3-20-2018

Being and Naughtiness: An Account of Being an Ethnographic-Insider Studying White, Working Class Gym-Users

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Abstract

In this work, I reflexively outline my experiences of researching white, working class British male gym-users as an ethnographer. During my research process, I adhered to the definition of a level three ethnographic insider, articulated by Giazitzoglu and Payne (2018, forthcoming). Two broad questions guide this article. First, how did I managed to create a third-level insider position in the field, especially through my own embodiment and gym practices? Second, what can others learn from my experiences; particularly in relation to the practicalities of research ethics, data analysis and the emotional consequences of leaving a research-field where one has belonged?

Keywords

Bodybuilding/Gym-Culture, Ethnography, Insider Ethnography, Third-level Insider/Giazitzoglu and Payne, Masculinity

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Acknowledgements

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In this work, I reflexively outline my experiences of researching white, working class British male gym-users as an ethnographer. During my research process, I adhered to the definition of a level three ethnographic insider, articulated by Giazitzoglu and Payne (2018, forthcoming). Two broad questions guide this article. First, how did I managed to create a third-level insider position in the field, especially through my own embodiment and gym practices? Second, what can others learn from my experiences; particularly in relation to the practicalities of research ethics, data analysis and the emotional consequences of leaving a research-field where one has belonged? Keywords: Bodybuilding/Gym-Culture, Ethnography, Insider Ethnography, Third-level Insider/Giazitzoglu and Payne, Masculinity

Introduction

This article discusses my experiences of researching, as an ethnographic insider, a pool of white, working class men who frequent a public gymnasium in a post-industrial British locale. I present this work with three aims in mind. First, to respond to calls for ethnographic insiders to produce reflexive accounts of their fieldwork and field-experiences (Chavez, 2008). Second, to consider how my experiences adhere to, and empirically substantiate, the idea of level three insider ethnography, as proposed by Giazitzoglu & Payne (2018). Third, more broadly, to consider what lessons others can learn from my time in the field and the insider-status I cemented, especially in relation to notions of a) research ethics, b) objectivity of data analysis and c) the emotional consequences, on researcher and researched, when an ethnographic-insider leaves a field and pool of participants they have become close and attached to.

Structurally, this article unfolds over five sections. First, I position my account in relation to recent literature, and problematize the sparsity of work written by ethnographic insiders about the derivation, nature and implications of their insider status. Second, the methodological context around my fieldwork is outlined. I explain where and who I researched, and how I produced a systematic analysis of the data my fieldwork elicited. Third, the basis of the insider status I constructed during my fieldwork is considered reflexively. This consideration is defined by the question: *how did I develop a total* (Chavez, 2008), *third-level* (Giazitzoglu & Payne, 2018) *insider status when researching a distinctive sort of masculinity in a specific cultural context?* In particular, I emphasize the role my embodiment and bodybuilding behaviors played in securing a third-level insider status among gym-using men ordinarily suspicious of outsiders. Fourth, I consider what lessons others can learn vicariously by considering my fieldwork. I suggest that the ethical, emotional and data-related issues I encountered in my fieldwork are carefully considered by other ethnographic insiders, so they can improve the quality of their field-experience and analysis. Last, conclusions are presented.

Insider Ethnography: A Literature Review

An ethnographic insider is somebody who, typically, researches in a geographical place

that is familiar to him and focuses his analyses on participants who are similar on the basis of shared identity-makers such as race, gender, class and/or past lived-experience (Headland et al., 1990). The insider may perform a version of the academic homecoming discussed by Oriola and Haggerty (2012) by returning to a geography and community that was once home in order to produce an ethnographic account about his own people, having left that community for a period of time. The ethnographic insider is involved in an emic ethnographic position, that is, the insider constructs an ethnographic account based on the micro-perspectives, views and experiences of those participants researched, in a particular research field, through sustained observations and conversations. This position is in contrast to an etic ethnographic approach, through which an ethnographer, typically as an outsider, constructs an account of a culture unfamiliar to him, which is usually based on a series of more brief encounters with multiple groups of participants, with the aim of comparing how different groups' experience an aspect of culture, relatively, across cultures. While the emic insider generally reports on what the participants see as important, the etic outsider will normally report on what he, as a researcher, sees as significant (see Morris et al., 1999, pp. 781-783 for more on the distinction between emic and etic ethnography). There is a long-standing, though contested, suggestion that all emic ethnography ought to be conducted by an insider (Lindeman, 1924).

Recently, it has been asserted that discussions about ethnographic insiders should differentiate between degrees and levels of insiderness. Banks (1998) and Labaree (2002) visualise the spectrum of insiderness that an ethnographer may encounter. Chavez distinguished between total insiders and partial insiders:

> Today, insider scholars have been characterized as total insiders, where researchers share multiple identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class) or profound experiences (e.g., wars, family membership); and partial insiders, who share a single identity (or a few identities) with a degree of distance or detachment from the community. (Chavez, 2008, p. 476)

Giazitzoglu & Payne (2018), in expansion of Chavez, introduce the notion of a level three ethnographic insider. For Giazitzoglu and Payne, the distinguishing feature of the level three ethnographer is the willingness and ability to take-part in the cultural phenomenon that ethnography is focused upon, as well as the past familiarity with the place, people and cultural acts under investigation. Giazitzoglu and Payne juxtapose the level three insider with the level two and level one insider. This juxtaposition is made clear by considering ethnographic work on soccer hooligans. An ethnographer of soccer hooliganism who joins in with his participants as they violently perform soccer hooliganism can be seen as a third-level insider in line with Giazitzoglu and Payne's definition, especially if he is recognized as being a competently violent hooligan by research participants and if he had relationships with those studied before fieldwork. (Although the choice to participate in hooliganism incriminates the third-level insider, it raises ethical and safety dilemmas exclusive to the third-level insider). In contrast, an ethnographer of soccer hooliganism who simply talks to, spends time with and observes soccer hooligans, away from the violence that defines hooliganism as a central behavior, is a partial insider (Chavez, 2008) or a level two or one insider according to Giazitzoglu and Payne's model.

A level two position is demonstrated in the work of Giulianotti (1995) who purposefully retracted from a level three position when researching Scottish soccer hooligans through fieldwork that consisted of:

> Regularly introducing myself to new research acquaintances; renegotiating association with familiar casuals; talking with them, drinking with them, and

going to matches with them; generally participating with them in a multitude of social situations; *but disengaging myself from preparing for and participating in violence*, within and outside of football match contexts. (Giulianotti, 1995, p. 3)

As a white man researching white men of a similar age and social class to himself, Guilianotti was able to cement what Giazitzoglu and Payne's model defines as a level one insider level on the basis of shared identity markers. Because Guilianotti was able to engage with cultural capital in line with his participants, like going to games with them and drinking alcohol with them, he also adopted a level two position in line with Giazitzoglu and Payne's model. But his chosen lack of violence prevented him conforming to level three.

Hence, the first or second level ethnographer may look like, sound like and gain access to soccer hooligans, and have the chance to generate data accordingly. However, because the first or second level ethnographer is not an active participant in the studied group's central behavior and identity, that is, they *talk the talk without walking the walk*, his immersion and data elicitation, like his field experience, is not as full or intense as it might be, had he taken on a level three position by being fully immersed within the research context. Although, possibly, this detachment may give the second or first level ethnographic insider a level of objectivity that the third-level ethnographer, so immersed in his field and participants' behavior, lacks. Indeed, Guilianotti implies that his lack of participation in football hooliganism, while preventing him full immersion and access into his participants' world, also limited him in one respect: "The resultant ambivalence of some research subjects toward the author is interpreted as one reason for minimizing the prospect of his 'going native'" (Guilianotti, 1995, p. 1). There is, then, a potential level of impartiality present in the level one and two positions that the level three insider may not have.

According to Giazitzoglu and Payne's model, a level three ethnographer's insider position and status is so substantial that research participants will overlook the ethnographer's academic identity and see the ethnographer as one of them. This is illustrated in the work of Monaghan (2002) who, through his ability to participate in Britain's nighttime economy as a doorman, was treated and seen as a doorman by those he both observed and worked alongside, despite those participants knowing Monaghan to be an academic who was researching them. As a result of his third-level status and participation in the behavior studied, the total insider may undergo physical sacrifice during fieldwork. This is highlighted in Wacquant's (1995) research into boxing, through which Wacquant would spar with participants and incur bodily injuries such as a bleeding nose.

The level three insider closely resembles the participant-as-observer role, originally defined by Gold (1958), and summarized more recently by Takyi (2015, p. 868):

In the participant-as-observer role "the researcher becomes more involved with the insiders' central activities" (Baker, 2006, p. 177). The researcher develops relationships with informants through time (Baker, 2006; Jackson, 1983), and spends "more time and energy participating than observing" (Jackson, 1983, p. 41). The researcher's intention is to experience the life of the informants in order to understand it better (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955). . . . The participant-as-observer role is very important because it offers the researcher deeper insight into the context being studied. Close contacts with informants help the researcher to understand, in practical terms, nuances in their discourses, which cannot be obtained through one-visit interviews. This is because, as Adler and Adler (1994) observed, the friendly relationship enables the informants to "instruct the investigator in the intricacies of their personal and social worlds."

(p. 380)

The participant-as-observer role has been positioned as the most beneficial form of participant-observational research, due to the sort of data the role can produce:

> As far as the situation permits, a researcher who wants to employ the participant observation method should adopt the participant-as-observer role, which offers a higher degree of involvement. This will not only give the researcher deeper understanding of the context under study but will also help him to gain the confidence of informants, thus yielding more reliable data. In doing so, however, the researcher should account for his/her biases and how they might have affected his/her observation. (Takyi, 2015, p. 870)

When comparing and contrasting the third-level ethnographic position proposed by Giazitzoglu and Payne with the more established role of the participant-as-observer, it should be noted that the third-level ethnographer, when he practices the academic homecoming discussed by Oriola and Haggerty (2012), takes the principles and benefits of the participant-as-observer role further. By entering a place he is familiar with, researching people he knew before the fieldwork commenced and participating in the studied group's central behavior, the third-level ethnographer potentially enjoys an even deeper level of rapport with his participants and a more authentic experience of his participants' lives—a rapport and experience born of timeliness, shared history and perhaps even nostalgia, as well as shared behavior and identity. This gives the third-level ethnographer, potentially, even more insight into the nuances of the people and behavior studied, a higher level of trust and confidence from participants and, ultimately, richer data. Yet it also makes the level three ethnographer more prone to the central disadvantage associated with the participant-as-observer role, namely *going native*:

> One major downside of the participant-as-observer role, however, is that the researcher may "go native," losing his ability to report data objectively (Gold, 1958, p. 221). In other words, the researcher may be so "affectively involved in such a way and to such a degree that he loses his perspective and his feelings obliterate his ability to observe" (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1955, p. 350). (Takyi, 2015, p. 869)

After all, the third-level insider, upon returning to research a field through academic homecoming, is a returning native.

Insider Ethnography: Problematic

As put by Chavez (2008) accounts about insider ethnography "have failed to systematically describe what insiders actually experience" (p. 475). This criticism remains the case today; when there is a continued absence of practical accounts written by insider ethnographers about their experiences of doing insider ethnographer, it critically reflects on the unique field experiences and challenges encountered when one adopts a full insider position. This is problematic, particularly given wider post-modernist calls for ethnography to be thought about and discussed more critically and reflexively (Brewer, 2000).

In response, here I present an account of my experiences of being what Giazitzoglu and Payne's model defines as a third-level insider, that is, as an insider who is similar to participants in terms of identity (level one) and has the ability to share cultural capital with participants (level two) and has the ability to take part in participants' central behavior as a competent and

willing actor (level three). Having returned to study a group, place and cultural practice I was familiar with before formally participating in fieldwork, my discussion is based on my time researching white, working class men who frequent a public gymnasium.

Akin to Chavez, several years after leaving the field I feel the need to critically reflect on my experiences of being an insider.

> It has been nearly six years since completing my dissertation, perhaps a necessary period of time to detach from the experience of researching one's own family. I feel the need to critically reflect on the experience of being an insider scholar as I recognize that little on insider methodology has been written, even in the wake of an increasing number of studies. (Chavez, 2008, p. 478)

I needed to take advantage of the detachment that time had allowed, and epistemologically recognize that the lack of insider methodological accounts Chavez referred to still exists today and needs correcting. I now discuss the wider context of my fieldwork, before considering how I procured a third-level position. I will close with the lessons others can learn from my third-level experience.

Research Context

Between January 2007 and January 2009, I ethnographically researched a pool of white, mainly working class males who ritually use a public gymnasium referred to under the pseudonym "Gym D." This research period occurred as part of a PhD investigation into how contemporary white, working class British masculinity is lived and experienced in a post-industrial British locale and the importance of gym-use and embodiment to contemporary male identities and lived-experiences (Giazitzoglu, 2010). In line with the British Sociological Association's ethical guidelines, no harm came to any research participants during the course of my research. All participants remained anonymous in my PhD and the peer-reviewed publications that emerged from my PhD's fieldwork (Giazitzoglu, 2014a, 2014b; Giazitzoglu & Payne, 2018).

Gym D is located in Dramen: a pseudonym used here to refer to a post-industrial town in the North of England (United Kingdom). Following the demise of Dramen's coalmines and coalmining industry in the 1980s, contemporary post-industrial Dramen has some of the highest levels of unemployment, crime, suicide and deprivation per capita in the UK and the European Union more widely. Gym D is where Dramen's bodybuilders, bouncers and local hard men build their anatomies. Illegal anabolic steroids are available and freely taken in Gym D. Gym D hosts specific training apparatus and weights to meet the demands of Dramen's serious gym-users.

Most men encountered in Gym D embody excessively large physiologies, which reflect the men's dedication to bodybuilding, high protein diets and, in many cases, anabolic steroid use. Outsiders are treated inhospitably in Gym D, especially after undercover policemen reputedly infiltrated the gym to gain intelligence on some members of Dramen's criminal underworld—as I heard anecdotally during fieldwork. Hence, Gym D is a closed, somewhat transgressive space that is exclusively for local men involved in serious bodybuilding. To ethnographically access and gain data from Gym D's community, a special sort of insider status was needed.

Fieldwork

The research questions that guided my fieldwork were: (1) *building on notions of*

sociological anomie, how and why do men who use Gym D (participants) experience a disjunction in their lives between how, according to them, things are and how things should be? (2) *how do participants view their labour situations, in mind of the post-industrialisation they've encountered in their town?* (3) *how do participants' bodies and bodybuilding behaviours relate to their wider lives and identities?*

My research was rooted ontologically in the interpretive phenomenological tradition (Gill, 2014). Accordingly, I tried to elicit rich, verbal data from participants about how they, potentially subjectively, interpret their anomic, labour-lives. I also tried to bring forth data about participants, based on my own observations of them and their behaviours. This data was then reflected upon, analysed and used as evidence to iteratively induct empirically-informed answers to my research questions.

In order to generate phenomenological data from and about participants, three modes of qualitative inquiry occurred. First, participant observation, whereby I trained with users of Gym D in Gym D on average five times per week for two years. This enabled me to a) establish rapport with participants by taking part in their central behavior, b) observe participants as they interacted with each other—especially when discussing their bodies and body-building, and c) create a research diary. In my research diary, any meaningful behavior observed or relevant conversations heard in Gym D that were linked to research questions were noted and recorded in written form. Hence, if participants mentioned anything about a sense of anomie, their labor lives or their bodies, this information was recorded, and later analyzed. To enhance my participant observations, I visited Gym D at different times of the day in order to observe a spectrum of Gym D's users. Unemployed men tend to train in Gym D in the morning, while employed men generally trained in the early evening. A subset of upwardly mobile men visited the gym later in the evening. By researching Gym D at strategic times, I could access and observe the different typologies of masculinity that use Gym D and answer the research questions with a more diverse range of data, elicited from a heterogeneous pool of Gym D's users.

Semi-structured qualitative interview occurred with 42 users of Gym D, who consented to be interviewed. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants consented to be interviewed after I displayed a poster in Gym D asking for volunteers. Interest in interviews also emerged through a word-of-mouth, snowballing effect, whereby Gym D's users learned about my research and wanted to participate in it. Interview questions were open-ended, and asked participants generic questions about their lived experiences, especially their anomie, their work-situations and how they interpret their bodies. Interviews allowed participants to answer questions using their own words and reveal their own relative viewpoints. I then spent time observing participants in leisure spaces outside of Gym D, such as in football stadia, bars, nightclubs, shopping centers and tanning salons. This field-time further improved rapport between my informants and me.

Before each interview, I explained the purpose of my research to participants and asked them to sign a consent form. I also promised participants that they would remain anonymous within my PhD thesis and any related publications and that no harm would come to participants as a result of their participation in my fieldwork. At this point, participants were reminded that I wasn't just a weightlifter and friend, but also an academic. At this point, my status and role with participants could have been challenged: participants may have retracted from me and the research process and perhaps questioned my authenticity as a friend and fellow weightlifter. However, this wasn't the case. Rather, the level three insider position I cemented before interviews transcended my identity as an academic. I remained, primarily, a Gym D lad during and after interviews, despite my request to interview participants and ask them what some participants described as "heavy" questions. Hence, the reminder to participants that I am an academic as well as a gym-user did not have an adverse impact on my relationships with

participants. If anything, interviews further heightened my relationship with participants, as interviews were generally enjoyable and humorous interactions.

Analysis

Upon eliciting data from and about participants in the ways discussed above, my job analytically was to order and make sense of data so that I could use it as empirical evidence to answer my research questions in a way which consulted the subjective phenomenological perspectives of my participants. Any qualitative data relating to participants' experiences and articulation of (1) anomie, (2) bodybuilding, and (3) labor lives inducted during fieldwork was identified by reading through my transcribed interviews and my research diary. I highlighted relevant data within transcripts and the diary. A three-color highlighting scheme was used so that relevant data was ordered into the three key themes linked to my three research questions: anomie, labor lives and bodybuilding.

Once data pertaining to each individual theme was identified and highlighted, relevant data was copied and pasted into three separate files. File 1 consisted of data relating to participants' anomie, File 2 consisted of data relating to participants' bodybuilding and File 3 consisted of data relating to participants' labor lives. In this way, data was coded into appropriate categories and stored autonomously.

Each file was then read several times, so that familiarity with data emerged. In this way, I was able to identify patterns, inconsistencies and nuances in the data files. For example, within data on participants' labor lives, some data suggested participants liked their jobs, while other data suggested participants loathed work. Further, the different forms of labor, practiced by the separate typologies of masculinity I identified in the field, directly impacted participants' lived-experiences and comments. The unemployed men I identified in Gym D, and whom I discuss in detail elsewhere Giazitzoglu (2014b), gave very different narratives about their working lives compared to the upwardly mobile men I identified, whom I also discuss in another publication Giazitzoglu (2014a). Differences existed in participants' physiological ideals and training practices. I found a desire to construct smaller but leaner, more athletic anatomies in the upwardly mobile men I identified. They lifted lighter weights and performed more cardio-vascular activities, eschewing anabolic steroid use. In contrast, males employed in manual roles generally desired to inhabit larger, more muscular bodies; they lifted heavier weights and used anabolic steroids. (See Giazitzoglu, 2010, for extensive analysis).

The diversity of data I acquired in the field—reflecting the relative and contrasting phenomenological views of the different types of men I identified—meant answering research questions was not straightforward and that further coding of data was necessary to identify and take into account contrasts between participants' phenomenological viewpoints. Hence, within each file, more specific coding took place. For example, data on participants' labor lives was further categorized into codes such as *labor is good within my lived experience*; *labor is bad within my lived experience*; *comments on post-industrial labor*, *comments on blue-collar work*, *comments on labor as a facilitator of upward mobility* and *comments on unemployment*. While data on body-building was further categorized into codes like *big bodies, athletic bodies, dieting, steroids, body-dysmorphia, comments that reveal the complexity of training* and *gym as catharsis.*

In this way, I was able to store, contextualize, order and evaluate the wealth of qualitative data I elicited. I used this data as evidence to present informed answers to my research questions, as follows in the phenomenological tradition. Hence, I systematically elicited and coded data, taken from one case (Gym D), in line with Eisenhardt (1989). I then used that data to come to, iterate and induct rigorous qualitative findings, grounded in participants' comments, in congruence with the principles articulated by Gioia et al. (2012) and

Strauss and Corbin (1998).

Having outlined the research context my ethnography took place within and the data acquisition (analysis and philosophy that defined my fieldwork) I now give a reflexive account of my fieldwork. I focus, first, on how I was able to construct a position in congruence with Giazitzoglu and Payne's notion of a third-level insider position in Gym D. I then reflect on some challenges my third-level insider position created.

Deriving an Insider Status in Gym D

I was born in Dramen and grew up a few miles outside. Dramen and Gym D are places that are defined by "a cultural knowledge of the way to become and be a working class man in this place" (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007, p. 350). Although I moved away from Dramen for university—and happily stayed away upon finding employment in the south of England—I was able, upon re-entering Gym D as an ethnographer, to appear to share a working class identity with those I researched.

Having attended quintessentially middle class universities and having worked in middle class institutions, my original working class identity was somewhat diluted when I entered the field. Despite this dilution, upon re-entering Gym D, and thereby practicing a form of academic homecoming discussed by Oriola and Haggerty (2012), I was seen as sufficiently working class —or working class enough—by Gym D's community. I communicated via a somewhat exaggerated regional accent. I talked about little except lifting weights and the local football team. I made jokes about certain topics, and I dressed like the other lads in the Gym. I did so to align my class-identity with a working class one by engaging and utilizing working class, masculine cultural capital. I drew upon my upbringing, through which I had learned how to perform, dramaturgically, in a general working class style. Through my class identity, I was seen as an insider in the gym rather than imposter; thereby gaining access to an otherwise closed group of participants.

By using cultural knowledge and capital about how to be a man in Gym D, I was able to cement a level two position in line with Giazitzoglu and Payne's model. The fact that I am white, male and local—in line with almost every other user of Gym D—worked to ensure my level two insider position in Gym D further.

The ability to enact the right class, and realise a level two insider position, was especially important in terms of gaining access to and establishing relationships with key participants during the first months of fieldwork. A small subset of upwardly mobile male users of Gym D exist, whom I labelled *Changers*. (See Giazitzoglu, 2014a for a sociological insight into the Changers and their upward mobility). The Changers were unpopular, even rejected, among the majority of Gym D's core community, who dismissed the Changers as posh, snooty and conceited on account of their middle class identities and aspirations. Had I, like the Changers, been seen as an exigency of middle class culture, I would have most probably failed to integrate among Gym D's predominantly socially immobile users and struggled to acquire data accordingly. There's an important point to be emphasized here. The Changers lift weights in Gym D. In this sense, the Changers are involved in the gym's core activity and so could be read as level three members of the gym's community. However, the Changers are seen as the wrong class within Gym D. Hence, they are not level two members of the gym and are eschewed accordingly. In all probably, lifting weights alone would not have allowed me full access and insiderness in Gym D as an ethnographer. It was the combination of lifting weights (level three) and class-performance (level two) that secured access to Gym D for me in the field.

Most Gym D users assumed that I, like the unemployed gym-users I identified in the field and discuss elsewhere (Giazitzoglu, 2014b), survived on welfare benefits linked to

unemployment due to me being able to train frequently without the apparent imposition of working-patterns infringing on my time. Users of Gym D noticed that I relied on lifts or public transport to get to the gym rather than owning a car. Similarly, gym-users saw me pay weekly gym-fees in loose-change, rarely being able to afford bodybuilding supplements, and frequently wearing old clothes. This was born of financial necessity at the time—I was an unfunded PhD student living in relative poverty. Yet, such acts were clearly noticed by other users and functioned, serendipitously, to further affirm my level two insider status.

How did I go past a level two insider position and take on a level three one? It was my embodiment and participation in bodybuilding that allowed me to acquire a deeper, third-level insider status within Gym D. Having learned to body-build as a teenager in Gym D in the late 1990s and having continued to practice bodybuilding principles after leaving Dramen, I began fieldwork with a physique that was similar to many of my participants. Hence, my body functioned to give me legitimacy among participants in the field, who saw me as one of them at the level of physiology and commitment to weight-lifting. This allowed me to integrate as an active bodybuilder among participants, or third-level insider, from the onset of fieldwork.

At the risk of sounding boastful, I lifted not only heavy weights but heavy weights in a controlled manner during my fieldwork, as this constitutes good-form in the bodybuilding community. I was always a willing participant (and a high ranker even if not winner) in the impromptu strength-tests that Gym D's users challenge each other to (such as who can bench, squat and deadlift the most.) Once, I fainted after a heavy squat session. On another occasion, I pushed a training partner to the point he vomited. Such acts, coupled with the fact that I added over a stone of muscle to my physique during my fieldwork as a result of the many hours I spent observing and thus bodybuilding in Gym D, functioned to further affirm my status as a third-level insider. This third-level position meant that participants acted naturally and authentically in front of me. Hence, the participant observations I recorded were a reflection of participants' natural actions, rather than a reflection of participants' affectations, constructed to suit me as an observer, as might have happened had I not been seen as a legitimate insider.

As a result of my insider status, established through my participation in bodybuilding, 42 users of Gym D (out of about 60 regular lifters) volunteered to take part in research interviews. It is unlikely that such a high proportion of participants would have agreed to participate in interviews had they not known and trusted me as one of them or one of the lads. During interviews, participants spoke to me candidly and in great detail, as illustrated in the following description of steroid-use and cycling given by a participant:

> *Participant*: In the Winter I am all about getting mass and size so I'm on the Dinabol, the Oxymetholone and some basic testosterone like some Sustanon, but this time of year [Spring] I start cutting down that size and dieting ... so I've just got myself some Trembelone jabs, some Winstrol tablets and some propionate testosterone.
> *Author A:* Why do you use propionate testosterone this time of year and not in the winter?
> *Participant:* Cause it's faster and there is no water in it, so you look leaner, and I don't want to hold water this time of year.

Although I never used anabolic steroids, the interview transcripts show that participants assumed I did, as evidenced in their language. This meant participants were willing to discuss their steroid-use with me in detail, on the basis that I was one of them, that is, another steroid-user or juicer; not someone who might stigmatize steroid-use or report it as an illegal act. This level of richness also existed in conversational data given by participants on topics such as

dieting, training rituals, and posing techniques on bodybuilding show stages. Similarly, many anecdotes I received started with phrases like "I can tell you this stuff because you know the crack," "I'm only going to tell you this because I know you're like me when it comes to weights so won't judge me," and "If you weren't a good bencher (i.e., a competent bench-presser) I wouldn't bother saying what I'm about to say."

Without a third-level insider status, built on my own embodiment and participation in bodybuilding, the data I elicited would have been less authentic, natural and rich, and not packaged in the discourse and argot of bodybuilding. Because participants saw me as one of them (level three) they spoke to me as one of them. In turn, my data and the phenomenological insights used were more empirically germane. During ethnography "there is a possibility that an ethnographer may be deliberately told partial truths by interviewees" (Naaeke et al., 2012). Through my third-level position, the chances of participants willingly telling me partial truths was significantly reduced.

Insider Ethnography: Issues of Objectivity, Emotions and Ethics

What practical lessons can others learn from my experiences of being a level three insider? I now focus on three lessons. The first relates to objectivity, the second to emotions and the third to ethics.

The most common criticism of the insider ethnographer, as we saw earlier with reference to the participant-as-observer role (Takyi, 2015) is the post-structuralist argument that insiders are too close to their participants to analyses them with impartiality and present a rigorous, objective interpretation of what was seen, heard and recorded in the field (Chavez, 2008). Although ethnography is not regarded as nomothetic, an element of scientific rationality is needed for the data an ethnographer elicits to be theoretically contextualized and used to systematically induct empirically rigorous findings.

I believed I achieved a balance between insider ethnographer (able to access rich, otherwise elusive data) and social scientist (able to impartially contextualize that data.) This alleged balance derived from me teaching at a local university while conducting my ethnography. Exposure to the middle class cultural practices of a university meant that I could juxtapose the working class masculinities I observed in Gym D with the masculinities I encountered in academia, through male colleagues and male undergraduate students. I also believed I viewed all three typologies of masculinity I identified in the field with the same level of impartiality and critical analysis, particularly later on in my fieldwork when I stopped using Gym D. I purposefully removed myself from Gym D's culture and those I had researched in order to code data and reflect on data scientifically and rationally.

Nonetheless, it was suggested in my PhD viva by one examiner that I had been biased to one group of Gym D men, whom I labelled Traditionalists. Of the three typologies of masculinity I identified in Gym D, these Traditionalists were the most likely to indulge in sexist and racist "banter," often making me feel uncomfortable. Despite my aversion to some of the Traditionalists, it seemed that my work gave the impression I empathized with, even admired, this group more than others. Indeed, reviewing my research diary, I found I sometimes used "we" when discussing the Traditionalists, although I never used the term we when discussing other groups of men in my fieldwork. I had unconsciously crossed the line between third-level ethnographer and someone so caught up in the Traditionalists' world that I was no longer fully critical and objective when analyzing them. This made my situation similar to that of Armstrong and Harris (1991) who, when researching football hooligans, had become so immersed in the culture and people they were observing that they had allegedly gone native as argued by Dunning et al. (1991). I encourage other third-level insiders to pay attention to how objective they are, even—indeed especially—when they think they've put measures in place

to remain analytically detached from their participants and data.

The second lesson I reflect on relates to the emotional challenges involved with leaving a field with participants that one has bonded with somewhat intensely, as a result of level three insider status. Upon leaving the field of Gym D, I wrote this in my research diary:

> Leaving the field of Gym D has had an emotionally negative impact . . . I felt somewhat lost and alienated. I miss those I trained with and the way I felt while socializing with participants in the spaces their social lives materialize. The free drinks, the lack of queuing for nightclubs, the attention were things I'd got used to. . . . Participants miss me, too. Post-fieldwork, many would text me complaining I'd "left them." On the occasions I bump into participants now, they sometimes seem insulted that I no longer use Gym D. But family members . . . especially my girlfriend . . . are pleased I stopped, commenting that I changed when using Gym D and socialising with certain participants, even accusing me of becoming *like the thugs at the gym you started hanging out with*.

The third-level ethnographer will establish deep relationships in the field. Beyond lifting weights with participants, I helped participants apply for jobs, find legal advice and fill in forms for welfare payments. On occasions, I even helped participants' children with their school-work. Likewise, participants helped me, through acts ranging from laying a new carpet for my Mother to lending me cash. The third-level insider becomes immersed in their participants' lives. Upon completing one's fieldwork, the extent to which these relationships should, indeed can, be maintained is an important notion to consider. Does one have a moral obligation to remain in contact with one's participants, having established the bonds that come with level three insider position? It is not for me to say, but there are emotional consequences of adopting level three that can't be legislated for, and which those embarking on level three insiders should be aware of.

I now turn to ethics. Because of my insider-status, I was exposed to various situations when participants were engaged in unethical and illegal behaviour, and where there was peer-pressure for me to join in. These situations ranged from taking part in binge drinking sessions, visiting lap dancing clubs and not running from threats of violence made by other working class males when socializing with participants in the night time economy (which I did willingly), to having a small group of participants ask me to inject them with steroids and attend an English Defence League (a far-right political organization popular among some white working class men) march (which I refused to do). During these times, it was clear that my level three insider status in Gym D was, for some participants, transferable to their lives outside of Gym D. Other third-level researchers may have had to cope with similar conundrums and ambivalent identities with their participants. While good data would emerge from engaging in such acts, morally the price of good data was not worth paying. Thus, in these situations, I retracted my willingness to be a full insider and declined the chance to participate in these behaviours.

Without knowing it at the time, declining the chance to participate in such behaviour was, almost certainly, highly beneficial to my status as an ethnographer, as well as my internal moral framework. In the short-term, the vast majority of my research participants may have, rightly, been annoyed had I participated in such acts and come to see me not as a level three researcher, but as a researcher lacking integrity. More long-term, I may have become known—both in the locale I research and within the academic community more broadly—as a researcher willing to not just study but indulge in illegal and offensive behaviours. This would have damaged my reputation as a creditable researcher. Indeed, the reputation I cemented locally when researching Gym D has helped me research other groups of males based around Dramen,

such as the small-business owning men I ethnographically researched (Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017). Had I failed to behave ethically in the field, the opportunities to conduct future work may not have arisen.

Conclusion

There is a need for ethnography to be discussed more reflexively (Brewer, 2000). Simultaneously, calls exist for accounts that describe the experiences of ethnographic insiders Chavez, 2008). In response, this work has considered how I reflexively cemented a third-level insider position within Gym D and among Gym D's community. By so doing, this work has given empirical substance to the methodological principles of third-level ethnography inherent in Giazitzoglu and Payne's model. I have drawn attention to some challenges I encountered in the field because of the extent of my insider status. I encourage others to take my experiences into account when obtaining a level three insider position so as to improve, or at least better anticipate, their own field-experience and produce a more impartial data analysis.

As Naaeke et al. (2012) noted: "Discussions about insider versus outsider status of the researcher remain alive and relevant" (p. 2). This is true not just in anthropology and sociology—disciplines where ethnography is formative and most obviously aligned—but also in other disciplines where the use of ethnography has proven useful, for example, education (Banks, 1998). Building on the account I present here, I encourage others, regardless of their discipline, to obtain level three ethnographic status should their field, study, ethical panel and constitution call for and allow it. Though I admonish as to the implications of being a level three ethnographer (level three ethnography will consume your life and the lives of those around you; e.g., friends and family members), it is a way of life as much as a research method. Taking on the position should not be underestimated. Those who do so must discuss the narratives and challenges associated with their field-experiences.

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Article Citation

Giazitzoglu, A. (2018). Being and naughtiness: An account of being an ethnographic-insider studying white, working class gym-users. *The Qualitative Report, 23*(3), 696-709. Retrieved from https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss3/14