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## Surviving Ethnography: Coping with Isolation, Violence, and Anger

Jennifer Harris

University of Central Lancashire, [jenny@hipark.demon.co.uk](mailto:jenny@hipark.demon.co.uk)

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### Abstract

This article concentrates upon the intensities of emotion experienced by a novice ethnographer. The argument is that acknowledging the emotional impact of events in the field enables the ethnographer to analyse reflexively the differences between the values of the self and those of the other. Seeing beyond the emotions generated at times of crisis can permit and facilitate an analysis of the everyday social relations between participants. Dealing with the personal impact of these emotions is an entirely different matter; very few others (supervisors, academics, peers) although well-intentioned, will appreciate the depths of these emotions and the problems that they produce for an individual ethnographer. The argument is illustrated by reflexive field notes, experiences and poetry from the author's ethnographic study of British Deaf people.

### Keywords

qualitative research

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# **Surviving Ethnography: Coping with Isolation, Violence and Anger<sup>1</sup>**

by  
**Jennifer Harris<sup>\*</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

This article concentrates upon the intensities of emotion experienced by a novice ethnographer. The argument is that acknowledging the emotional impact of events in the field enables the ethnographer to analyse reflexively the differences between the values of the self and those of the other. Seeing beyond the emotions generated at times of crisis can permit and facilitate an analysis of the everyday social relations between participants. Dealing with the personal impact of these emotions is an entirely different matter; very few others (supervisors, academics, peers) although well-intentioned, will appreciate the depths of these emotions and the problems that they produce for an individual ethnographer. The argument is illustrated by reflexive field notes, experiences and poetry from the author's ethnographic study of British Deaf people.

## **Introduction**

During the final year of my degree and social work training course (CQSW), I undertook a placement with a group of Social workers for Deaf in a North West town in England. Whilst there I realised that there was a whole other world - a Deaf World to which we as hearing people have little or no access, and which revolves around British Sign Language (BSL) use. I quickly became fascinated with the language, the politics of using it and of course Deaf people in general. In trawling through libraries to undertake my undergraduate dissertation, I realised how under-researched these issues are and how little is known about social aspects of Deafness. When an opportunity arose to apply for post-graduate study I decided to design an ethnographic study around social and political aspects of Deafness. This research forms the basis of this article ([Harris, 1995A](#)).

The aims of the study were to understand the cultural interpretation of the term 'Deaf'<sup>2</sup> which has a very specific meaning to the group of radical Deaf people in question; to understand how the group react with hearing people in mainstream society and, to understand the boundaries that Deaf people draw between their world, the 'Deaf World' and the hearing world (cf. [Harris, 1995B](#)). This culture is based upon British Sign Language (BSL) and access to it is strictly language-dependant. Therefore, my first aim was to improve my rudimentary skills in BSL and, since Deaf people do not live in a discrete geographical community, it was necessary to think laterally about how I could achieve two basic aims of ethnographic work:

- 1) To achieve language proficiency to facilitate close interaction with group members.

2) To live with the group in question.

The opportunity arose to achieve both aims by living with a group of Deaf people in a rehabilitation unit which was established to deinstitutionalise group members and in which the primary language of communication between group members and staff is BSL ([Harris, 1996](#)). Access was facilitated through the medium of an ex-social worker for the Deaf who had become part of the management team of the rehabilitation unit<sup>3</sup>. Since I was keen to research also the political life of Deaf people, I approached a national organisation of Deaf people, the British Deaf Association, (BDA), and began negotiations for permission to interview members in the following year.

Having 'solved' the immediate problems of access to BSL users and finding a community were however, only the initial issues. The Deaf people were placed in the rehabilitation unit by virtue of their underlying mental conditions or learning disabilities and the subsequent traumatic events described below owe more to this fact than anything else. Indeed, BSL use was the only common feature of all participants in the setting; the vast majority of the staff were hearing care workers and the closed system of institutional practice ([Goffman, 1961](#)) meant that the residents had very little redress in disputes concerning their care. Compounding this feature was the fact that the residents, by nature of their disabilities, (and the fact that there are so few hearing sign language users out there) had very little contact with the outside world and in order to complain about their care or treatment would have to do so via the staff - these being the only other BSL users in the setting. This of course, compromised accountability and confidentiality in the complaints procedure since staff could effectively contain dissent by 'turning a blind eye' to it. These issues contributed to the underlying feelings of distrust which exacerbated incidents such as those described here and it is these, I contend, which ultimately played a significant role in shaping the conduct of participants in the field.

As I describe below and elsewhere ([Lawrinson & Harris, 1994](#)), my role in the setting was occasionally problematic, since the residents had difficulty in realising the difference between 'researcher' and staff. Given what I have stated above about the nature of contact with the outside world, my work seemed very odd to many of the residents and I spent a very long time in explaining it. I wrote notes on everything which seemed of interest in the setting and quite a lot which seemed trivial at the time and spent quiet periods in typing them into a portable computer. Although the bulk of the analysis had to wait until I had left the field, I formed links between different types of experience which subsequently acted as 'pointers' in beginning data analysis. The method was based upon grounded theory ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)) and I utilised a qualitative research computer program, [Atlas.ti](#), specifically because it supported this methodology. The raw data was diverse in nature; ethnographic notes from day to day encounters with residents formed the bulk of the material, but there were also transcribed interviews with radical Deaf committee members<sup>4</sup>; notes from Deaf conferences and my own reflexive notebook. By the end of the fieldwork period, I had lived in the community for a period of 10 months and the experiences described below draw directly upon material written in my fieldwork notebook in that period.

The article is divided into five sections. The first three deal with the emotions experienced whilst in the field and the fourth is a reflection upon the impact of the emotions in shaping my thinking

which highlights the importance of how events are recollected and the utilisation of such recollections in subsequent data analyses. The final concluding section attempts to situate my experiences within the bodies of literature from feminism, the sociology of the emotions and ethnography.

## **Isolation**

A very thorny problem, of being 'different' to those in the chosen field is isolation from the cultural system of mainstream society. In many ways, appreciation of this isolation and its effects is extremely important because it is only by acknowledging our difference from the group that we come to understand their cultural systems. In order to illustrate this point, I will cite a poem I wrote during one such isolated emotional experience:

### **Fieldnote Extract 1**

#### **A Poem - No, a Sad Poem about being here alone**

**Always it seems my brief is to be OUTSIDE  
APART, kept from the camaraderie of friendship and loyalty  
I'm IN yet OUT - how strange it feels  
A researcher's job is to be alone, to be STRONG to  
draw upon the hidden depths  
To search WITHIN one's own reservoirs of strength  
and to keep going even when you're sure  
you can't take another day.**

Setting aside the literary worth of the poem (which is nil), the point here is that very early on in the fieldwork I was acknowledging the problems of not being part of anything - not the society of Deaf people nor the staff culture; and the fact that both these groups had reservoirs of support that I could not utilise, nor was it appropriate for me to do so. I belong to a different culture entirely called 'University'; a world of abstract ideas and books and a world which was and is, so very foreign to the conditions in the field. These emotions were intensified by the language difference from those in the field. The realities of living and working in a different language are that isolation experiences are inescapable - I was not 'IN' precisely because of my difference; my status as a hearing person precluded being 'IN'. However, my developing skills in the language gave me the opportunity to (eventually) become IN, whilst also being OUT. In fact, it was not until my later in the research that I learned that it was an advantage to be different, since it is this difference that gives the facility to appreciate and question the very things that group members take for granted and to come to understand them from an outsider's perspective. Therefore an analysis of the feelings of isolation demonstrated in the poem enabled me to contextualise them by 'placing' myself in relation to the other participants in the setting; to see how some group members were ordinarily IN whilst others could not get IN at all. Within this setting, some Deaf people were seen within the group as 'good' people whereas others appeared to be very much left to their own devices. The former group were more IN precisely because they were in touch with the unstated rules of the group, such as being 'kind' and helpful to other residents, being generally compliant with the aims of the unit and so on. Those who were OUT comprised group members who did not subscribe to these aims, (such as Violet discussed later); who could not be

relied upon or who were volatile. Again, these social relations only became apparent through studying reactions of group members at times of crisis. I will attempt to demonstrate this by describing the problems of violence in the setting.

## **Violence**

Living at the Centre meant that violence was an everyday occurrence. This is not to say that it is possible to get used to it, although I was amazed to find that the staff had become habituated to violent outbursts from the residents and to a large extent had learned to expect it. As a person who was IN but also OUT, coping with violence within the group is extremely difficult. Residents and staff have group norms and procedures for dealing with violence; whereas ethnographers do not. Furthermore, the University support system, (supervisors, academics, peers) although well-meaning, cannot appreciate fully the emotions engendered by being in a violent setting. I intend here to illustrate this point by fieldnotes again:

### **Fieldnote Extract 2**

**I was sitting in the office today observing the wildlife. The office is the focus for all the happenings at the unit so it's a good place to hang about and a great place to see lots of different styles of signing. It is also the absolute boundary between staff and residents - the place of argument, explanation, conciliation, retribution, medication - the seat of power - the interface between hearing staff and Deaf residents. There were two staff working, one senior, one junior. The senior got called away to another site. The junior was called over to the Administration block to sort out a problem. Could I just answer the telephone and keep any eye on things? How many times had that happened recently? The phone rang constantly - everything from staff wage claims to disputes over alleged mis-treatment of residents. A resident (Violet<sup>5</sup>) came in. She should be at 'work' on site but has bunked off - she prefers to sit in the office and smoke and observe me. What must I look like to her, I wonder? I sit here going redder in the face by the minute and jabbering into a piece of plastic - the scene must make no sense at all. I know this resident well. Her temperament is renowned throughout the staff. Violet is, quite literally, a time-bomb. She is sometimes passive, particularly if she has access to large quantities of cigarettes, but should she not, and should she be requested to do something she does not particularly fancy...well, I had seen the consequences several times. Furniture flying, no regard whatsoever as to whom or what it hits, abusive signing in threats generally followed by hasty departure.**

**I looked at her, she looked at me. She looks in a bad mood, I think, oh dear. PROBLEM WHAT?<sup>6</sup> I sign to her. FAG, WANT, NOTHING, HUNGRY<sup>7</sup> FAG. Ah. That old chestnut, no money and no cigarettes, look out. I remembered the same scene yesterday evening, when she had finally extracted a pound from the senior - she had not earned the pound of course and it would be deducted today so there would be no money today and no fags and now it's my problem and not the senior's! She sat very close to me at one side of the desk. Another two female residents (Caroline and Fiona) came in. Now Violet, I happen to know, dislikes intensely both Caroline and Fiona. Violet begins 'bad mouthing' Caroline, teasing her about allegations that she is having an affair with a male member of staff. Caroline signs to her to 'shut it' but she carries on. Fiona signs to her to 'shut it' and starts signing**

**very fast and going red in the face. Suddenly Violet starts to sign KILL YOU, KILL YOU, KILL YOU, STAB YOU. She then, to my horror, grabbed a large pair of scissors from the desk and started making thrusting movements with them at both Caroline, Fiona and me. We were all terrified and showed it. Violet was really enjoying herself, slavering with excitement as she waved the weapon aloft. I know the history of her disturbances. I had observed her daily for over two months, she frequently signed for long periods to people who were not present at all. If I jumped her would she stab me - was it my place to protect the other residents? Why was I in this stupid position? There was no point in shouting - I was the only hearing person in the block. I tried to remain calm and decided that as she was obviously enjoying the effect that our attention was having on her, I should try to look disinterested. To my great relief this worked. She became bored and put the scissors down on the desk. I quickly removed them to a drawer at my side: WHY (do) THAT YOU? STUPID YOU! signed Violet. Ah, not as stupid as you think!**

It was much later when I returned to work at the University and began to sort through my participant observation notes that I realised that the incident was not an isolated experience - that there were many forms of violence in this setting and, amazingly, I seemed to have become so acclimatised to them that I had to step out of the setting to understand this at all. I searched through the ethnographic literature for guidance on researching in violent situations but found little of use other than [Lee's](#) (1995) account which provides a somewhat sanitised account of the possible occurrences and types of hazard without entering into the detail of how to deal with the effects of regular violence.

In fact, physical fights were commonplace between residents and when the staff were involved in sorting these out, they were frequently hurt too. One evening I came into the office to find a male staff member cowering behind a filing cabinet in shock. He had attempted to intervene between two fighting residents and one pulled the cabinet over. When he had attempted to stop it falling, it landed on his arm. It took a good hour for me to persuade him to go to the hospital casualty department as he knew there would be inadequate cover while he was gone and the residents were 'jumpy'. This expression was frequently used to describe periods when incidents were either brewing or tempers running high post-fight.

What I learned from this was that I had not satisfactorily resolved the crucial issue of my role in the setting. This had happened for two reasons. Firstly, the residents, have limited intellectual capacities. I spent many long hours with them going over the fact that I was not really staff but worked in another place called University, to no avail. Basically, the majority of residents believed that there were only two types of people there, staff and residents. Since I was not a resident I must be staff, explanation or no explanation. I admit to have finally given up on this score. The hearing staff all understood my role however, so there was no confusion there. However, the temptation to leave me in charge, since I was always there and since I am a trained social worker, was irresistible. Therefore, the staff had inappropriately delegated responsibility to me and I had accepted this since by that time I had, a) gone a bit native; b) given up being assertive about my role and c) saw my main aim in the setting as being as unobtrusive as possible. The staff thought my description of the violent incident unremarkable and in fact related countless times that similar events (some much more serious) had happened to them (cf. [Lawrinson & Harris](#), 1994). In fact, it was described as 'sissy' to complain, from which I

deduced that there was a dangerous acclimatisation process operating in the setting and that violence to persons was unremarkable as an everyday occurrence.

So, how can we, as researchers, deal with violence in research settings? Does a parallel 'culture of bravado' exist amongst researchers similar to that of the staff described above? Also, although I would be the first to acknowledge that some errors were made on my part in the scissors incident, it is possible to understand how and why this occurred and it is even more difficult to see how the episode could have been avoided. My primary task at the time, which was one of the collection of rich data, was not to 'rock the boat' - not to draw any more attention to myself than absolutely necessary. The incident actually stems directly from the confusion over the role (researcher not staff), yet I had tried repeatedly to get both residents and staff to understand this, to no avail. It is very important that roles are clearly stated on arrival in research settings. I did this, repeatedly, ad infinitum. The main difficulty here was that I was resident for several months and became very well-absorbed into the unit. Put differently, my presence was not remarkable after about a month - perfect for participant observation, but with inherent role difficulties. Even the accommodation I used was designated for staff. In an way, the *setting* refused to allow me a different role - it was just not possible. This however, leaves the problem of whether anything of use can be drawn from acknowledging violence in the field or is each research setting unique and therefore has unique potential for the occurrence of violence? At the very least, researchers need to 'come out' about these issues as I suspect they are far more widespread than is currently thought.

In analysing this violent event and attempting to see beyond the immediate terror induced by the incident, I was able to draw several conclusions concerning the operation of coercive power within the setting. Indeed, these power relations became transparent through the analysis of crisis incidents such as violence. **The residents' almost complete lack of power and the staff's inability to exercise effective control meant that neither party knew where the boundaries lay - these were constantly being infringed and renegotiated.** The resultant atmosphere of general unrest and mistrust was unsettling for the residents and difficult for the staff to work in. In fact this was probably the most salient feature contributing to the frequency of actual aggression. However, these power relations were not apparent at the everyday level but became evident in crisis situations. The example above demonstrates how little power the residents actually had (Violet's outburst appears to have started from frustration about a lack of money; she had to ask for extra favours and so forth) and how ineffective the staff were in 'controlling' the situation; in preventing violence developing or in dealing with the consequences.

## Anger

At times, even 'small' events within research settings can be 'the last straw' - reducing the ethnographer to an angry mess. Here is another example from the fieldnotes which concerns the episode when I was allocated a bedroom at the Centre:

### Fieldnote Extract 3

**I have started to wonder if the KEYS are more of a symbol than I anticipated post-Goffman.... Yesterday I took the master key off Marian's keyring so that I could re-enter**

my room, thinking she would have another. I put a note in the container they came in and took it back - she wasn't there so I left it for her. She was round in a flash - 'You dared to take my key off my keyring! Don't you ever do that again' very angry reactions - how does she expect me to get into the room she just begrudgingly allocated me? I made four trips up and down with keys for the bedroom door. When I finally found one that fitted and went in, I realised I didn't need to have done all this- the lock was broken off! I couldn't believe it. The room is like a cupboard - very tiny indeed. No lightbulb - I was staggering about in the dark. When I finally got to bed I discovered there were no sheets. Back to the hostel and more KEYS - go and rip some off another bed in the hostel. Bed was like a rock - hardly any sleep.

When I went down to start work (I was late for breakfast - no-one had told me that I was supposed to be there before eight). I saw Susan in the laundry - looking very aggressive - WANT SPEAK YOU (no good morning!) I came round.

**PROBLEM STAY HERE UPSTAIRS PROBLEM,**

OK I thought, so we went upstairs. She opened the door to my room:

**THIS STUFF YOURS?**

**YES.**

**MOVE IT - ROOM MINE.**

She opened the cupboard door and put her coat in with mine. I signed that the Principal had said this is my room. She asked if I was sleeping there and changed the subject by showing me her new shampoo. She carried on brushing her hair in my mirror. What am I going to do I thought - she obviously was not open to reason on this. I played my trump card -

**MAN COMING LATER FIX DOOR.**

No she explained he can't fix the door. Oh yes he can...it degenerated into a panto for a bit, then she brushed her hair a bit more. I decided that if she was really going to wander in and out of my room all morning then I really had better not leave my computer and handbag so I took them out. I worried about the silver earrings I had left there. She moved all my stuff. Later when I went to get my coat as we were going out she told me she was changing her clothes and I could get out! I told her the man was coming soon so she had better hurry up - she ignored me. The man did come and she had hardly any clothes on - so he went away -damn damn damn I had only just got him to agree and managed to sign it all!

Apparently she HAD used the room for a bit in the past, but now lived at home and she has obviously just been using it to change in. I wouldn't have minded this if she hadn't been so nasty about it all. She told me I shouldn't leave my things there as Deaf women pinch

**things (the staff later told me she is one of the worst for this) and I just got the impression that she wanted me to go away - that's all.**

**Later the workmen came back and said I had the wrong number room. I sorted this out - he thought I meant a different block. Anyway they managed to change the horrid bed for a decent one but when they saw the broken door lock they started signing about BIG JOB and HARD WORK and proclaimed it would have to be done tomorrow - I hope to God it gets done tomorrow.**

Dealing with personal anger towards people in research settings is extremely difficult. Even separating out the emotions underlying the anger is complicated - in the example above, my own anger was exacerbated by isolation and by the Deaf woman's angry response to finding my stuff in her room. Issues of power, or lack of it, can clearly be seen here; the Deaf woman was capitalising on the fact that I was 'peripheral' to the research setting since she would not have reacted in this way had I been perceived by her as 'staff' in the way many other residents did.

Although the incident described above angered me, I realise in retrospect that I described it in the notes in a 'detached' fashion and I have subsequently come to appreciate that this is not unusual practice in ethnography. Sherryl Kleinman appears to have also operated in the field in this way:

*I managed my emotions mostly by putting them aside. Ironically, doing so helped me keep my cool and maintain friendly, but not close, relations with participants. Only later did I develop the kind of empathy that helped dispel some of my negative attitudes. However, I am not suggesting that other field researchers deny their negative feelings. Rather, by not confronting those feelings they may spend less time in the field and have less enthusiasm for the research than they might otherwise. And they will find it more difficult to remember those feelings later and understand their effects on the study ([Kleinman, 1991, p. 85](#)).*

Admittedly, Kleinman is not describing incidents which threaten the personal safety and well being of the researcher, which tends to inject a different intensity to the ways in which they are remembered and subsequently analysed, but her point supports my view that emotions can be 'managed' at the time and subsequently scrutinised for analytic purposes in data analysis. Indeed, using one's own recollection of emotions stirred up by field participants can be a powerful means of making sense of the data.

In analysing such encounters I constantly had to remind myself that this was not an ordinary setting and that, in many ways, I was unreasonable to expect that the people in the setting would react in the usual ways to events which annoyed them. The residents were there for a reason - namely that they found it difficult to manage ordinary life and were being rehabilitated. This means, in effect, that the rules of everyday existence do not apply and that behaviour which might be viewed ordinarily as aggressive or at least, confrontational, occur more frequently. I concluded that my own reaction, in being affronted, was in fact, in this setting and with these rules, 'abnormal'.

### **On Reflection: Fieldwork Revisited**

The emotional effects of these experiences left me wondering why I was doing this research project at all. In devising a coping strategy, I had to separate the feelings of frustration caused by my ineptitude in the language, from the fact that I had absolutely no status, power or even credibility in the setting and also from the intense feelings of self-pity engendered by harsh conditions. It was only when I acknowledged all of these feelings that I realised their analytic importance: I might be finding it harsh to live in the conditions of the Deaf people's reality but they have to live there all the time. In fact, it was this which subsequently led to my full appreciation of the differences between my self and the Deaf group. I would argue that it is only through such reflexivity that we can come to appreciate fully the meaning of such fieldwork experiences and what they have to teach us about the realities of other people's lives.

Focusing upon emotion in the research process has a further pertinent purpose. Throughout the process of writing about Deaf people I have been constantly aware that the vividness of the events and the initial profound impression that they made upon me has driven the production of texts and, in a very real sense, dictated the inclusion or preclusion of events within them. This is much more than saying that trauma provides the imperative, since some of the events I have described were not traumatic but poignant, joyous and sometimes just 'odd'. In a very real way, utilising the emotions of the self as a sounding board enables the researcher to determine their relative importance within the production of an ethnography. Indeed, there are few things in life as 'grounded' as one's own emotions and the production of grounded theory, ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#)), I would argue, is primarily an emotional labour.

In revisiting the fieldnotes, the experiences described above seem as vivid as they did at the time, although the memories of the physical harshness have faded. In exploring them and trying to 'make sense' of them, I am constantly aware that I utilise the vividness of the experiences to construct my analyses. I see this as useful not only in 'owning' what happened and seeking explanations but for directing the course of the written work. As Judith Okely states:

*Interpretations are attained not only through a combination of anthropological knowledge and textual scrutiny, but also through the memory of the field experience, unwritten yet inscribed in the fieldworker's being. ([Okely, 1994](#).)*

## **Conclusion**

In exploring and revisiting experiences in fieldwork, I have posited that emotion, especially recollected traumatic emotion, can be a useful analytic tool. I want here to detail this in more depth within an exploration of the bodies of literature which discuss emotion.

The subject of emotion is in general dealt with in the literature in two ways. Firstly, as an abstract concept, which although it acknowledges that 'feelings' are intrinsically linked to emotion, still manages to speak of the latter without addressing the impact of the former upon researcher and fellow participants. For example, within an exploration of 'feminist fractured foundationalist epistemology positions', Stanley and Wise claim that:

*Emotions, the product of the mind, can be separated, at least at the level of theoretical discussion, from feelings, rooted in the responses of the body; cold and pain are feelings, love and envy are emotions. (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 196).*

The authors acknowledge that separation for theoretical purposes is 'by no means simple' (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 196). However, this begs the question of why we should wish to attempt to understand either emotions or feelings in isolation. These issues of course, depend entirely upon particular definitions of 'emotions' or 'feelings'. That provided in the quotation above seems to imply that 'emotions' are somehow more 'pure' than 'feelings'; that perhaps 'feelings' could be considered also to be experienced by animals whereas 'emotions' could not. This definition then, implies that whilst 'emotions' might be considered theoretical 'meat', 'feelings' are comprised of raw animalistic urges which are not amenable to study. This begs the question of how to understand an emotional response in isolation from the feelings which generated it and further, why should we wish to do so, for indeed I would argue that both 'feelings' and 'emotions' are **data** and therefore should both be considered 'meat'.

Setting aside for one moment, whether we can and should operationalise this stance (and how it is done) there is the more pertinent issue of why 'feeling' and 'emotion' is discussed in ways which do not acknowledge how they affect the researcher and the process of the research in general. Therefore, whilst some feminists have acknowledged the importance of 'emotion' and the sin of its omission from Cartesian ontology, (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 196), the more practical issues of how emotion and feeling affect the research process have not been addressed and the issue of their usefulness has been largely ignored. This is rather curious, since 'emotion' in some feminist texts is linked to very fundamental issues such as ontology and 'epistemology' (Stanley & Wise, 1983, p. 196) and indeed Jaggar suggests:

*...that emotions may be helpful and even necessary rather than inimical to the construction of knowledge. (Jaggar, 1989, p.153)*

So the importance of emotion is acknowledged within some feminist texts but it would seem that the discussion of the effects, impacts and possible coping strategies are missing from the debate. Why is this so? It would seem that one reason is that the debate concerning emotion takes place at a level largely divorced from the practicalities of empirical research and therefore does not engage with the applicability of derived theory or its usefulness for such purposes. Alison Jaggar (1989) for example puts forward an eloquent case for the importance of emotion in feminist epistemology, but concentrates almost exclusively upon the ways in which emotion is defined by authors without considering what the effects of using one definition over another might be within empirical research projects. The only hint that this is an interactive process is contained within this quotation:

*Just as observation directs, shapes and partially defines emotion, so too emotion directs, shapes and even partially defines observation. Observation is not simply a passive process of absorbing impressions or recording stimuli; instead it is an activity of selection and interpretation. What is selected and how it is interpreted are influenced by emotional attitudes. (Jaggar, 1989, p.160)*

There are similar curiously curtailed debates in the literature from 'the sociology of the emotions'. Arlie Russell [Hochschild](#) (1975) structured her debate of feelings and emotion around the idea of 'images of actors' which, she claimed were divided into 'conscious \ cognitive' and 'unconscious \ emotional' and did not appear to admit of the possibility of the 'sentient actor' which she proposed. This now elderly piece obviously still has implications today for the ways in which emotion is discussed, or is invisible, within the literature, since the focus is exclusively the 'researched'. This is my second criticism of existing literature on emotions: the 'feelings' and 'emotions' discussed are entirely those of the researched group and no mention is made of the researcher's emotions at all, let alone whether there might be some usefulness in the latter as data.

The most detailed discussion of the effects of emotional encounters in the field is to be found in the more broadly based fieldwork literature. The best of these for my purposes is [Kleinman and Copp](#) (1993) which takes the issue of the researcher's emotions as its central topic. In fact, there are very few places in which these issues are discussed in general and even fewer where authors are prepared to be honest about such issues as feeling angry towards participants ([Kleinman & Copp](#) 1993, p. 49). However, the authors' major contribution to the field is undoubtedly that they not only give emotions and feelings pride of place in their writing but they acknowledge the ways in which the researcher's feelings and emotions can be used for the purposes of data analysis:

*As I look back, my anger served as an inequality detector. This detector however, is fallible; we should use it to test whether or not we are witnessing an injustice. But we can only test this hypothesis if we first acknowledge such feelings as anger. Facing my worst fear, that I was unempathic, led me to articulate my analytic position and explain why it fit the data better than some other perspective. ([Kleinman & Copp](#), 1993, p. 51)*

Engaging with the emotional effects of ethnographic fieldwork is traumatic and reliving experiences through the notes can be equally distressing. It is also still comparatively rare that authors include descriptions and analyses of **intense** emotions experienced in fieldwork. However, doing so is crucial if we are really to call ourselves **participants** in settings, (cf. [Hammersley & Atkinson](#), 1983, p. 14). Acknowledging the emotional effects of such fieldwork encounters enables us to relive our time in the field in a vivid manner. This tapping into the experiences at the level of emotions is a powerful tool for the analysis and subsequent reanalysis of field notes. I have argued above that researching in this way enhances understanding of 'everyday' social relations of groups.

Making use of researcher's emotions and feelings as data and the important ways in which doing so can enrich research reports and writings would move the debates within feminist thinking and the sociology of the emotions out from the level of theory and into the realms of practice. Such a move could only be mutually beneficial.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>A shorter version of this paper was presented at the 4th International Social Science Methodology Conference, University of Essex, England, July 1996, for Theme 5--"The Emotional Nature of Qualitative Research".

<sup>2</sup>This article concerns pre-lingually profoundly deaf persons, (that is, those persons who are born deaf or become deaf in very early childhood before speech is acquired) who use British Sign

Language (BSL). Some of these people have recently adopted the term 'Deaf' in reference to themselves. The term 'Deaf' is used as an expression of identity and this is distinguished from the audiological condition of deafness ('deaf').

<sup>3</sup>In the U.K. Universities do not have Review Boards similar to those in the U.S.A. Ph.D. students explore issues of access and ethics with their Supervisors before entering the field. In my own case, it was not considered note-worthy that I was proposing to live with Deaf people who had suffered from mental illness - nor was I advised concerning possible effects of so doing.

<sup>4</sup>These people are members of the British Deaf Association. I interviewed at three levels; Executive Committee members, Regional Committee members and 'grassroots' members. The most 'radical' members, or those espousing the most radical views, are to be found at the Executive Committee level. The BDA is a national organisation of Deaf people, controlled and run by Deaf people themselves within Great Britain. It has a democratic structure and Executive Committee members are elected from local and Regional membership groups. The BDA has an active political campaigning stance, lobbying the Government on Deaf issues.

<sup>5</sup>Pseudonyms used throughout.

<sup>6</sup>Words in capitals are signs throughout. Although the 'gloss' gives a clue as to the meaning in English, signs do not directly translate since one individual sign may contain the equivalent of several English words. It should also be noted that British Sign Language does not conform to the word order and structure of spoken English.

<sup>7</sup>This sign 'HUNGRY' used in this context is the equivalent in English of 'crave' - I guess we would say in English 'dying for a fag'.

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\* *Jennifer Harris's* career has incorporated a variety of both paid and voluntary work including integrating disabled children into mainstream education. She took a Degree in Social Work and CQSW at Lancaster University, U.K. and during this period developed a specialisation in work with Deaf people. Jennifer was awarded a Ph.D. in Social Policy in 1994 from Lancaster University for her thesis entitled *The Cultural Meaning of Deafness*. A book based upon the thesis was published by Avebury press in 1995. She recently completed on a ethnographic study of pharmacy practice at the University of Manchester and has just taken the post of Principal Lecturer (Research) at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, U.K.. Jennifer Harris, Ph.D., is Principal Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1. 2HE. Her email address is [jenny@hipark.demon.co.uk](mailto:jenny@hipark.demon.co.uk)

**Jennifer Harris, Ph.D.**  
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