what I already knew in my heart, that I would lose the opportunity to learn something significant. He also pointed out that my main objection to not participating, namely that I wanted to respect the family's privacy, was not well founded, as the people probably expected me to show up. Peter also informed me that a (non-Aboriginal) New Zealand engineer, who was employed during the summer on a local building project, was participating in the procession, crying and apparently caught up in the intense emotion of the event.

There was no doubt that I did not feel the same emotion as the engineer, even though I had known Elijah for quite a few years longer. In retrospect, this is probably one of those classic fieldwork dilemmas, to get involved or not. In this case, my main regret was that my reticence about getting involved in private matters got the better of me and prevented me from becoming involved in something that could have given me considerable insight into the Wolf River community. I never had the same opportunity again, and I regret that my personal feelings and fears of getting involved prevented me from doing a better research job. Even to this day, after reflecting off and on over numerous instances, I still have not come to any firm conclusion on this matter of social propriety and involvement. When Elijah died, I was caught up in a personal dilemma about becoming involved in what I saw as essentially a private family matter, that is, Elijah's funeral. I saw this partly as a moral or ethical issue in fieldwork and partly as a methodological one concerning the participant-observer technique.

It is these sorts of experiences gained during the course of fieldwork that would suggest the subtle nature of gaining information. Learning and applying a kit bag of research techniques is one matter, but under the surface there is a myriad of ethical and methodological issues that have a propensity to emerge quite unexpectedly in day-to-day events that require a thorough thinking through. In my mind, these issues are important ones, not only at a personal level but also in terms of the broader sphere of the "philosophy of science" and the methodological context of information management, use, and control.

Fieldwork experience as an epistemological factor

One of the problems with fieldwork is that we never seem to have as much control over what is going on around us as we would sometimes like. Perhaps we have the most control in structured interviews, but when it comes to most of the techniques available to an ethnographer, such as participant observation, we pretty much have to go along with the flow of events around us. It is a matter of how much we would like to shape events and how much we are willing to let events shape us.

To use Mead's (1975) words, which sum up the point I am attempting to make here about experience as an epistemological factor in fieldwork, "The fieldworker is wholly and helplessly dependent on what happens…one must be continually prepared for anything, everything—and perhaps most devastating—for nothing" (p. 25). There was not much that happened in Wolf River that I did not find interesting in one manner or another. This does not mean that I tried to force all my experience into the mold of my dominant political-economic research theme, but I played around with situations long enough in my mind to see if I could take advantage of them in some way for research purposes. I never forgot that I needed material, as Mead reminded us.

Fieldworkers need particular events and situations so that they can be studied, analyzed, and placed in a larger context. As Powdermaker (1966) has explained, ethnographers "write out of their immersion and participation in a particular situation . . . the particular illuminates the human condition" (p. 296). On occasion, these "particulars" come to us, unannounced, on our doorstep, but mostly, we have to go out and seek them, to reach out, even though we might feel shy or retiring. I now believe that I have some understanding of what Geertz (1973) meant when he talked about ethnography becoming "imprisoned in the immediacy of its own detail" (p. 24).

It is almost as if time becomes crystallized at certain points in our fieldwork journey, such that some events attain added meaning or significance because they stand out in such sharp relief to the other mundane situations that are happening. It is in hindsight that we learn from our experiences in fieldwork, but a certain period of reflection is necessary at times to consider the direction our fieldwork is heading and what we should be doing to keep it on track. The people, places, and things in which we become "encased" are not often what we would have predicted or maybe even preferred. We really have no choice but to play the cards, as it were, that are dealt to us. It is up to us to make of them what we can. It is the everyday events, the everyday stuff of life—the details, background, and personalities—that fill out our life's experiences, imbue them with meaning, however, at times, obscure, and serve to propel us forward in time.

These everyday events also allow the ethnographer to engage in a certain amount of self-reflection. Fieldwork is capable of facilitating an understanding of who we are as people and, in a wider sense, the cultural milieu that has spawned the ethnographer. Whittaker (1992) raised a similar point about the self-reflective endeavor: "What is particularly intriguing for them [self-reflective researchers] is experience, the turning inward, in order then to turn outward. They concentrate on the individual, on person and on self" (p. 191). Such a discussion of ethnography as a context for self-reflexive introspection is also at the heart of our attempts to understand emotional experiences when conducting fieldwork An emotional experience is understood in the context of other such feelings—attempts at understanding are virtually inseparable from the then, and now, as historian Joan Scott commented when she told us, "Experience is at once already an interpretation and in need of interpretation" (1991, p. 779). Emotional experiences are what "we feel," but they are also what we have learned to feel, as "an arbitrary imposition of meaning on the flow of memory" (Bruner, 1986, p. 7).

There is, then, a cultural and social context to emotional experiences in fieldwork that can become highly personalized, as lived experiences relate the "personal to the cultural" (Denzen & Lincoln, 2000,

p. 931). As Ellis (1991) explained, "Resurrecting introspection…as a systematic sociological technique will allow sociologists to examine emotion as a product of the individual processing of meaning as well as socially shared cognitions" (p. 23). However, there is a question here concerning how one examines, or comprehends, emotional experience and then translates this comprehension into some meaningful form which is comprehensible in a cross-cultural perspective. These "socially shared cognitions" to which Ellis referred probably have some empirical validity within a particular culture, but one suspects that they would be difficult to identify across cultural boundaries. Of course this is not to say that there does not exist universal human emotional responses involving death, grief, or the loss of loved ones; it is just that these responses are tempered, or contextualized, within specific cultural norms and values.

Perhaps, then, this helps to explain my reticence about involving myself in the funeral procession. I had not yet acquired that "intimate familiarity within the group," to use Hanyano's (1979, p. 100) term, and therefore felt uncomfortable about engaging in the emotional sharing that becoming involved in the funeral would have entailed. This sort of emotional sharing of a deeply felt experience was something that I was not prepared to deal with, even though my presence would probably have been accepted by those involved because of my long-term residence in the community.

The importance of emotional introspection

The main thesis argued in this article is that emotional work is part of the epistemology of qualitative methods. Epistemology has to do with the creation of knowledge. It is therefore not only a state of being but also a process by which knowledge is a product of our processing of information as individuals. In the social sciences, there is a tendency to focus only on overt behavior, as if this were the only significant aspect of the research endeavor. The suggestion in this article is that an examination of our inner experiences, especially in terms of our attempts at emotional introspection, is an equally important aspect of sociological enquiry.

Perhaps a study of one's emotional experience has been a neglected or understudied phenomenon in qualitative methodology because of its complex and sometimes ambiguous nature. As human beings, the qualitative researcher is a feeling, self-examining individual, yet it is difficult at times to decide what we feel, especially when conflicting and ambiguous emotions "flood over us." I am strongly urging that a study of our inner, emotional selves become a necessary aspect of our methodological inquiry, because such emotional introspection is apt to reveal much about how emotional states influence the researchers' processing of information. In turn, we could also learn more about how we process meaning during the course of our sociological and anthropological studies, thus adding to our understanding concerning the epistemological process of knowledge acquisition.

The study of emotional experience is difficult work, as are most attempts to gain a measure of self-awareness. Most of us are trained to be detached, objective researchers. Overt behavior is seen as all that matters, whereas a person's inner experience is ignored or regarded as not particularly significant. One of the purposes of this article is to suggest that the study of emotion be brought into the anthropological and sociological study of behavior. One of the problems is that we presently lack the methodological techniques to study feelings, especially in terms of any depth. Perhaps the reason for this lacuna is that we tend to regard ourselves as social scientists, with an emphasis on the objective, readily observable aspects of human behavior. The Durkheimian approach, whereby one seeks "social facts," is apt to lead one away from a search for the richness of subjective experience that is involved in sociological research if only it is sought. Researchers are not just situated on the margins of the community life that is studied; they are also an integral component of the knowledge that is gained and processed. As such, the researcher's inner experience of this endeavor is an important facet of how it is that we come to understand understandings not our own, to paraphrase Geertz (1973).

It is evident that introspection, as a conscious attempt to understand our awareness through self-examination, could be made a more explicit or systematic sociological technique, alongside such favorites as participant observation. From an epistemological point of view, neglecting emotions is a grave error. If the pretense is made to understand the depth of social "reality," then we need to know more about how the social and private inner experiences of the researcher affect the interpretation of human behavior,

how emotions are processed in fieldwork, and what sorts of emotions are felt by a person conducting a field study.

It would be interesting to know about qualitative researchers' self-dialogue, as a process of the living experience of emotions. Emotions are not just feelings that other human beings have. There is a failure on the part of researchers to examine their own emotional responses and to view their own experiences in an emotionally detached way, hiding their reactions in an array of "scientific" techniques. There are certainly some problems here when using one's self as a subject of study, such as attempting to eliminate bias or overgeneralizing on the basis of the researcher's experience, yet such self-introspection has the potential to give us knowledge about the research endeavor that can be gained in no other way.

Conclusion

In this article, I have related an ethnographic account of the death of a young Aboriginal man in a northern Canadian community and have attempted to assess my emotional response to this distressing episode. The argument that emerges from an analysis of this incident is that emotional responses in ethnographic fieldwork involve some very complex epistemological issues that should be more adequately addressed in qualitative research. One of these issues involves a feeling of ambiguity in certain fieldwork situations and how to respond appropriately to them. Evidently, our training in qualitative methods does not provide sufficient sensitivity to situations in which there is an ethnical or moral dilemma. Of course, we cannot expect hard and fast guidelines for all fieldwork situations, but in my personal case, I felt a rather intense conflict between the desire to gather information regardless of the sensitivity of the situation, on the one hand, and a personal side, which empathized with the grieving village residents, on the other. Other fieldworkers might have handled this situation differently from the way I did and not seen in it the ambiguity that I perceived. They might also have chosen a different tactic to gather information, such as not becoming directly involved but interviewing participants afterward. Discussion of such sensitive subjects and a sharing of introspective accounts of emotional experiences in fieldwork can only serve to deepen our understanding of important methodological and epistemological issues in qualitative research.

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