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Emotions, Encounters and Expectations: The Uncertain Ethics of 'The Field'

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Abstract

Entering 'the field' can be a daunting, demanding and at times bewildering experience, with researchers negotiating a myriad of assumptions, expectations and motivations. Whilst early career researchers and doctoral students may be trained in theories of research practice, research design and ethical conduct, the realities of actually *doing* research often test the limits of such formal training and knowledge. In this practice note, I draw upon my experience of fieldwork in the UK working with dispersed asylum seekers and refugees in order to discuss the challenges faced in encountering 'the field'. The note discusses how ethnographic research with asylum seekers and refugees produced a series of entanglements of emotional connection and expectation, as research in practice demanded the dissolution of fixed categories of the researcher, the volunteer, the advocate and the friend. In tracing a path through the messy realities of working with asylum seekers in this way, I argue that encountering 'the field' cannot be parcelled off into distinct chunks of time, but demands a constant attentiveness to context and constant work to develop skills of listening, observing, questioning and perseverance. The note concludes by asserting the need to take seriously the ways in which fieldwork produces more than simply 'data'. Rather, fieldwork produces sensibilities and dispositions, it alters researchers and those they encounter in often unpredictable ways.

Keywords: advocacy; asylum seekers; negotiations of consent; research ethics; research practice; trust

... I turn on my heel and walk back up the slight incline of the road, towards a set of traffic lights and a row of shops. On my right hand side I pass the church hall. This is the third time I've walked up this road, having circled the entrance to the hall twice already, not being able to see much beyond a slightly battered wooden door. I reach the top of the road and enter a Co-op store stationed on the corner. I buy some chewing gum and stand outside the store, checking the time on my phone. The centre's been open for twenty minutes and I've been building the courage to enter for five. Maybe the gum will help alleviate my nerves. I chew frantically and begin to walk back down the road to the church hall entrance; this time I'll go in. Doubts flood my mind as I walk, my pace slows; what if I say the wrong thing? What if no one will talk to me? What if I forget things? What if, what if, what if...? I walk

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past the door again and stop a few paces beyond it, trying to clear my head. As I turn to go in I remember the chewing gum, should I remove it? Will it give the wrong impression? I cross the road to find a bin and discard the gum. I walk back slowly and, with one final check of my phone, I push the door open and enter a long beige corridor with voices faintly audible at the other end.

This was my first encounter with what was to become the key site of my doctoral research, a drop-in centre for asylum seekers and refugees in the city of Sheffield, United Kingdom (UK). At the time of this encounter I was far from inexperienced in attending drop-in centres for asylum seekers, having previously volunteered as a student at a centre in Newcastle. But this was different. I would pass through this door for the next 10 months, meeting people from across the world, making friends, hearing and telling stories, celebrating and consoling with their highs and lows, sharing food and copious cups of tea. The nerves of this first encounter were far from unique—indeed fieldwork is often an anxiety-inducing experience as much as an exhilarating one (Browne and Moffett, p. 223). As [Thrift \(2003a: 106\)](#) argues, fieldwork is ‘a constant stew of emotions, ranging from doubt and acute homesickness to laughter and a kind of comradeship’. Such situations mark fieldwork as a social practice, a process of engaging in the ‘ethics of encounters’ (ibid: 105) with others. In this practice note, I want to reflect upon this engagement in order to show how a series of fieldwork entanglements emerged over time, and how these posed emotional and ethical challenges as the research progressed. This is not to suggest that there are any straightforward solutions to such challenges, but rather to highlight how doing justice to the messy contingencies of ‘the field’ is always a mixed, uncertain and unfinished affair.

Discussions of refugee research highlight a series of challenges associated with working with asylum seekers and refugees ([Block et al. 2012](#); [Lammers 2007](#)). Notable among these are the challenges which come with the highly vulnerable nature of asylum seekers as potential research participants. Not only are such individuals in socially and politically precarious positions, but they also bear the weight of the conflicts, abuse, torture and trauma which led to their forced migration in the first place. In this context, the need to be sensitive to the marginality of asylum seekers is paramount. However, this does not mean simply adhering to the formal ethics of audits, review boards and good practice as demanded by funding bodies, universities and the academic community. Rather, it means critically thinking about the realities of fieldwork as going beyond these formal mechanisms and reflecting what [Guillemin and Gillam \(2004\)](#) term ‘ethics in practice’. A practical and practised concern with ethics argues that processes of ethical review are often limited in their applicability once faced with the complexities of fieldwork itself (Wamai, p. 213). As [Thrift \(2003a: 119\)](#) suggests, the difficulty of such a procedural model is that it seeks to ‘render the ethical outcomes of research

encounters predictable'. By contrast, in reflecting on the entanglements of emotion, position and politics that ethnographic work in a drop-in environment produced, I argue that fieldwork demands the development of situated judgements which exceed procedural models of ethics (Darling 2010; Wilson 2013). It is these elements of fieldwork which may elude the grasp of doctoral training schemes and ethical audits as they only emerge through the practice of research itself (Browne and Moffett, p. 223; Wamai, p. 213).

In examining my own field experiences the paper develops as follows. I begin by briefly outlining the context of my research in Sheffield. I then explore how a series of emotional and practical entanglements emerged, as my position within the drop-in centre shifted with time. With these connections established, I explore their effects in two ways. Firstly, in challenging how I sought consent from research participants, and secondly, in placing expectations of advocacy at the heart of the power relations of 'the field'. The paper concludes by suggesting that addressing the entanglements of fieldwork is not about mastering ethical practice or emotional relations, but rather about a 'commitment to uncertainty, humility and *un*learning in the research process that might enable both researcher and researched to move on' (Jazeel and McFarlane 2010: 115, original emphasis).

Encountering asylum

My doctoral research set out to consider the links between urban politics and responses to asylum. The research was centred on Sheffield as a key site within the UK's dispersal policy, whereby asylum seekers are relocated to temporary accommodation around the country on a 'no choice' basis. In exploring how asylum seekers experienced the city, I undertook a multi-method approach combining discursive methods of document and interview analysis and ethnographic methods of participant observation and diary-interviews. This blend of methods represented an attempt to move away from a purely textual focus in examining the everyday lives of asylum seekers.

The ethnographic work, which forms the basis for this discussion, centred on a concern to 'see people in action, or perhaps more precisely, to see people in interaction' (Fine 2003: 46). To this end, I attended a twice weekly drop-in centre as a student volunteer and researcher. Over 10 months I began to get to know those individuals who were 'regulars' and spoke to them regarding their experiences of the city. As my relationships here deepened I attended a range of events as a helper, student and researcher, from charity meetings, theatre productions and festivals through to public demonstrations in support of individual asylum cases. It was notable across this time period that whilst the other elements of my fieldwork could be clearly planned, diarized and ordered, my ethnographic work was far less stable. It is to this question of timing, and to how my relations within the drop-in centre changed as time passed, that I want to turn first in discussing how entanglements of emotion,

friendship and reciprocity emerged through the practice of performing in this 'field'.

Emotional entanglements

One of the first things I learnt during the research process was that fieldwork is resistant to the demands of a strict timetable. Ebbs and flows of activity were very much the norm and my early research diary entries testify to an anxiety about how little I felt I was accomplishing. I was concerned about a lack of activity, about prospective interviewees not responding, about how those I worked with at the drop-in centre viewed me and whether they would be willing to be interviewed later in the research. Despite these anxieties, those first couple of months were essential. They allowed me to gain at least a partial understanding of the city, for as [Jazeel and McFarlane \(2010: 121\)](#) note 'cities are not *a priori* known, they must be learnt'. This process of learning the city provided me with resources on which to build points of commonality with those I met at the drop-in centre as we compared notes about the city, its neighbourhoods, parks, streets and people. These icebreakers proved essential over the coming months as I met more and more asylum seekers and refugees and became increasingly immersed in the social relations of the drop-in centre.

Literature on research with refugee and asylum-seeking groups highlights the need to develop relationships of trust to ensure that vulnerable individuals are not coerced into participation (see [Block et al. 2012](#)). For me, developing trust was also essential in ensuring that I was able to engage with the social setting of the drop-in centre as a researcher *and* a volunteer. Becoming a trusted volunteer as well as a researcher inevitably took time and commitment. It meant being there twice a week, every week. It also meant engaging in ways I had not expected at the outset of the fieldwork. Firstly, it meant an attitude of reciprocity. As a result each Wednesday and Friday I would often find myself addressing a range of questions about my own life, about my family history, my background, my personal life and how my research was progressing. Discussing these details was essential to a reciprocal exchange of views and experiences. I could learn about how asylum seekers experienced Sheffield as they learnt about my own views on the city as a relative, albeit very different, newcomer. It was in these regular, informal and often quite banal conversations that friendships were formed. Being an attentive listener was not enough in this context. Rather, attentive listening *and* reciprocity were demanded as means to display the value one placed in the relationships being developed.

Engagement also demanded a wide array of different tasks, few of which could have been predicted before entering 'the field'. Over my time at the drop-in centre I made the tea, translated Home Office letters, helped draft CVs and cover letters for voluntary work, painted banners, signed petitions, built lanterns, emailed members of parliament (MPs), played games,

accompanied people to report to the police and attended demonstrations. These varied tasks all contributed to the research in some small way—they all helped to inform an understanding of how drop-in space worked. But these activities also did more—they situated me as part of this social space and invested me with a variety of responsibilities previously unanticipated. It was this sense of immersive involvement that I was least prepared for when nervously entering the drop-in centre for the first time.

Taking time to get to know individuals, to develop friendships, trust and relationships of mutual respect meant investing in the lives of others in ways that are often hard to quantify before entering 'the field'. As I became more accustomed to the rituals and expectations of drop-in space the nerves of my first visit subsided, and I began to know when silence in a conversation signalled not a misunderstanding or a failure of language, but a pause for thought or reflection. I began to recognize those days when individuals would rather just sit and listen rather than sit and talk. Through this growing awareness of the personalities I met I began to care not just about the issue of asylum, but about these specific individuals, their lives, hopes, fears and frustrations. The drop-in centre was an emotionally charged setting. With asylum seekers bringing in letters from the Home Office conveying decisions on their status, this space often resonated with the joy or sorrow of refugee status granted or denied. Alongside this, the sudden and unexplained absence of individuals was common due to deportations, periods in detention and the movement of asylum seekers to other cities. Whilst efforts were made to trace individuals and to advocate for their release, there was an inevitable sense of loss and frustration at such absences. There was also the debilitating realization that in many cases one would never know what happened to some of those individuals detained and deported. This lack of information and closure could at times hang over the drop-in centre and was a stark reminder of the precarious nature of asylum status.

Whilst I was aware of these elements of the asylum system before embarking on fieldwork, developing friendships through the drop-in centre meant that I came to *feel* their effects too. The significance of this was not simply in the emotional labour that is often attached to fieldwork of this kind, in which discussions of trauma place a burden upon both researchers and participants (Wood 2006; Browne and Moffett, p. 223). In addition, emotional engagement must be considered as central in the *practice* of research. Elmhirst (2012) argues that emotions affect the research choices we make through the attachment of interest and resources to issues which attract emotional identification. Emotion might thus be seen to 'energize action' through focusing attention on those subjects who evoke 'compassion and connection' (Elmhirst 2012: 278). In this case, I would argue that my own choices were conditioned by how I came to identify with and feel connected to this social setting and these individuals. As my fieldwork continued I placed increasing time and emphasis on the drop-in centre. The entanglements that emerged through this immersive

environment thus had a series of effects on the orientation of my research and it is to these that I now turn.

Ethical negotiations

In reflecting on the challenges that fieldwork poses, [Rose \(1997\)](#) argues that positionality is never static, but rather is constituted in response to different audiences, demands and contexts throughout research. Thus, as I became increasingly entangled in the lives of those I worked with, my position shifted, as did other people's views of me. One implication of this growing immersion was that it challenged the ways in which I thought about, and sought to gain, informed consent from those I was working alongside. Whilst I entered 'the field' with a consent procedure in place, centred on signed consent forms, in practice my time at the drop-in centre forced me to explore additional methods of negotiating, rather than purely seeking, consent.

Whilst gaining informed consent is a critical prerequisite for all research, it is of particular importance when working with those who have fled persecution and are often demonized in the UK through media narratives, public opinion and political rhetoric. At the same time, addressing issues of consent in ethnographic research is itself a challenge due to the changing nature of the social settings, and social actors, being examined. Before my first visit to the centre I had contacted the charity that ran the centre to ask permission to attend and to undertake research. I outlined the aims of my research and how the material produced would be used. I highlighted that I wanted to act as a volunteer and to take on any duties that came with such a status in order to observe this social space. These observations would then be written up in an anonymized form in a research diary. During this conversation, the question of consent was raised. We discussed the possibility of placing signs around the centre highlighting my role as a researcher. However, this was felt to be too intrusive and potentially damaging to the fragile equilibrium of the drop-in centre environment. Not only would such signs pose potential language difficulties, but there was a risk that they would be associated with the formalized information gathering of the state. Through this process of discussion, we arrived at a less invasive plan. On my first visit to the centre I would introduce myself and my role to those present; I would then mention this to people as I met them over the coming weeks, reiterating my position as a researcher and a volunteer. For more formal research activities, such as interviews, I provided an information sheet and gained either written or verbal consent. Finally, we agreed on the need to conduct interviews outside the drop-in space to ensure that respondents were not 'captive' research participants ([Block et al. 2012](#)).

This posed the challenge of attempting to find suitable locations for interviews. Initially, I would suggest a range of public spaces near the drop-in centre and conducted my first three interviews in a nearby café. These first interviews were awkward and frustrating at times, as questions, meanings and responses were lost or misunderstood in the noise of the café. At the same time, it was

clear in these interviews that those asylum seekers I had come to know well through my time in the drop-in centre were not comfortable in this setting. The relatively free-flowing conversations of the drop-in centre were replaced with disjointed responses and a nervousness I was not used to. I left these interviews feeling dissatisfied and a little uncomfortable, as though the process had become an ordeal rather than an exchange of experiences. In part I put this down to the conventions of the interview process, and of its associations with formal 'data' gathering and the asylum adjudication processes of the state. But the issue of location was highlighted by my fourth respondent, who rejected the suggestion that we meet in a public place, and insisted that I accompany him to his space of accommodation. I was initially uncomfortable with this, fearing intruding on respondent's lives. In response, he pointed out that an intrusion would be to take him out of his familiar surroundings and expect him to discuss his experiences in an open, public and unfamiliar setting. The awkwardness of those first interviews might thus be reflected upon as not simply manifestations of the contrived nature of any interview, but as an expression of my own inability to consider the need to negotiate the location of interviews without presumptions of what and where would be most fitting.

Alongside these negotiations, it is notable that as my role at the drop-in centre shifted over time, so too did my sense of how others viewed me. I became one of the volunteers and I have no doubt that many of those present forgot or ignored my role as a researcher as time passed. In one sense this was part of the research process itself, one in which developing relationships of trust was part of examining how volunteers engaged with asylum seekers. Yet it also meant the blurring of lines that may appear clear cut at the outset of research—between the researcher and the volunteer, the academic and the advocate. The importance of this was that consent moved from being a singular event to becoming a more 'iterative' or processual negotiation. Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway (2007) argue that in refugee research, biomedical conceptions of informed consent need to be supplemented with a more flexible recognition of how consent may shift and change as understandings develop through research engagements (Wamai, p. 213). For me this meant not simply checking at regular intervals over my fieldwork period that individuals were comfortable with being included in my field notes, but also discussing these notes with those involved. This meant that consent was never a one-off signature or agreement, it was revisited in light of the events and knowledge shared through the drop-in centre. It is important to note that a more iterative consent process, in which formal demands are supplemented with dialogue, reflects a nuanced view of the power relations involved in research. Rather than simply assuming that researchers must protect potential respondents from the risks of involvement, an iterative process respects the capacity of refugees to judge the potential risks and costs of participation within research (Kirmayer, Rousseau, and Crepeau 2004; Lammers 2007), whilst still placing

a responsibility on the researcher to accurately represent their research and its intentions.

Such an approach is not without challenges, however. Returning to issues of consent could be a frustrating and time consuming process as this meant not only relaying information on how observations and interview accounts may be used whilst still in ‘the field’, but also enabled respondents to alter their accounts and edit their views as the research progressed. In particular, this was an issue for a number of asylum seekers who would openly express their anger at the UK asylum process and their dissatisfaction with decision-making, support levels and accommodation provision. Accounts of these discussions would be written into my research diary one week, only for individuals to approach me the following week and request that their comments be omitted, for fear that they may be picked up by the Home Office and affect their chances of gaining refugee status. Despite repeated reminders that my work was in no way linked to the Home Office and that all comments were anonymous, I would still spend time editing my research diary to note those comments to be omitted due to this processual approach to consent.

Expectations

A second consequence of the entanglements of ‘the field’ I want to discuss is that of the social expectations that accompanied this research. As a number of researchers in this area have noted, it can be common for researchers to be viewed as external ‘experts’ or authority figures (Pittaway, Bartolomei, and Hugman 2010). Part of the problem of being positioned as an ‘expert’ is in having to respond to the expectation that one has the power to effect change. In being identified more closely with other volunteers I was spared some of these expectations, yet in their place I was subject to a different set of associations. Instead of being positioned as a figure of academic authority with the capacity to effect change through intellectual capital, I was positioned, alongside other volunteers, as a privileged citizen who might effect change through social and political capital.

The drop-in centre sought to break down barriers of status through presenting everyone as part of a single community. For example, all those present, regardless of status, were encouraged to help in making food and drink for others and all were able to access the kitchen as and when they pleased. At times, my fieldwork felt like an attempt to constantly evade or destabilize a series of assumed positions. I was well aware of the harm that positioning oneself as ‘generous’ or ‘charitable’ could cause (Darling 2011). Yet in ‘the field’ it became increasingly clear that such distinctions could not be so easily denied and could, at specific points and for specific purposes, come to be useful tools. On entering ‘the field’, I was not fully prepared for the demand to use cultural and political capital that was placed upon me in this context. As a volunteer, I was asked to take on a range of responsibilities, such as accompanying asylum seekers to meetings and calling solicitors and local authorities

to make enquiries on their behalf. These actions were all part of the relationships that made up the drop-in centre as noted above, but they were also actions that strategically employed my position as a British citizen.

For example, the value of accompanying asylum seekers to appointments was in both the support provided through being there, and the fact that asylum seekers reported being treated differently when accompanied by British citizens. This differential treatment is noted by asylum advocates, who highlight citizenship status as a key marker which determines how local and state authorities respond to individuals. As such, acts of accompaniment were both ways in which volunteers could extend care towards asylum seekers, and ways in which citizenship status could be strategically used (see [Henderson 2009](#)). Similarly, being asked to sign petitions, attend demonstrations and call solicitors were all acts not associated with an 'expert', but with the political status of a citizen.

At the outset of my fieldwork I was uncomfortable with such a position and with the demands of using my position in advocating for others. I was afraid of the risk of speaking 'for', rather than speaking 'with' asylum seekers. For the first couple of months I evaded such demands and tried to avoid becoming explicitly involved in these political acts. This was not an attempt at objectivity, but rather a fear of reproducing that which I sought to critique. However, this position became increasingly untenable as time passed. As my connections with those I worked with deepened on a weekly basis and I learnt more about their lives, stories and experiences, both my emotional ties to these individuals grew and their expectations of me developed. I began to consider my own role as a citizen as one of occupying, as best one could, a series of compromised and conflicting positions in practice, for as [Jazeel and McFarlane \(2010: 111\)](#) argue, 'the "field" has its own politics, urgencies, necessities'. Thus whilst many in refugee research defend a position that advocates *for* refugees, and which argues that research and advocacy can go hand in hand ([Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway 2007](#)), for me it was through the relationships forged in 'the field' that political and ethical demands were placed upon me to respond in practice.

This does not mean that every attempt to work alongside and speak in solidarity with, rather than for, those I encountered succeeded, or that I avoided all traces of charitable humanitarianism. Neither does it mean that this was always a comfortable experience. For example, my initial reluctance to sign a number of anti-deportation petitions arose from a scepticism about the claims being made by particular individuals. This scepticism had a knock-on effect as it meant I was reluctant to sign other petitions for fear of highlighting the selective nature of such support. It quickly became clear that whilst volunteers at the drop-in centre were not required to sign petitions or join campaigns, there was a tacit expectation that one would do so. Personal judgements were to be suspended in this environment as expectations of support irrespective of status took centre stage. This meant occupying a position between assuming

the 'right' to judge the legitimacy of those one worked with, and fulfilling expectations of support. Being responsive to this context of ethical expectations and practices thus demanded a recognition of the compromises of 'the field' and of how such compromises could challenge the politics and views that one carries into 'the field'.

Conclusion

In reflecting on my first encounters with 'the field', I have sought to discuss the ways in which research can be viewed as the enactment of a series of social interactions in which individuals invest time, effort and insight. With this in mind, I want to highlight a number of issues I would wish to reflect more carefully on before fieldwork. Before undertaking fieldwork I assumed that research took place within distinct parameters of activity, during interviews, focus groups and observational work, and that outside of this fieldwork need not intrude on everyday life. In practice, I found that such a distinction was both problematic and arbitrary (Browne and Moffett, p. 223; Wamai, p. 213). For me, any time spent in 'the field' was of value. I would thus advocate approaching fieldwork not as a set of activities or methods to be performed, but as an outlook. Encountering 'the field' cannot be parcelled off into distinct chunks of time, but demands a constant attentiveness to context that requires skills of listening, observing, questioning and perseverance. These were skills I presumed I possessed before undertaking fieldwork, but in reality they were skills I was only beginning to develop, and am still developing, *through research*. In this regard, before encountering 'the field' I would advocate careful thought about both the skills required to be attentive to the social world one is entering into, and the emotional, practical and ethical demands such a world is likely to place on one as a researcher. Whilst my nerves on encountering 'the field' for the first time were a natural response in some ways, they also betray a fear that I may lack those skills required to make fieldwork work. Of course, preparation can only take one so far in approaching 'the field', but in my own experience I wish I had been more fully cognizant of the emotional and practical demands of 'the field' and of how the art of attentive and responsive listening is not something immediately possessed.

Finally, my experiences of 'the field' encourage me to reflect on the importance of flexibility. Before encountering 'the field' I would have benefited from an awareness of the contingent nature of fieldwork, of how plans rarely fall together in 'the field' and of how important responding to events is to this process. From my nerves on the first day at the drop-in centre to the sadness of my final day there, my experiences of this 'field' was always one of the 'incompleteness and event-ness with which the whole research process is shot through' (Latham 2003: 2005). Uncertain and unexpected friendships arose, mutual exchanges formed and fell away, and all of this occurred against the backdrop of the instability of asylum status. It was in this context, as I have tried to illustrate, that research demanded more than simply a response in

terms of 'procedural ethics' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004). It demanded a response that was based on situated judgements and the less certain, but no less valuable, search for ways to 'speak the right words at the right time' (Thrft 2003b: 2020; Darling 2010: 257).

I was by no means always successful in this endeavour—it took practice, patience and an attunement to the social atmosphere of this space. However, what such an approach highlights is the need to consider more carefully the ways in which fieldwork produces more than simply 'data', narratives or notes to be analysed and represented. Fieldwork produces sensibilities and dispositions, it alters individuals and may orientate them differently towards others. Through examining my own experiences of 'the field', I have sought to describe how sensitivity to context is never a final or full accomplishment. Context and positionality are always shifting beneath our feet as research develops, relationships grow and recede and the lives of those we work with move on around us. As such, fieldwork demands the continual acknowledgement that the accounts we produce are incomplete reflections of a 'here and now' never to be repeated. There is then a constant need to be cautious, watchful even, for as Duneier (1999: 14) reminds us: '[t]hrough participant observers often remark on the rapport they achieve and how they are seen by the people they write about, in the end it is best to be humble about such things, because one never really knows'.

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