

---

4-14-2019

## “Through the Looking Glass”: The Emotional Journey of the Volunteer Ethnographer when Researching Sensitive Topics with Vulnerable Populations

Fábio Rafael Augusto

*Universidade de Lisboa*, [fabio.augusto@ics.ulisboa.pt](mailto:fabio.augusto@ics.ulisboa.pt)

Ana Patrícia Hilário

*Universidade de Lisboa*, [patriciahilario@gmail.com](mailto:patriciahilario@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Augusto, F. R., & Hilário, A. P. (2019). “Through the Looking Glass”: The Emotional Journey of the Volunteer Ethnographer when Researching Sensitive Topics with Vulnerable Populations. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(13), 17-30. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.4118>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---

A promotional banner for the Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate at Nova Southeastern University. The banner has a dark blue background on the left with the NSU logo and text: "Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate", "Indulge in Culture", "Exclusively Online • 18 Credits", and a "LEARN MORE" button. On the right, there is a photograph of six diverse people sitting on a stone ledge in front of a building with "NOVA SOUTHEASTERN" visible on the wall.

**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits  
**LEARN MORE**

NSU  
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN  
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

## **“Through the Looking Glass”: The Emotional Journey of the Volunteer Ethnographer when Researching Sensitive Topics with Vulnerable Populations**

### **Abstract**

This paper extends further research on being both a volunteer and ethnographic researcher and intends to offer some insights on the emotional challenges of adopting this dual role when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations. The discussion presented here draws upon an ethnographic participant observation study of a food redistribution organization (Re-food) held in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. The paper builds awareness on the emotional challenges in the field and discusses potential self-reflective strategies for researchers to cope with the extraordinary demands posed on them by specific circumstances and subjects. The volunteer ethnographer, when developing their work, is subject to a wide range of emotional challenges that are related to the functions that they had to develop in the research context itself due to their dual role, as well as to the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the topic addressed.

### **Keywords**

Volunteer Ethnographer, Sensitive Topics, Vulnerable Subjects, Emotions, Food Poverty

### **Creative Commons License**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### **Acknowledgements**

The PhD project leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement n° 337977 and from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCH) supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and national funds of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MCTES) with the reference SFRH/BD/130072/2017.

## **“Through the Looking Glass”<sup>1</sup>: The Emotional Journey of the Volunteer Ethnographer when Researching Sensitive Topics with Vulnerable Populations**

Fábio Rafael Augusto and Ana Patrícia Hilário  
Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal

---

*This paper extends further research on being both a volunteer and ethnographic researcher and intends to offer some insights on the emotional challenges of adopting this dual role when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations. The discussion presented here draws upon an ethnographic participant observation study of a food redistribution organization (Re-food) held in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. The paper builds awareness on the emotional challenges in the field and discusses potential self-reflective strategies for researchers to cope with the extraordinary demands posed on them by specific circumstances and subjects. The volunteer ethnographer, when developing their work, is subject to a wide range of emotional challenges that are related to the functions that they had to develop in the research context itself due to their dual role, as well as to the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the topic addressed. Keywords: Volunteer Ethnographer, Sensitive Topics, Vulnerable Subjects, Emotions, Food Poverty*

---

The methodological challenges of conducting qualitative, ethnographic research on sensitive topics has been widely discussed (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008). There are many interpretations on what constitutes sensitive research, but for the purposes of this article we will use that proposed by Lee (1993) for whom it is the “research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it” (Lee, 1993, p. 4). This notion enables us to include the participants that take part in the research as well as the researchers conducting the research (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008). Working on sensitive topics might also involve direct contact with vulnerable subjects (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). The term vulnerable has been applied to people who experience “diminished autonomy due to physiological/psychological factors or status inequalities” (Silva, 1995, p. 15). This has been extended to people “who lack the ability to make personal life choices, to make personal decisions, to maintain independence, and not to self-determine” (Moore & Miller, 1999, p. 1034). This paper extends further research on being both a volunteer and ethnographic researcher (e.g., Garthwaite, 2016) and intends to offer some insights on the emotional challenges of adopting this dual role when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations.

The discussion presented here draws upon an ethnographic participant observation study of a food redistribution organization (Re-food) held in Lisbon, the capital of Portugal. The study is part of a PhD project<sup>2</sup> that seeks to analyze three food aid initiatives operating in Portugal (e.g., Re-food, Food Bank and Social Canteen) and the voluntary-beneficiary relationship. This analysis will make it possible to understand not only how these initiatives work and the relational dynamics that develop within them, but also to understand what can be

---

<sup>1</sup> This expression comes from the story “Through the looking glass” by Lewis Carrol and is often used in English language.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is based on the research carried out by the first author during his PhD in Sociology at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-ULisboa), currently supported by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).

done to meet the needs of their stakeholders/actors. Since the group of beneficiaries is subject to labelling, exclusion, and stigmatization processes by the unique, difficult phase they are facing in their lives, it is considered appropriate to discuss the vulnerable group concept. Also, since the study focuses on the phenomenon of poverty, particularly food poverty, issues related to the sensitivity of the topic emerge. This dual level - the vulnerability of the participants and the sensitivity of the topic - poses several challenges for the volunteer ethnographer.

While there is some work on the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting ethnographic research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations (e.g., Watts, 2008; Woodthorpe, 2009), there is little information available about the dilemmas faced by researchers when adopting the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer (O'Connor & Baker, 2017). Tinney (2008) and Garthwaite (2016) have discussed the role of being both an insider and outsider, as well as the emotional (de)attachment to the field when adopting this dual role, but they have not provided sufficient insights on being a volunteer ethnographer in sensitive contexts and with vulnerable subjects. The intention of this paper is to overcome this gap and provide insights for researchers who intend to adopt the role of the volunteer ethnographer when developing research in sensitive contexts and/or with vulnerable populations.

## **Background**

When conducting research on sensitive topics, we should bear in mind that researchers can be in a vulnerable position and may find themselves in an emotionally challenging terrain (Watts, 2008). Although much has been said on the implications of undertaking qualitative, sensitive research (Dickson-Swift, James, & Liamputtong, 2008), little has been written on the practical dilemmas faced by researchers when they adopt the role of both volunteer and ethnographer when studying sensitive topics or engaging with vulnerable populations. With a few exceptions (Garthwaite, 2016), much of what is known about volunteer ethnography comes from the work of scholars within the field of qualitative health research.

In her ethnographic work on the bodily experiences of hospice patients, Lawton (2001) outlined the difficulties she encountered because of the dual role she adopted. Although patients had given their formal consent for observational purposes on their admission to the hospice, this could not be taken for granted in all the encounters that the researcher had with them. Indeed, Lawton noted that patients on some occasions interacted with her foremost in her role as a volunteer, and therefore she used the data collected in a sensible, ethical, and reflexive manner. When confronted with the dilemma described by Lawton in her ethnographic work on the everyday life of families of patients with a life-threatening illness, Ellis (2010) also used her moral and emotional sensibilities to make decisions concerning her observations as a volunteer ethnographer in a British hospice. The emotional impact that undertaking research on sensitive contexts and with vulnerable populations for a prolonged time may have on the volunteer ethnographer was also spoken about by these authors, albeit in a non-descriptive manner.

The prolonged contact with people who are experiencing intense physical and/or emotional suffering may lead to problems with detachment during and/or after ethnographic fieldwork (Lawton, 2001). This was described by Watts (2008) who, in her ethnographic participant observation study of a cancer drop-in center, pointed out the need for boundaries when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations such as those who are suffering from or have suffered from cancer. She suggested that the need for boundaries involves the creation of "a sense of emotional balance, taking care to be close, but not too close, to participants, ensuring that (we) can retain the filtering and distilling functions that are core to the agency of the qualitative researcher when conveying the stories of participants" (Watts, 2008, p. 9). When conducting research in a space where death is engaged,

such as a cemetery landscape, Woodthorpe (2009) had to drop some participant/observation as she had moments of intimacy with the people in the field site, so the research was becoming too personal.

The emotional intensity of the volunteer ethnographer role was outlined by Tinney (2008), who stressed the importance of maintaining boundaries so that the researcher will not lose the necessary distance from the research setting. Arber (2006) also acknowledged the tensions of having a dual role when conducting ethnographic research and described her emotional labour to manage the challenges of being both an insider and an outsider. The negotiation of emotions and attachment as Garthwaite (2016) described is part of the “volunteer ethnographer journey” (2016, p. 69). The experience of conducting ethnographic work has been fraught with many challenges, some of which have already been described in the literature. The practical dilemmas faced by the volunteer ethnographer and the development of emotional protection strategies when studying topics with a sensitive nature and/or engaging in research with vulnerable populations has received little attention and thus would benefit from further exploration.

## **Methodology**

### **Overview of the Study**

Although food aid initiatives have a long history and have become extremely important in crisis contexts in Portugal and elsewhere - such as the international economic crisis of 2008 - they have also been the object of several criticisms related to: i) the legitimization of the neoliberal model; ii) the dependence of their beneficiaries; iii) the nutritional inadequacy of donated foods; and iv) the extent to which they are in fact promoting human dignity (Miroso, Mainvil, Horne, & Magan-Walker, 2016; Vlaholias, Thompson, Every, & Dawson, 2015a). Even if these initiatives do not always solve the source of problems, they end up mobilizing a significant number of human and financial resources. Thus, it is important to (re)think about these initiatives to overcome their vulnerabilities. The study which this article draws upon seeks to understand and highlight the strategies that can be adopted to make these initiatives meet the real needs of its actors. A qualitative research approach was adopted. Participant observation will be complemented by semi-structured interviews. Through participant observation - namely the practice of volunteering - the researcher will be able to understand the relational dynamics between volunteers and beneficiaries and create a relationship of proximity that would make it possible to conduct semi-structured interviews.

### **Participants**

The study focuses on beneficiaries and volunteers from three food aid initiatives operating in Portugal (i.e., Re-food, Food Bank and Social Canteen). These initiatives: i) are at different stages of the institutionalization process; ii) act at national level; and iii) represent the main models of food aid in Portugal. To guarantee the anonymity of the participants, it was considered relevant not to disclose the places where the volunteering occurs and to only mention that the study focuses on centers of the initiatives located in the district of Lisbon.

Participant observation, through volunteering, occurred twice a week (4h) for a period of three months in each of the initiatives. Re-food was the first initiative to be contacted, and the volunteer work took place from February to April 2018. Thirteen semi-structured interviews will be carried out in each of the food aid initiatives (6 volunteers, 6 beneficiaries and 1 director), that is, a total of 39 interviews (18 volunteers, 18 beneficiaries and 3 directors). The interviewees will be selected through a contrast technique (Guerra, 2006), aiming to create

a mosaic sample that captures the diversity of this population, articulating general variables (e.g., gender, age and family type) with specific variables (e.g., expectations, visions and practices regarding food aid initiatives and the relations inherent to them).

For the current study, we will focus on the ethnographic research already developed in Re-food and the challenges that emerged in the contact with the field. Voluntary work here involved the direct distribution of food to the beneficiaries and, therefore, made it possible to explore the initiative itself as well as the volunteer-beneficiary relationship.

## **Procedure**

In the negotiation phase of entry into the food aid initiative, the objectives of the research were explained to the founder and all legal and informative documents were made available, namely: i) description of the project; ii) informed consent; iii) interview scripts; and iv) cooperation protocol. All these documents were submitted to the Ethics Committee of ICS-ULisboa (host institution of the PhD project).

The cooperation protocol, signed by the researcher and the person in charge of the initiative, included a brief description of the project and a set of terms that regulated the established agreement. In the case of the researcher, he proposes to: i) collaborate, as a volunteer, with the food aid initiative; ii) share and present to the food aid initiative the results of its investigation under the anonymization of the participants; and iii) involve all stakeholders in the dissemination of the project results. In the case of the person in charge, he/she proposes to: i) provide the necessary conditions for the researcher to perform volunteering; ii) provide the conditions necessary for the researcher to select and contact the beneficiaries and volunteers of the food aid initiative for semi-structured interviews; and iii) assist in mediation between the beneficiaries and volunteers and the researcher.

After this negotiation phase, volunteering started. Both the beneficiaries and volunteers were informed by the researcher that the investigation was taking place. The information provided was based on three key points: i) explanation of the project; ii) explanation of the dual role adopted by the researcher; and iii) explanation of the commitment made to the organization through its founder. Then, verbal consent was requested from beneficiaries and volunteers to conduct the study. Asking for written consent from research participants for observation did not appear to be the best option due to the fact that signing a contract is not typical amongst Portuguese society unless the “issue in question is serious and that breaking of duties can lead to severe consequences for the parties involved” (São José & Teixeira, 2013, p. 56).

## **Findings**

### **The Dual Role of Being Both a Volunteer and Ethnographer**

Ethnography has been one of the most widely used methods of data collection within the field of social sciences, particularly of sociology (Charmaz & Oleson, 1997). Through ethnography social scientists can capture the nature of a specific social setting (Delamont, 2004), as well as the meanings attributed to individuals to their own experiences (Fielding, 2008) without disturbing the internal dynamic of the place where the research is being conducted and making extraordinary demands on the subjects under study (Lawton, 2001). Thus, research on sensitive topics and/or with vulnerable populations often draws upon the ethnographic method (e.g., Watts, 2008; Woodthorpe, 2009). Ethnography has also been widely used to conduct research within organizations (O'Connor & Baker, 2017). Indeed, being able to observe the internal logic of a given organization through the articulation of participant observation with the practice of volunteering is a possibility that has seduced some researchers

(e.g., Martin, 2014; Merrell & Williams, 1994; Watts, 2011). This was the case of Vlaholias, Thompson, Every, and Dawson (2015b), who in their study on food aid initiatives adopted the role of the volunteer ethnographer to understand the relational dynamics that are established within it.

The term volunteer ethnographer was used by Garthwaite (2016) to describe her dual role in a food bank organization. Volunteer ethnography operates on a reciprocal basis, since researchers donate their time in exchange for information for the development of their research. As such, it is a viable alternative for both the researchers, who have the possibility to reciprocate, and the organizations (O'Connor & Baker, 2017). This is particularly interesting in the context of food aid initiatives, as through the immersion in the field, due to their role as volunteers, researchers can better understand “the complexities of food bank use and the lived experience of food poverty and insecurity” (Garthwaite, 2016, p. 63). While some ethnographic research has been conducted within food aid initiatives (e.g., Salonen, 2016; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2003; Williams, Cloke, May, & Goodwin, 2016), few scholars except for Vlaholias, Thompson, Every, and Dawson (2015b) and Garthwaite (2016) embraced the dual role of volunteer ethnographer. Through volunteer ethnography, researchers gain a privileged access to the dynamics that occur both on the front stage and the back stage (Berger, 2017; Burgess, 1997). An important point to be made is that the researcher’s social position, age, and sex can influence the establishment of relationships in the field and data collection (Berger, 2017).

In the context of the current study, and particularly, of the Re-food initiative, the level of immersion and involvement of the volunteer ethnographer varies according to the group that he observes and interacts with. As mentioned previously, one of the main objectives of the PhD project is to analyze the dynamics of the volunteer-beneficiary relationship, so it is important to analyze both the volunteer and the beneficiary group. Thus, the observation occurred at two levels: as a volunteer who observes volunteers and as a volunteer who observes beneficiaries. In the first case, the level of involvement and immersion is greater since the researcher performs the same activities as the other volunteers (Spradley, 1980) and spends the whole volunteer time with them; in the second, since the interaction is restricted by the time that involves the service (i.e., food donation), the level of immersion and involvement ends up being smaller. Moreover, since the researcher is not in the same (disadvantaged) position as the beneficiaries, there are situations in which he is one of the others, with whom certain beneficiaries have conflicts derived mainly from the treatment they receive in the initiative (e.g., waiting time and how they are served) and the food they receive from it in terms of quality, quantity and diversity.

Following this train of thought, a question arises on how to create proximity with a vulnerable group and address sensitive issues when the volunteer status creates distance with certain beneficiaries. On the one hand, the volunteer status allows the researcher to enter into the field and build rapport with the group of volunteers; on the other hand, it can contribute to creating distance with the group of beneficiaries. In the Re-food case, even though the volunteer status has turned some beneficiaries off and restricted their participation in the study, it allowed a trusting relationship to be created with other beneficiaries which: (i) generally had a good relationship with the volunteers of the initiative; (ii) saw beyond the volunteer role of the researcher and felt comfortable in sharing aspects of their life with him; and/or (iii) understood that the researcher had a dual role and therefore was able to distinguish the researcher from the volunteer.

Since the number of beneficiaries interested in participating in the interview phase allowed the requirements of the study to be met, it was not considered necessary to follow another path which involved the breaking of some roles and the combination of both approximation and distance strategies to reach as many beneficiaries as possible. This path would eventually require the researcher to volunteer as a way of entering the institution and,

after establishing rapport, would enable the recruitment of beneficiaries and end their participation as a volunteer - therefore leaving the dual role and presenting himself to participants as an external element to the initiative. Due to time constraints in the current study, it was decided not to follow this path, albeit it could itself be a valid option.

Another issue that may arise when researchers adopt the volunteer status is how they should manage the priorities of their dual role. On the one hand, as a researcher, they must accomplish the research goals they had defined; on the other hand, as a volunteer, they must meet the objectives proposed by the organization. The management of these two roles implies that volunteer ethnographers should be extremely aware of the reality that surrounds them and at one and the same time they must fulfil their role as a volunteer.

When establishing a commitment to an organization such as Re-food, researchers should bear in mind that the volunteer status is not just a means to an end. That is, volunteering cannot be understood as a mask that researchers use to meet their research needs. Researchers should incorporate the role of volunteer and manage as best as possible their research objectives. In the context of Re-food, the priority was to meet the food needs of the beneficiaries, which made it possible to analyze the volunteer-beneficiary relationship, but the researcher only interacted more extensively with the beneficiaries when volunteering allowed it. This means that the researcher had to manage the interaction that he had with the beneficiaries and his role as a volunteer. Only at times when the initiative had few beneficiaries was it possible for the researcher to prolong his interaction with them.

In short, assuming the dual role of researcher and volunteer implies responding to distinct but interrelated objectives from the research and the organization. Thus researchers who adopt the volunteer ethnography role should seek to fulfil their research objectives - which led them to interact with the organization - and truly incorporate the status of volunteer, fulfilling their duties to the organization and, more importantly, to the beneficiaries.

### **The Volunteer Ethnographer Emotional Journey**

Emotion has been acknowledged as an important part of human life and it has been recognised that a fundamental aspect of being human is the capacity to feel and show emotion (Gilbert, 2001). The importance of looking at their own and others' emotions when conducting research on sensitive topics has been widely documented (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008). The powerlessness and frustration felt by Melrose (2002) in her study on juvenile prostitution and the guilt, anger, outrage and sorrow expressed by the novice researchers in Malacrida's (2007) study on the challenges and rewards of mothering when disabled are illustrative of the emotionality of the research encounter.

Rager (2005) reported how her research affected her well-being as she had experienced psychosomatic symptoms like breast pain, abdominal pain, and digestive problems during data collection. Rager described this as compassion stress and indicated the strategies she developed to cope with such an emotionally demanding experience. Rager (2005), in her study on self-directed learning of women with breast cancer, used psychological counselling, journal writing, peer debriefing, and relaxation techniques to minimise the impact of entering an emotionally draining field. The importance of the use of self-care strategies was also outlined by Valentine (2007) on her study on the experiences of bereavement in contemporary Britain. Valentine stressed that "we cannot always know in advance what will prove sensitive, that is potentially threatening and intrusive" (2007, p. 161). Thus, it is in the encounter and interaction with the other that the researchers will be able to understand the emotional impact that the research may have on themselves and participants.

The adoption of a self-reflexive approach and the development of self-reflexive tools is key for understanding the sensitive nature of the data collected (Valentine, 2007; Vincett,



2018). As Woodthorpe (2009) pointed out: “Reflexivity thus offers the researcher the opportunity to critically unpack their own assumptions and expectations, openly account for their particular interpretation(s), and reflect on their successes and failures” (2009, p. 73). Following this train of thought, McQueeney and Lavelle (2017) pointed out that emotional reflexivity helped to “mediate the negative effects of emotional labour” in the sense that it enabled to “turn unwanted emotions into analytic insights” (2017, p. 87).

Holtan, Staandy, and Eriksen (2014), in their study on child and family contact with child protection authorities in Norway, described how the acknowledgment of the emotions experienced by the researchers enabled them to gain a deeper insight of the phenomenon under analysis, that is, to be more reflective and transparent. Drawing upon their experience of conducting qualitative research with women who mother children with disability, Emerald and Carpenter (2015) have similarly outlined how knowledge sensed through or by emotions helped them to have a better understanding of these women’s living experiences. As pointed out by Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, and Kemmer (2001), emotionally-sensed knowledge is key in the research process and helps to enhance our comprehension of the social world. When conducting research, particularly on sensitive topics, and with potentially vulnerable subjects, emotionally challenging experiences might take place without warning, and it is crucial for researchers to be prepared for this degree of unpredictability (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001).

In the Re-food case, there were situations that caused emotional distress to the researcher. Indeed, the contact with the beneficiaries involved a great diversity of situations that implied different levels of involvement and emotional exhaustion on the part of the researcher. It was possible to find three recurrent situations that stood out and made the development of fieldwork and the management of emotions difficult. This was particularly evident in situations with these different types of beneficiaries: (i) the beneficiaries *I want more*; (ii) the *upset/angry* beneficiaries; and (iii) the beneficiaries’ *storytellers*. In a similar way to Li and Arber (2006) in their study on how nurses construct patients’ moral identities, we used “observed emotions as resources to interpret (the beneficiaries) demeanour and behaviour” (2006, p. 27).

The beneficiaries *I want more* refers to those who rarely leave the initiative satisfied with the food they take home as they tend to complain about the quantity, quality, or diversity of the goods that are donated. These beneficiaries imply a hard negotiation on the part of the volunteer ethnographer, as he repeatedly had to explain that the food donated is not unlimited and that he must be fair to all beneficiaries. Often, the volunteer ethnographer takes more time to attend to these beneficiaries, mainly due to their insistence on more and better food. The behaviour presented by this group of beneficiaries caused some emotional distress to the researcher due not only to their need for constant negotiation, but also because when adopting his volunteer role, the researcher ends up denying food to people who are in a situation of extreme vulnerability. This raised some ethical and moral dilemmas since, on the one hand, Re-food seeks to combat food waste and food poverty; on the other hand, the researcher as a volunteer felt obliged to restrict some access to food in order to ensure that all beneficiaries receive the same amount of food in accord to the same criteria. In addition, arguments such as: *but my family needs this food or if they are here to help people, they should give more food* eventually lead the volunteer ethnographer to reflect on his role and question the way he acts in the initiative. The contextualisation of emotions (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2017) by giving light to the socio-economic deprived context of the beneficiaries helped to ease situations of emotional distress and to explain their attitudes and behaviours.

In the second case, the volunteer ethnographer is faced with the type of beneficiaries who arrive at the initiative already upset or angry and who often complain of mistakes that have been made in the past by other volunteers, type of food donated, the conditions under

which it is donated, and the waiting time. This situation leads the volunteer ethnographer to be frustrated, fundamentally, by being subjected to criticism during the performance of a voluntary practice. As with the beneficiaries *I want more*, this type also puts the researcher under great stress and emotional distress. The linking of emotions to personal biographies (McQueeney & Lavelle, 2017) helped the researcher to understand that the attitudes and behaviours presented by these beneficiaries were shaped by their past experiences and therefore to better deal with the emotionality of the research encounter.

In the third case, the volunteer ethnographer is in the presence of beneficiaries who like to speak and share aspects of their life or aspects that they consider relevant (e.g., anecdotes and stories). Although these beneficiaries are extremely friendly, they tend to generate tensions in the relationship between the volunteer and the other beneficiaries who are waiting for their turn and, consequently, do not like to “waste” their time waiting for other beneficiaries to end their stories. Thus the volunteer is often criticized by other beneficiaries and feels obliged to speed up the process of delivering food. Although the interaction with this group is not emotion free, it usually involves a lower level of stress and emotional distress. In addition, the attitude that these beneficiaries present is characterized by the concern to create a good environment and can be interpreted as a coping strategy in the face of the difficult situation in which they find themselves.

Overall, the attitudes and behaviour presented by the beneficiaries appeared to be related to their inherent vulnerability and the way they deal with their current situation as well as the sensitivity of the research context. In addition to the emotional tensions to which the researcher, as a volunteer, is subjected, it is also important to highlight the difficulty that the volunteer ethnographer faces in dealing on a more or less day to day basis with poverty. While it is true that there are cases where it is not so visible, there are circumstances where the phenomenon is apparent both physically and verbally. The knowledge of people's life stories inevitably led to great emotional distress and to feelings of powerlessness. Although the interaction established by the volunteer ethnographer with the beneficiaries is restricted by the necessity to distribute food quickly, there are occasions when the researcher has time to talk with the beneficiaries. This eventually leaves space for the researcher to better know their life paths.

Dealing with the vulnerability of the person who tells us about a history of physical and symbolic violence in the first person entails enormous emotional costs for the researcher and had lead him to develop some self-care strategies already documented in the literature such as: i) talking about the experience of conducting research with others (e.g., researchers, advisor, friends); ii) reporting in the field diary the frustrations, anxieties and expectations; iii) practicing sports; and iv) reading or speaking about other research experiences. Although in contact with the volunteers there were also situations that involved emotional exhaustion, it was considered more pertinent to focus the discussion on the volunteer/researcher-beneficiary relationship.

### **Opening Pandora's box**

The emotional vulnerability of participants when conducting research on sensitive topics has been discussed in the literature (Liamputtong, 2007). To mitigate this inherent vulnerability, researchers are likely to engage in what has been described as emotional labour. This concept was originally developed by Hochschild (1983) and later reformulated by James (1989) who referred to it as “the labour involved in dealing with other peoples' feelings, a core component of which is the regulation of emotions” (1989, p. 15).

As a way for participants to feel relaxed and comfortable enough to share their stories, researchers must manage both their own and participants' emotions (Dickson-Swift, James,

Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009). The establishment of rapport through showing empathy has been described as the most common strategy used by qualitative researchers to minimize the emotional impact that the research experience could have on participants (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer 2001). Listening with concern and compassion to the stories of cancer sufferers and cancer survivors was an empathic strategy employed by Watts (2008) in her ethnography to prevent negative feelings on their part. Through touch, Watts was also able to ease the emotional distress of her participants when they talked about their painful stories.

The development of rapport and empathy can place researchers in a difficult position as they might wonder about the extent to which participants had given their full informed consent for the use of such information (Ducombe & Jessop, 2002). Researchers feel the need to develop close ties with their research participants while at one and the same time maintaining a certain degree of detachment (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). The emotionality of the research encounter inevitably leads to the need for the development of some boundaries as they might easily become blurred (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2006). The emotional attachment developed by researchers with participants was outlined in the Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong (2007) study on the experiences of researchers while undertaking qualitative research.

Confronting subjects with their vulnerability and the sensitivity of issues that somehow concern them through the establishment of more or less informal conversations that may arise during an interview or participant observation may result in a wide range of reactions by the participants. Although the researcher is able to outline some scenarios that allow him to anticipate some of these reactions, he cannot foresee how the participant will actually react.

In Re-food, the contact with the beneficiaries was covered by a great diversity of situations. From beneficiaries who chose not to talk about their situation to beneficiaries who made it known in a relatively natural way.

As mentioned in the previous section, there are different types of beneficiaries who adopt different behaviours and strategies to deal with their situation and with the relationship they establish with the Re-food organization.

The first two groups of beneficiaries presented (*I want more* and the *upset/angry* beneficiaries) posed a great challenge to the researcher. These types of beneficiaries show no particular interest in sharing their life stories, much less in talking about their situation and their relationship with the initiative. Their main concern was to collect their food and exit the initiative as soon as possible.

However, even though these beneficiaries were reluctant to share aspects of their lives, it was possible to find some strategies to overcome the distance that existed between volunteer and beneficiary. The researcher, in light of what is described in the literature (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001), sought to show empathy with the participants. The method of participant observation and the regular and permanent contact with the field allowed the development of a relationship of trust and proximity to some of these beneficiaries. To build this relationship, the researcher sought to hear the arguments of these beneficiaries and respond to them in a clear, coherent, polite, and friendly way. Through the adoption of this attitude and over time, some beneficiaries began to show greater openness to talk to the researcher and to share aspects of their lives with him. In addition, whenever the researcher felt he had the opportunity, he would launch questions or affirmations that might encourage dialogue, such as: *How are you today? Is everything okay with you? Today is a very rainy day, or You look tired, your house is far from here?* These prompts led the beneficiary to feel more comfortable and predisposed to communicate more freely. However, it is necessary for the researcher to show interest in the life and situation of the beneficiary without being too intrusive.

With the third group of beneficiaries previously identified (*storytellers*), the relational dynamics occurred in a different way, their interest in sharing stories and aspects of their lives in a natural way leads the researcher, as a volunteer, to adopt an active listening posture and to show interest in what is said by the participant. With this type of beneficiary, more important than encouraging the start of a conversation is to promote their continuation in order to capture clues for research: *Really?, That is very interesting!, Can you tell me more about it?, And then, what happened?*

The cathartic effect that small informal conversations - in the context of participant observation - can provoke in participants is also an important aspect to consider. The researcher was faced with a number of situations in which beneficiaries thanked him for the brief minutes of conversation that had been given to them or for the sympathy shown. In fact, the beneficiaries find in these brief interactions a moment to share their experiences that ends up functioning as a way of dealing and giving meaning to their situation.

However, these interactions can have different impacts on the beneficiaries, and it is difficult for the researcher to assess the repercussions that a reflexive moment can have for the participants. Thus, it is important that the researcher has the necessary sensitivity to perceive the type of participant with whom he is interacting - what characterizes it - and he must also be able to create a relationship of trust that does not lead the beneficiary to feel uncomfortable.

## Discussion

This article sheds light on the challenges of the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations. While some authors have adopted this dual role for conducting their ethnographic research (e.g., Martin, 2014; Merrell & Williams, 1994; Watts, 2011), few have addressed the specificities of the volunteer ethnographer role (Garthwaite, 2016; O'Connor & Baker, 2017). While these studies offered an expressive account of the volunteer ethnographer journey, they did not sufficiently address the emotionality of the research encounter and the impact on researchers working on potentially laden topics, such as food poverty.

Drawing upon an ethnographic participant observation study of a food redistribution organization, this article aims to offer guidance to researchers who intend to adopt the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer for developing their work on sensitive topics and/or with vulnerable populations. It builds awareness on the emotional challenges in the field and discusses potential self-reflexive strategies for researchers to cope with the extraordinary demands posed on them by specific circumstances and subjects. We believe that it is extremely important to discuss these matters openly, particularly with doctoral students and novice researchers as due to their inexperience they might not recognise that emotions are part and parcel of undertaking qualitative research (Benoot & Bilsen, 2016), as well as to build knowledge on this matter for researchers to be prepared for emotionally demanding experiences when adopting the volunteer ethnographer role.

Overall, the article shows that volunteer ethnographers, when developing their work, are subject to a wide range of emotional challenges that are related to the functions that they had to develop in the research context itself due to their dual role, as well as to the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the topic addressed. A self-reflexive approach will enable volunteer ethnographers to be better equipped to deal with these challenges.

## References

- Arber, A. (2006). Reflexivity: A challenge for the researcher as practitioner? *Journal of Research and Nursing*, 11(2), 147-157.
- Benoot, C., & Bilsen, C. (2016). An auto-ethnography study of the disembodied experience of a novice researcher doing qualitative cancer research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 26(4), 482-489.
- Berger, R. (2017). Conducting an unplanned participant observation: The case of a non-birder in bird watcher's land. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 18(1), 1-14.
- Burgess, R. (1997). *A pesquisa de terreno: Uma introdução* [Field research: An introduction]. Oeiras, Portugal: Celta Editora.
- Charmaz, K., & Oleson, V. (1997). Ethnographic research in medical sociology: Its foci and distinct contribution. *Sociological Methods Research*, 25(4), 452-494.
- Delamont, S. (2004). Ethnography and participant observation. In C. Seale, G. Gobo, J. Gubrium & D. Silverman (Eds.), *Qualitative research practice* (pp. 205-218). London, UK: Sage.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2006). Blurring boundaries in qualitative health research on sensitive topics. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(6), 853-871.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007) Doing sensitive research: what challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research*, 7, 327-352.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). *Undertaking sensitive research in the health and social sciences*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). Risk to researchers in qualitative research on sensitive topics: Issues and strategies. *Qualitative Health Research*, 18, 133-144.
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2009). Researching sensitive topics: qualitative research as emotion work. *Qualitative Research*, 9, 61-79.
- Ducombe, J., & Jessop, J. (2002). Doing rapport and the ethics of faking friendship. In M. Mauthner, M. Birch, J. Jessop, & T. Miller (Eds.), *Ethics in qualitative research*. (pp. 108-121) London, UK: Sage.
- Ellis, J. (2010). *Family practices during life-threatening illness: Exploring the everyday* (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Sheffield, UK, University of Sheffield.
- emerald, e., & Carpenter, L. (2015). Vulnerability and emotions in research: risks, dilemmas and doubts. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 21(8), 741-750.
- Fielding, N. (2008). *Ethnography in: Researching social life*. London, UK: Sage.
- Garthwaite, K. (2016). The perfect fit? Being both volunteer and ethnographer in a UK foodbank. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 5(1), 60-71.
- Gilbert, K. R. (2001). *The emotional nature of qualitative research*. London, UK: CRC.
- Guerra, I. (2006). *Pesquisa qualitativa e análise de conteúdo: Sentidos e formas de uso* [Qualitative research and content analysis: Senses and ways of using]. Cascais, Portugal: Princípia.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Holtan, A., Staandy, A., & Eriksen, S. (2014). When emotions count in construction of interview data. *Nordic Social Work Research*, 4(2), 99-112.
- Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K., & Kemmer, D. (2001). Working with emotion: Issues for the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork. *Social Research Methodology*, 4(2), 119-137.
- James, N. (1989). Emotional labour: Skill and work in the social regulation of feelings. *The*

- Sociological Review*, 37(1), 15-42.
- Johnson, B. & Clarke, J. (2003). Collecting sensitive data: The impact on researchers. *Qualitative Health Research*, 13(3), 421-434.
- Lawton, J. (2001). Gaining and maintaining ethical concerns raised in a study of dying patients. *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(5), 693-705.
- Lee, R. (1993). *Doing research on sensitive topics*. London, UK: Sage.
- Li, S., & Arber, A. (2006). The construction of troubled and credible patients: A study of emotion talk in palliative care settings. *Qualitative Health Research*, 16(1), 27-46.
- Liamputtong, P. (2007). *Researching the vulnerable*. London, UK: Sage.
- Malacrida, C. (2007). Reflexive journaling on emotional research topics: Ethical issues for team researchers. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1329-1339.
- Martin, N. (2014). Spaces of hidden labor: Migrant women and work in nonprofit organizations. *Gender, Place and Culture: A journal of Feminist Geography*, 21(1), 17-34.
- McQueeney, K., & Lavelle, K. (2017). Emotional labour in critical ethnographic work: In the field and behind the desk. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 46(1), 81-107.
- Melrose, M. (2002). Labour pains: Some considerations on the difficulties of researching juvenile prostitution. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 5(4), 333-351.
- Merrell, J., & Williams, A. (1994). Participant observation and informed consent: Relationships and tactical decision making in nursing research. *Nursing Ethics*, 1(3), 163-172.
- Miroso, M., Mainvil, L., Horne, H., & Magan-Walker, E. (2016). The social value of rescuing food, nourishing communities. *British Food Journal*, 118(12), 3044-3058.
- Moore, L., & Miller, M. (1999). Initiating research with doubly vulnerable populations. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 30(5), 1034-1040.
- O'Connor, C., & Baker, R. (2017). Working with and for social enterprises the role of the volunteer ethnographer. *Social Enterprise Journal*, 13(2), 180-193.
- Rager, K. (2005). Self-care and the qualitative researcher: When collecting data can break your heart. *Educational Researcher*, 34(4), 23-27.
- Salonen, A. (2016). Locating religion in the context of charitable food assistance: An ethnographic study of food banks in a Finnish city. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 31(1), 35-50.
- São José, J., & Teixeira, A. (2013). At the 'ethical crossroads' of ethnography: Observing the 'care encounter' at the elderly person's home. In I. Paoletti, M. Tomás, & M. Menéndez (Eds.), *Practice of ethics: An empirical approach to ethics in social science research* (pp. 43-63) Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholar Publishing.
- Silva, M. (1995). *Ethical guidelines in the conduct, dissemination and implementation of nursing research*. Washington, DC: American Nurses Publishing.
- Spradley, J. (1980). *Participant observation*. London, UK: Wadsworth.
- Tarasuk, V. & Eakin, J. (2003). Charitable food assistance as symbolic gesture: An ethnographic study of food banks in Ontario. *Social Science & Medicine*, 56, 1505-1515.
- Tinney, J. (2008). Negotiating boundaries and roles: Challenges faced by the nursing home ethnographer. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 37(2), 202-225.
- Valentine, C. (2007). Methodological reflections: Attending and tending the role of the researcher in the construction of bereavement narratives. *Qualitative Social Work*, 62, 159-176.
- Vincett, J. (2018). Researcher self-care in organizational ethnography: Lessons from overcoming compassion fatigue. *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 7(1), 44-58.

- Vlaholias, E., Thompson, K., Every, D., & Dawson, D. (2015a). Charity starts...at work? Conceptual foundations for research with businesses that donate to food redistribution organisations. *Sustainability*, 7, 7997-8021.
- Vlaholias, E., Thompson, K., Every, D., & Dawson, D. (2015b). Reducing food waste through charity: Exploring the giving and receiving of redistributed food. In L. SanEpifanio, & M. Scheifler (Eds.), *Evisoning a future without food waste and food poverty* (pp. 271-276). Bibao, Espanha: Wageningen Academic Publishers.
- Watts, J. (2008). Emotion, empathy and exit: Reflections on doing ethnographic qualitative research on sensitive topics. *Medical Sociology Online*, 3(2), 3-14.
- Watts, J. (2011). Ethical and practical challenges of participant observation in sensitive health research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 14(4), 301-312.
- Williams, A., Cloke, P., May, J., & Goodwin, M. (2016). Contested space: The contradictory political dynamics of food banking in the UK. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 48(11), 2291-2316.
- Woodthorpe, K. (2009). Reflecting on death: The emotionality of the research encounter. *Mortality*, 14, 70-86.

### Author Note

Fábio Rafael Augusto is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at the Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-ULisboa) and currently holds a PhD grant from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). His doctoral research seeks to characterize and analyze food aid initiatives operating in Portugal. He had been a guest lecturer at Escola Superior de Saúde, Instituto Politécnico de Santarém (ESSS-IPSantarém) and has been involved in two research projects (“TRANSE-AC: Social and Environmental Transition – Alternatives and Commons” supported by Programa Pessoa/FCT and “FFHT: Families and Food in Hard Times” funded by the European Research Council). He holds a MSc in Sociology: Exclusion and Social Policies and a BSc in Sociology (UBI, Universidade da Beira Interior). His research interests include food (in)security, poverty and social exclusion. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [fabio.augusto@ics.ulisboa.pt](mailto:fabio.augusto@ics.ulisboa.pt).

Ana Patrícia Hilário holds a junior research position at Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-ULisboa) with the project “Making visible the invisible: an exploration on family experiences and management of chronic pain in childhood”, under the Scientific Employment Stimulus 2017 funded by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT). Previously, she held a post-doctoral position under the framework of the project TRANSRIGHTS: “Gender citizenship and sexual rights in Europe: Transgender lives in transnational perspective”, funded by the European Research Council, at ICS-ULisboa. She had been a guest lecturer at Instituto Piaget and at Escola Superior de Saúde, Instituto Politécnico de Santarém (ESSS-IPSantarém). She had also worked as a research assistant at Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, ISCTE-IUL, Instituto Superior de Ciências Sociais e Políticas (ISCSP-ULisboa) and Instituto de Ciências Sociais, Universidade de Lisboa (ICS-ULisboa). She holds a PhD in Sociology (Royal Holloway, University of London) and a BSc in Sociology (Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, ISCTE-IUL). Her current main research interests focus on the Sociology of Health and Illness, Sociology of Diagnosis, Sociology of Gender and Sociology of Childhood and Youth. Correspondence regarding this article can also be addressed directly to: [patriciahilario@gmail.com](mailto:patriciahilario@gmail.com).

The PhD project leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013)/ERC grant agreement n° 337977 and from the Portuguese Foundation for

Science and Technology (FCT) through the Human Capital Operational Programme (POCH) supported by the European Social Fund (ESF) and national funds of the Portuguese Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MCTES) with the reference SFRH/BD/130072/2017.

Copyright 2019: Fábio Rafael Augusto, Ana Patrícia Hilário, and Nova Southeastern University.

### **Article Citation**

Augusto, F. R., & Hilário, A. P. (2019). Through the looking glass: The emotional journey of the volunteer ethnographer when researching sensitive topics with vulnerable populations. *The Qualitative Report*, 24(13), 17-30. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol24/iss13/3>

---