UNDERMINING THE SANITIZED ACCOUNT

Violence and Emotionality in the Field in Northern Ireland

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The experience of researching violence is underpinned by experiences of emotionality. Yet such emotionality is considered at best peripheral to the substance of our research or even our ‘confessional tales’. This paper is interested in the ways emotionality has been so easily ignored in most criminological work and the ways it was impossible to ignore during a study of women, policing and resistance in Northern Ireland. Examining the impact of emotionality on the experience of researching violence offers a way to challenge traditional distinctions between reason and emotion and suggests that there are serious theoretical and epistemological consequences in ignoring the many roles of emotion in our research. In this paper I identify the ways emotionality is central to understanding the experience of researching violence.

In particular I am interested in revealing the ways emotionality, as an important component of subjectivity, informed my investigation of women, resistance and policing in Northern Ireland. My emotionality came from a number of sources: myself, the women I interviewed and my relations with them, and the political situation in Northern Ireland. This required me to understand the ways that emotion has been systematically excluded in most academic work on Northern Ireland and what this suggests about taking subjectivity into account and challenging traditional distinctions between reason and emotion.

Emotion and the Construction of Reason

I want to commence by locating emotionality within concerns of intersubjectivity that rail against the separation of (‘objective’) knowledge from (‘subjective’) experience in the research process.

There is now a considerable body of work that alerts us to the ways the ‘expert’ gaze and the construction of professional discourses have not only subdued a person’s lived experience but have driven a wedge between subjective experience and objective knowledge (McKendy 1992). Not coincidently, emotionality has been deemed epistemologically irrelevant (Code 1993). The ‘detached’ researcher as the ‘disinterested’ observer has underpinned ‘scientific’ enquiry where emotions ‘must not get in the way’. Small (1997) and Ellis and Flaherty (1992) have argued that such enquiry has depended on a set of ‘feeling rules’ concerning the conduct and reporting of research. ‘Feeling

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rules’ require the story of the researched to be told in such a way that the researcher’s introspection has little or no part to play. Even in qualitative work such introspection often remains detached from the serious business of writing up. Consequently, as Small (1997) has warned, researchers who attempt to write up their subjective experiences and feelings are ‘. . . likely to invite the charge of unhealthy self-absorption’ (Small 1997: 100) or face charges of being ‘emotional exhibitionists’ (Ellis and Flaherty 1992: 3). As Code suggests, this is despite the fact that:

Neither Plato, Spinoza, nor Hume, for example, would have denied that there are interconnections between reason and ‘the passions’; neither Stoics, Marxists, phenomenologists, or pragmatists, nor followers of the later Wittgenstein would represent knowledge seeking as a disinterested pursuit, disconnected from everyday concerns. (Code 1993: 17)

There is now a growing literature interested in emotionality as an important element of subjectivity. The works of Rosenberg, (1990), Small (1997), Alcoff and Potter (1993), and Code (1993) suggest that interrogating emotionality has the potential to examine complex emotional considerations and decisions in the research process. Aldridge (1993), Atkinson (1990), Britzman (1995), Clifford and Marcus (1986), Denzin, (1984), Ely, (1991), Hochschild (1979) and Rosenberg (1990) have further suggested that the researcher is obliged to do ‘emotion work’, to understand the ways emotion assumes importance and to disrupt the taboo status of emotion in the research process. To reveal emotionality about one’s self, is not only to reject the neutral observer and knowledge maker role, it is also to take responsibility for the power relations inherent in the research process.

When researchers have began to write about emotionality in the research process often it has been done apart from the serious business of reporting the main research findings. It has been considered important but disruptive to the ‘real heart’ of the research project, often being relegated to appendices or to less scholarly publications, colluding in its marginalization. As Small (1997) has argued, such relegation leaves the basic principle of self censorship unchallenged. Confessional tales that remain apart from the theoretical and substantive core of our work intimates that our objective analysis prevails, uncontaminated by disquieting emotional experiences we have during the research process.

The available literature suggests unveiling the emotions of those doing research with, for, and on women is vital to the feminist project (Reinharz 1992). The elision of knowledge and experience is important for two main reasons in relation to the study of women, policing and resistance in Northern Ireland: first in order to prioritize the experience of struggle; and second, to hear women’s voices not only as active agents, but as potent, creative and resilient resisters.

When experience is rendered superfluous or inappropriate to the production of knowledge then so too is the experience of struggle. In other words, if we demarcate experience as the ‘other’ to objective knowledge then we separate the study of people’s struggles from the experience of struggle. Studies conducted from within the oral history tradition suggest to do this is to continue producing histories from the elite that systematically ignore, marginalize and denigrate histories ‘from below’ (see for example Thompson 1984; Bravo 1982; Bruzzone 1982; Scaraffia 1982; Dunaway and Baum 1984; Slim and Thompson 1993). Accordingly, to study struggle is not simply to understand from the experience of those who struggle but also to understand through the emotions
of struggle, and the emotionality of recording struggle. Consequently, it is a tradition which has been developed, and is developed, by the questioning of silences and forgotten areas.

Much of western philosophy remains concerned with rationality. Often constructed as the ‘other’, experiences and emotions have routinely been equated with ‘femaleness’, with feminist interventions reminding us of the ways that the exclusion of lived experience has systematically silenced women’s voices in knowledge production (Oakley 1981; Finch 1984; Harding 1987; Stanley and Wise 1993; Reinharz 1992; Williams 1993). In rendering experience as knowledge, new knowledge spaces have been forged and existing spaces challenged by the non-elite. A crucial part of feminist interventions has been a re-evaluation of emotions and the critique of the othering of emotionality in the research process (for example see Chase 1996; Code 1993; Fonow and Cook 1991; Jaggar 1989). Feminists have increasingly been able to cast-off views that consider emotionality apart from and counter to knowledge production, thus formulating alternative ways of knowing grounded in lived experience, embodiment and emotionality (McKendy 1992).

I am not simply interested in emotionality, however, but more specifically in outrage. It has been noted elsewhere that feminists have been concerned with:

. . . the negative emotions: anger, depression, sadness, disappointment and fear. These might be valuable signals, pointing to the contradictions that disorganise women’s lives. Feminists treated anger as particularly significant, asserting that in patriarchal society women’s anger has been suppressed, trivialised and otherwise ‘managed’. (McKendy 1992: 64)

Subsequently, outrage can be understood as important to rupturing the silences that obscure the messy and complicated process of doing ethnography. But rather than ‘managing’ outrage in the ways McKendy (1992) argues has happened to women’s experiences of anger, I suggest outrage needs to be contextualized, theorized and politicized. In the project under interrogation, this occurred through the theorization of women’s experiences of policing in Northern Ireland in terms of resistance.

Women, Resistance and Policing in Northern Ireland

This project investigated the policing of conflict in Northern Ireland as experienced and perceived by politically active women in Northern Ireland over the past 30 years. It examined the adequacy of dominant understandings of policing in addressing gender and in particular the policing of politically active women. I was interested in women as active agents and the ways gender affected policing and women’s responses to that policing. This examination raised theoretical and conceptual issues about resistance worthy of consideration: in particular the ways in which women’s struggles have been policed, and women’s struggles against policing. Drawing on the oral history tradition, 100 politically active women from across the political spectrum in Northern Ireland were interviewed between 1995 and 1997.

The women interviewed were aged between 18 and 72, most were married, some for a second time, others were single, widowed or divorced. All of the women worked, although many were not employed in a conventional sense—many dedicating much of their time to political activism, human rights causes or community pursuits. Around
three-quarters of the women identified themselves as being from working-class backgrounds while the remaining quarter acknowledged their more middle-class standing. Four women identified themselves as not being heterosexual. The women interviewed had been politically active at grassroots levels, and while many remained so, some had also become more involved in conventional politics with some becoming public figures: 12 had been elected representatives, and some had a history of militant activities. Those women who identified themselves as having been militant had served prison sentences and were no longer active.

The censuring and criminalization of women’s collective oppositional activity revealed both political and gender determinants. Policing has been most repressive when women act out against both the state and gendered norms. It has been more negotiated and accommodating when women participate in collective action that does not clearly transgress traditional arrangements. When women have had formal contact with policing agents they have used a range of tactics to protect their bodies, to prevent incursions of their legal rights and status and to strengthen their resolve not to be dominated. Women’s actions of defiance were increasingly informed by a critical awareness of the relationship between the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the state. However, whether a critical awareness of the RUC and state translated into a consciousness infused by wider considerations was less evident.

The study suggested that resistance as a concept embodies elements that underscore the study of women and policing in Northern Ireland. First, it attempts to understand women’s agency: women’s attempts to understand and act in relation to policing; second, resistance reorders discourses that traditionally dichotomize women’s experiences of policing in terms of victim/agent; third, it unveils the complexities of a gendered read of consent and force, and consequently of hegemony; fourth, it views women’s subjectivity under domination and the complexities and subtleties of their experiences of policing; and finally, it prioritizes the embodiment of consciousness within power relations.

I wanted to focus on women’s resistance as a way to subvert the overwhelmingly violent experience of policing in Northern Ireland. Resistance as an analytical tool can also help to understand the ways that a study of women and policing in Northern Ireland evokes emotions and requires an understanding of the ways emotionality was played out. Moreover, resistance to dominant ways of knowing, that problematize and marginalize the researcher’s feelings, seems an equally important way to understand the theoretical thrust of the research project.

**Locating emotionality in women, policing and resistance in Northern Ireland**

The interrogation of emotionality in this research project begins with the substantive issue of violence. Emotions were central to the experience of, and reflections on, violence in Northern Ireland. This study was interested in understanding women’s experiences and perceptions of policing in a violent conflict. Historically studies on Northern Ireland have mapped the brutal and bloody war, the ways that lives have been taken and normality disrupted (see for example Weitzer 1985, 1987, 1992; McWilliams and McKiernan 1993; Ryder 1991, 1992; Brewer et al. 1996; Coogan 1996). More specifically, however, this study was interested in state violence, as manifested in the security forces in Northern Ireland. Those that have added to the radical critique that policing
remains integral to the maintenance of the conflict in Northern Ireland have sought to render state violence as the central problematic (see for example McGuffin 1973; Boyle et al. 1975; Farrell 1980; Hillyard 1983, 1987, 1993; Munck 1985, 1988; Ward 1989; Curtis 1994; McVeigh 1994). They have sought to unveil the ways that normality has been constituted by the permanency of emergency powers, state violence, censorship and general repression. Historically studies have been less interested in the coercive power of the state, with even less concern to engage with ‘voices from below’ in order to understand the experiences and perceptions of those coerced and subjected to state violence. There have been, however, some notable works which have revealed experiences of political criminalization and its impact on the responses of those policed (see for example Hillyard 1993; Green 1990; Campbell et al. 1994). It is within these studies that the perceptions, emotions, meanings and interpretations of those who experience state violence form the indistinguishable subjective and objective components of the research process. It is within such studies of violence that individual and collective emotion begins to be rendered visible.

This study was interested in women’s experiences and perceptions of policing. Often this conversation took myself and the woman over vast violent terrain that began as children and went up to the present day. ‘Policing’ for the majority of women in this study could be easily interchanged with ‘violence’. For some the violence emanated from the state and from policing agents, for others violence was seen as coming from within communities and met with the legitimate violence of the state. Talking of violence also meant women were emotional, it also meant I was emotional. Such emotions often took a range of forms—sadness, fear, alienation, laughter, anger, but mostly outrage. The use of the home and women’s bodies as battlefields for violent confrontations with the RUC and British Army has engendered bitterness, anger and resentment as well as providing the site on which women carved out some space to refuse domination. Some women took every opportunity to defy policing—not differentiating between political and everyday policing. Their actions of defiance: laughing, remaining silent, fighting—were increasingly informed by a critical awareness of the relationship between the RUC and the state. They understood their actions of defiance as ways to assert their commitment to derailing attempts by the authorities to have them cast as deviant: be that deviant as ‘the enemy’; as less than ‘woman’; or even as working class. Consequently the talk was often substantively about emotions as well as being emotional.

We can also begin to understand emotionality in this research by beginning from women’s lives. While emotionality has often been a term of denigration levelled at women as a ‘biological consequence’ of their femaleness, it potentially problematizes the dualities that often inform criminological readings of violence and policing. Women’s emotional experiences, along with the emotional experience of retelling one’s own story, are often messy and non-conforming. This has consequences for the relations developed between the researcher and the researched as well as for the theoretical development of the study.

I can also begin a discussion of emotionality in the research process with my own dislocation. This research on women and policing in Northern Ireland was carried out by an Australian woman researcher. In terms of emotionality, this for me raised questions about my familiarity with the violence of Northern Ireland and the experiences of coping with such violence. The difficulties of listening to and coping with life in Northern Ireland where negotiations with police and policing were part of the everyday required
more than simple adaptations to be made. My experiences of being followed and watched raised more questions about the ways other women experienced surveillance. My fear at walking past heavily armed soldiers and police had me ask women about the ways they coped with such fear, if indeed they did fear such situations. Indeed their recommendations of steeling oneself, not looking at members of the security forces, refusing to acknowledge their existence as you walked past helped me decrease my feelings of intimidation. While such a dialectic approach is not new it does raise questions about why some researchers choose to reveal such interaction and others do not. The effect on me of many of the conversations I had with women was outrage. However it was not an unmediated kind of anger, it came to be constituted by feelings of unfairness, indignation, humiliation, hurt and sorrow. As a consequence of becoming distressed at the stories women told, or elated at their recollections, I looked to capture the emotional scaffolding that women offered those stories within. Attempting to recapture that emotion within the writing up process was often difficult, from the available writings on Northern Ireland it seems for many impossible.

There are few academic accounts of Northern Ireland in which the emotionality of the researcher is rendered visible (Sluka 1995). Few render the emotions of the researched visible (D’Arcy 1981; Fairweather et al. 1984; Hillyard 1993; Campbell et al. 1994). This raises questions about whether the marginalization of emotionality remains a question of epistemological privilege, structural, institutional or disciplinary restraints, or of personal emotional protection. If we are to understand the emotionally taxing experience of living and researching people’s stories of violence such questions should be the subject of further research and disclosure.

Upon reflection, there emerged three main ways emotionality was manifested in my experience of the research process. Emotionality was primarily mediated by my place in the research process through the relations of insider and outsider; my identities in the research process; and the ways some allegiances and identities came to be experienced as betrayals. As a way to understand my emotionality in the research process it is to these I now turn.

*Relations of insider/outsider/self/other, all and neither*

In many ways for the outsider looking in, it’s a very unnatural situation. (Jan)

In understanding my relations with the women I have attempted to decipher my positionalities because I was constantly confronted with my place in this research and the basis of the relations I built with the women I studied. In so doing I have been forced to understand the self–other dichotomy through an exploration of the relations of insider- outsider. Notions of ‘otherness’ become entangled with ideas of ‘outsiderness’ (and in turn with ‘strangeness’). Attempting to come to terms with these positions, engaged me with discussions of standpoint theories and notions of ‘giving voice’.

Holland and Ramazanoglu (1994) have argued that while feminist researchers have been successful in recovering women’s histories and voices, this has not necessarily entailed success in being sensitive to where the ‘knower’ is situated. Locating the researcher as actor recognizes the power relation within which the researcher is located (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1994; Maynard 1994), and further helps understand the complicity of researchers in the construction and (emotional) distancing of others (Fine...
Central to these understandings has been the recognition of constructions of self and other in the research process, which has been understood mostly in terms of first world feminists investigating women in the global south, in the writings of post colonial feminists and critical social researchers (Wolf 1996).

Writings on ‘othering’ alert us not to homogenize, or decontextualize the voices of women, and reveal how othering in social research has constituted a ‘consciousness of domination’, and that we should be seeking to work with but not romanticize subjugated voices (Fine 1994). When engaging in this kind of qualitative research it is not just a matter of giving voice, it is also about revealing ourselves as researchers as gendered, classed and raced subjects in a constant (re)negotiation of relations of power and domination. It is also about researching the emotional practice of doing research.

A number of authors have argued that much of qualitative research has reproduced a colonizing and emotionally bereft discourse of the ‘other’ (Ramazanoglu 1989; hooks 1990). However, otherness is not limited to the relationship between the researcher and participant. Passerini summarizes senses of otherness through distinguishing sets of polarities:

(1) Between a self understood as the researcher or observer and an other understood as the subject of the research observation;

(2) between self as indicating those aspects of one’s culture that are taken for granted and other as indicating other aspects discovered in what had been taken for granted . . . Thus it is the interplay of self and other that really deserves most attention: how the two are linked and influence one another, how each is actually part of the other. (1986: 190–1; original author’s emphasis)

Understanding relations of self/other as working on a number of levels means we are able to obscure the dichotomization which has normally characterized self/other discussions. This interdependence becomes far more complex and enmeshed in Fine’s description and understanding:

Self and other are knottingly entangled. This relationship, as lived between researchers and informants, is typically obscured in social science texts, protecting privilege, securing distance, and laminating the contradictions . . . When we opt, instead, to engage in social struggle with those who have been exploited and subjugated, we work the hyphen, revealing far more about ourselves, and far more about the structures of Othering. Eroding the fixedness of categories, we and they enter and play with the blurred boundaries that proliferate. (1994: 72)

An understanding of relations between context, ourselves and those we study, encourages us to strive for and achieve ‘better’ research by limiting what we are comfortable asserting in the name or experience of ‘others’ and making us more comfortable in asserting our roles and experience in the research process.

During this study I was self and other, and this at times facilitated closeness, at others strangeness. I am a white, middle-class academic while the majority of women interviewed were working class, have negotiated hardships in an ongoing conflict, and are marginalized by the machinations of the state and media. Yet I am also a woman, I am young and have overly idealized antipodean origins. I made return visits from far away. I was an insider because I have slowly made a network of friends and colleagues in Northern Ireland. I was an insider because I stayed both during and after ceasefires.
I decided who was studied and that I studied them. At different times and with different women my outsiderness was all consuming ultimately because I am not Northern Irish and, in communities which have been built on extended periods of struggle and wars of attrition you are ‘two generations in the graveyard before you are a local’ (Mairead).

I repeatedly found insiderness and outsiderness can be one and the same. For example, not being Northern Irish means you are essentially a stranger, but because you are a long way from home you are introduced further into communities and made to feel more a part of something intrinsic. At other times I was simply another interested person, neither local nor foreign, worthy or otherwise of their time and stories. At times my perceptions of insider and outsider differed greatly from those of the women I interviewed. Some women accepted me while at the same time I felt distance towards them. The dichotomization of insider/outsider is clouded in this study primarily by the interaction between myself and the individual women. The relationships built through returning each year for extended periods of time meant my interaction with many of the individual women grew, taking on various forms of association, from professional exchange to friendship. Therefore, as Passerini has indicated, I was self and other on a number of levels—I felt I was an insider, an outsider, and both—an uncomfortable position.

Indeed, understanding my insider-outsider positionalities has meant confronting many of the complex and difficult issues surrounding the theme of identification and the consequent realities of betrayal to be discussed in the following sections. These multiple positions meant I was able to identify with the vast majority of women, not simply on the basis of shared gender, but because usually at least some of my multiple positions corresponded with these women’s position. So the self/other dichotomy which has made identification and voice such problematic concepts has been blurred by the quality of relations I was able to build on the basis of my personal dualities. Such blurring has been underpinned by the emotional exchange of building relations that were interested in exploring the ways women experienced and responded to systematic state violence.

**Identification**

Identification is bound up not only with notions of insiderness and outsiderness, but with rapport, politics, individual personality and emotionality. Building rapport with women in this study was a relatively easy and enjoyable experience, however it was punctuated in parts by incidences of bigotry, sectarianism and sexism. These interactions at times made this research confronting, uncomfortable and difficult.

In feminist literature there has been the assumption that feminist research is a rather comfortable and cosy activity (Maynard and Purvis 1994: 4). Some early feminist writings suggested a sisterly bond between feminist researchers and those they studied, often ignoring, or at least avoiding, power differentials because of their assumptions about the commonality of womanhood.

The feminist interview environment has, in the recent past, been problematized with positionalities being understood as important for the conduct of the interview and the relations between the researcher and participant (Phoenix 1994). While a range of factors may well contribute to the building of rapport and the cosiness of the interview environment, the personal attributes, the character and personality of the researcher and those of the participant also have significant bearing on the interview process. In
short, the emotional work of research is brought to bear on credibility building and the creation of rapport.

Difficulty to ‘connect’, or build rapport, with women participating in an interview can include negative reactions to the researcher, offensive responses and the researcher offending the respondent (Phoenix 1994). While all of these issues were traversed at some time during this study the most significant remained that of offensive responses by the women and the ways such responses impacted on the ‘emotional work’ of the research. Some women expressed thoughts and opinions that were offensive to my views, position and beliefs. My dislike of these women created a particularly troubling disjuncture. As Wolf noted:

. . . few feminist researchers admit to not liking some of their subjects. This omission may be due in part to the pressure to have a more feminist (read friendly and empathic) relationship with informants. But even if we reject the notion of common identification through shared sisterhood, surely there are times when the researcher experiences alienation from and dislike of some subjects. (1996: 22)

The situation arose for me with six women who articulated beliefs that not only advocated summary executions, but in my view were bigoted and sexist. Unequivocally sexist comments were expressed to me twice during the conduct of this fieldwork. The most memorable times were when I was unable to establish rapport to the level that I had enjoyed with other women, either on the grounds of my politics or simply on the basis of being woman. One woman looked me in the eye and proclaimed she was ‘not a woman’s woman or a whinging woman’ and that women’s ‘women were only concerned with women’s issues which are best left to social workers’. This response raises significant questions for a feminist researcher as was noted by Kelly et al.:

It is not entirely possible, not to mention probable, that some women participating in research hold anti-feminist viewpoints. . . . Not only do these realities problematize the ‘empathy’ which shared gender is frequently deemed to embody, they also raise complex issues about whether we simply treat such responses as ‘data’, and whether some of ‘us’ are more able to do this than others . . . (1994: 37–8)

Such situations reveal one of the most fundamental, yet most easily forgotten aspects of feminist research, that there is no such thing as a shared experience of being woman. While this observation is easily made theoretically, pragmatically it is quite a revelation in the field with a gender-centred research project.

I found researching women who held beliefs in direct offence to my own raised a number of concerns between feminist methodologies and political commitments. As Wasserfall (1993) has argued, reflexivity is often not enough to ease tensions such as those encountered when doing feminist research when there is not political sameness between researcher and researched. Conflict situations present an opportunity for political doctrines and ideologies to become more marked with the possibility for difficulties arising (Wasserfall 1993: 25).

Bigoted responses made the process of identification increasingly complex and difficult to endure. These remarks were compounded by the fact that many of these women held highly conservative views, often endorsing extreme right wing political action and ideologies. Two group interviews elicited some highly bigoted remarks even though I enjoyed the respect and company of the women concerned. Interviews which produced such responses were often followed with invitations socially and offers of further assistance. Such acceptance of me by these women caused significant angst on my
part. How could these women, who hold such bigoted and offensive views, like me? Do they think I am complicit with their views? Why do they feel free to express them to me? Have I misrepresented myself? Have I manipulated them? An extract from my field notes after one such interview reads:

I feel weak in the face of hatred, feel dirty when confronted with bigotry and bitterness, and I feel compromised by these women liking me. I find the prospect of any more such interviews difficult. (10 August 1997).

With an insight similar to Phoenix (1994), I have concluded that such a response on my part may indicate that by establishing good rapport with these women, through my feminist research approach, I made it more difficult to have no emotional reaction to responses which I found offensive. The situation was made increasingly difficult by the fact that their class consciousness was so clearly articulated and the interview environment so free and accepting of me as a researcher. This is not unlike what others have found especially when respondents have offered racist views and remarks (Phoenix 1994). While some feminist authors have noted interviewees can offend when they rail against a category the interviewer fits into (ibid.) I found I was offended when these women railed against the category I had put them into—working class and women. Was I perhaps expecting that these women would proffer not only class conscious and gender awareness but would also transcend the bigotry of sectarianism? I possibly expected a more comprehensive consciousness than clearly existed.

How then do I treat such information, given that the interviews I refer to are some of the most rich in terms of experiences and perceptions? Phoenix has advised:

Since the whole point of interviews is to evoke respondents’ accounts rather than to hear one’s own discourses reflected back, I would argue that this is usually interesting data rather than upsetting and that it is manageable within the interview context. (Phoenix 1994: 56)

Similarly, I have taken the general approach of accepting this information as part of the larger picture I am attempting to understand and that my disdain at such responses has to be analysed in terms of my ability to approach the research project with a willingness to be surprised and an opportunity to grant women agency, even in a negative sense, and to reject homogenizing women’s experiences to those which are not only different, but are in direct offence to my own.

**Betrayal**

The above section gives rise to the issue of betrayal, again an area skirted or ignored by most methodological scholarship. Betrayal was possibly the most significant emotional and scholarly issue for me to come to terms with and the conclusions are not necessarily comprehensive or comfortable.

There is now a limited body of writing, especially within feminist scholarship (Maynard 1994; Reinhartz 1992; Wolf 1996) discussing betrayal in the research process. Generally, this has drawn from earlier feminist writings on the non exploitation of women (or, indeed, other powerless others) in the research process which has generally been a guiding concern for feminist work. Feminists have advocated the non exploitation of research subjects through opposition to the traditional hierarchical and ‘objective’ research approaches. Ironically, qualitative methods may provide more chance of
exploitation, through the access the researcher is given to the most intimate, sensitive and potentially harmful aspects of people’s lives. Indeed, the narrative or oral history interview can leave the participant vulnerable to the interpretations and conceptualizations of the researcher who may conclude very differently and even offensively about their lives. As Kelly et al. contend: ‘Several feminists have noted recently that the fact that in depth, ethnographic methods reduce distance means that the potential for harm increases’ (1994: 36). Therefore, the kind of rapport which feminists have developed in order to overturn the distanced and exploitative methods of ‘masculine’ or mainstream methods may well have left participants increasingly open to exploitation (Wolf 1996: 20).

Josselson (1996) investigated how what she had written down about people had affected them and found this a ‘... much more anxiety-provoking and difficult topic to discuss than were the interviews that explored their life histories’ (1996: 63). Indeed she felt much shame, guilt and dread in having people talk about what it is like to be written about by her. This is something I have been mindful of since the inception of my research project. I was often driven by a desire to ‘get it right’, a direct request by many of the women I interviewed, not to misinterpret or misconstrue, while remaining willing to differ in opinion or vary in analysis. In every stage of this research this has caused considerable angst and reflection. Possibly the best advice to a researcher faced with such issues comes from Josselson:

That we explore people’s lives to make them into an example of some principle or concept or to support or refute a theory will always be intrusive and narcissistically unsettling for the person who contributes his or her life story to this enterprise. I don’t think that there is any measure one can take to prevent this (beyond the usual safeguards of course). No matter how gentle or sensitive our touch, we still entangle ourselves in others’ intricately woven narcissistic tapestries. When we write about others, they feel it in some way. Yet I would worry most if I ever stop worrying; stopped suffering for the disjunction that occurs when we try to tell another’s story. To be uncomfortable with this work, I think, protects us from going too far. It is with out anxiety, dread, guilt, and shame that we honour our participants. To do this work, we must then contain these feelings rather than deny, suppress or rationalize them. We must at least be fully aware of what we are doing. (Josselson 1996: 70)

While the strongest sense of betrayal, or indeed guilt, I feel over this research project is my boarding a plane to come home and leaving the struggles, concerns and daily realities of these women behind, my more general concern of why I wanted to avoid any sense of betrayal stems from three main regards. First, the size of Northern Ireland and the close knit nature of the communities means that a bad opinion of a researcher can precede their arrival, seriously impeding future research work; second, Northern Ireland is a highly researched situation where some people have been misrepresented in prior journalistic, government or academic projects and therefore continue to harbour suspicion of researchers and are often reluctant to participate; and last, I wish to contribute to understandings of women in Northern Ireland which do justice to women’s various and complex perceptions and experiences of policing. All of these regards acted interdependently to ensure that an avoidance of betrayal operated throughout the interview process with all women.

However, a sense of betrayal seemed to operate more particularly than generally. The greatest dilemma as a feminist, methodologically at least, has been the potential betrayal of some middle-class unionist women who took part in this research. My concerns were
not necessarily with misrepresentation but with positing their experiences within a class and gendered analysis, meaning that I committed not personal, but political, betrayal. Middle-class unionist women may well expect my political analysis to portray them in a relatively favourable light, one which adopts some form of complementary perspective, or at least one which attempts neutrality or objectivity. They possibly made such assumptions through my appearance and demeanour—young, middle class, antipodean, polite and working around the corner from the Loyal Orange Lodge in Melbourne. I did not dispel such assumptions. Furthermore, I did not directly engage in feminist or socialist political discussions in a way that I often did with every other subgroup. However, this was not an attempt at dishonesty on my part but a consequence of pursuing a strategy of letting the women set the tone of the interview, allowing them to take control for the import of the talk. Middle-class, unionist women did not talk about class, they largely did not see ‘being woman’ as important. Hence, in my efforts to rebalance the interview power dynamic I in fact forced myself to re-analyse why I am attempting to study these women given the potential betrayal.

This reality prompted the asking of a number of questions most importantly—what use was it to interview middle-class unionist women? Plainly I had initially interviewed them in order to understand what their experiences of policing had been and how that could be understood in relation to the other women studied. However what has been revealed is the stark contrast between their experiences and those of women in every other subgroup including their own unionist working-class counterparts. But researching one group of women to show they are less oppressed than another group of women, or are complicit in the oppression of another group, raises significant issues of betrayal. Therefore, while I maintain it is important to contrast their experiences and perceptions to those of other women, to do so simply to reveal their close relationship to the state, or at least to the powers that be, or to betray them for the advantage of another group, is not enough if we are to maintain a commitment to women generally. To this end it is necessary to identify some positive contribution to an understanding of middle-class unionist women and policing in Northern Ireland. I have mostly attempted to do this through an analysis which reveals despite some of the middle class (and even working class) unionist women being almost iconic figures in both the most reactionary, and mainstream, elements of unionism, they still maintain only the most tenuous link with the so called Protestant ascendancy. At risk of generalizing, they too have led a relatively marginalized political existence compared with their male counterparts while retaining particular relative privileges and powers through their consent to the regime in comparison with other groups in this study.

Furthermore, it was this group of women that often offended me in their responses with sexist, bigoted or sectarian remarks. Therefore all women participants in a study are not equally powerless and some can oppress others. ‘Thus, the feminist aim of empowering all women cannot mean the taking of sides with women in general’ (Phoenix 1994: 58). Bound with tensions and anguish, this is a difficult position to conclude as a researcher whose research population consists only of women, and was only made more difficult because while I disliked some of these women they were not alien to me. However, such a position can be further developed from a more complex understanding of the subjective-objective debate.

Perhaps my approach to these women is best understood with reference to Cain’s (1986) position, which argues that not everyone deserves to be a subject in the research.
Using standpoint theory, Cain (1986) tells us which people are ‘entitled’ to remain subjects and which must be objects. She rejects the assumption that the subjectivity of all whom one interviews should be taken into account (in particular those with dominant knowledges), seeing this as subjectivity in a weak sense. Rather, subjectivity should be insisted upon for those that share a standpoint but denied to those who do not. This position is acceptable when one is researching people who are clearly in a dominant position, however, middle-class unionist women, as mentioned, occupy an ambiguous position in any apparent hierarchy of domination in Northern Ireland. Therefore, I chose to approach these women as subjects in the same way as other women in this study. The interviews were informal, they were personal and intimate, they proceeded in much the same way as all others, with the exception that their experiences and perceptions directly contradicted, and indeed often condemned, those of all other women. This was discussed by Cain:

The problem arises . . . when we want to say that some women’s real experience does not count because it has been hegemonized—an ugly word for an ugly process . . . What we must do rather is be prepared to modify our theory so as to take real account of the facts . . . We can use our theory to see that the form of sharing involving female subordination is the result of a structural dependence which also makes hegemony possible. But we can still treat the experience as real. (1986: 265)

I wanted to conclude that middle-class unionist women’s accounts were not legitimate, they were not right, that in comparison with the experiences of all other women they just do not fit. But they are real, they are the lived experiences and perceptions of a group, however privileged or small, in Northern Ireland. Therefore my subjectivity towards them was transformed. Where in the case of other groups of women I maintained some kind of contact and follow up, mostly as a way to garner further opinion and input into the nature and shape of the research project, I did not pursue this with middle-class unionist women. I attempted to approach these women in the most pragmatically and theoretically flexible way in order to assess how much I wanted them to be involved, eventuating with them being subjects in this research project in a more limited sense because of the political, ideological, and real chasm between myself as researcher and them as participants. This was one of the few ways in which I was able to analyse my approach to these women, attempting to understand feelings of betrayal on my part and my determination to rail against individual hurt and harm through theorizing and establishing my position via a wider understanding of the research approach.

I could not feel the same empathy and sensitivity for a small group of women and therefore I could not involve these women in the process as extensively as other women with whom I shared political beliefs of one sort or another. I interviewed women in a qualitative research process which assumes the establishment of a certain relationship, which was confused when I found their positions offensive. Wasserfall (1993) asked of her own research, ‘How do I represent a group of people with whom I had strong conflict, whom I disliked and from whom I felt alienated?’ Similarly, I questioned whether I was able to satisfactorily represent a minority of women’s experiences and politics and whether or not this constitutes betrayal. On reflection, coming to a different conclusion from them is not betrayal; I did not promise in any way to share their political beliefs—only to represent them accurately. The remaining question is whether I have represented them as well as I intended.
Conclusion: Understanding Resistances

By way of conclusion I reaffirm feminist praxis in regard to the importance of listening and learning from your emotions. Researchers shouldn’t be afraid of what they put on the public record; confessional tales shouldn’t be simply left at the fraying edges of our work or on the periphery of scholarly debate. The emotionality of researching violence was at the substantive core and practice of this research project. Nonetheless I acknowledge the difficulty of such an approach for those living and researching violence in Northern Ireland where researching state violence generally, and policing particularly, is already ‘political’ with researchers often charged with bias simply because of the issue under study. However, analysing emotionality rather than simply describing it or sanitizing it also means that we are not content to subsume the potential violence of silencing the often inherent emotionality of researching violence. Moreover, it acknowledges that such silencing has significant theoretical and epistemological consequences.

Emotionality can be a critical way to promote, sustain and challenge the ways we go about knowing women’s experiences of policing and their responses to that policing. It renders the ‘expert’ gaze inappropriate and helps refocus attention away from the acts of violence (thus undermining the centrality of victim status) and on to the ways women have experienced, interpreted and responded to that violence, casting the researcher in an increasingly complex and more ambiguous relation with the research. While such relations can often be uncomfortable or troubling they also suggest that emotionality can be a critical way of knowing.

Emotionality can help problematize the lack of fit between lived experience and accepted interpretations of that experience. When considering my experiences of emotionality in light of readings in mainstream research practice I was beginning to wonder about my own inadequacies. What had I done that was inappropriate, how was I distorting or complicating things in order for me to feel the ways I do? Upon reflection, what I was experiencing was the incongruity between mainstream social research discourses and my own experience (albeit inchoate and contradictory experiences). In so doing I was also overlooking a potential source of knowledge.

References


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