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Main Article:

Walking the Fine Line Between Fieldwork Success and Failure: Advice for New Ethnographers

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Abstract

While the importance of ethnographic research in developing new knowledge is widely recognised, there remains minimal detailed description and discussion of the actual practice and processes involved in completing ethnographic fieldwork. The first author's experiences and struggles as an ethnographer of a group of young men from two locations (a gymnasium in Melbourne, and a remote Australian fishing town) are presented and discussed as a means of informing research practice. Challenges faced by the author were often intrapersonal or interpersonal, but also included meeting institutional demands. The fieldwork process was full of negotiation and compromise between fieldwork dynamics and the restraints and realities of researching within a university. While this project was manageable in the end, it had profound personal impacts and gave rise to consideration of many research implications.

Index Terms: ethnography; fieldwork; doctoral research; research supervision; reflective practice; researcher's role & responsibility; researcher's subjectivity

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1. Introduction

While the need for prolonged fieldwork is often acknowledged in the ethnography literature there is still insufficient discussion of what exactly that entails (Reeves, 2010). Fieldwork tasks are often time consuming, expensive, and require substantial personal investment. Additional challenges for the ethnographer can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, or institutional in nature. Intrapersonal obstacles include the feelings of self-consciousness, incompetence, and impostorism experienced by “reluctant researchers” (Scott, Hinton-Smith, Harma, & Broome, 2012) and the feelings of uncertainty and awkwardness that may lead researchers to withdraw physically and mentally from situations occurring in the field (Bille & Steinfeldt, 2013).

In addition, interpersonal obstacles include potential misunderstandings and/or mistrust between researcher and participants, such as having differing expectations about what the research process will entail, where the boundaries lie, and how the resulting data will be used, as well as the possibility of encroaching subjectivity if the researcher becomes too interpersonally enmeshed in the setting (Boccagni, 2011; Paechter, 2012; Trigger, Forsey, & Meurk, 2012). The relationship between researcher and participants, therefore, can be viewed as an ongoing negotiation of access to the ethnographic setting (Blommaert & Jie, 2010; Bondy, 2012; Burgess, 1991), with the researcher responsible for maintaining the delicate balance between being a distant and objective researcher (outsider) and an engaged group member (insider), while ensuring that time spent in the setting is productive in relation to the research project’s aims and objectives.

Institutional challenges are also prevalent, with studies typically dependent on institutional approval and support (e.g., ethics, funding) and needing to meet both pre-defined and evolving expectations for the commencement and continuance of the research. Refusal of ethical clearance for planned ethnographic activities can evidently curtail or prevent aspects of studies that may be deemed essential by the researcher (e.g., Meurk’s rejected application to go pig hunting, reported in Trigger et al., 2012), while insufficient funding can similarly restrict what can be attempted and achieved in the field. Additional challenges are often experienced by doctoral students due to institutional and disciplinary expectations and pressures (e.g., to complete studies within a timely manner) and the amount of guidance and support available to students while they are in the field.

Overcoming the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional obstacles associated with ethnographic research can be difficult for experienced researchers and are potentially overwhelming for those who have little or no experience in the field, such as early-career researchers and doctoral students. As a means of contributing to and encouraging a holistic development of ethnographic research practice and reporting, the present article explores these challenges and their impact on success or failure in ethnographic fieldwork. This will be achieved by describing and comparing “failed” and “successful” examples of ethnographic fieldwork, both of which occurred within the first author’s (PG) PhD study. The lessons learned about managing the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional demands associated with PG’s fieldwork are then discussed.

First, however, it is important to provide some background information about the purpose and context of PG's doctoral research, which involved over 2 years of fieldwork with two groups of young Australian men, one from a remote Australian fishing village (population less than 1,000 and located more than 200 km from Melbourne) and, the other, a group that frequented a gymnasium in suburban Melbourne. Included throughout this article are reflexive narratives of PG's experiences.

2. Reflections on an Ethnographic Field Study of Men

2.1. Background

At the time of the study, I (PG) was in my mid-thirties and considered myself to be a white, middle-class male from metropolitan Melbourne. My interest in men's issues began 5 years earlier when I studied the identity development of young adult men as an undergraduate student in psychology. This then evolved into an interest in understanding the social elements of identity. As such, the current ethnographic study arose out of a desire to study in-depth the identity of men and, in particular, the identities of working class men, as a means of making positive contributions to contemporary understandings of men's health and well-being.

Prior to commencing the study, I had read extensively about ethnographic studies and their advantages and disadvantages (Wolcott, 1999) and had developed a strong and passionate belief that ethnographic work was the key to understanding the complexities of men's lives (see Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2003). I believed that identities were dynamically constructed and negotiated and that, to understand these processes, researchers needed to spend considerable time with and document different sub-groups of men. Hence, the plan was to ethnographically study a subculture of young, working-class men.

Planning began in earnest in 2003 when I applied for a 3-year PhD scholarship. The choice of location for the fieldwork was based on the groups of men reported to be most in need of study in Australia (i.e., remote, rural men). This proposal was successful and, after confirmation of candidature and ethics approval in 2004, I had my institutional mandate. In summary I was to receive a small salary for 3 years to conduct an ethnography of rural male identity. This included the collection of journal data along with both focus group and one-to-one interview recordings. To facilitate this, I had a research budget of AUD1,000. This type of research (i.e., ethnography) is extremely rare in the field of psychology and, as such, there were no people within my department with past experience in ethnographic research. My supervisor and I were confident, however, that with my strong commitment, interpersonal skills, and bibliographic knowledge, I could succeed.

The official data collection phase began in February of 2005, during the 2nd year of my doctoral studies. When the time came for data collection to begin, my journal loaded with methodological theory also contained notes indicating that I was very anxious—it was

one thing to plan fieldwork and another thing to actually do it—but still I booked a plane ticket, packed my journal and voice recorder, and set off into the unknown.

2.2. Failed Fieldwork

The anxiety became even more pronounced once I had arrived at my location. Although I had diligently assured myself of being “okay” by previously setting up a strong alliance with a major player in the community, this in itself did not prepare me for the major cultural and social impact the field was to bestow.

Reflection in my journal indicates that early in data collection phase it was evident to me that the time, cost, and personal sacrifice required for this location was immense. Most salient, however, was the personal investment needed to become a participant in such an unfamiliar cultural environment.

At this time, I also reflected in my journal about how I had ended up committing to this remote location. I had access to working class men in my local urban area, but had been encouraged by university colleagues to study rural men. In part, this encouragement had been prefaced with advice that the university would be more inclined to approve a PhD proposal involving rural, rather than urban, men. Also on my mind during the early stages of my fieldwork was that I did not want to disappoint my university mentors, who had supported me to get to this position and who had faith in my ability to complete this research. I also did not want to let myself down by failing. As such, I felt obliged to buckle down and make a go of it regardless of how I felt about it.

A summary of some of the field notes taken from my first visit to this ethnographic location provides a description of the cultural setting I had entered and highlights some of the challenges I would encounter in becoming a participant observer in this location.

2.2.1. Summary of Ethnographic Field Notes

I arrived by light plane and on approach noticed the absence of anything that looked like a central township. This place was as rugged and remote as it gets. Merv (pseudonym), my insider, was there to pick me up and was in his customary attire of shorts, singlet, and work boots despite the cold winter like weather. Merv was a regular at my local hotel before he moved to the country. I had talked to him about my research and he said he was happy to help in any way he could.

While waiting for the luggage to be unloaded, Merv pointed out that the baggage handler was also the town mayor and proclaimed, “Hurry up Phil, you slow bastard.” Merv made clear in this statement that there were no tall poppies in this community. “Jump in the Ute,” he said, “just push the dog over” (a large, friendly, and pungently odoured dingo-cross named Sam). I had never seen a dirtier interior of a car, a consequence no doubt of the butchering trade. Merv and I (with Sam on my lap) drove around for 2 hours in which I was able to see and learn much about the town.

It was almost a prerequisite to drive a four-wheel drive for much of the best scenic spots and coastline was accessible by rough tracks that passed for roads. Merv painted a picture of almost perfect rural life with friendly people, great produce, plenty of employment, and affordable housing. Most men worked as fisherman, in the dairy or kelp industries, or at the abattoirs. Recreational activities included surfing, scuba diving, fishing, bushwalking, horse riding, horse racing, shooting, tennis, football, dancing, pool, gambling, and drinking. The population was spread out over about 50 square kilometres, with a small central township that included one pub and one recreational club, both with gambling facilities.

The small population was very familiar with each other. Merv waved or spoke to everyone he passed by, be it by car, while walking, or at the pub. The community outsiders, according to Merv, were mostly young male seasonal workers sent by a metropolitan employment agency. Merv went on to say that there were few social problems and the few instances of violence or misbehaviour were a result of these men or a few other bad eggs (usually young men) living in the community. These people were ostracised very quickly and often left the community as a result. Trust and approval were the most important factors for an enjoyable community life. These factors were achieved through work competency and creating employment and prosperity, as well as friendliness and community participation. Merv had both these factors working for him and it was soon apparent to me that he was a well-liked and respected community leader. It was a mixed population of young and old, men and women (approximately 1,500 people). Women were in the numerical minority and worked mainly in the clerical, tourism, hospitality, and service industries.

I stayed at Merv's house, which was modest and located about 10 kilometres from town. He had no neighbours for at least a kilometre in all directions and the sense of isolation and/or tranquillity was apparent; while it felt like isolation for me, I could see how it might become tranquil. Merv led a bachelor's existence and cared little for cleanliness and hygiene. Since his job involved getting dirty he did not see the point in cleaning and washing all the time, as it would only get dirty again. His house looked like it had not been cleaned since he moved in some 3 years ago. Appearances were just not important to Merv, who appeared to stake his self-worth on his professional success as a butcher and his esteem within the community. This was apparent when he showed me my bed for the 4 days and said, in the tone of a question as much as it was a statement, "It's not much but it'll do ya [you] . . . somewhere to put ya head down, that's all ya need." I nodded in agreement and said, "That's right mate," as I looked in horror at the dense covering of dog hair on the doona cover.

Merv was very suspicious of, and anxious about, being a participant in psychological research. He would often make jokes about me psychoanalysing him. To help offset this anxiety Merv had coined me the nickname of Psycho. While not flattering, I was glad to accept it as it represented the beginnings of a group identity and negotiation of my position as a social psychological researcher. Merv also appeared not to want me to psychoanalyse or upset others in the community and, hence, put his community standing in jeopardy. It appeared above all that this community standing had taken Merv a long

time to establish and he was not willing to put this in jeopardy for any reason. As he said, “I’ve got a good thing going here . . . what do ya reckon?”

I was introduced to and chatted with many of the local men. Topics ranged from breeding pigs and cattle, to farming, to produce quality, to the housing market, and to business acumen. A barter system that involved trade of goods and services was evident and, according to Merv, offset the higher cost of imported products. I was more often than not excluded from these conversations as I had little knowledge of the topics, so was relegated to the role of an active and empathic listener. The importance of work competency in this location cannot be overemphasised as it related to the self-worth and identities of all the men in the community. These men were stoic and proud that they were employed in, and excelled at, typically masculine endeavours. There was a sense of pride in the fact that they were performing tasks that had a direct influence on not just the immediate community but broader society. They were catching, breeding, killing, and producing the food that sustains lives.

2.2.2. Deliberations After the First Visit

On returning home, I sorted and analysed my field notes and reflected on a strategy that might allow me to gain the best insights of life in this community. It was apparent, at this stage, that the community members’ greatest concern was retaining the integrity of one’s personal standing and reputation. Hence, confidentiality between community members was the most salient issue. I needed to spend considerable time in the community to establish trust and get to know the men better. In line with this, I knew that I needed to contribute something to the community such as labour, entertainment, knowledge, and/or friendship; otherwise I would just be a “user” or a “scab,” as the men would put it.

I had planned to conduct interviews and/or focus groups to facilitate in-depth analysis of discourses and psychological consistencies and inconsistencies. However, my time within the community convinced me of the high likelihood that attempting formal interviews with the men would only result in guarded testimony. Thus, these methods could be problematic and, perhaps, even invalid, in the context of this remote community. Further, such an approach to data gathering was likely to also put my position within the community at risk. I wondered if I could change my data collection methods without jeopardising the project. These considerations caused me to spend much time worrying about how I would manage to conduct interviews, while also worrying that, if I did not do them, I would be failing an institutional requirement.

Moreover, I realised that I would need to operate covertly for some period of time, until sufficient trust had been established to reveal my research role. This process was consistent with the second theme proposed by Shaffir (1991), where his experiences led him to state that the researcher is always required, in some way or other, to be deceptive. As a result of making this decision, I experienced strong feelings of guilt, impending failure, and anxiety. Not only had the covert nature of the research clashed with my individual morality and ethics to some degree, but the thought of an indefinite period of covert fieldwork was extremely daunting.

In all, I spent the 6 months following my visit planning my next move. Besides worrying about how I would gather the requisite data and coping with my feelings about the deception I knew would be necessary, this involved talking to Merv and other community leaders about travel, work, and accommodation and how the time in the field would fit with my university teaching and family life. In general, community leaders were guarded and sceptical in regards to the research. There was also the issue of finances; my PhD budget of AUD1,000 had been exceeded on my first visit. This was an extremely difficult period as the logistics were virtually impossible. I was extremely determined to succeed, yet I felt like the entire study was doomed and that I would come out of it a failure.

This sense of inevitable loss only subsided, after many months, when my supervisor said to me, “You know you can just choose a more accessible location and start again.” I felt incredibly relieved upon hearing this, like a huge weight had been lifted off my shoulders. So, I began looking for a new location, a new group of men to engage with.

2.3. Successful Fieldwork

The second location and group of men selected for the project were from a gymnasium in suburban Melbourne that I had frequented regularly for more than a year. Although this location was a second choice, it seemed a good fit for my research as it contained many working class men, with the majority of the clientele being men aged between 18 and 45 years. I anticipated that entry into this group would be far easier than the first location, particularly because, as a member of the gym, I already knew some of the men: this time, I was an insider.

According to my journal notes I perceived the environment in the gymnasium as low fuss and informal. There was a large weight lifting area filled with old and run down equipment and two treadmills towards the back with signs on them saying “walking only”. Despite the lack of up to date equipment the gym was spacious and generally quiet, which suited the more advanced weight trainer. I believed that the conversational-style focus groups and interviews (Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998) that would satisfy institutional expectations would be feasible in this setting, and that this methodology would enable me to gather the data needed to meet my research aims.

2.3.1. Commencing Data Collection

Despite my feelings of having landed in a more congenial location and having some familiarity with intended participants, from the moment the data collection process began I noted that I perceived those relationships differently; I had become task oriented. My position was altered from simply being a member of the gym because I was now also representing the research institution and its inherent expectations. In order to overcome this regression to an outsider role, and achieve the transition towards the participant observer role, I had to step back and reflect on my fieldwork.

I decided to extend the period of time I already spent at the gym and to also increase the level of engagement I had with other gym members. Initially, I discussed the project with

the gym owner and two other members who I'd spoken to a number of times. Their response was very positive—they laughed at the potential of including some of the more colourful characters who frequented the gym. They suggested that I come at the same time daily so that I would get to know a specific cohort of gym members.

As it turned out this group of men were extremely interesting and engaging and I slowly informed them, one at a time when it seemed appropriate, of my research role. When participants first became aware of my motivations they tended to withdraw slightly, and become attentive to the information they shared with me. This regression and guardedness occurred despite a degree of familiarity with me. As a consequence, I realised that any collection of interview testimonies at this stage in the research would remain to some degree guarded and reflect a power differential between me and the participants. So, I continued to visit the gym at the same time of day, continuing to build relationships and working to gain the men's trust, only discussing the research when such conversations seemed welcome.

During this time, I participated in the ongoing process identified by Burgess (1991) of negotiation and renegotiation of relationships. This involved the to-ing and fro-ing between my roles as an insider and outsider as the participants worked out who I really was, how much they wanted me to know about them, and how much they wanted to include me within the group. While feeling time pressures regarding data collection, my intuition was telling me to continue participant observation, that rapport and trust were not yet sufficient to conduct interviews that would accurately reflect the group. In particular, this was evident because, although participants would normally agree to be interviewed, when the interview time grew nearer they would then find excuses for not being available. I was also aware of how, when the subject of recorded interviews was raised, I felt the dynamic change between me and the individual group member, with the power differential felt more strongly. For example, as noted in my journal, I felt that the conversations between me and Spiros (pseudonym), which were normally jovial, were instead strained and awkward. I reflected that this may be due to the anxiety the upcoming interview was provoking in him. I knew that such distancing threatened the integrity of our relationship.

At this stage my instincts in managing relationships and my desire for authentic conversational interviews were heavily weighed against the overall goals and time restraints of the project. In one instance, I had approached Pedro (pseudonym) and he had agreed to do an interview. Yet I noted in my journal that he then began avoiding me, and possibly the interview, by coming into the gym at different times. I felt that the best thing to do was to not raise the topic again unless Pedro did so first. It seems that I made the right decision in ensuring that I did not pressure or make demands of him as, after a few weeks of playing it down and resuming normal conversations, Pedro said, "Hey, so when are we doing that interview? I thought you were keen to do one." I conducted the interview shortly thereafter.

2.3.2. Changes in the Insider/Outsider Dynamic

A shift in the nature of my relationships with group members was first evidenced when Alex (pseudonym) called me on a Sunday afternoon. I had exchanged numbers with Alex some time ago but it was the first time he had called. He told me he needed to speak to me and he wanted to meet at a cafe near his home. He explained that he had broken up with his girlfriend and needed to send her some flowers but the florists did not deliver on Sunday. He asked me to deliver the flowers to her house, disguised as a delivery driver. I was happy to do this and help Alex out of a bind. To be able to give back to the group members both resourcefully and symbolically was a significant step towards a collaborative relationship (Burgess, 1991). I was also glad that he trusted me with this personal information and that he would seek my help and advice. This gesture strengthened our friendship. It was a significant step in becoming a group member, particularly as here my research role was largely dormant and clearly conceptualised as separate from my friendship role.

After 2 years with the group of men, the recording of interviews often seemed superfluous and, when conducted, closely resembled everyday interaction. Gaining the interviewees' consent did not alter relational dynamics. The men would often and enthusiastically offer me information for my thesis: "Don't forget to mention that," they would say. I did not ask specific questions, as I had already told the men the study was about male identity, and I allowed them to develop the conversation topics. This suited my analysis objectives, which were to locate masculine discourses as well as the relative subject positions of the men. The men were keen to divulge as they felt I knew them well enough to interpret their interactions and speak on their behalf and many of the men seemed to get some narcissistic pleasure in being written about as part of an academic study. However, the distinction between friend and participant had become blurred and, with the ethnographic process being so subtle and gradual, someone outside the group was needed to recognise the end of the data collection phase. This role fell to my supervisor.

Over this extended period of research my attitudes and feelings towards the research group moved from a distant observer with an eye for some data, to a full member and confidant of one group. In the end, I believe that the men were proud of me because one of their own is also an academic and a writer. In terms of my group social identity, we have negotiated many aspects so that Pete the football fan, Pete the weight trainer, Pete the joker, Pete the researcher, and so on, can all co-exist. It was interesting to note that the first time I felt like the group was filling in an identity for me was when they gave me a nickname. Having a personal term of reference created by the group relieved the anxiety of group members by placing me on a more equal level. This is further evidence of the necessity for the participants to co-construct the ethnographer's group identity (Harrington, 2003).

My familiarity with participants was also an important analytical tool as it allowed me to pick up on coded or abbreviated language (see Gill, Teese, & Sonn, 2014). For example, during a focus group one of the men looked away briefly and said, "Paddle pop." This

was a reference to an attractive woman who was walking past. Importantly, this reference was well known to all of the men in the group but would appear incoherent alone on an interview transcript, further enforcing the importance of the researcher being truly engaged with their group. Group membership and the joy of engagement are based on a collection of these shared, and often quite exclusive, cultural and linguistic knowledges. Hence, they are integral to understanding the group and an important factor related to how a sense of belonging is acquired and negotiated within a group (Frosh et al., 2003).

3. Discussion and Conclusions

3.1. Lessons Learnt and Advice for New Fieldworkers

The goals of ethnographic research are to engage with, get to know, join, and report on behalf of a group of people. For a multitude of reasons PG failed to do this in the first location and succeeded in the second. These reasons are addressed in turn, while providing advice for new fieldworkers, under three headings: intrapersonal challenges, interpersonal challenges, and institutional challenges.

3.1.1. Intrapersonal Challenges

It is evident, on reflection, that PG focused too much on the theoretical aspects of the research when preparing for the fieldwork and not enough on the emotional toll and personal sacrifices it would require. This, perhaps, increased the likelihood and the impact of a number of intrapersonal challenges faced by PG, which included: dealing with deception, feeling hopeless and overwhelmed, and feeling pressured rather than supported by mentors. In relation to these challenges, we offer the following advice:

(a) Be prepared for the covert stages and aspects of fieldwork. Deceiving people on any level will have emotional consequences, which you must work your way through to have any chance of completing your fieldwork. PG learnt this the hard way in the first location, specifically when needing to hide his research role from the men in order to gain trust. This experience, however, helped PG work through similar situations in the second location, where deception was again required in the initial stages. Thus, our advice is to take the time, being honest with yourself, in the planning stages to work out how you will deal with this aspect of fieldwork and the associated stress you are likely to experience. Make sure you have supports in place, for example, an experienced fieldworker from your supervisory team.

(b) Fieldwork should be challenging but achievable. If it is too difficult, you will feel overwhelmed and risk losing hope. This was the most difficult thing that PG had to deal with in the first location; the task was too difficult on too many levels, leading PG to feel hopeless and overwhelmed. In contrast, in the gym environment, PG faced many challenges but always felt they were surmountable, and the fieldwork became fun and exciting, leading to a successful outcome. While the intrapersonal combination of excitement, thirst for knowledge, and commitment will take you a long way, it will not take you everywhere. We recommend that careful and realistic consideration is given to

choosing fieldwork tasks, locations, and groups of interest so that they will be challenging but not overwhelming. Having a Plan B, a fall-back option where you can meet your research aims with a little less challenge, it is also advisable.

(c) Try not to feel indebted to your supervisors, mentors, and institutions. See them as sources of support rather than investors or backers. Every research project is a learning opportunity, regardless of prior experience; so do not be afraid of communicating your concerns or problems to those who are in a position to provide you with advice and/or support. I (PG) took the burden upon myself for far too long before asking for help; this was detrimental to my research and also my own psychological wellbeing.

3.1.2. Interpersonal Challenges

The interpersonal challenges inherent to ethnographic research are discussed more often in the literature than the other two types of challenges covered here. Nevertheless, having read about the process of negotiating and gaining access to groups did not adequately prepare PG for the reality of these fieldwork tasks. Of particular note here are issues relating to assessing the goodness of fit with the group of interest and developing relationships on a timeframe.

(a) Fieldwork is likely to fail if there is a lack of goodness of fit between you and the group of interest. In the first fieldwork example provided above, it is clear that the rural men were very different from PG and that it would have been necessary for him to spend a very long time with them and evolve aspects of his identity and his life to become a member. PG was not willing to make such a commitment, which was a factor contributing to the discontinuation of that fieldwork site. PG's insider status provided a better fit with the gymnasium men and, although gaining entry was challenging and required sacrifice, it did not involve changing fundamental parts of himself or his life. While we are aware that some ethnographers are prepared for this level of sacrifice, many (including PG) are not. As such, prior to commencing fieldwork and, ideally, prior to choosing a site/group, you need to determine how far you are willing to go in an effort to join with the group, including what you are and are not willing to sacrifice to do so.

(b) Fieldwork relationships need to develop naturally. Forcing the pace, such that it is too fast and unnatural for the participants, can undermine rapport and compromise the quality of the data collected. Thus, while you will inevitably have time restraints, it is best to block them out of your mind where possible when engaging with group members. In particular, avoid forcing interviews through when you know rapport is not sufficient. Follow your interpersonal instincts on this, but keep in mind that if you are feeling overly anxious and ill-at-ease when requesting interviews, your relationship with the participant is probably not yet strong enough to get naturalistic authentic data.

3.1.3. Institutional Challenges

From the researcher's perspective, institutional challenges can sometimes appear to be insurmountable, particularly when these may be related to long standing policies,

procedures, and budgetary constraints that adversely impact planned research. Nevertheless, there are often ways to find compromise between the researcher's needs and institutional regulations, such as in relation to time and budgetary constraints, researcher mentoring/support, and project design and approval.

(a) Ensuring you have an adequate budget in relation to your fieldwork is essential. Thus, as it is improbable that a researcher will ever have access to unlimited funds, it is necessary to choose a site that fits within the available budget and where appropriate participants are accessible. Similarly, it is rare for research to be undertaken without some sort of time constraints, thus it is important that adequate time is allowed for the fieldwork process within your project's timeframe. For doctoral students in particular, the funds available can often be low and the deadlines for completion strict. While there may be no option for gaining additional money from your institution, if you have a strong research proposal it is worth investigating external funding schemes and/or perhaps considering crowd funding if you feel that your lack of funds will adversely affect your research. Alternatively, you need to rethink your design to fit within the budget. Regarding deadlines, don't be afraid to ask for time extensions. If the project is viable and progressing, your institution should support you, perhaps enabling you to negotiate an additional 3-6 months.

(b) Institutions tend to vary with regard to the level of support and mentoring that is available to researchers and doctoral student who are completing fieldwork away from campus. The lack of adequate support can be compounded if you are from a discipline, such as psychology, where fieldwork is rare. If you are in this situation, consult more widely, ensuring that people with fieldwork experience are involved in the planning aspects of your project and that they are readily contactable for advice/support while you are in the field. For doctoral students this could be achieved by adding an extra person to your supervisory panel, even if this is a cross-disciplinary appointment. An experienced fieldworker's involvement in PG's project would have helped choose an appropriate location and better prepared him for the challenges. Further, having additional supervisors increases the likelihood that, at the very time you most need support, someone will be available.

(c) All institutions seem to have specified areas of research interest or focus. While it can be tempting or expected to try to fit your research within these areas, such as with hopes of gaining additional funds or support, this can lead you astray from your interests or what is realistically achievable given the constraints you are working within. Further, it is not uncommon for a researcher to find that, after the contortions necessary to fit their research into an area of institutional importance, the project no longer resembles that which they had set their heart on doing. If you communicate clearly the rationale for your project and your suitability for conducting it, you should be able to safely leave the decisions for the appropriate bodies. As such, we recommend that you plan realistic projects rather than ones that are fashionable or ones you or others think your institution would encourage or reward. Doing research that you believe is important and that satisfies your curiosity is more sustainable and enjoyable in the long-run.

3.2. Thoughts on the Reporting of Ethnographic Studies

Even when the formality of data collection is over, ethnographic researchers must look back over their major life experience, their field notes, interview transcripts, and memories, as they begin to make sense of their work and search for themes, discourses, and theoretical insights. In most cases, they will be looking back over a long and often messy process containing many circumstances, actions, and decisions that do not fit neatly into any formalised methodological research protocol. This is because, quite regularly, the ethnographic experience is unpredictable, uncontrollable, irrational, emotional, unsystematic, and unscientific. It is the interaction and obligatory complexity of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional factors that produces these irregularities, despite systematic planning.

However, we believe that it is in reporting and discussing the entirety of the research experience that we can share fieldwork insights, locate consistencies and inconsistencies, and help better prepare fieldworkers. To do this, it is necessary for fieldworkers to feel empowered to resist the pressure to smooth over rough edges and to, instead, engage, report, and analyse the data and data collection methods that can often seem objectionable to the academic or paradigmatic eye. Within an academic context in which the “validity” of ethnography is contested, it appears to us that an important part of the validity of ethnographic data is demonstrated in the reflective and detailed reporting of the research process.

As evidenced in the current project, PG’s experiences in the remote rural location could easily have been buried and forgotten, or filed away as a failure. However, by taking ownership of all of the research experience, PG could report valuable information about these men and the difficulties in getting to know and understand them. This is particularly important in light of current research and epidemiological data that has suggested the psychosocial health of rural men continues to be of social concern (Corboy, Macdonald, & McLaren, 2011). Specifically, the awareness of some of the major obstacles to accessing groups of such men has offered up an understanding of the inherent lack of fit any treatment modality or policy aimed at fixing or ameliorating the identified health crisis will have. Such knowledge, we propose is central to informing further clinical or political/social actions.

Thus, we think that the inclusion of greater acknowledgement of the subjective tensions involved in fieldwork and discussion within the literature is essential. In particular, we propose that the messy cases be given as much space as the neat ones, as it is these messy cases that provide the grist for contemplation and substantiation of our knowledge development. It will also lead to ethnographic reporting that reflects more accurately the lives of our groups of interest rather than the prerogatives and interests of a detached observer and his/her research affiliates.

3.3. Summary and Conclusions

This article highlights some of the hands-on intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional challenges of fieldwork, which were illustrated by PG's experiences as an ethnographer of two groups of young men. The tendency for doctoral students, such as PG was at the time of this research, to be left "floundering in relative isolation" has been noted by van der Meer, Spowart, and Hart (2013, p. 314). In line with this, we believe institutions should be aware of the additional support and guidance that is likely to be needed by inexperienced ethnographers (such as doctoral students) and ensure that these needs are met.

We believe that consideration and discussion of PG's experiences of success and failure have been valuable in informing the development of sound advice for new fieldworkers. As noted by Harrington (2003), the sharing of such experiences can be quite cathartic and, I (PG) believe, this would have been invaluable to me, providing solace in my times of doubt. The importance of such support in the field is evident, for example, in Scott et al.'s (2012) description of four researchers' behaviour when their study participation requests of art gallery visitors were met with "cold rejection":

“. . . feeling mortified we would scuttle away red-faced to the safety of the backstage region (the darkened edges of the gallery) and seek comfort from each other as supportive team-mates. Sharing our experiences of rejection, groaning, cringing and laughing together helped to relieve the feelings of shame, and gave us the courage to persevere. These backstage conspiracies also allowed us to compare, discuss and rehearse our strategies for approaching visitors, increasing the likelihood of future success.” (p. 726)

In summary, our advice to inexperienced fieldworkers is as follows. Regardless of how well planned your project is, you will encounter unforeseen intrapersonal challenges, so be prepared for a bumpy rather than a smooth ride. Be proactive about finding support, getting advice, and asking for help throughout the project, ignoring disciplinary boundaries when necessary to find people with the right experience. Your ability to collect valid, naturalistic, ethnographic data will depend on you becoming a member of the group of interest and developing good rapport and a trusting relationship with the group members. This process will be facilitated if you are already an insider, but is also possible if are an outsider who is willing and capable of making necessary adjustments to your behaviour and life to fit in. So choice of fieldwork site/group is critical to the success of your research, but you must also make sure you take as much time as is needed to develop good quality relationships with group members before bringing your researcher role to the forefront of your interactions. In the planning phase, be realistic rather than optimistic when estimating the amount of money and time needed for your research—everything costs more than you expect and takes longer than you imagine. Have a Plan B that takes less times, costs less, and is less challenging both intra- and interpersonally, just in case you need it. And, finally, do research that you find interesting, important, and enjoyable.

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