

ON WRITING NOTES IN THE FIELD: INTERROGATING POSITIONALITY, EMOTION, PARTICIPATION AND ETHICS

JENNIFER A. THOMPSON *McGill University*

ABSTRACT. Fieldnotes help researchers document research activities and position themselves in the field, invariably constructing the research, the researcher and the knowledges produced. Yet the process of how fieldnotes are produced often remains invisible. These “Notes from the Field” explore one doctoral student’s experiences writing fieldnotes. Interrogated here are some of the tensions that emerged writing fieldnotes in relation to positionality and emotion, as well as regarding participation and ethics.

**PRENDRE DES NOTES SUR LE TERRAIN: S'INTERROGER SUR LE POSITIONNEMENT,
LES ÉMOTIONS, LA PARTICIPATION ET L'ÉTHIQUE**

RÉSUMÉ. Les notes provenant du terrain permettent aux chercheurs de documenter leurs activités de recherche et de se positionner dans le milieu, influençant inévitablement la recherche, le chercheur et le savoir généré. Or, le processus de production de notes écrites sur le terrain demeure invisible. Ces «Notes du terrain» explorent l’expérience de rédaction de notes d’une doctorante dans ce contexte. Certaines des tensions qui émergent lors de la rédaction de notes sur le terrain sont soulevées dans ce texte, dont le positionnement et les émotions du chercheur, ainsi que la participation et l’éthique.

In these “Notes from the Field,” I explore the process and experience of writing fieldnotes for my doctoral research. During my graduate coursework, I developed a keen interest in how subjectivities produce different types of knowledges in research. Studying ethnographic, interpretive, feminist, participatory and textual methodologies, I was always encouraged to write fieldnotes, research journals, and reflective memos. Here, I share some of the tensions I encountered in writing fieldnotes. First, I contextualize “the field” and “fieldnotes.” I then complicate this celebrated yet elusive practice by interrogating the writing of fieldnotes in relation to positionality and emotion, as well as participation and ethics.

WRITING FIELDNOTES IN CAMEROON

For me, the field is southwestern Cameroon where I am working with women to study water management using participatory visual methodologies. I trouble conventional definitions of the field as a far-off place, “out there,” somehow exoticized from my everyday life. Reflecting boundary concerns such as “where does the field begin and end?” (Clifford, 1990, p. 64) and “I am a fieldnote” (Jackson cited in Sanjek, 1990, p. 95), I am always constructing the research, no matter where I am. However for me, doing fieldwork did involve relocating to a different country. I defended my comprehensive exams and promptly boarded a plane for six months of fieldwork in Cameroon. Collaborating with a local professor and NGO, I facilitated photovoice and participatory video workshops, community exhibitions, and a decision-maker forum. While currently back in Cameroon writing, volunteering and doing some follow-up research, I focus here on the fieldnotes I produced during my first visit. These constituted my initial reactions to being in a new place, the bulk of my “data collection” activities, and my first concerted foray into writing fieldnotes.

During those six months, I wrote almost 250 single-spaced typed pages (213,000 words) of fieldnotes. These are not “jottings” or “scratch notes” taken *in situ* (Clifford, 1990). Often actively engaged as a workshop facilitator, I did not quietly write observations in the corner. While a little notepad in my pocket helped for quick jottings to later jog my memory, I mainly wrote fieldnotes on my laptop, alone in my room. In that sense, the notes constitute memory work, where I remembered to document and reflect on the research. My fieldnotes describe interactions and conversations, senses and spaces, my on-going decision-making and interpretations. I elaborated both on the everyday and more dramatic “crisis events” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Adopting reflexivity to situate the knowledges produced (Rose, 1997), I questioned my reactions and assumptions, desperately wanting to recognize and deconstruct essentialist constructions. I also wrote about how others reacted, such that my notes also consider participant concerns (Emerson et al., 1995). As I fumbled through, I did not know if I was “any good” at writing fieldnotes. I rarely reported about them or asked for feedback; they remained a relatively private process. Despite the integral role of fieldnotes in constructing myself as a researcher and the knowledges produced in my work, I tackled them alone. By exploring my emerging uncertainties regarding positionality and emotion, as well as participation and ethics, I hope to counter the general invisibility of the fieldnote process.

POSITIONALITY AND EMOTION

All too aware of my position as an “outsider” and “researcher” in Cameroon, I considered the structural aspects of my identity. Regularly called *white man*, the general Pidgin term for white people, my outsider status was overt. Indeed,

my intersecting whiteness, gender, sexuality, age, ability to speak Pidgin, and funded doctoral student status all construct the research in complex and specific ways. In my fieldnotes, I attempted to address how these structural aspects of my positionality situate the research and knowledges produced; this will be a central analytical piece informing my dissertation. Explored here however are aspects of positionality that I was not initially thinking about but that emerged as I wrote, namely, the deeply emotional dimensions of writing fieldnotes. The common “do what works best for you” fieldnote advice implies emotional dimensions, as individuals seek what “feels” right. This section illustrates the role of emotion in writing fieldnotes, firstly through writing fieldnotes as diary and secondly regarding my embodied emotional relationship with this genre of writing.

Fieldnotes as diary

My fieldnotes in Cameroon became my personal diary. Overwhelmed by trying to separate my observations and running record of activities (fieldnotes), abstract thinking and analysis (memos) and personal reactions (diary) (see Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008; Emerson et al., 1995; Sanjek, 1990), I kept just one Microsoft Word document. Having tried in my master’s fieldwork to separate these writings, the thoughts and stories I was trying to tell always leaked into each other. Wait, should I write about this in my fieldnotes, a memo or my diary? This confusion reflects perhaps a blurred distinction between them, and my feminist-inspired beliefs that thinking is feeling is doing. Confiding with my friend April Mandrona that I could not silo my thoughts, feelings and actions, she laughed, “You can’t separate JT the person from JT the researcher!” (personal communication, November 14, 2013). In throwing myself, my thinking and my work into the same file, I wrote this messy interconnected subjectivity into my fieldnotes.

Consequently, my fieldnotes recount confused and frustrated or excited and gushing moments. These reactions span both the research activities and my life events more generally, such as how I spent my weekends. This is all part of how I positioned myself in the field. Initially feeling anxious, lonely and socially isolated in Cameroon, writing provided a coping strategy. Emailing my supervisor, I wrote: “Am writing pages and pages of fieldnotes. I keep thinking how not having very many friends is helpful for producing a lot of fieldnotes. Call me loopy, but I just talk to myself on paper” (November 24, 2012). Writing fieldnotes also helped me through struggles. Entering one challenging encounter, I prepped myself by writing: “This is why I’m writing now – to try to talk sense into my head, to orient myself before heading into this” (December 21, 2012). Not always wanting to email and with phone and Skype limitations, my fieldnotes served as a confidant. I put everything in there. Every so often, I would panic; maybe I shouldn’t write this stuff in my fieldnotes? But, I needed a safe place to work through things. Even as I

developed relationships in Cameroon, my fieldnotes remained a significant non-judgmental sounding board.

Emotion seems essential to what happens in field *and* how the field is written about in fieldnotes. Yet the limited scholarship about fieldnotes under-acknowledges this. Drawing on traditional ethnographers, Sanjek (1990) portrayed diaries as a cathartic outlet, lifeline or checking point. That he drew mostly on women ethnographer's diaries highlights the gendered nature of his accounts. In one assessment of Malinowski's infamous diary, it was argued that the diary was "never intended for publication.... [Diaries] are a partial record of the struggle that affects every anthropologist in the field.... The negative side of fieldwork... predominates in the diaries... a place to spew up one's spleen" (Forge cited in Sanjek, 1990, p. 109). Such accounts imply emotion as integral yet somehow separate from, interfering with, or even tainting fieldnotes.

Alternatively, emerging scholarship values emotion in research and fieldwork. Holland (2007) argued "emotions are important in the production of knowledge and add power in understanding, analysis and interpretation" (p. 195). Despite the possibilities for diaries to expose fieldwork's "hidden struggles" (Punch, 2012), emotion seems under-valued in fieldnotes. Attempting to be reflexive and position myself, how can I write fieldnotes *without* emotion? My diary weaves itself through my fieldnotes such that I am left wondering, how personal is too personal? When is it appropriate or useful to share? I am conscious of my need for privacy and feel vulnerable about being exposed:

The curious eye of the printshop guy wandered over the pages, and I found my privacy violated as I thought about how openly I had written about sex, loneliness and desire. "I would prefer if you didn't read the document," I said, insulting the man I think, who immediately said he wasn't reading, just skimming the document to make sure it would print well. As the last page printed, he giggled and apologized, but that he thought it funny I ended the document with "Bla bla blaaaa." (December 22, 2012)

Quite comfortable writing to myself, there are risks I hadn't considered.

Writing my diary into my fieldnotes also created an ethical dilemma. Despite my feminist intentions to consider the personal as political, I was guilt-stricken to realize the implications – that in writing about my life, I was also writing about the people around me: "This should probably not be shared. I don't have those people's permission to include them in my fieldnotes. They have no idea that I am writing about them" (December 31, 2012). On the one hand, I felt I had a right to react to my life privately in writing. On the other hand, with reactions so intertwined with the research, I felt frozen in ethical peril. Eventually refining my approach, I learned to dialogue more with participants, facilitators and collaborators about my position as a researcher who is writing fieldnotes. But that did not completely solve this ethical dilemma of consent when merging journal with fieldnotes. Perhaps I should have been more careful.

Would talking through things have been more ethical than writing about them? I wonder who is written about in other researchers' fieldnotes and how they address the corresponding ethical questions and compromises involved.

Writing and emotion

The second emotional dimension I observed in writing fieldnotes was my relationship with this genre of writing. Fieldnotes are typically best written as close to the event as possible, preferably that night, while everything is fresh and before you talk away the details (Emerson et al., 1995). However I quickly realized that I was often tired and grumpy at night:

I was so utterly exhausted last night that by the time I downloaded all the footage, bathed, made spaghetti, figured out the cash handouts for Day 2 and did the dishes, I was in bed asleep by 9. The whole "writing fieldnotes at the end of the day" just doesn't work for me. Or, I don't like doing it at the end of the day when I'm so tired. (March 27, 2013)

My emotions also intersected with my body: "I'm tired and hot and sweaty and sunburnt and stinky and blah. I want to write more now because I have to [get up early tomorrow], but I'm just feeling so blah ..." (November 19, 2012). I negotiated this embodied emotional fatigue by suspending my observations and thoughts until my fresh body and perspective could write in the mornings. But sometimes that wasn't possible, so I plugged away in a more tired and cynical way in the evenings, producing curt, more judgmental, and less detailed accounts. Sometimes I complained, was less willing to explore multiple meanings or lacked the energy to even care. Understanding how my fatigue influenced my writing, I preferred writing in the mornings: "Feeling much more optimistic today than last night. Again, evenings really aren't the best time for me to write" (November 10, 2012). This enabled me to construct more open-minded, thoughtful, inquisitive, lengthy and descriptive fieldnotes. Perhaps these different types of writing deepen reflexivity. However, choosing when to write based on mood and body certainly affects the accounts produced, underscoring how emotional subjectivities construct writing.

Another emotional dimension to writing fieldnotes is how one feels about writing them. I loved writing fieldnotes! Writing in my pyjamas with a coffee and the sun streaming in to the sound of birds and roosters (or my neighbor's Nigerian hip-hop) was a gratifying activity for me. My notes repeatedly comment, "I so enjoy these daily writing sessions, trying to make sense of my day, to locate myself in this place, to work through the things I am noticing and feeling" (November 17, 2012). Whereas fellow students have complained about writing fieldnotes, some opting out altogether, I absolutely thrived, relishing the routine and solitary space to reflect. Maybe this is because I kept a diary growing up, or because I am more reflective and introverted; a discreet locked file on my computer offers a safe space for me to explore. Or, maybe fieldnotes helped me process and consider carefully the flood of details and emotion I

was encountering. Complicating this is the privilege of having the time. Some colleagues are doing research while also working as full-time mothers or with full-time paid employment (or both) and have much less time to write long detailed fieldnotes.

Nonetheless, it is significant that writing fieldnotes can bring joy. Crafting these rough sketches fulfilled me:

I find comfort in doing thorough, detailed description. I used to feel that way when I was doing fieldwork at my engineering job. I loved the part of my job where I had to make a map, and write everything down. There was so much satisfaction in that, I felt good about it. (December 31, 2012)

Admittedly not “writing everything down” but constructing particular versions of selected events, I genuinely liked the process. Writing fieldnotes evades the daunting revision inherent to thesis or publication writing. With an intended audience of one, I didn’t worry about coherence, succinctness or word limits. I explored in volumes because I enjoyed it so much. Conversely, if writing fieldnotes feels more like a chore, wouldn’t that mean avoiding it, spending less time on it, or devoting less of oneself just to get it over with? For me, writing fieldnotes has certainly moved through moments of joy, struggle and perfunctory obligation. I wonder about the different types of fieldnotes that are produced (or not) in these emotional spaces.

PARTICIPATION, ETHICS AND WRITING FIELDNOTES

Confounding the rich possibilities of fieldnotes, I question how the practice risks contradicting my research methodology. I adopt participation as a way to broaden the knowledge production process, to open access to it and the issues identified, to expand how issues are interpreted as meaningful with the potential for transformation through research, thus shifting who research benefits. Power and ethics are central concerns. Heeding critiques of participation as a form of social control, my work incorporates ongoing tensions about the nature of participation. Therefore, it dawned on me that writing fieldnotes risks being one of the least participatory things a researcher can do. My singular voice constructed a private running narrative of the research.

I note the particular oral and visual nature of participation in my project. At various stages, participants produced and interpreted images and films, writing captions and reflecting publicly on their experiences. Participants took “process” photos and films during activities and in some instances wrote short reflections. I frequently debriefed activities with facilitators and collaborators to account for diverse perspectives. But most participant involvement was oral and visual. While these photo and video accounts constitute the data more broadly, ultimately, *I* wrote the fieldnotes. I am still writing the fieldnotes. Would anybody else *want* or have the time to write every day for six months? With over 120 participants involved, many for just two-day workshops at a time,

I'm not even sure if or how that would be feasible. Certainly alternative forms of note-taking exist, such as video diaries. But how invested might participants be in creating such detailed running accounts? Should I have written my notes to be shared? These questions are laden with power. My decision to write fieldnotes (underscoring my responsibility to produce written products) altered my intentions.

Noticing how my fieldnotes were impacting the research, I questioned my methodology: "I think I have come to be resolved that, in addition to using participatory arts-based methods, I am also using ethnographic methods through my fieldnotes" (December 31, 2012). I realized that in writing fieldnotes, I was relying on the cornerstone of ethnography. This led to a sinking fear about what I might be replicating. Although now studying different ways of doing ethnography (critical, feminist, autoethnographic), at the time, I felt embroiled in ethnography's uncomfortable colonial legacy. My friend Katie MacEntee and I have an on-going joke about writing that sounds "Geertz" in its authoritative descriptive stance. This stems from our disgust hearing Geertz read aloud in a seminar by an older white man who relished in Geertz's description of the beautiful sway of the African woman's hips. This was all too symbolic of how many cultures continue to be exoticized, objectified and othered in research. Each of us now doing research in different African contexts, Katie reminds me: "Our joke really acts as a thin veil to mask how horrified we really are about our own work sounding or being interpreted the same" (K. MacEntee, personal communication, February 19, 2014). Am I constructing the same problematic representations? Despite my commitment to participatory principles, I worry about how writing fieldnotes departs from them. While reflexivity can help disrupt this, what happens when reflexivity fails (Rose, 1997)? Would I even know?

CONCLUSION

Writing fieldnotes provided me a safe space to document and question my work. I advocate writing fieldnotes as a critical tool for doing reflexive and ethical research. But the practice has also left me unsettled, with complicating questions: How can researchers ethically position themselves emotionally? How does one's relationship with this writing genre affect the fieldnotes produced? How do fieldnotes intersect with participation? Are there different *ways* to write fieldnotes? Or is the process too inherently individual (an interesting thought in and of itself)? Many more ethical questions surface beyond the space allowed here, such as: What of doing research in Pidgin and writing fieldnotes in English? Reflecting broader methodological and ethical issues, writing fieldnotes offers a valuable site to interrogate research practice. I hope these "Notes from the Field" help make this complicated and complicating practice more visible. Producing a growing body of fieldnotes that both tickle and trouble me, I welcome finding ethical and meaningful ways to integrate them into my next big writing project, my dissertation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the research participants and facilitators, Mrs. Agbor Magdaline, Executive Director of Changing Mentalities and Empowering Groups (CHAMEG) Cameroon and Dr. Sunday Shende Kometa from the University of Bamenda. The Buea Water Research team and Participatory Cultures Lab (both at McGill University) I acknowledge for the spirit of collaboration they have shared with me. Thank you Dr. Claudia Mitchell, Dr. Susann Allnutt, Katie MacEntee, April Mandrona, and the McGill Journal of Education editorial team for their helpful feedback on this piece. This research was carried out with the aid of grants from the International Development Research Centre, Ottawa, Canada (Information on the Centre is available on the web at www.idrc.ca), Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture, and the Jackie Kirk Fellowship (McGill University).

REFERENCES

- Birks, M., Chapman, Y., & Francis, K. (2008). Memoing in qualitative research: Probing data and processes. *Journal of Research in Nursing*, 13(1), 68-75. doi:10.1177/1744987107081254
- Clifford, J. (1990). Notes on (field)notes. In R. Sanjek (Ed.), *Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology* (pp. 47-70). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Holland, J. (2007). Emotions and research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 10(3), 195-209. doi:10.1080/13645570701541894
- Punch, S. (2012). Hidden struggles of fieldwork: Exploring the role and use of field diaries. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 5(2), 86-93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2010.09.005>
- Rose, G. (1997). Situating knowledges: Positionality, reflexivities and other tactics. *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), 305-320. doi:10.1191/030913297673302122
- Sanjek, R. (1990). A vocabulary for fieldnotes. In R. Sanjek (Ed.), *Fieldnotes: The makings of anthropology* (pp. 92-121). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

JENNIFER THOMPSON is a PhD candidate in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. She has Bachelor of Science in Geo-Environmental Engineering from Queen's University and Master of Arts in Culture and Values in Education from McGill University. Jennifer may be contacted by email at jennifer.thompson4@mail.mcgill.ca

JENNIFER THOMPSON est doctorante au département d'études intégrées en sciences de l'éducation de l'Université McGill. Elle possède un baccalauréat en génie géo-environnemental de l'Université Queens, ainsi qu'une maîtrise en éducation avec spécialisation en étude de la culture et des valeurs en éducation de l'Université McGill. Jennifer peut être rejointe par courriel à l'adresse suivante : jennifer.thompson4@mail.mcgill.ca