

Chapter 11: Research emotions: the view from the other side

Al'bina Garifzianova

This chapter considers the significance of the emotions of the researcher in, and after, the 'field'. It draws on fieldwork conducted for this book which constituted my personal 'research debut' and the particular issues related to managing emotions faced by first-time researchers are considered below. Reflecting on the emotional engagement of the researcher whilst conducting participant observation, I suggest that the expression of openness, concern, sensitivity and other human emotions towards events in the 'field' is the researcher's strength; it is the means by which they understand other ways of life and enter informants' worlds. However, the researcher who acts and reacts emotionally in the field also encounters a number of difficulties. Firstly, by forming close, trusting relations with respondents in the field, the researcher ceases to be an outside observer and becomes a full subject of the research process with all the emotional commitment that entails. Secondly, emotional engagement in the lives of informants generates problems that accompany the sociologist out of the field, and on their subsequent return to it. Moreover, the post-field situation itself becomes a source of reflection and emotion since revealing one's feelings publicly means risks misunderstanding by work colleagues since, for many, emotional engagement continues to be understood as signifying a lack of objectivity.¹ Finally, the chapter explores the importance of the public discussion of the emotional labour of ethnographic research both in order to evaluate the impact of emotions on the researcher's life and sense of self after the 'field' and in the interests of the development of qualitative methodologies more generally.

Emotions and sociological knowledge

Contemporary sociological debate on research emotions turns on the question of whether to conceal or to seek to understand the role of emotions in the research process. According to Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001: 132), '...the research process is not an emotion-free experience', and the recognition and management of such emotions can become important at various stages and in a wide range of contexts of research (133). Shane Blackman (2007: 699) has described the recounting of emotions, not to mention, the revelation of more intimate relations with informants in the 'field' as the 'hidden' part of ethnographic research. While Blackman (700) understands the burying of 'empirical data' in this 'hidden ethnography' to be a result of its controversial nature, however, Barter and Renold (2003: 100) argue that such data remain hidden rather because, 'emotion is deemed to be epistemologically irrelevant'.

The 'irrelevant' nature of emotion to research is particularly well illustrated by academic debate in contemporary Russian sociology in which 'objectivity' is frequently considered as the key criterion for distinguishing between the reflection

¹ In Russia, at regional academic conferences at least, the dominant view remains that the objectivity of information is best guaranteed by maintaining a distance between the researcher and respondent and that, in this way, the main weaknesses of the ethnographic approach – subjectivism, or the researcher's loss of ability to evaluate the situation objectively - can be avoided (Puzanova, Trotsuk and Vitkovskaia 2007: 209). Recently, there has been some recognition that 'objectivity' is a contested and relative term and that the possibility of subjective knowledge should not be completely rejected. According to Shteinberg et al., for example, complete objectivity is, in any case, impossible for it is whittled away gradually and unnoticed by the researcher who is unable to withdraw from the human relations formed in the field in a timely fashion (Shteinberg, Shanin, Kovalev and Levinson 2009: 78).

and distortion of 'real facts'. Il'in (2006: 85) argues that the maintenance of 'distance' between informants and the researcher guarantees that the material gathered will not be 'subjective' or distort the 'field' results while Semenova (2003: 274) maintains that it is essential to adopt the position of outside observer if the researcher is to 'conceptualise the actual experience of participants in the events'.² Baranov (2004: 27), meanwhile, argues that once shared feelings, emotions or intuitions become centre-stage then the individual researcher's impact on the research increases and the data gathered lose their absolute objectivity. However, Shteinberg (2008: 189), in contrast, calls the 'objective and distanced position of the researcher' a myth. He argues that maintaining such a distance in the field is difficult and disruptive since 'the researcher is unable... to experience the normal human desire to help, [and] support their interlocutor as they recount a tragic story or honestly share their feelings, [and] doubts' (189-190). However, surely the issue here is less the psychological burden borne by the researcher as they seek to maintain their distance in the field, or are frustrated in their desire to help, than the impossibility of realising this in practice. Concealing one's emotions and maintaining that emotional control can be preserved in the field are incompatible with the authentic ethnographic experience. This is, firstly, because, 'it demands exceptional effort to distance oneself from one's own body and maintain one's distance in the "field"' (Sokolovskii 2003: 4). Moreover, the artificial maintenance of distance can be detrimental to both the researcher and their work; for the 'field' quickly stops being an imagined reality and becomes an integral part of the biography of the researcher. Secondly, distance between informants and the researcher cannot be maintained because communication in the 'field' is essentially subjective; the researcher cannot 'appear' interested, concerned or sympathetic to informants, only 'be' so. Thus, the very nature of research in the social sciences presupposes the close interaction of the object and subject and thus all research becomes subjective (Bobretsova 2009).

While the value of subjective knowledge has long been recognised in Western research,³ in Russian academic circles the understanding of research as a dialogic process in which the positioning of the sociologist is integral to the understanding of 'the field' is relatively rare. According to Abashin (2004: 15), subjectivity has either been driven out or discriminated against in Russian academic circles.⁴ However, even in the West, it is recognised that this reflexive turn involves both power and risk since the sociologist exposes their origins, biography, locality and 'intellectual bias' (Bourdieu cited in Blackman 2007:700) and thus not everyone is prepared to talk openly about work in the 'field'. Emotional openness, on the one hand, allows a researcher to enter a group relatively quickly, develop relationships and participate in group practices but, at the same time, it opens the researcher to the scrutiny of others. This may be particularly difficult for young academics (Coffey 1999), dependent upon the appreciation of the quality of their data from others more established in the field, but even established sociologists, who accept that emotions are central to the

² This is a position, moreover, that is supported by Fontana and Frey's (1994: 367) claim that the formation of close relations between the researcher and informants can lead the sociologist to lose his/her distance and objectivity and begin to reidentify themselves in relation to the group observed and thereby abandon their academic task.

³ The process and consequences of this is discussed further in the following chapter.

⁴ For an exception to this rule, see the editorial introduction to the journal *Antropologicheskii forum*, (2004, no.3) in which the positionality of the researcher is recognised and research is envisaged as a dialogue between researcher and informants.

research process, often choose to keep silent rather than risk their reputations. One of the key sites of such 'risk', according to Blackman (2007: 700), relates to the 'ethical demand, that storyteller and the narrative should be "clean"'. The impossibility of fully controlling the degree to which relations between an informant and the researcher can be kept 'clean' is illustrated below by my own personal experience.

I had left for the field to study a group of 'skinheads' armed with little more than a set of stereotypes about their everyday life and with no expectation that I would feel any fondness for them or that I would, myself, become an object of study. However, emotional intimacy develops just as unpredictably in the field as it does in real life and during both periods of fieldwork key informants evoked in me not only research-led curiosity but a range of human emotions from fondness, curiosity, flirtation and admiration to hurt, fury and irritation. Particularly close relations with one informant developed out of a growing mutual interest in and fascination with not only our work together but each other personally. Our closeness became evident therefore not only in displays of kindness in the 'field' - providing a certain security and helping access additional respondents - but in some painfully honest commentaries on me as a person and a sociologist:

Respondent: To be honest, you've just become a friend (*drug*). You've become a friend (*drug*), a friend (*podruga*).⁵ You're like, funny, it's fun to talk with you, it's fun to have a laugh with you...

Interviewer: [interrupting] You mean make fun of me...

Respondent: Make fun of you? Make fun of you even. Lots of things are fun with you. You, you don't always behave as you should, in some situations, seriously. Look, I'm looking at you now, take your glasses off, I prefer looking at you without them. Seriously. Right. And, seriously, yes, you behave not wholly appropriately. It's not your thing. Seriously, I understand sociologists. You know last year, I looked at you, you were somehow, for a sociologist, you're stupid.

Interviewer: [laughs]

Respondent: Seriously. You're really stupid for a sociologist...

Interviewer: Maybe 'inexperienced' rather than 'stupid'?

Respondent: No. You're stupid. Inexperienced. Yeah, that's what I'm talking about. How do you mean you're inexperienced? You're stupid. Do you know what you are stupid about?

Interviewer: Life?

Respondent: ... You are really stupid sociologists... Why are you stupid? You kept on [asking], I remember from last year, 'Can I photograph here?' Who gives a fuck?
(Slava, 2007)

Such situations naturally increase the emotional stress of the field; you begin to question your own competence. You cease to relate to the respondent as merely a source of information and perceive him as somebody close to you, to whom you bear your soul and, in so doing, become emotionally vulnerable. Sociological reflection is all that keeps the researcher's sense of self intact. A range of different feelings

⁵ In Russian the word 'friend' has two forms – a male friend is rendered by the word '*drug*' while a female friend or girlfriend is rendered by '*podruga*'.

experienced by the sociologist together with the unpredictability of events transforms the researcher into one of the key subjects of 'the field'. In this way, as Omel'chenko (2008: 250) writes, '...the researcher – his/her professional skills, abilities, knowledges as well as their body with its feelings and emotions, physical and mental parameters and abilities, is transformed into a kind of instrument with whose help the research is conducted'. In this process, the researcher becomes the most 'accessible and open informant' (Il'in 2006: 95) and, if accompanied by the necessary reflexivity – rooted in emotional labour – this transformation opens new possibilities for understanding social reality.

Reflexivity and the research debut

The fieldwork described in this book was my first experience of research in the field and a sense of fear and discomfort about conducting research into xenophobia seemed natural as I prepared for the field. In fact, however, I was less worried about what it meant to try to understand the everyday practices of people who consider themselves 'skinheads' than I was about not messing up. Deep down I was thinking mostly about getting the research right, fulfilling the task set and being successful in the "field" (see also Chikadze 2005: 80). At that time I didn't realise that rising to the challenges of the project would mean not simply living in two worlds – my own and theirs – but taking certain research risks including emotional ones. The actual experience of fieldwork turned out to be, on the one hand, a huge adventure, thanks to which I acquired all kinds of valuable experience, but, on the other, an emotionally traumatising experience, which, undoubtedly, changed the whole way I looked at the world.

Prior to entering the field my main concern was that I might not find sufficient points of contact with people in the group and that, as a result, the fieldwork would fail and the faith my colleagues had in me would prove unwarranted. I thought the key to success was simply generating enough empirical material so, before leaving for the field, I tried to imagine a strategy for behaving within the group. I never imagined at that point that such 'games' were impossible in ethnographic observation; the life you lead is a full, normal life, complete with its routine events, and the researcher lives it with no immunity to the emotional experiences it brings (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer 2001: 120). Yet, it is not your life but some other life; this is an unavoidable risk you run when undertaking participant observation and one that needs to be reflected on.

The desire to 'see the world through the eyes of the respondent, in his terms, through the prism of specific interests, passions, prejudices, illusions, hopes' (Il'in 2006: 4) requires certain sociological skills. It requires making decisions in critical situations, following your intuition, being open to and ready for criticism and irony and being genuinely interested in understanding the lives of other people. Without emotional engagement none of this is possible. However, researchers need to reflect, question themselves, throughout the whole research process (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer: 2001: 133) and this itself is part of the emotional labour of the field. Emotional labour is connected not only with building communication with informants but also with diary writing when deep reflection takes place. The writing of a diary – during which your feelings and fears of the 'field' give way to irritation, personal concerns for absent friends and family - presents a moral dilemma for the researcher. The degree of openness with which one writes the diary is a matter of personal choice

but I was not conscious immediately of the fact that I was effectively writing a personal diary for research purposes; the choice about whether to describe everything or not thus only occurred later. During my first period of research in Vorkuta I wrote my diary with the maximum openness, describing and analysing everything we usually consider to be private. I didn't stop to think that a research diary is essentially a public work and that sooner or later others would read it. Some researchers have resolved this by writing two diaries: one for public consumption and another for themselves. In other words, the researcher themselves decides what has academic value and what is better not to bring into the public arena. It is the individual personality of the sociologist that determines whether to reveal what is usually hidden and thus 'cross emotional borders in fieldwork' (Blackman 2007: 701) or to play safe and not risk their reputation.

This situation is different when research is conducted as a team, as in this case. On the one hand being alongside other researchers in the field provides support, on the other, the presence of colleagues in the 'field' can evoke negative emotions especially when confusion arises in the process of the research itself. Knowing there is a witness to how you are working in the 'field', inferring some kind of evaluation of your actions and the decisions you take, creates a certain stress; a stress which can be overcome, however, through emotional labour and collective reflection. During our participant observation my co-fieldwork – El'vira Sharifullina - and I developed a routine practice of discussing events that had taken place and our personal feelings about them; a process of collective reflection. Many hours of 'talking' became a part of our work with emotions and not only acted as a support but, as Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001: 134) point out was also important to our professional development.

It was only after returning home that I became conscious of the importance of finding ways of dealing with the significance of emotion in fieldwork. One of the discoveries I made during this ethnographic debut was that 'a researcher can never be fully independent' (Il'in 2004: 85). 'Non-participation', 'outsider observation', 'maintaining relations on a researcher-informant basis' is practically impossible to implement if you genuinely want to understand the lives of your informants. On this I concur with Dorothy Smith (2002: 8) who has argued that the attitude of a sociologist to the subject of their research is not at all straightforward and thus 'feelings of attachment, friction, arguments, worries and the experience of the researcher as the discoverer' in the 'field' are just as significant as the life of the informants. Just as in life, trust borders distrust, deceit straddles truthfulness, hypocrisy rubs up against sincerity. And this results in feelings, suffering and pain.

A turning point for me in coming to this realisation occurred during the first fieldwork in Vorkuta when one of the leaders of the group, whilst discussing ethnicity, turned to me and said that, 'My philosophy doesn't permit me to talk with you'. He was referring to my non-Russian ethnic background and went on to call me 'virtually black'. I had come to Vorkuta to study xenophobic attitudes among young people in relation to some mythical person with 'incorrect ethnicity' never imagining that I would become that person, that I would be one of those at which intolerance was directed. Experiencing this feeling was, in equal measure, unexpected, painful and instructive. It demonstrated, as Brannen (1988) notes, that protection is necessary not only for the respondent but the interviewer as well. Extended stays in an environment

with informants, the absence of the researcher's usual communicative circle deprives him/her of their support, thus in order to understand events in the field and to retain oneself as a person it is important not so much to build so-called 'objectivity' as constant emotional labour, directed towards the analysis of feelings and relations with informants. Field experience taught me to be more sensitive to others, to learn not only to listen but to hear people. Personal experiences that grew out of feeling attracted, confused and hurt were additional important results of my 'research debut'. The understanding that you yourself become part of the 'field' and that the everyday life that surrounds you influences you and that you influence those you are studying, comes during the process of reflection. In my opinion, attempting not only to study and describe accurately what is happening, but to engage emotionally, allows the researcher to render the results of their ethnographic research closer to reality. We engage ourselves, our emotions, all our personal resources in all the events of the field and sometimes we lose a sense of the borders between our former 'self' and the 'self' of the here and now. And for that reason probably in the field just as in my normal everyday life, I reacted to things emotionally; a fact that made me unhappy and sad but also happy and joyful.

Returning to 'the field'

My emotional feelings and personal transformations in the 'field' did not end on returning home. Whilst I was still in Vorkuta those close to me did not understand me, my field situation, and thus at home I could not talk or explain my feelings; this resulted in a long depression. The emptiness that appeared after the 'field' was intensified by the lack of understanding on the part of my partner and my yearning for Vorkuta. I genuinely missed the Vorkuta lads; I missed the feeling of being immersed in that 'other' and at the same time that familiar life. Returning to the 'field' therefore was going back to people who were in some ways close to me, to people I knew and trusted. Some thought I was a 'stupid sociologist' but at the same time 'close' to them, others saw in me a 'temporary friend' who had come to have their own particular place in the group. Perhaps my desire to maintain a 'live dialogue' with informants, which envisaged them not only as some kind of resource, allowed me to cut across borders and penetrate their real lives. I was with them when they were out, met up, spent their free time, when they were at home cooking food, playing 'Associations', when they went to the basement gym, drank beer, gathered at someone's flat, pierced each other, sold, or used, drugs, danced, went for a drive – at all these moments I was there, trying to live, feel, perceive just as they did. To empathise, experience, not be indifferent is not only demonstrating human participation but accepting the responsibility for your emotions. When you stop being an outsider, for a period of time, the researcher and informant become the closest people around.

My second period in the field was full of events that tested me not only as a person but as a woman. I often felt I was the informant and whether I or they were the researchers remains an open question. I always felt conscious that I was not a sexless being and was well aware of a fondness for me. Nevertheless I did not imagine that I could genuinely fall in love in the 'field'. Blackman (2007: 707) suggests that intimacy, close contact, love, romance and flirtation are part of the ethnographic endeavour, which allows for a more substantial grasp of the true dialogue between participant and observer'. How, in my case, fondness turned into falling in love is difficult to determine although a number of external causes can be identified. Firstly,

in comparison to my first visit, during the second period in Vorkuta the communication I had with Slava became more intense. He had always been one of the core members of the group but it was during the second period of fieldwork that he began to play the main mediating role in the 'field'. The reason for this was that Andrei, who until this point had played the role of 'leader' of the group, had ceased to have close contact with Slava – following the argument described in Chapter ?? - and limited his contact with his former group of friends. Slava and I were in constant touch except when he was at work or at home with his mum. We went out together, visited his friends' flats, sat around in the basement. Soon I began to be taken for his girlfriend; this is not surprising since I was always with him. Nevertheless, what happened between us was as unexpected as it was rapid. The second explanation for the deep attraction that developed was our absolute difference in everything – way of life, way of thinking, life stories; we were both interested in the other's life and emotions became the only natural way of getting to know each other. The third reason is lodged in the 'field' situation itself. The 'field' creates a split in the consciousness of the researcher: on the one hand you understand that the world around you is constructed as 'outside' and the sociologist must remain vigilant in it; but on the other you long to cast all responsibility for the field, transfer all the weight of controlling the course of events, on to someone stronger, more decisive, whose whole life personifies risk. If, however, Lutz is right that ethnographic work consists of a range of sources of information including what your body, emotions and head tell you about the field (Lutz 1986: 290) then this kind of emotional intimacy might be seen as just another source of information. Being open about this may make the researcher vulnerable but silencing it is also unhelpful for both sociological analysis and sociologists themselves

It remains extremely difficult and painful to remember the experiences of Vorkuta. If it is in any case difficult to articulate the feelings, likes and dislikes, attraction, romantic gestures, disappointments we experience in our everyday lives, then it is even more difficult to speak about this publicly from the position of a sociologist. Maybe it was simply impossible not to fall in love with someone who was so genuine, so open, always there, who, by his very presence, personified both strength and risk but at the same time expressed his feelings in a remarkably touching way. Slava came to embody for me everything alien to my life; it was frightening but at the same time attractive.

After that things happened like they do in the movies. Slava, rushing past with Iana didn't notice me. It was me who stopped him. He said he was tired of looking for me and insisted I dance. He grabbed me by the hand and we began to dance. To say that the world disappeared at that moment is to say nothing. [There was only] The deafening music, the bright light and Slava's eyes. I drew him close to me. He embraced me and simply lifted me high, then he wrapped my legs around him and pulled me close. He stroked my hair, tenderly brushed his lips against mine. It was incredibly erotic and touching. Incredibly emotional. The lightest of kisses, the strongest of embraces and the spinning - spinning with closed eyes. For a minute I couldn't hear anything. I simply never imagined that this person could be simultaneously so strong and so tender. It amazed me. Strength combined with super tenderness – I simply stopped

controlling myself. After a while I opened my eyes and saw Slava smiling...

(Extract from Al'bina Garifzianova's diary, 12th October 2007)

Our mutual attraction was noticed by my colleagues too and some of them were also implicated in the events that followed. It is possible that if I had been alone in the 'field' these events would have remained part of the 'hidden ethnography'. There is always a fear that your colleagues will condemn you for having demonstrated your feelings and, after writing up these events in my diary, I thought constantly about what they would say. In my case, however, my colleagues were not only tactful but emotionally supportive and quick to absolve me of blame.

It is impossible to anticipate when emotions, let alone love, might appear but it is essential that we have a clear sense of our responsibility for our own desires in the 'field', especially when this involves meaningful relations and that we understand that the research process sooner or later becomes a natural part of your life in which anything can happen.

On the other side of the 'field'

Field work has an emotional impact on the researcher themselves (Denzin and Lincoln (eds) 1998 cited in Blackman 2007) and naturally reflection continues after the field too. Indeed, 'leaving the field' was not that simple and returning home does not signify the end of the researcher's emotional engagement with events in the 'field'.

The analysis of material from the field is the first site of mental return and brings with it new emotional engagement in the events experienced by the researcher. It initiates a second stage of reflection and is often painful. Secondly the 'field' leaves an imprint on your own self-understanding and your perception of the world around you; much of what you did in the field is not characteristic of you in your normal life and thus changes to your personality are inevitable. And finally, a new emotional stress appears as you seek to answer the question, how should I present the material gathered publicly without compromising ethical norms or your own promises to respondents? Indeed it was only after return from Vorkuta that the full meaning of the rule 'Do no harm' became clear to me. This issue became particularly acute in relation to the use of visual materials; deciding whether or not to obscure the faces of informants was a particularly emotional question for the fieldworker who was responsible directly for discussing with informants the question of preserving anonymity. After the 'field' I continued to worry that I might have broken some ethical norm, failed to keep my word or 'used' them as a source of information – a feeling expressed by one of the respondents as using them 'like a condom'. And, consequently, all the arguments I had worked through in my head about them having become more than informants and having started to feel real friendships with them began to be thrown into doubt. On the other hand, the informants with whom we worked, thanks to their many years of acquaintance with sociology, knew perfectly well what our work was about and having agreed to communicate with us, they took on this responsibility jointly with us. It is important, in my opinion to recognise this contradiction. Sooner or later after return the researcher begins to reflect on the question of what is more important – human relations with the informants or professional advantages? And for this reason it is just as important to consider the

emotions of the researcher and their relations with informants after the field as in it. And, although the researcher who reveals their emotions in this way renders themselves vulnerable to ethical scrutiny, ‘unless the hidden ethnography is made more transparent a more realistic account of fieldwork will not be forthcoming’ (Blackman 2007: 701) and the ‘living texture’ from which we derive our understanding of social reality disappears. The ambiguity of the situation of the sociologist produces emotional feelings about which we need to speak with each other in the field and write about after return.

Conclusion

Two broad positions are evident in contemporary sociological discussion of emotions in research. The first recognises research experiences in the field to be significant for understanding the world studied and emphasises the necessity of publicly recognising this fact. The second suggests that emotions play an ambiguous role in the research process, impacting on the research results. Indeed, despite the recognition of the importance of emotions in the field, few sociologists choose to share their experience, preferring not to risk their reputations: established researchers fear ‘losing face’ by revealing their subjectivity and emotions in the field while for younger sociologists, whose research debut is likely to be particularly memorable and emotion-ful, risk having the ‘objectivity’ of their data questioned if they recount their emotional experiences openly. Whether one is prepared for these risks or not, however, the reality is that the researcher is only able to maintain an outside, ‘objective’ position until the point at which they are drawn into the field situation (Shchepanskaia 2004: 131). Once that engagement takes place, moreover, its successful management is achieved not by seeking to re-establish distance in relation to the ‘objects’ of research but by conducting emotional labour aimed at analysing one’s own actions, feelings and relationships with informants. Only through the critical analysis of one’s own actions, including research emotions, is it possible to come close to understanding the life trajectories and events that play out in the ‘field’; as Shchepanskaia (132) puts it, ‘strong objectivity demands strong reflexivity’.

It is not only the lives of informants that are changed by the researcher’s presence in ‘the field’ but the researcher is profoundly influenced by their informants; it is virtually impossible to ‘enter and leave a research environment with all pre-existing values unchallenged or unchanged’ (Pilkington 2008a: 97-8). The Vorkuta field undoubtedly allowed me to see myself differently and understand much that was not only around me but inside me, triggering deeply personal changes in my understanding and perception of love, trust and intimacy and causing me to act in a previously uncharacteristically decisive manner. Since there are no strict ‘rules of engagement’ in the field and emotional shock and stress are experienced not only by informants but by the researcher as well, work in the field requires constant reflection on one’s own presence in the field. The main aim of such reflection is, of course, to ensure ‘no harm’ is done to informants. However, if we are aware that emotions are an integral part of our field work, then by working with emotions in the field - by discussing personal experiences with other sociologists, building trusting relations with informants, keeping diaries and engaging in profound reflection – it is possible to bring emotionally sensitive knowledge into academic circles (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer 2001: 135) and in this way broaden the capacities of qualitative methodology.