Emotions, encounters and expectations: the uncertain ethics of 'the field'

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…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 displaying a sign reading "Welcome". 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 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, UK. At the time of this encounter I was far from inexperienced at 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 ten 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. As Thrift (2003a:106) argues, 'fieldwork is often a profoundly emotional business, a constant stew of emotions, ranging from doubt and acute homesickness to

laughter and a kind of comradeship, which are a fundamental part of how you think the situations you are in'. Such situations mark fieldwork as a social practice, a process of engaging in the 'ethics of encounters' (ibid:105) with others. Ethics, emotions, encounters. These are three central components of my engagement with this drop-in centre as 'the field' of my research. In this paper, 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 such entanglements and 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, often isolated and without citizenship rights, 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 practiced concern with ethics argues that processes of ethical review are often limited in their applicability once faced with the complexities of fieldwork itself. 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 want to argue that fieldwork demands the development of situated judgements which exceed purely 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 and become apparent through the practice of research itself.

In examining my own field experiences from such a viewpoint, 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 in 'the field'. With these connections established, I explore their effect on my research 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). I begin though, with Sheffield.

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 and to 'fuse text, context, and embodied practice' (Lorimer, 2003:282), to examine 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), so as to produce a situated account of the social relations of asylum. To this end, I attended a twice weekly drop-in centre in as a student volunteer and researcher. Over ten months I began to get to know those individuals who were 'regulars' and increasingly 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 and marches 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, diarised and ordered, my ethnographic work was far less stable, less certain. 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 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. At points in my fieldwork I found myself unoccupied between drop-in sessions, only to then be inundated with activities the following week. 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 exploited or 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 CV's and cover letters for voluntary work, painted banners, signed petitions, built lanterns, emailed MP's, played games, accompanied people to report to the police and attended meetings and 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, 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 recognise 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 realisation 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 and abuse place a burden upon both researchers and participants (Wood, 2006). 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 and engagement. Emotion might thus be seen to 'energise action' through focusing attention on those subjects who evoke 'compassion and connection' (Elmhirst, 2012:278). In this case, I would argue that such choices were conditioned by the ways in which 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. Thanks to the emotional ties bound within this space, the drop-in centre and the connections made there spilled out into the city. 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 inter-subjective ways throughout research and in response to different audiences, demands and contexts. Thus, as I became increasingly involved in the drop-in centre, and became 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 and particular delicacy when working with those who have fled persecution and are often demonised 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 roles or duties that came with such a status as a means to observe this social space. These observations would then be written up in an anonymised form in a research diary. During this conversation, the question of consent and how this might be addressed 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 formalised 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 be introduced and would introduce myself and my role, 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

in a manner akin to much social research. 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 and negotiating these with prospective respondents. Initially, I would suggest a range of public spaces near the drop-in centre such as cafes, and conducted my first three interviews in one such café. These were far from wholly successful as the noise of the surroundings made recording the conversation difficult, and also hampered communication across languages. 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 new setting. The relatively free-flowing conversations of the drop-in centre were replaced with disjointed responses and a nervousness I was not used to. Whilst these three interviews produced interesting discussions at points, I left each one feeling dissatisfied and a little uncomfortable, as though the process had become an ordeal rather than an exchange of experiences and views. In part I put this down to the inevitable 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 to me by my fourth respondent, who rejected the suggestion that we meet in a public place, and instead 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 not be to ask questions of him in his accommodation, but would be to take him out of this context 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. From this point onwards, I made few suggestions of location and left this up to those I worked with, allowed them to make initial suggestions and not presuming that my role as researcher was to direct this process entirely.

Despite these formal mechanisms for consent, 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 scholar and the friend. The importance of this was that consent moved from being a singular event to becoming a more 'iterative' or processual negotiation. Mackenzie et al. (2007) argue that in refugee research, biomedical conceptions of informed consent need to be supplemented with a more flexible and reciprocal recognition of how consent may shift and change as understandings develop through research engagements. For me this meant not simply checking at regular intervals over my fieldwork period that individuals were comfortable with being included in my fieldnotes, but also discussing these notes with those involved in the final weeks of my time in the field. 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 et al., 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. In my experience, 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, in fear that they may be picked up by the Home Office and in some way affect their chances of gaining refugee status. Despite repeated reminders that my work was in no way linked to the Home Office or to the asylum process and that all comments were anonymous, I would still spend time relatively regularly editing my research diary to note those comments to 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 et al., 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 assumptions and 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 such 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. This was a small gesture, but one which sought to break down assumptions over who had the right to access resources and to destabilise ideas of 'charity' (see Darling, 2011). At times, my fieldwork felt like an attempt to constantly evade or destabilise a series of assumed positions. I was well aware of the harm that positioning oneself as 'generous' or 'charitable' could cause. 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.

Much as those running the drop-in centre wanted to present this as a space of equals, these relations were always grounded in associations one could not escape – citizenship, class, race, culture. Before entering the field I knew that I should not deny such attributes or seek to evade them. But 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 in 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 (Stamp, 2014). 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 and voice 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, of perpetuating an image of the powerless refugee being politicised by the hospitable citizen. 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 et al., 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 for asylum being made by particular individuals. This scepticism had a knock-on effect as it meant I was reluctant to sign the petitions of those I supported 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 on behalf of individuals, there was a tacit expectation that one would do so and, beyond this that one would be supportive irrespective of the values attached to asylum claims. Volunteers were not expected to make value judgments on the claims put forward, or to deny support to any who attended, and as such

Rather, it means that positions were taken in response to the 'urgencies' of 'the field' and its politics, and as a researcher my responsibility lies in learning from such decisions and the context of 'the field' they help to perform.

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 on a series of social interactions in which individuals invest time, effort and insight. These investments and entanglements with others shape not only the outcomes of research, but also its direction, its conduct and the ethics that accompany it. 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' (Thrift, 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. In advocating a less procedural model of research ethics, Thrift (2004:94) argues for the cultivation of 'responsive judgements' which are 'intent on performing each moment with understanding, by cultivating sensitivity to context'. The sensitivity envisaged here is not only to those individuals one may encounter through research, it is a sensitivity to the messiness of research itself, to the entanglements, uncertainties and failings of research as much as the successes. Through examining my own experiences of 'the field', I have sought to describe how such a '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]hough 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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