When Fieldwork Hurts:
On the Lived Experience of Conducting Research in Unsettling Contexts

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Introduction

Prolonged exposure to the lived experience of others—by observation as in ethnography or vicariously through interviews—can be deeply unsettling. Human misery is contagious. Some of what makes research unsettling is context specific. Thus, repeated encounters with, for example, those living life behind bars (Rogers, Corley, & Ashforth, 2016), victims of rape (Whiteman, 2010; Zilber, 2002), human trafficking and street-level sex workers (Eberhard, 2017), or drug addicts (Lawrence, 2017) will likely impact the one collecting data. Occasionally, contexts are not obviously unsettling but reveal incidents or exposure to the emotional experiences of others that can be. Research can also be experienced as deeply troubling for reasons not specific to context in forcing us to front up to moral questions around voyeurism and exploitation, the answers to which are often deeply personal.

In this chapter, we provide several examples of these types of triggers as experienced by contemporary organizational researchers across the career spectrum, and explore how our colleagues have responded to them. Our chapter has its origins in a series of friendly exchanges around our own experiences of conducting research in unsettling contexts, prompted in part by a re-reading of Gail Whiteman's (2010) eloquent account of heartbreak in her fieldwork. We began to suspect that her sentiment might be more widely shared, particularly in view of a marked increase in the number of papers that draw on unconventional issues, topics, and settings (Hallgren, Rouleau, & de Rond, 2018), and new calls for management scholars to engage in work that confronts societal 'grand challenges' (George, Howard-Grenville, Joshi, & Tihyani, 2016). Fieldwork within and beyond organisation studies has long unsettled those who do it, because it exposes them to issues, people, and settings they may not be fully prepared to encounter nor understand (Bell, Meyerson, & Nkomo, 2003; Schramm, 2005; Goffman, 2016), despite their best efforts to sensitize to the setting, heed ethical norms, and engage in reflexivity (Anteby, 2013; Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008; Bourdieu, 2003; Burgess-Proctor, 2015; Irwin, 2006; Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Gray et al., this volume).

Our modest aim in this chapter is not to re-tread ground already covered by thoughtful prior accounts, but to give voice to the experience of 18 colleagues, all of whom have engaged in fieldwork that unsettled in different ways. We reflect on themes that emerged around their emotions and to the often-overlooked relational aspect of coping with unsettling fieldwork. As an author team comprised of two senior and two junior scholars, we are also keen to better understand how we can support each other in doing unsettling fieldwork and coping with its aftermath. We briefly describe our methodology before exploring what our informants perceived as the causes and the consequences of unsettling fieldwork, and the coping strategies they employed in response. We conclude with some suggestions for those considering exposure through their research to morally complex, upsetting environments.

How We Explored the Lived Experience of Unsettling Research

To obtain a rich understanding of how organisational scholars experience and cope with research in 'unsettling' contexts, we used an inductive, qualitative research approach. We began with a brief systematic review of recent papers (published between 2014 and 2017) in *ASQ, AMJ,* and *Organization Science,* to identify potential interviewees, in search of empirical contexts characterized by inequality, injustice, or marginalized or vulnerable people. We expanded this sample through our personal networks, to include scholars who we knew had conducted research in unsettling contexts, but whose work had not yet been published in these outlets, was published in other outlets, or had been published earlier. Struck by the number of junior scholars in our original sample, we made a deliberate effort to include scholars at different career stages. As we conducted our interviews, we also engaged in "snowballing" (Flick, 2009) to further expand our list of interviewees.

In total, we completed 18 semi-structured interviews[1] either face-to-face (8) or via skype (10). Conversations lasted between 30 and 70 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. All authors were involved in the data collection process and selectively multiple authors conducted interviews together. We were guided by four broad questions: i) how did it feel to collect data in an unsettling context? ii) what was it about a particular study that triggered emotional responses on the part of the researcher?, iii) what coping strategies did the researcher develop and with what effect?, and iv) what did s/he learn from the experience that might be useful for others?

Our analysis of the transcribed interviews followed established procedures for inductive, qualitative research. Two authors manually coded a small sample of the transcribed interviews, attending to the lived experience of conducting fieldwork in unsettling contexts and how researchers coped with it. After discussing differences, these authors agreed on a set of preliminary codes and completed a first round of coding of all interviews. We collectively refined, elaborated, and collapsed codes as we began to see themes about how codes adhered to the broader questions of what the causes of 'unsettling-ness' were, what consequences resulted from the unsettling nature of fieldwork, and how researchers responded. While no single account can capture the diversity of experience, it soon became apparent that unsettling research gives rise to a set of common concerns. As well, interviewees had diverse ways of responding and of coping (or not coping).

Causes of 'Unsettling-ness'

Many of our interviewees indicated that the *contrast* between what they encountered during fieldwork and their prior experiences, personal lives, and/or strongly held beliefs about the (social) world contributed to fieldwork being unsettling. For others, what unsettled was an awareness that their own

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[1] Some interviewees requested anonymity, whereas others allowed us to use their names. In the latter cases, we report some details of their studies, in order to contextual their comments. In the former cases, we disguise some aspects of their studies or settings.

presence, their *influence* on the observed, contributed to a dangerous or deeply unpleasant situation or outcome.

Exposure to contrast. Tammar Zilber spent 19 months of her doctoral studies serving as a volunteer in a rape crisis centre. Her tasks included answering phone calls and interacting with victims of sexual harassment on a regular basis. She remembered being told by the centre's staff about the nature of the job and the possibility that encountering victims might create tensions between the predominant feminist worldview of power relationships between the genders and her own personal experiences with specific men. One staff member told her "you will have to come to terms with the fact that you are sleeping with the enemy…you're here and here they are the enemy. They are the aggressors."

Such encounters led Tammar to question her own interactions with the opposite sex. She faced the conundrum of having to actively frame men as perpetrators in her daily work while simultaneously enjoying a wonderful relationship with her husband:

> I remember coming back home and getting into a fight with him, and it took both of us time to understand that what was going on is that I was spending whole days just reading this log [about] another attack and another attack and another sexual harassment, another rape, and another, and it just got under my skin.

For Tammar, the contrast between her work at the rape centre and her prior experience brought her face to face with misery, which she recalled as almost visceral: "it was just depressing. You would get into the organisation and … the wall would cry to you [in] pain … the suffering, all these victims."

Several others experienced sharp contrasts between their research setting and other aspects of their lives, and similarly noted that what made it so unsettling was the misery and human suffering to which they were exposed. For example, Jeannette Eberhard, who studied sex workers and trafficking in her doctoral work, remembered getting "mad at the pimps or human traffickers who trap other women. …You know, how can you do this?" She continued, "but, what also makes me mad is when you think that these women are made to have sex with ten or fifteen men a day. …These [men] are

the guys that live beside you. … They're leading everyday lives and in denial … They're violating these women." For some researchers, what unsettled was the way contrasts exposed inequality. Emily Block, for example, recounted a moment from her work in East Timor:

> I'm lying on my bed, which is on the floor, and my phone works there, so [I get] a message: "You've been upgraded from Tokyo to Chicago on United Business"… I'm lying there in this thatched roof house where we've been staying for three days in East Timor. The contrast between how small the world is, but how big the divides are, it's astounding. It's nuts.

Even for those who anticipated the contrast they would encounter during fieldwork, the enormity of the misery and ugliness in the setting touched many of our interviewees deeply. Tom Lawrence explained how "even though I'd been living in [Vancouver] for quite a while, I had no idea the scope of the [drug] overdose problem that people were being exposed to or suffering from." He recalled the stark contrast of working in his modern office, just a few streets away from where he was learning about the enormity of the problem when studying actions to help drug addicts:

> To listen to the stories that people told about people living in very difficult conditions, injecting heroin in alleys using puddle water, stirring or shaking their heroin because they didn't have a heat source to be able to melt it. And the idea that people would leave other people that they were injecting with when there was an overdoes because they were too afraid to engage with police or ambulance services, and because they didn't have phones. It was very otherworldly, especially when I'm working in my office five blocks from where this is taking place. … There's this real bifurcated existence in Vancouver, where you have this 'world's most livable city,' and at the same time, the sickest, poorest postal code in Canada. They're absolutely shoulder to shoulder with each other. … It was really like walking through some kind of portal into a very different world, and not my world.

Another interviewee, Kira Schabram, had already volunteered at three different animal shelters before conducting her fieldwork through which she sought to capture the difficulties that shelter workers face in trying to reconcile their love for animals with the reality that most shelter animals will be euthanized. She noted: "when you work in [shelters] you can delude yourself thinking this is as bad it gets. Then when you start doing a study that's across North America, … [there's] that sense of oh no, it's bad everywhere. … You're suddenly seeing the enormity of … what these people are facing."

Realisation of influence. Beyond a contrast between life as they knew it and life as experienced by 'the other', what unsettled some interviewees was a growing awareness that their presence had

begun to affect those being observed. Arguably most troubling was John van Maanen's experience conducting the police ethnographies that feature large in his early career. He trained as a police cadet and subsequently joined his cohort in policing the streets of a large city on America's west coast. Van Maanen (1978) tells of an incident during a return visit to his research site five years after having concluded the original fieldwork. He had been invited to join a routine patrol when his colleagues were asked to help remove a drunk from a bar. What could have been a misdemeanour let off with a warning escalated into the drunk being beaten to within an inch of his life in the back of a police van. As if that were not disconcerting enough, John came to understand some months later that the beating was courtesy of him being present. Reflecting on the incident in our interview, nearly fifty years later, he explained:

> They beat the shit out of him on the street. And I'm watching, I'm just watching. And they throw him in the back of what they called the van. … And I'm up in the front with the driver. We're driving to the jail and I can hear the beating going on in the back … They were showing off. They were showing off that they didn't take shit on the street. They knew what they were doing… They probably would've ignored this case had it not been for my presence.

Others found their presence in the field led to unsettling circumstances. Madeline Toubiana recalled being interrupted by a social worker and her interview with a convicted paedophile stopped because, as she was told, her being pregnant was arousing her informant. Another interviewee talked of how unsettling it was to be on the receiving end of her informant's anger following a major work-related loss. Feeling physically intimidated during his outburst, she was taken aback by him eventually yelling "so is that gonna go in your book?" She reflected: "[some people were] hostile to having me there, they didn't really want me to be watching them do [their highly sensitive work]."

Consequences of Unsettling Fieldwork

Having provided a few examples of what might cause experiences of 'unsettling-ness', we explore the consequences and complex emotions that underlie some of these experiences, as described by our

interviewees. Themes that derived from our analysis include *feelings of helplessness*, *feelings of guilt or shame*, and *discomfort about one's role* in the field.

Feeling helpless. Exposure to misery and malice frequently elicited feelings of helplessness, which our interviewees attributed in part to the bystander role that is often par for the course as a researcher. For example, Paul Tracey was confronted with a variety of issues that made him feel uncomfortable during his fieldwork at Keystone (Tracey & Phillips, 2016), including racial tensions inside the social enterprise, not knowing how to deal with the reality of poor people's lives, and the inability to better them. As the 'Acting Director of Social Innovation' – a title he was given by the organization so as to legitimise his presence – he worked with both migrant workers and poor British workers. He recalled several incidences in which the racial tensions between two groups made him feel trapped:

> One is that there was a lot of banter going on that certainly wasn't politically correct. Some of that was even by people inside Keystone itself. Some of the Keystone employees, even ones that are supposed to be helping the migrant workers were saying things that you wouldn't expect to hear. That put me in a very difficult position because, what was I going to do? Was I going to tell Neil? I couldn't really do that. That would screw everything up.

While these tensions left him helpless in the sense that he was unsure how to respond, his sense of helplessness also stemmed from hearing of devastating life stories from those he met and his difficulty in sharing these stories with others. Particularly vivid was his recollection of a transgendered woman who had volunteered as a community worker and with whom he worked for several days. She was living in a village near a socially conservative town in Norfolk, and shared with him her stories of the abuse that she endured as part of her daily life. Paul recalled feeling intensely affected by her recollections, without knowing how to respond. Being helpless to do something about people's situations like hers led Paul to reflect with despair upon his own position and impact as a business school professor:

> Just being face to face with that is quite challenging. I remember thinking, 'What the hell am I doing working in the business school?' I'm just helping all these really privileged people […] I'm part of a

system that's basically making privileged rich people even richer […] I'm interested in issues around poverty, equality, and social innovation. Is this really the right environment to be working in? […] Basically, what I do is fairly pointless.

Feeling helpless as a result of the experiences, stories, and emotions one encountered during fieldwork was a common feature in many of our interviews. For example, Jeannette, having joined police officers on their patrols as part of her study of street-level prostitution, stated:

> There's this feeling of impotence to do anything because we're researchers. So we can write about it and we can talk about it but ... I don't think talking about it makes it better or worse.

The sense of helplessness that interviewees recalled stemmed partly from the nature of the context itself (i.e., the injustice, poverty, and/or vulnerability of subjects), but also from understanding oneself as a bystander in the role of a researcher. This helplessness could pervade seemingly innocuous settings. Kristie Rogers, who had conducted fieldwork in prisons, experienced equally profound feelings of helplessness during a subsequent study of working adults who identify as dyslexic:

> I actually feel just as helpless with this group as I did with the inmates. There's nothing I can do to make the people around you understand what dyslexia really means. There's nothing I could do to make the interactions these women had with prison guards any better than they were.

Feeling guilt and shame. Confronted with people living in situations far less favourable than those of the researchers, many informants reported strong and persistent feelings of guilt and shame. Kira's research in animal shelters is illustrative in this respect. While animal shelters might have relatively positive connotations to the general public, this perception compares poorly to reality and, as a consequence, work in such organizations can be emotionally taxing. Many of the animals that are taken into a shelter have been neglected by their former owners and will eventually be euthanized. Day in and day out, shelter employees witness suffering and death while also trying to cope with toilsome working conditions. During and after her fieldwork, Kira reported feeling "just this constant sense of guilt." She elaborated,

> I often find myself sitting in my nice office and working on research that's really fun and thinking like, "Who am I to be this lucky and have this decent job when what I'm hearing from people in the field is just so miserable." … Several times a day I'm just struck by the sense of guilt about the unfairness of it all.

Further, the guilt was not assuaged by her efforts to provide practical help by sharing her work at practitioner conferences. Kira reflected:

> I naively I thought that as a researcher, I could help solve some of those issues … [But now] I have a strong sense of guilt, especially that I'm also doing other research projects. So, I've got this idea that I'm supposed to be helping [the shelter workers], but I'm spending a lot of my time solving these abstract questions.

This combination of ambition to help, yet incapacity to do so, was experienced by other researchers. For example, Kristie gave a detailed account of her work in a female state prison and recalled feeling very guilty and ashamed about how she reacted to some of the inmates' stories, while simultaneously realizing that she could not have had much impact anyway:

> I felt some … guilt and regret. I can still think of an example that I just feel awful not thinking what could I have done to have made that woman's situation better. But reminding myself that that was not my job, that wasn't my place.

Fifty years after he witnessed the brutal beating at the hands of his police officer peers, John still feels shame: "Why didn't I stand up and say something at the time? I didn't say a word."

Feelings of guilt and shame would occasionally result from the realisation that, at least to some extent, their research could be considered exploitative. As Jeannette noted, "one of the biggest feelings I had was a feeling of guilt because you are doing this research and people [ask…] 'how will you share this and what will you do with it?" The answer of 'contributing to theory' was "a pretty cold-hearted use" of people's experiences, which led her to consider how she could contribute to the problem, and also move to a different academic department where she could balance the demands for theory with the desire for impact. Kamal Munir, who studied child labour and its societal context (Kahn, Munir, & Willmott, 2007), asked: "what gives me the right to go and collect data from completely destitute people who, I can see, are highly oppressed." He felt strongly obligated to contribute to alleviating people's suffering, through, for example, writing for the newspaper to bring attention to company practices. Otherwise, he noted, it's "an exploitative relationship."

Guilt caused our interviewees to question their right to be in the field and elevated their concerns that reporting on their findings would 'add nothing' to either those who lived the complexity and misery of it every day, or to what other experts had already contributed through their work in such contexts. As Corinna Frey, who studied refugee camps in Rwanda, recalled:

> Every time you walk by these [refugee] families … It feels so … What's the right word? It feels somehow meaningless. How does your work relate, or how meaningful is what you're doing, [in] comparison with [what] they're seeking?

Tom captured this concern well in noting that "one of the things you have to acknowledge when you go into these complex areas is that you're not the first one there. If it's an important domain, there will be a whole bunch of people [experts] there ahead of you." Coming to grips with one's choice to study a given domain, and one's presence there, thus involved working through "trying to be able to say something, but at the same time, trying to work out where the limits are to what I can say reasonably." For Tom, there was a lingering risk of "feeling like a real potential dilettante, outsider, tourist."

In sum, while feelings of helplessness were more immediately experienced during and shortly after fieldwork, our analysis suggests that guilt and shame were emotions that often lasted long after the fieldwork had been completed. Guilt and shame also had multiple sources ranging from the inability to help in a meaningful way to the fear of exploiting vulnerable individuals.

Discomfort about one's role. Our analysis suggests that feelings of helplessness and guilt contributed to the experience of fieldwork feeling 'unsettling' because these emotions brought to the fore discomforting aspects of the researcher role, like being a bystander or engaging in voyeurism or exploitation. Put differently, the lived experiences of these emotions forced our interviewees to confront the limitations of their role as a researcher. Being in the researcher role could prompt behaviours that were contradictory to those that one would ordinarily enact as a fellow human being, resulting in feelings of discomfort about the appropriateness of one's actions. Recall Kristie's

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unsettling encounter with an inmate, to whom she wished she had responded more emphatically, but as a fieldworker collecting data, she realized "that was not my job, that wasn't my place."

Others echoed this understanding that, in their role as a researcher, they were limited in how they could interact, out of concern that they might influence or distort – rather than simply observe – the situation. One of our interviewees recalled being exposed to crudity and gender-based harassment that she would not have stood for in her own academic institution. However, as a researcher in the field she was aware that intervening was not appropriate. She admitted that, oddly, being subject to this kind of interaction was a sign of how close she had gotten to her informants' worlds, and indeed how she had become an insider: "That they treat you with the same casual dismissive sexism that they treat the other women around them… in a sense, I also regard that as a compliment." However, having "negotiated friendship" as a means to entering her informants' worlds, and feeling that she truly had become friends with some of them, she also recounted with sadness how she had learned eight months after leaving the field that one of these 'friends' has been hospitalized with brain damage some months before. This person had been about to get married, but now he is "in a rehab hospital, and [work colleagues] are fundraising for him." As a friend, she continued,

> You'd sort of expect to have known that. So it was a really … confronting reality to me, that I had negotiated a friendship at the level where I knew stuff about what the marriage is gonna be like, and part of all the in jokes, and I wasn't inside at all. Not at all. Why would I be? I'm just there to do a job. I had negotiated all that friendliness, only as a job.

Some settings reinforced a 'professional distance' that others – like humanitarian workers in refugee camps – enacted. While this helped the researcher perform a role it also organizationally sanctioned the removal of humanity from it. Corinna recalled:

> I always walk by these families; I never talk to them. I don't know if I did not talk to them because no one talked to them. [There] was quite a clear organisational message that there's one person responsible for them and no one else is supposed to engage with them. [How is it] that we can operate to these weird structures that prevent us from just being human in such a situation?

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John Amis, who studied childhood obesity (Amis et al., 2012), was struck by the lack of concern for children's welfare and the general apathy and 'laissez-faire' attitude towards it.

Others, in the absence or organizational or societal norms that set such a tone, self-censored their emotions while in the field in order to simply cope with the enormity of the misery yet still collect their data. Laura Claus, who had been following activists campaigning against abductions conducted by the terrorist group Boko Haram in Nigeria recalled that "I was a different person [in the field] because I was so blank in terms of my emotions." She remembered: "(I) deliberately told myself to not feel anything for the time that I was going to be there. …to just push that aside and do the interviews as professionally and objectively as I could." But "then I stepped on a plane two weeks later, and … I was really crying almost the whole plane [trip] from Abuja to London."

In sum, performing the researcher role confronted our interviewees with a number of challenges to how they understood themselves as humans: by foregrounding the limitations of how they could respond to what they saw in the field; by reminding them that they were forever an outsider even when they had made personal connections in the field; and by forcing them, in some instances, to conform with organisational or personal practices that separated the empathetic, emotional responses from actions that got the (research) job done.

Coping with Fieldwork that Unsettles

While some researchers consciously chose to live with their unsettling experiences and abstained from trying to overcome what they had witnessed, many of our interviewees engaged in practices that helped them cope with the unsettling experiences they had encountered. These included *regular communication*, *enacting boundary rituals*, and *giving back*.

Regular communication. Naturally, individual researchers had their own preferred manner of sharing their observations, experiences, and emotions with their colleagues, friends, and family. Some communicated via email by distributing accounts of their daily lives to others on their research teams;

others focused on writing memos and field diaries and sometimes shared these. Some relied on face-to-face interactions with peers or family. Tammar recalled:

> [My partner, who was writing his own PhD thesis in anthropology at the same time] would tell me, "You are out of proportion. You are taking it too seriously, [you are 'going native']. Think about that." He would give me another perspective of what was going on. … So it was very helpful to actually just share with him the experiences.

Reaching out to others helped our interviewees in a number of different ways. One implication was that such communication made it easier to process one's experiences from the field. In sharing different emotions, those of happiness and equally those of sadness and frustration, our colleagues often reported a cathartic-like experience. Others explained that they found it extremely difficult to talk to anyone about their work, let alone convey their emotions, because they felt others were unable to relate to the unsettling experience.

Some researchers reported how they involved others proactively to enable communication and support. Kristie explained how her whole doctoral committee joined her on her first day in the field, recalling, "it was a long, exhausting (day), I think we were there for 10 hours." But this experience helped her committee understand the research context, have a sense of the atmosphere in the field, and hence made it easier for her to talk with them about her subsequent experiences. Others chose to work in teams. One said "as a group, we were reflective about [what we were seeing] and we talked … and thought about what's going on in these environments." Johanna Mair noted:

> I don't go on a field trip myself, but I go with someone [else]; we do it a lot like that. Because these sharing experiences are super helpful on the spot.

Finally, we also came across researchers who made conscious attempts to seek 'off-topic' conversations with individuals in the field. Interviewees explained that speaking to people about day-to-day issues, which were not part of the research agenda, enabled them to better understand what they encountered, helped them feel slightly more embedded, and made the context more familiar, somewhat mitigating the 'unsettling-ness' of the experience.

Enacting boundary rituals. Many of our interviewees found that enacting boundary rituals eased their experience of doing research in unsettling environments. Those who were moving between the field and home on a regular basis used the physical transition to engage with and disengage from the field. Tammar recalled thinking initially that her commute to the rape crisis centre "would be a waste of time, this hour commuting every time back and forth." But she subsequently realized how "this hour is really, really important to me, because it allowed me to decompress before I go back into my life." Kristie, as well, found:

> My commute definitely helped me ... I was about 35 miles from the prison and having that time [helped] to gear myself up for the experience. Then when I left, I would turn on the voice recorder and just say everything I needed to say immediately for a memo and have that transcribed later. I would just talk until I was done talking. Then, I still had time to drive and decompress.

Other researchers relied on material objects to cognitively set boundaries and distance themselves from unsettling research environments. Corinna recollected how her official NGO clothing enabled her to cope with regularly interacting with deprived individuals in a refugee camp in Rwanda:

> All international staff members or organisational members are wearing certain jackets indicating [their] organisations … It keeps the professional distance but, weirdly, it also helps you to find a way to distance yourself from, for instance, people that are approaching you and asking you for help.

For some, small ritual acts helped, like taking a shower after leaving a field site, or building themselves up with meditation to "get energy and try and fill my own cup a little bit."

Letting be. While boundary rituals helped researchers to physically and materially demarcate what happens in the field from their lives 'outside the field', it was also necessary for a number of interviewees to cognitively manage what proved unsettling. Some struggled at first but then actively chose how to conduct their work in a way that enabled them to not take on all the problems and complexities of the setting. Madeline who had studied both incarcerated criminals and the corrections officers with whom they interacted recalled "being really overwhelmed when I was trying to do these interviews simultaneously and go back and forth." She elaborated, "it was just this really tough moment in research process," because their contradictory statements about each other led her to feel

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she was betraying one, or the other, group in believing their stories to be true. Then, she realized that she could take "all of what they were telling me [as] true, because it was true to them and their experience … So I could stop myself from taking sides, [and] feeling that one group was inauthentic and the other was authentic." Kristie, also researching incarcerated criminals, recalled making the decision that she did not need to take on the person's history during the interview: "I really separated the criminal and any choices they had made from the woman sitting in front of me."

For others, having returned from unsettling fieldwork, conversations with academic colleagues helped them set limits to their own expectations of what they could and could not do. For instance, Corinna recalled that "I kind of always thought I need to get everything into this one paper … the complete spectrum of emotions and injustice and whatever I felt." Yet her conversations with others, who had done research in unsettling contexts, helped debunk this and she realized "that you don't have to" put it all in a paper. Laura could not touch her data for six months after returning from studying the resilience of activists who had been demonstrating daily for two years in support of kidnapped children in Nigeria, because "it just felt so wrong internally," to try to tell the activists' stories. She eventually shifted her analytical focus:

> Originally, I was really interested in that resilience. And the data are great, but I realised when I came back I couldn't write about it. It just felt wrong because I was sitting in the UK, back in my comfortable environment, and I didn't want to tell the story on their behalf. So now the paper has shifted perspective, as in, I'm looking at the government's strategy to repress the activists, which is sort of losing the other side of the story, the resilience part.

Several interviewees noted that one way they reacted to unsettling fieldwork was by taking extra care with their data, analysis and publications, even if they continued to pursue the original research questions they entered the field with. They recounted feeling very strong attachments to their data and their informants' stories, and not letting the journal publication process give these short shrift.

Finally, others noted that discomfort in studying unsettling contexts and the emotional upset this involved was not something they were looking to suppress. Emily observed:

I guess … I don't want to manage these emotions. I don't want it to be another day in the office. If I ever get to the point where it's easy for me I don't want to do it anymore, because then I'm viewing the problems of the world through a cynical lens, a lens that doesn't reflect or respect the challenges that other people go through. If this was easy … we shouldn't be doing it.

Giving Back. Maybe one of the most (for the academic profession) unconventional ways to cope with the 'unsettling-ness' of studying contexts was that of 'giving back': through fundraisers, the writing of reports, proposals and books, and/or volunteering. The need to give back to the communities we study was, for many of our interviewees, the most pro-active and immediate way to address persistent feelings of guilt and shame. To raise money for those one had studied was described by one interviewee as a way to redeem oneself for "having benefitted from the experiences and stories of marginalized populations." Others gave back by writing a book or blog article in order to raise awareness about a particular issue or to give voice to the plight of informants, sometimes with informants as coauthors. As Laura put it:

I felt like I needed to give back to them because they gave me their whole personal experiences, and they were so open, and transparent, and welcoming…so the first thing I did is I wrote a blog article with one of the activists that was just talking about their experiences in Nigeria.

Yet others opted to use their skills and expertise more directly in an effort to help address issues. Several reported serving on committee boards, mobilizing financial resources, and creating courses that would allow them to teach about these topics. For example, Tammar's exposure to rape victims led her to become more conscious of promoting the cause of feminism in business schools, while John's work on obesity prompted him to join an Obesity Board. As he explained:

I also served on the (…) Obesity Board, and I made sure that I recounted the experiences that I had in that forum as well, so we were trying to tell the story as widely as we could, in order to be a voice for those people who perhaps didn't have a voice within the normal channels that would allow them to perhaps access resources in a way that other groups were able to.

While for the majority of our interviewees the motivation to give back stemmed from the guilt and shame associated with their fieldwork, for others it was a means to achieve personal closure. For example, Johanna, who studied social change organisations in Bangladesh and India over many years,

wrote a book (Seelos & Mair, 2017) translating her studies' findings into strategies to help organizations engaged in driving social change. She said:

> These instruments are in a way a tool that help communicate what they're really doing. That was meaningful for us to do. In a way, as a researcher, it was a nice way to almost close a chapter.

In sum, while the motivations to give back may have differed across our interviewees, the ways in which our informants sought to give back have one thing in common: in one way or another, they all helped to make the experience of studying unsettling contexts somewhat more meaningful—at least for themselves. Giving back in the various cases described here mainly involved retrospective activities; i.e. *after* fieldwork had been conducted. Might it be possible to 'give back' during fieldwork as well, so as to potentially ease the sense of guilt that many described to be one of the main motivators to engage in such *post-hoc* activities? As one of our interviews suggested, more 'action research' could be one potential step in that direction.

By way of conclusion

One may never quite get used to studying the lives and lived experience of those who, daily, front up to challenges provided by extreme poverty and depravation, psychological and physical abuse, humiliation, physical impairment, drug and alcohol addiction, aggression and war. Our interviewees were able to recollect powerful emotional experiences mobilised by their fieldwork, emotions triggered by observations that, in some cases, took place decades ago. The power of their recollections is indicative of our shared humanity, or the very tool that enables us to reach out to, and empathise with, those whose lives and fates are, for a short while, our principal pre-occupation.

For ethnographers to become emotionally charged in the conduct of fieldwork is nothing new. The relevant literature contains plenty of acknowledgements of such strongly felt emotions as *sorrow* (e.g., Allan's (2006) study of a British fertility clinic), *sexual desire* (e.g., Goode's (1999, 2002) gratuitous accounts of sex with members of a fat civil rights organization), *dislike* (e.g., Malinowski's (1967)

distaste for the Trobrianders among whom he lived and worked), *anxiety* (e.g., Schramm's (2005) rejection by informants in her study of African-American 'homecomings'), *shame* (e.g., the on-set of compassion fatigue in de Rond's (2017) account of life in a war hospital), *anger* (e.g., Goffman's (2016) fury at the murderer of one of her informants), and *hatred* (e.g., Hage's (2009) hatred of Israel following its bombardment of Southern Lebanon, killing several members of a family of informants). The most commonly experienced emotions by our interviewees were those of helplessness and of guilt and shame. Helplessness was typically born of the frustration that one cannot alleviate the suffering on display for not having the permission, skills, or resources to do so effectively. Feelings of guilt and shame appear to have been generated by the realisation that as a researcher one is, and forever will be, a bystander, able to beat a retreat at the end of each day and repair to home comforts.

But guilt and shame can also stem from a recognition that what we do is fundamentally exploitative: we rely on the generosity of others to provide us with the raw materials for publications that will only ever be read by a small subset of our colleagues and are designed to further our own careers, yet often without the need, expectation, or indeed ability to reciprocate. To paraphrase Malcolm (2012: 1), every scholar who is not too stupid or too full of herself to notice what is going on knows that what she does is morally indefensible. Despite well-intended attempts to 'give back,' the fact of the matter is that professional incentives are heavily stacked against those of us affected by our work and keen to offer practical help: academic institutions do not generally reward practitioner documents, white papers, blogs, or books targeted at the general reader.

So what strategies can we avail ourselves of to help us manage the emotions mobilised by our fieldwork? The experience of our interviewees hint at four possibilities. First, there is the sharing of one's lived experiences with friends, family, colleagues, and PhD supervisors or committee members. For example, Tammar gained strength from her ability to talk openly about her work to her husband (himself an anthropologist). This coping strategy has been made much easier with technological

advances, allowing us to span long distances relatively cheaply. Even if one feels unable to talk openly about one's experiences with others, one can record one's experiences (including anxiety dreams mobilised by fieldwork) in a personal journal (de Rond & Tuncalp, 2017). For many ethnographers this has become par for the course, a feature of reflexivity that characterises the best work in our field (Gray, in this volume).

A second strategy is that of enacting boundary rituals, or of compartmentalising the fieldwork experience. For example, Kristie found it helpful to have a commute to and from the prison in which she conducted her fieldwork, as did Tammar with her rape crisis centre. A third option is simply 'letting be', or realising that one cannot, and perhaps need not, 'save' everyone. The world is what it is, and one copes by shedding the moral burden that can follow empathy. A fourth means of coping is to act on this moral burden by giving back. Thus, Laura organized a tennis match to act as a fund-raiser for Nigerian refugees, while John joined the Obesity Board, and Paul founded a social innovation centre.

Exposure to those less fortunate reminds us of how lucky we really are. Few other professions provide as much status and freedom as academia does. Many of us are relatively well-paid and, with incentives increasingly aligned behind easy-to-tally top journal publications, are perfectly able to carve out a successful career solving relatively trivial problems. Question is: should we? Beyond journal publications, if we were to take seriously our responsibility to 'give back', what might that imply in terms of how we teach, write, and organize our careers?

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