THE SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE OF THE UNSPOKEN

Considering Physical Assault in Fieldwork

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Abstract

This paper explores the silence of my traumatic experience, the feeling of vulnerability, and insecurity that affected my fieldwork and the writing process. Drawing on the concept of "auto-reflexivity", I address the "double violence", experienced in the field and institutionally, where the lack of support in my academic environment exacerbated existing trauma. I conclude with recommendations on how individuals, our discipline, and institutions can better prepare and care for researchers. It is crucial that anthropologists discuss and share their experiences by including them in anthropological literature and methodology courses.

Keywords: *physical assault, violence, unspoken experience, auto-reflexivity*

Introduction

My lip has tripled in size, my cheekbone hurts terribly, and I have trouble opening my right eye. I no longer recognize my face, distorted by the blisters and the purple colour of my skin. My fieldwork, which started just a few weeks ago, is turning into a nightmare. I feel a huge emptiness and ask myself a thousand questions. Should I continue? Why did this happen to me? Am I going back home? Why did this happen to me? What am I going to do? Why did this happen to me? Between the guilt, the questions, the difficulty in understanding what has just happened, I am literally lost. This personal turmoil will only be the prelude to further complications, for my personal situation has had a lasting impact on this research (and certainly the next) and especially on its writing. Indeed, not knowing how to deal with the violence I had suffered during my fieldwork, I was unable to redirect my research or renegotiate my position as an academic. Trapped in a position of "perfect student" or under control, I concealed this undeniable part of my field at the expense of a reflexive approach that would have allowed me to discuss my field, certainly differently.

This paper explores the silence of my traumatic experience, the feeling of vulnerability, and insecurity that affected my fieldwork and the writing process. My difficulty of putting into words, of verbalizing my academic research, led me to produce a tasteless and shallow piece of work, and I narrowly missed out on my diploma. This feeling of failure led me to start a new university course, which I experienced as a personal *tabula rasa*. By knowing that

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other people had experienced violence during their fieldwork, I began to lose my shame and was able to reflect on my past experiences. Drawing on the concept of "auto-reflexivity" (Heinze 2020), I will address the "double violence", experienced in the field and institutionally, where the lack of support in my academic environment exacerbated existing trauma (Kloß 2016). I conclude with recommendations on how individuals, our discipline, and institutions can better prepare and care for researchers.

A First Foray into Fieldwork

After months of preparation, I had finally begun my fieldwork. This dream fieldwork filled with adventure, encounters, and discoveries. With some difficulties maybe, but I was bullish. Enthusiastic and excited, I redoubled my energy, contacted many people and conducted many different interviews. In short, I was happy to do this research to complete my master's degree in ethnology. Of course, I felt a certain amount of stress: "Will I be able to get the data I need? How can I be sure I'm doing it right? Am I asking the 'right' questions? Will I meet the 'right' people?". But I had confidence. I was one of those hardworking students, not particularly bright, but full of good will. After three weeks in the capital, I went to a small town for a few days to interview a key person for my research. I was lucky enough to share her daily life with her family. But one morning she was busy with foreign clients, and I was left alone for a day. I took the opportunity to review my notes and work on my first data. In the late afternoon, I decided to go out and explore the surroundings of this small town of barely 10 000 inhabitants. It was the end of September, and the weather was grey and gloomy. A light rain was falling, casting a nostalgic veil over the small houses along the main road. Apart from a few passing cars, the streets were deserted and the atmosphere desolate. As I wandered aimlessly, I came across a young man sitting, killing time with a bottle of vodka. He was there, alone. He was mumbling some unintelligible words. I continued on my way, not paying any attention to him. A few moments later I felt a presence behind me. I turned and saw the same young man following me. I quickened my pace. I felt a shiver run down my spine and a knot in my stomach. I turned my head a second time and, without any understanding of what was happening, he punched me in the face. The shock was so strong that I collapsed. Before I could come to my senses, his heavy body was lying on top of mine, his hands were pulling at my clothes and his fists were beating me. I tried to scream, to ask for help, but his hand was over my mouth. I tried to get away, but it was impossible. I tried and tried again, but he was too strong. I remembered seeing cars pass by our two bodies lying on the asphalt and hoping that one of them would stop. But no, none of them stopped. My memories from then on are hazy... my ordeal ended when two women appeared out of nowhere and caused my attacker to flee. What are their names? Who are they? I don't know and I never will. But they saved me. One of them held me tightly and I started to cry on her breast. They took me out of the rain. Into a kitchen. Or a small café. My memories are blurred. They brought me hot tea and tried to comfort me. After a few minutes, I was able to articulate a few words. They asked me a few questions and I painfully explained that I was

from Switzerland, that I was a student. In the end, they said to me apologetically: "That happens a lot here...". The hot brew poured down my throat. The sobbing started again and all I wanted to do was go back, go home. I asked myself a thousand questions, doubts arose, I felt bad, and I was in pain. I went to my informant's home and got under my blankets. My face hurt more and more. In the small bathroom mirror I saw my swollen, distorted face. During dinner, my informant said the same words as my two rescuers: "It happens here, it's common". And she added: "You should always be wary of men who have been drinking". I should have known.

Then I decided to return to the capital. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to go back to my family cocoon. I needed to be pampered. But I couldn't bring myself to do it. I wanted to do this research. And I'm so ashamed. What have I done to get into this situation? I went through a period of self-blame and self-doubt about my ability to conduct ethnography. I was blocked. I wanted to go back, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Going home early would have been a greater source of shame. So I stayed. I had two and a half months of fieldwork left and I tried to carry on. With ups and downs. I worked hard to stop thinking about what had happened, but sometimes, often, the trauma would resurface and condemn me to the same questions again. When it happened, I was stuck in my hotel room. The days went by and looked the same. I could no longer stand the dilapidated walls of my room. So I went out, but I felt fragile, I was afraid of everything, of everyone. I didn't dare talk to people. Pushed to my limits, I still managed to observe the festival I had come all this way for. But I had difficulties. I was weakened and so was my data. After weeks of doubt, uncertainty, and questions, I returned home. If my physical wounds had healed, the psychological ones had not. They were gaping and wouldn't close any time soon.

Silencing a Traumatic Experience

My return from my fieldwork did not relieve me. On the contrary. A second violence was waiting for me around the corner: the violence of the unspeakable. Of course I shared my experiences with my family and a few friends. But much remained unsaid. It was even more difficult with my supervisor. His harsh comments about my scraps of draft and the data I was trying to mobilize made me decide not to tell him what had happened. I felt I had no one to turn to. Moreover, I was afraid to talk about it and be labelled a "victim", a "failure", an "incapable", or any other term that would prove my inability to do "good fieldwork". This feeling took over and sealed my silence for years. And the trauma of what had happened haunted my personal relationship with the discipline, with the field, but most of all with writing. I struggled to put two words together. As soon as I sat down to write my master's thesis, the words got stuck and I couldn't return to the field intellectually. To immerse myself in those painful memories. The bruises were gone, but not the trauma. I found myself wanting to forget everything. I was unable to start analysing data or writing. Writing leads to restimulation: the beatings, the shame, the questions. As Amy Pollard points out, "Students reported finding it difficult to let go of the traumas of fieldwork, because the writing-up pro-

cess meant they were continually having to relive them" (2009). For weeks, months, and finally years I could not write this text. These few pages. And the more time that passed without me being able to write it, the more my frustration, anxiety, and guilt grew. I was suffering and failing as an anthropologist. This reinforced a further sense of shame and regret that I wasn't good enough, that I wasn't cut out for fieldwork.

Fieldwork. The obligatory requirement for any established or aspiring anthropologist is often fetichized through a tale of adventure. During my undergraduate years, I had pre-fieldwork courses in which I heard several stories about academics' "little failures" and how they had brilliantly overcome them to produce dazzling pieces of work. Why couldn't I do the same? Why couldn't I put two sentences together without suffering? These stories, as interesting as they are, accentuated my silence around my very personal experience of fieldwork. I then saw my vulnerability as detrimental (Henize 2020). And I had no one to turn to, certainly not in the academic world in which I was immersed. As Sundberg (2003, 188) notes, the peculiar silence implies academia "fails to provide adequate guidance for students preparing for research, leading many to individualise and thus conceal the challenges they encounter". This situation "reproduces violence as it further depoliticises structural violence by obscuring power relations" (Cai 2019).

"I'm not the only one"

If writing hasn't been a cure, the path to healing developed in the most unexpected ways. First, I decided to start a new university course. Like an academic *tabula rasa*. It was like a rebirth, starting from scratch, without this painful experience, without this ball and chain that hindered my movements. By starting again, I gave myself the right to try again. My sense of failure was not an academic death sentence. Second, I was completely relieved to learn that my own experience was not an isolated, unpredictable case of bad luck. Far from it. While talking to a colleague, he told me about an incident that had happened to his supervisor: this renowned professor had been beaten up during his last fieldwork and was on sick leave. This news had an incredible effect on me. What? An experienced anthropologist, whose reputation was well established, had been physically attacked on his own fieldwork? In an area he had studied for years... of which he knew the workings, the intricacies? I was no longer in a unique situation. Others had experienced what I had. I did not talk to this professor about my own experience, because I was still too ashamed. But I began to read. And read. And read everything I could about violence in anthropology. These readings troubled me, shocked me, disturbed me, but they were necessary. They helped me move from what I thought was unique to something sadly common. Progressively, I found the strength to write my master's thesis. I had to close this circle. But the result was frustrating. Almost disgusting. No trace of my traumatic experience: the beatings were gone. My vulnerability was gone. The feelings of shame and failure were gone. I silenced my experience because I wanted to produce a "good" ethnography. I was not able or did not know how to rethink my positionality. Much less to renegotiate my research. And I missed my point...

A Cared Academia

The years have passed. This experience doesn't define me but it is part of me. Like Larissa Begley writes, "as anthropologists, we are part of the narrative we create. Our fieldwork does not exist detached from our own emotions and our lives. We impact on those we study and they impact on us. It it because of this dialectical relationship we have with the 'field' that we must recognize the impact that fieldwork can have emotionally, psychologically and physically on us" (2009, 9–10). Instead of imposing myself silence, I should have spoken: "rather than understanding our vulnerabilities as a failure and lack of professionalism and political engagement, we need to ask how we can produce ethnography through engaged research in violent contexts from which we cannot be completely detached" (Schild 2021). Indeed, these experiences, however disturbing they may be, must be included in the analysis of the data obtained, and it is necessary to reflect on them in ethnographic writing and knowledge production (Kloß 2017, 396). As Heinze argues, an "auto-reflexive" approach is then required that allows researchers to discuss and reflect on how we are affected by fieldwork: "When spaces are created for researchers to not just state their subjectivity but also to divulge how the research has impacted them, their traumas are no longer exiled to being 'dirty little secrets' or pieces in exclusively feminist journals. Rather they are allowed to become part of the collective understanding of some of the harsher realities of knowledge production" (2020). Thereby, it is crucial that anthropologists discuss and share their experiences by including them in anthropological literature and methodology courses. Preparing students for the widest range of experiences in the field will provide them with more useful and practical tools for dealing with fieldwork (Begley 2009; Kloß 2017, 411). Of course, no course or seminar could have prevented or prepared me for what happened. And even less could the few pieces of advice given in a methodology course. But the lack of training on the prevalence of violence in fieldwork perpetuates the larger doubt that it is actually a problem (Cai 2019; Heinze 2020). Various forms of violence exist while conducting fieldwork. My experience, and many others, should not be dismissed as an isolated incident. We should be talking about this reality. "Only when catastrophes are accepted as possible outcomes of any research endeavour can the complicity in their silencing be broken and ways of using them as data be established" (Schneider 2020, 189). I now know that I am not alone, and this is an important part of my self-care.

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