

## ‘Sleeping on the job’: where qualitative fieldwork meets the sociology of sleep

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### Abstract

This article examines the question of sleeping (or not) during the course of ethnographic fieldwork. It is argued that the concept of what is termed here ‘sleepwork’ has yet to be fully addressed or adequately problematised in the fields of sociology and social anthropology, in particular. The first part of the article highlights the relative silence about sleeping and fieldwork in the literature on qualitative research methods, and reflects upon why this subject is largely absent from the ethnographic corpus. I then make a number of propositions about some potential methodological strategies for incorporating ‘sleepwork’ into fieldwork. The second part of the article suggests that data analysis should not be seen as an activity that only occurs in states of wakefulness, but rather as a 24/7 activity that is undertaken with varying intensity.

### Keywords

Sleep, sleeping, fieldwork, dreaming, data analysis, hypnagogia, ethnography, sleepwork, reflexivity

### The sound of silence. . .

There are numerous topics of ethnographic enquiry where sleeping (or not) is likely to present challenges for the fieldworker. This may be due to disruption to normal sleeping patterns during the course of fieldwork. In some cases, some experience of disturbed sleep may be intrinsic to the research project itself. One only needs to consider ethnographic research with people who work on night shifts (Arber et al., 2007; Marinache, 2016; Patel, 2010), with seafarers working in isolating and hazardous conditions round-the-clock and subject to the continual motion and vibration of the ship (Sampson, 2013, 2018)<sup>1</sup>, with homeless people who are rough-sleepers (Hall, 2003; Smith and Hall,

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2013), with airline crew crossing time-zones, or indeed any kind of ‘dangerous’ research (Bloor et al., 2010; Goldsmith, 2003), to become aware that fieldworkers investigating these areas of social life are likely to face challenges in relation to the organisation of their own sleeping arrangements, and their eventual accomplishment of sleep. This is especially the case if they are endeavouring to observe the sleeping arrangements of those affected by, and working through, disrupted circadian rhythms and body-clocks that are poorly synchronised.

It is especially notable that urban ethnographers who conduct fieldwork with homeless people do not appear yet to have reflected on the implications – for themselves and others – of the point made by James Spradley in *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* that ‘sleep is an act embodying numerous facets of homelessness’ (Rensen, 2003: 87). So, when urban ethnographers such as Rensen note that it can be typical for homeless people to go without sleep for three or four days at a time, his readers are left ignorant as to whether this insight derives from his own first-hand experience, or simply anecdotal report (Rensen, 2003). Mitchell Duneier’s study of those living at the margins of society on the sidewalks of Greenwich Village includes a statement about his research methods that appears as an appendix to *Sidewalk* (Duneier, 1999). Despite the subject of his study – those without a home – he mentions in passing that his own sleeping was taking place in the spare rooms of friends on the Upper East Side, acknowledging that these were far more hospitable places to sleep than the spaces in which many of his informants would endeavour to sleep (Duneier, 1999: 355).

Sociologists and anthropologists appear to have devoted relatively little attention to an aspect of fieldwork practice that likely takes up about a third of their time (if they are fortunate enough to manage 8 h of undisturbed rest). There are few accounts of what happens (or not) when darkness falls, or the light is switched off, in order to enable the restoration of body, mind, and (if one is so disposed) soul. The ways in which fieldworkers manage their own sleeping arrangements ‘on the job’ are rarely considered, which is surprising in relation to projects that require extended periods of time away from home. It is perplexing that an activity that takes up so much time in the field is somehow taken-for-granted and assumed (given the apparent silence in the literature) to be *unproblematic*. There is passing mention of ‘insomnia and nightmares’ (Bloor et al., 2010: 47) as a risk in dangerous and/or emotionally challenging fieldwork conditions, but the connection between *increased* risk for fieldworkers who are over-tired doesn’t seem to get a mention. Publications about dangerous fieldwork seem to pay insufficient attention to the ability of fieldworkers to gain restful sleep (Belousov et al., 2007). Any mention of sleeping and fieldwork appears to be entirely incidental, such as Douglas Harper’s account of fieldwork with tramps who ride on freight trains: ‘As the sun set, the train turned due west. . . .it got dark fast and I got depressed, feeling quite alone. I was nearly overcome with tiredness before I crawled into my sleeping bag and found my way to sleep in the lurching, rocking and screeching freight car’ (Harper, 1996: 63). The ability to ‘Look Inside’ books on the Amazon website and search for keywords (in this case, ‘sleep’) in texts concerned with ethnography and qualitative fieldwork yield only fleeting glimpses of what it can be like to ‘sleep on the job’, such as the joys and perils of sleeping in a hammock (Okely, 2012: 120), or the arduous of staying awake when there is clearly important data to be recorded (Emerson et al., 2011).

The extensive (and typically quantitative) literature on the relationship between work-related stress and insomnia/sleeping (Åkerstedt et al., 2002; Burgard and Ailshire, 2009; Kalimo et al., 2000) does not appear to have featured so far in qualitative anthropological fieldwork methods discussion. Fieldwork sites are workplaces and yet, ‘sociologists have all but ignored the contribution of experiences in the workplace to sleep quality’ (Burgard and Ailshire, 2009: 476). With a growing body of literature about the risks that ethnographic researchers might face when they are in the field (e.g. Sampson, 2013), their accomplishment of an activity that is a basic human need surely requires some attention. What enables researchers to ‘switch off’ from their work, in order to achieve sleep? Does the writing of fieldnotes at the end of the day (the ‘golden rule’) have a crucial and cathartic part to play in enabling researchers to get to sleep? To what extent are the bedtime rituals of home transferrable to fieldwork sites? Will the wearing of a particularly favourite or comfortable garment of nightwear (‘the uniform of sleep’ (Taylor, 1993: 466)) help the weary ethnographer to fall asleep? How commonly do ethnographic researchers resort to sleeping pills, or to sleep itself as a state of refuge from the demands of the waking world? Is the announcement to research participants that ‘I need an early night’ a socially justifiable way of disengaging from further social interaction? I do not have answers to these kinds of questions, but posing them is suggestive of a largely unexplored area of methodological enquiry, and one that builds upon the relatively recent development of the sociology of sleep (Williams, 2008), extending it into discourse about ethnography and qualitative fieldwork practice. Like Edgar, I am perplexed about the omission of any extensive discussion about sleep (or dreams) as sources of insight, in the classic qualitative research fieldwork textbooks (Edgar, 2004), the more so because of the extent to which sleep is increasingly seen as ‘a *problem* in Western societies’ (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011: 178). If that is the case, surely it can be usefully problematised among those engaged in qualitative fieldwork research? Why do fieldwork researchers get so little sleep in the textbooks that underpin their work? The fact that ‘sleeping and sleeplessness are the foci of manifold popular, everyday talk and knowledges regarding well-being’ (Krafft and Horton, 2008: 511) surely makes discussion of sleep a necessary dimension of qualitative fieldwork practice, as well?

In the early days of anthropology, most fieldwork was conducted away from home, and often in physically demanding conditions where basic survival undoubtedly required energy, time and attention. Many early anthropologists of the 20th century were concerned with the sleep, but more especially the dreams, of those with whom they were working in various non-Western cultures (Jędrej and Shaw, 1992). This is because dream accounts were regarded as suggestive of modes of thought and an understanding of cultural and social phenomenon (Bulkeley, 2008). It is likely that the sheer fatigue of doing fieldwork in arduous conditions pushed the anthropologist towards relatively unproblematic sleep, but the lack of any detailed consideration of their own sleeping arrangements leave us making a considerable assumption on the basis of fairly limited evidence. Some cultural anthropologists have maintained fieldwork diaries that record their dreams (Kracke, 1987; Tedlock, 1991), and Malinowski recorded some of his dreams during his work with the Trobriand islanders (Malinowski, 1967). The celebrated American anthropologist Robert Lowie was exceptional in maintaining a dream diary for some 50 years (Lowie, 1966). The Australian anthropologist, Michael Jackson, reported on his dream

experiences while conducting fieldwork in Sierra Leone (Jackson, 1978). Some anthropologists have narrated their dreams to those with whom they are working as a means of establishing reciprocity in field relationships (Ewing, 1994; Foster, 1973). Dreaming narratives are all well and good, but the fieldwork conditions that have served as the prelude to these dreams remain obscure. In the transition towards more anthropology being conducted 'at home' (Jackson, 1987) and despite the increasing attention paid to questions of reflexivity (Ellis and Bochner, 2000), the topic of sleep and dreaming seems to have quietly slipped away from many index pages. This potentially deprives us of a means to interrogate and understand different cultural beliefs about sleeping, by using *our own sleep* as a tool for reflexive consideration, rather than simply an 'accidental exit' (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011: 186) from the day's work.

An important exception to the relative silence about sleeping and fieldwork is the literature and theorists associated with the field of travel and tourism. In 2011, Anu Valtonen challenged those in his field to address 'sleep in tourism'. He noted that so far, 'tourism studies have focussed mainly on experiences gained with eyes wide open' (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011: 175), in much the same way, I am arguing, that sociologists and ethnographers have also focussed their energy and attention in their fieldwork with 'eyes wide open'. He argued that 'the inclusion of sleep in the larger picture invites the researcher community to treat sleep and sleeping as meaningful experiences. . . which inevitably, through our bodily being in this world, conditions the way in which wakeful experiences *can* be performed and consumed' (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011: 176). Following this line of argument, reflexive attention to 'sleepwork' during fieldwork will alert ethnographers to possible nuances in their fieldwork practice and analysis that can be attributed to sleep/ing. It is only because of their sleeping that they *can* then re-engage with the world upon waking. 'The fact remains that having not articulated sleep and sleeping in our theorising of time, place, and social relations, we have missed a critical potential residing in practices of sleeping' (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011: 185). In much the same vein, ignoring those hours when the ethnographer is asleep, rendering them 'dead', unproductive or useless (Valtonen and Veijola, 2011) misses the potential to gain insights from a substantial period of time spent 'in the field'. Furthermore, giving further attention to sleep in fieldwork amplifies the importance of being able to function properly the next day. To this end, Valtonen et al. have undertaken autoethnographic studies of their own sleep (and dreams) during the course of their research via self-reflective diaries (Valtonen et al., 2017).

one of us decided to keep a dream diary for 1 month: another to reflect on sleep experiences taking place away from her private bed (e.g. in aircrafts, trains, cars, and hotels) for a certain period of time; and yet another focussed on observing and reflecting on how sleep is present in spaces traditionally associated with wakefulness, such as lecture halls, official meetings, presentations at conferences, and so on. (Valtonen et al., 2017; 6)

The primary argument of this article is that qualitative researchers could usefully follow the example of those working in the field of travel and tourism studies by paying much closer attention to their 'sleeping on the job', via 'sleepwork'. They might also take some inspiration from Ellis's auto-ethnographic discussion of sleeping in strange places,

including on aircraft and in hotels (Ellis, 2017). So, what have been the obstacles to reflexivity in relation to sleeping and the broader literature in ethnographic research, so far?

### Why the silence?

There are a number of reasons that might explain the apparent silence in the literature when it comes to 'sleepwork' and qualitative fieldwork. First of all, sleeping and beds are associated with privacy, sex and intimacy (Williams, 2007a). Ethnographers no doubt quite legitimately 'draw the curtain' between their waking world of work and their restful slumbers; their quest for sleep perhaps falling within the private sphere that is off-limits as far as fieldwork goes (Ellis, 2017). Secondly, in a postcolonial world, more ethnography is now done 'at home' in societies, settings or communities with which the fieldworker is proximate (Greenbaume, 2006; Jackson, 1987). It is now commonplace for serious anthropological fieldwork to take place while at the same time going home to sleep in one's own bed. In this instance, the accomplishment of sleep is perhaps less likely to pose questions or challenges, certainly compared to the anthropological work of those who venture to distant lands for long periods of time, often experiencing considerable physical disruption or discomfort. Thirdly, there is perhaps a taboo about discussion of one's sleeping and/or dreaming experiences during fieldwork as it potentially leads to suspicion that one has somehow fallen beyond the parameters of proper academic work. The anthropologist Marianne George took a bold step in documenting some of her dreams during and after fieldwork with people in Papua New Guinea, and noted the unconventional decision to do so: 'people like myself have not paid attention to these kinds of field experiences, much less written them up. We fear being disbelieved and discredited. . . treating dreams on a comparable footing with objective reality is tantamount to "going native"' (George, 1995: 18). An anthropology workshop devoted to academic understanding of the 'dark side of life' noted that 'certain subjects simply seem to lack academic "respectability" and the rewards for interest in them appear few and far between' (Steger and Brunt, 2003: 3). Steger and Brunt go on to say: 'simply mentioning that one studies sleep provokes laughter, amazement and the suspicion that the researcher only wants to justify his or her favourite pastime' (Steger and Brunt, 2003: 10). Fourthly, the descent into sleep and the loss of waking consciousness renders it a 'non-event', a 'non-experience' (Taylor, 1993): 'I cannot *directly* audit or experience my sleep' (Williams, 2007a: 313). So, unlike accounts of emotional challenges during fieldwork (Behar, 1996), or reflection upon those occasions when the personal and the professional have become blurred (McLean and Leibing, 2007), researching one's sleep, as it is taking place, is impossible. A fifth reason for the lack of attention to sleep and fieldwork practice perhaps derives from the way in which our lives largely remain structured by the prevalent framework of 7 am–11 pm rhythms. Social scientific understanding has largely derived from a focus upon the activities that take place during waking hours and daytime (Steger and Brunt, 2003), and this has arguably pushed the hours between 11 pm and 7 am into the margins of reflection about qualitative research and fieldwork practice. This is amplified all the more by the fact that most people have a special room for sleep – a bedroom – which enables some structural differentiation between sleeping and other

parts of life, such as work, leisure or family. A sixth possible reason for the lack of attention to sleep and fieldwork perhaps arises from the fact that sleep seems to span so many other disciplines beyond the social sciences (Taylor, 1993). It is investigated biomedically, neurologically and psychologically (usually via quantitative methods) and the findings from these fields have translated into many self-help books devoted to issues of sleep hygiene, particularly for insomniacs (Espie, 2006). Philosophers and historians have brought their concerns to the subject (Ekirch, 2015), as have those in organisation/management studies where the well-slept body is the productive employee (Hancock, 2008; Valtonen et al., 2017). The subject of sleep is thus unevenly dispersed over many different fields and has a longer history in some disciplines than others. In the arts and humanities, academic attention to sleep has ‘followed in the slipstream of sleep medicine’ (Ekirch, 2015: 150). While the five distinctive areas mapped out within the ‘sociology of sleep’ (Meadows, 2005) allude to topics such as the medicalisation of sleep, and the gendered experience of sleep, there is apparently no mention of sleep in relation to qualitative research practice. Set the discourses on these topics alongside the attention now given to issues of subjectivity, reflexivity and the potential emotional labour of qualitative research (Adkins, 2002; Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Jacobs-Huey, 2002; McCutcheon, 1999), and we seem to find ourselves in relative methodological virgin territory, concerned with the question of how, when (possibly, with whom) and where the ethnographic fieldworker accomplishes the embodied practice of sleeping ‘on the job’.

### **Why is ‘sleepwork’ important?**

Biomedical and psychological research has established without question that stress (which for qualitative fieldworkers might arise as a consequence of physical danger, emotional abuse or upset, or problematic issues of ‘access’) results in

increased neurological arousal that involves the release of key neurotransmitters (such as adrenaline and noradrenaline) and neuron-effective hormones (such as cortisol). The presence of cortisol, in particular, can interfere with a worker’s ability to ‘switch off’ at the end of the work period. (Burgard and Ailshire, 2009: 478)

The impact of insomnia, poor sleep quality (which implies disturbed, delayed or non-restorative sleep), or indeed any real discussion of ‘sleeping on the job’, seems to be absent from qualitative research methods discussion, despite the evidence that negative psychological experiences and emotional loads have an impact on sleep quality (Winwood and Lushington, 2006), not to mention the difficulties of sleeping in strange places (aircraft or hotels, for instance). The extensive discussion about the emotional aspects of fieldwork doesn’t seem to recognise the impact such fieldwork may have upon the accomplishment of sleep in the field, which is why it warrants some attention. An important exception here is recorded in the results of a small-scale study conducted with 16 doctoral students in anthropology (Pollard, 2009). Among the difficult experiences and emotions, they recounted, one of them was sleep disturbance, mainly on account of bad dreams, or lack of confidence about physical security during sleep. In one case, it

took time to ‘learn how to sleep again’ (Pollard, 2009: 10) having returned from fieldwork. Learning to sleep also formed part of the reflections of Nancy Lindisfarne, recounting her fieldwork experiences in Afghanistan in the 1970s, in an interview with Judith Okely (Okely, 2007: 73).

I became very fond of this veil, and how one could use it to watch without being watched. . . I still very much have this sense of what you can do with this veil. Learning to go to sleep! Because again, they [Afghan women] have no privacy. But learning to do what women did, which was – you pulled your veil, lay down – absolutely wherever you were – pulled the veil over your head, and you could go to sleep. Because you weren’t there!. (Okely, 2007: 73)

It is likely that during episodes of fieldwork away from home we are more sensitive to our location, even while asleep. While sleep may involve a loss of waking consciousness, we are not entirely severed from the waking world, and indeed, we may learn to become sensitive to particular kinds of noise (Williams, 2007a). ‘When we are nearest to sleep the senses become abnormally acute’ (Mavromatis, 1987: 53). ‘Our intentional threads to the intersubjective world, as Merleau-Ponty (1962) reminds us, are never entirely severed: we are never “totally” sleepers’ (Williams, 2007a: 319, citing Merleau-Ponty, 1962). **[AQ: 1]** Indeed, Merleau-Ponty argues that while sleeping the mind is ‘cluttered with the debris of the past and present’ (Morley, 1999: citing Merleau-Ponty, 1968) **[AQ: 2]** on account of the common ground of existence that shared by waking and sleeping states. This immediately suggests the significance of sleeping (or not) ‘on the job’, and the merits of paying attention to the quality and quantity of our sleep. Neuroscientists of sleep are clear that our senses are still at work during sleep: ‘your ears are still “hearing”; your eyes, though closed, are still capable of “seeing”’ (Walker, 2017: 39). We remain able, despite our loss of waking consciousness, to map the passage of time, as evidenced by our ability to wake up just a few minutes before the alarm clock is set to ring. Given the extent of brain activity going on during our sleep, paying attention to whatever facets of our sleep behaviour we can recall begins to seem rather obvious, if we are to take a properly holistic and reflexive approach to ethnographic fieldwork.

So how might ‘sleepwork’ be incorporated within our research practices? Sleep is a behaviour that we can *partially* control and consciously manage through the performance of a range of sleep-related habits (Williams, 2007b). The ethnographer might therefore consider and document how they set about arranging their sleep, physically, mentally and emotionally, in order to ‘switch off’. When (if at all) have they resorted to sleeping pills? The impact of sleeping alone, if they are more familiar with sleeping accompanied might be considered and documented. There is merit in recording dreams experienced during fieldwork for the straightforward reason that

the content of dreams. . . draw on previously experienced interaction and are often presented in social situations. Dreams are emergent ‘experiences’ that reflect, in unsolicited and uncontrollable fashion, the interaction of self, culture and structure. (Fine and Leighton, 1993: 96)

The relationship between dreaming and waking experience is likely, according to Fine and Leighton, to illuminate questions of class, race, gender or occupation, and thus

dreaming becomes a legitimate ‘tool and object of sociological analysis’ (Fine and Leighton, 1993: 99)<sup>2</sup>.

Depending upon the fieldwork setting, feigning sleep, though ethically dubious, may enable the researcher to listen to surrounding soundscapes and conversations, which may become useful data sources (particularly if the subject of the conversation is the researcher themselves!). An astute fieldworker may begin to pay attention to the personal and ‘local’ etiquette around sleeping. When, in the interests of maintaining good fieldwork relations, have they deliberately smothered a yawn, or noticed others doing the same? Conversely, a public yawn may be a way to signal to all concerned that the fieldwork conversation is over and that one party is going to ‘switch off’.

The circumstances, time and implications of when fieldnotes are written are also worthy of recording as part of our research projects, particularly if these encroach into night-fall and times when those with whom we are working have gone to sleep. In his research with the South Asian Muslim *Tablighi Jama'at* movement, a 42-day period of fieldwork travelling with a group of missionaries around Europe required Riyaz Timol to record his fieldnotes in the small hours of the night, away from the gaze of his fellow travellers (Timol, 2017). Being unable to do more than make jottings on a small notepad during the day (Emerson et al., 2011), the process of writing accurate and detailed notes involved several hours of hard labour at the end of a long day of travelling. Documenting the implications and consequences of the trade-off between the physical urge to sleep and the necessity of writing good fieldnotes, is surely worth a mention in our research accounts, and perhaps as a word of caution in the qualitative research methods literature. If nothing else, noting the personal cost and implications of doing fieldwork that could be disruptive of our sleep, thereby potentially affecting our mood, memory moral compass (Lewis, 2013: 19), decision-making skills and judgment of ‘risk’ or danger, might be considered as part of a legitimate risk assessment for qualitative research. The (neuro) scientists of sleep also help to explain to ethnographers why the ‘when’ of writing fieldnotes is so important (Emerson et al., 2011).

Sleep impacts all types of memory – but not always by simply strengthening it. If I give you a list of word pairs to learn e.g. cat-ball, tree-fence. . . and ask you to repeat the whole list back to me straight away and then again 12 hours later, you will probably find that you’ve forgotten some of the pairs over that time. If the 12 hours include a night of sleep, your memory will probably *still* deteriorate, but the damage will be less. Thus, sleep seems to protect this type of memory, somehow preventing it from decaying as quickly as it would if the same period of time were spent awake. (Lewis, 2013: 12)

Another good reason for consideration of sleepwork during fieldwork relates to the intensity of experience that often accompanies the ethnographic endeavour. Neuroscientists of sleep have noted that synapses in the brain can reach a point of saturation in conditions of stimulating activity. In other words, we can find ourselves at a point of exhaustion when we simply cannot absorb any new information (Horne, 2006). ‘Something has to happen in order to clean up the mess, reset the synapses, and get rid of the unwanted information that has been stored. That something is sleep. Slow wave sleep resets the whole system. . .making space for new learning’ (Lewis, 2013: 50). Self-

awareness as to when we have reached that state of exhaustion might help the enthusiastic ethnographer to know when it is time to stop.

The relatively new mass production of affordable sophisticated biometric devices (such as a Fitbit) worn on the wrist are able to monitor the length and quality of our sleep, providing visual representations of the length and quality of our sleep over a period of time. Thus, the data that can be gathered from these devices, as well as the keeping of a sleep-diary that documents the *perceived* quality of sleep during fieldwork (Horne, 2006) as well as a record of our dreams, might help to account for unexpected feelings and moods the next day (Lewis, 2013). Hislop et al. advocated the use of audio-diaries as a method of data collection in social scientific studies of sleep as part of a larger project about sleeping and ageing among women (Hislop et al., 2005). However, they don't take this suggested method of data collection to its logical conclusion by advocating the possibility that fieldworkers might periodically turn recording devices away from others, and back towards their own voice. Nevertheless, they offer a systematic method by which audio-diaries of sleep could be used within qualitative fieldwork, enabling the researcher to log such things as the quality and time of their sleep and the factors that enabled or constrained restful slumber. Recording such data both before, during and after fieldwork also offers the opportunity to explore the way in which sleep is incorporated into the production of everyday routines and time-space rhythms which demarcate different activities.

With some awareness of the necessity and importance of sleep, we might take proactive steps to protect it during the course of fieldwork as part of our prior preparation; the very success of our research may depend on it. Neuroscientists have noted the particular role of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep in increasing our ability to 'recognise and therefore successfully navigate the kaleidoscope of socioemotional signals that are abundant in human culture, such as overt and covert facial expressions, major and minor bodily gestures, and even mass group behaviour' (Walker, 2017: 74). Thus, we may decide to self-consciously adopt sleep-inducing rituals and behaviours at home, in anticipation of enacting them in fieldwork settings. It may be prudent to give serious attention to the places and locations where 'sleeping on the job' is likely to happen; a cursory glance of Trip Advisor reviews might help to avoid the over-heated hotel room adjacent to a noisy road and complaints about the light emanating from vehicle headlights penetrating thin curtains.

All this suggests that 'sleepwork' can become an intrinsic and valuable dimension of qualitative fieldwork practice, given that it can affect the quality and quantity of the data we are able to collect on account of context, circumstances and energy-levels. Proper reflexive attention to the restorative (or not-so-restorative) neurological processes happening during sleep signal the potential for our research insights to be enriched by the recording of our sleep and dreams during fieldwork, not to mention the ways in which our minds can weave new experience into pre-existing understanding. The ways in which we are enabled or constrained in our sleep and sleep behaviour by the context in which we find ourselves yield insight into the impact that our fieldwork practice is having upon us. This knowledge gives the fieldworker new agency in their work, and scope to see fieldwork as a more complex endeavour.

For example, as a sociologist of religion, I have frequently been the guest of faith communities for extended periods of time during the course of fieldwork, and have thus slept in theological colleges, at religious festivals and in a range of monastic communities. Sometimes I have been allocated a single guestroom in which to sleep, and in other circumstances, I have been accommodated in shared dormitories. Sleeping in dormitories implies that the ethnographic gaze may be turned upon oneself, perhaps revealing habits associated with one's sleep of which one had been previously unaware (such as snoring or sleep-talking). Sleeping as a guest in spaces that religious communities regard as sacred seems to stimulate a certain self-imposed censorship of language and behaviour, even when apparently unobserved. The acceptance of faith-based hospitality inevitably imposes a particular set of constraints on one's sleeping arrangements. For example, it may be rude to suggest the need for an early night, and one should be prepared to begin conversation the next day by answering questions about 'how did you sleep?'. This may extend to a willingness to share one's dream accounts, as Prof Ron Geaves found when he undertook a 'retreat' at a Sufi centre in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. The Shaykh was happy to accommodate him, provided that he was willing to adopt Islamic dress, read portions of the Qur'an each day, and to describe his dreams as part of a daily audience with the Shaykh<sup>3</sup>.

Thus far, I have been particularly considering sleeping in relation to the practical business of fieldwork. But there is another important sense in which we might consider 'sleeping on the job', and this pertains to the analysis of our data, and the possibility that we can problematise the very phrase 'data analysis'. I have made brief allusion to this above, and to the analytic potential of dreaming. However, a foray into the science and psychology of sleep and dreaming affords an opportunity to think again about what constitutes data and what constitutes analysis. Once again, the textbooks about qualitative research seem to refer to these terms un-problematically, and with little critical evaluation of the many possible ways in which we might think about the nature of data. . . likewise the diverse possibilities as to 'what counts' as analysis. Exploring these terms from the perspective of sleep and dreaming offers an entirely new way to reflect upon an activity that is predominantly discussed only in relation to our waking lives, perhaps working our way through a project loaded into NVivo software, or reading a how-to book about data analysis. In the remainder of this article, I therefore consider in further depth some of the ways in which our memories and experiences are analysed during sleep, and the potential to regard the outcomes of sleepwork as a legitimate source of data.

### **Hypnagogia and data analysis**

Any connoisseur of the Anglican service of Evensong will be familiar with the well-known hymn 'The Day Thou Gavest Lord, Is Ended'. It was written in 1870 by the Cheshire vicar, John Ellerton, apparently during the course of a nightly walk to teach in a Mechanic's Institute. He was a prolific hymn-writer, never more so than 'while he lay in a state of semi-consciousness on his deathbed' (Bradley, 2005: 126). I want to progress the ideas of this article by suggesting that liminal states of consciousness and occasions of physical transition between wakefulness and sleep offer particularly rich opportunities

to acquire insights about our work. The eureka moment in the shower, driving the car, going for a walk or during wakefulness in the small hours, indicate that data analysis should be understood as an activity that occurs during both conscious and un- and semi-conscious moments. Difficult decisions can sometimes become easier to make next day, if we have been able to ‘sleep on it’, suggesting that considerable emotion-work goes on while we are in a state of slumber. ‘Few people would deny having had occasional flashes of inspiration while drifting off to sleep or awaking’ (Mavromatis, 1987: 186).

The idea for this article in fact derives from the hours of sleeplessness that occurred as I was completing a complex and stirring piece of writing. Waking up at precisely 2.17 am, I found myself continuing to ‘write the paper’ in a hypnagogic state of mind, and accessing ideas that had been elusive during the day. In the darkness and silence of the night, without the stimuli of sight or sound, intuitive insights seemed to flow with the same relative ease as the words of the hymn cited above. Not being awake enough to get out a notebook and pen from the bedside, I resorted to a tried and tested mnemonic of putting a slipper on top of my clock radio. Waking up next morning, and seeing the slipper so clearly out of place was a reminder of the drowsy insights of the small hours. I am by no means the only researcher who takes advantage of bedside recording devices; we can go back to the 18th century for the first commercially produced device, namely the ‘Nocturnal Remembrancer’ developed by a London tradesman in 1768. The device is described as a tablet of parchment with a horizontal aperture for a guideline whereby ‘philosophers, statesmen, poets, divines, and every person of genius, business or reflection may secure all those happy, often much regretted, and never to be recovered flights or thoughts, which so frequently occur in the course of a meditating, wakeful night’ (Dick, 1950, cited in Ekirch, 2015: 311). Others have written about the insights that can occur in states of hypnagogia.

Lying in bed, I am in liminal space and time – somewhere on the continuum between being fully asleep and fully awake. I am conscious enough that thoughts about writing this article wander through my head; I am relaxed enough to let my creative imagination run free. As I melt into the experience, the ending for this article begins to take a shape. (Ellis, 2017: 296)

As a writer of fictions, I’ve always been sensible to the creative wellspring which is insensibility. I like to write the first drafts of my novels and stories first thing in the morning when the waking mind is still poorly adjusted to the prosaic day. I also believe that the sleeping mind in responding to the circadian rhythms of nature joins in other natural cycles as well. The tug of the tides shifts the shingle of our sleeping thoughts, throwing down wave after waves of fantastical imagery on the foreshore of our awareness. (Will Self, ‘Macbeth and the Insomnia Epidemic’, Radio 4, Point of View, 26.11.17)

Sleep appears to have an important role in the integration of our waking experiences, and in creating new forms of underlying knowledge (Walker, 2017). As a consequence, sleep becomes implicated in ‘the complex process of integrating new information with old and in abstracting out the general principles or rules which describe a corpus of events and help us to make informed predictions about the future’ (Lewis, 2013: 102). More importantly, scientists of sleep suggest that this can help us to see ‘the bigger picture’ (Lewis, 2013: 103). Neuroscientists have established that NREM (non-rapid eye movement) sleep does important editorial work, sifting through neural connections and removing

those that are unnecessary. Meanwhile, the stages of sleep associated with dreaming (REM sleep) which typically occur in the latter phases of sleep, play a role in consolidating those neural connections that are important for our wellbeing. So, even as we sleep, our brains are engaged in ‘data analysis’ at the deepest levels, beyond our consciousness (Walker, 2017).

We therefore consider waking brainwave activity as that principally concerned with the *reception* of the outside sensory world, while the state of deep NREM slow-wave sleep denotes a state of inward *reflection* – one that fosters information transfer and the distillation of memories. . .while REM sleep [involves] *integration*. (Walker, 2017: 52, italics original)

It is during this phase of integration of past and new experiences and memories that we are perhaps most able to achieve ‘innovative insights and problem-solving abilities’ (Walker, 2017).

Freshly minted memories. . .collide with the entire back catalog of your life’s autobiography. These mnemonic collisions during REM sleep spark new creative insights as novel links are forged between unrelated pieces of information. Sleep cycle by sleep cycle, REM sleep helps construct vast associative networks of information within the brain. (Walker, 2017: 75)

Just as there is no tight boundary between day and night, so too it seems worthy to consider the possibility that data analysis is a fluid 24-h undertaking, and that the process of understanding our data and developing creative insights about it occurs while we are awake, asleep, dreaming and in states of hypnagogia. Despite the evolution of CADAS tools, real understanding of our ethnographic data arguably emerges from intuition and an ability to stand back from our work to ask, and hopefully answer that more creative question: ‘what is going on here?’ (Atkinson, 2015: 71). To be truly creative, Mavromatis argues that ‘one must be able to lift one’s logical “dampers”, thereby disinhibiting the free flow of mental life and allowing the rising to consciousness of unconscious-nonrational and original combinations of associative elements’ (Mavromatis, 1987: 215). This uniquely happens as we sleep. Psychologists have claimed that in the hypnagogic state, the constricting influence of logical thinking is laxed or absent, and subjects can be helped to break down mental blocks, prejudices, biases, resistances and learn new material (Mavromatis, 1987: 56).

Social scientists of sleep and night-time have noted that the fact that our cities never sleep. The emergency services work 24-h a day; news media is in a constant state of production, along with the baking of the morning loaf of bread – all these activities and services essential for the functioning of contemporary human societies. We might apply this analogy to our sleep; the processing of our data is going on in the background of our consciousness, providing an opportunity for the emergence of particular insights about our research.

. . .the study of sleep. . .is changing humankind’s view of itself by shedding light on the ways in which our daily behavioural rhythms, our perceptions, our feelings and our thoughts reflect the detailed workings of the 100 billion nerve cells within our head that spark, secrete juices, and code and store data. . .around the clock. (Kraftl and Horton, 2008: 512, citing Hobson, J. 1995, *Sleep*, New York: Scientific American Library, p. 10)

If contemporary society operates on an 24/7 basis, it seems obvious that our research methods should become more attentive to this reality by taking greater account of our sleep as an important dimension of embodied fieldwork practice.

## Conclusion

In earlier writing about the embodied practice of fieldwork and the vital role of the body in the collection of qualitative data (Author, 2011 [AQ: 3], details withheld for peer review; Author, 2010 [AQ: 4], details withheld for peer review), I paid insufficient attention to the embodied act of sleeping (or trying to sleep, often unsuccessfully) after long days in the field. Perhaps this was a reflection of a time in life when sleep was personally less problematic. More recently, the daily accomplishment of sleep (or not, as the case may be) has become challenging; this seems to have made it problematic in professional life, as well!

This article has traversed a range of social scientific, psychological, anthropological, neurological and religious studies literature. The fundamental argument is that ethnography as a fieldwork practice, and writing about qualitative fieldwork methodology, has paid insufficient attention to sleep (Steger and Brunt, 2003). Where Williams argues that the sociology of sleep provides ‘an important new light or window onto social processes, roles and relations across the public/private divide’ (Williams, 2007a: 325), I extend his argument to suggest that during fieldwork, our sleeping arrangements provide important insights into both the mundane and creative work of social scientific enquiry. Because our societies have become ‘colonised by the imperialism of the waking consciousness’ (Willis, 1992: 179), we are perhaps losing access to potentially useful data derived from our ‘sleepwork’.

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## Notes

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2. There is an extensive and growing literature about dreams as sources of ethnographic data, both the dreams of those with whom one is working and one’s own dreams. This is the subject of a different forthcoming article.
3. I am grateful to Prof Ron Geaves for sharing this information, personal conversation, January 2019.

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