

Unfinished business: a reflection on leaving the field

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Abstract

Whilst confessional tales are a common feature of the research process, stories of exiting the field remain scarce. In this chapter, I reflect upon my experiences of leaving a post-industrial town after a long period of study. First, I trouble the popular narrative of 'leaving' as a voluntary and deliberate decision. My abrupt departure from the research site prompted questions and anxieties about researcher responsibilities and commitments. Second, I highlight the affective nature of leaving the field and sketch out the interpersonal intensity of the relationship between both the researcher and the participants. Third, I reflect upon my trepidation about writing once I had left the site, both in terms of doing justice to participants' lives and not further stigmatising a maligned community. By sketching out not the reasons *for* leaving the field, but what concerns emerged *because of* my departure, I argue that researchers must treat disengagement as a serious matter – pragmatically and analytically – which rarely leaves us unaffected.

Keywords

Emotion; leaving the field; reflexivity; relationships; stigma; writing up

Introduction

In his lecture on fieldwork, Erving Goffman (1989: 132) touches on many aspects of the research process, yet on 'getting out', he identifies there are 'issues', but concludes before identifying what these may be. This reflects how accounts of fieldwork access, data collection, establishing and maintaining relationships, and the defining role of researcher attributes are staples of textbooks, journal articles, and colourful confessional tales, yet stories of leaving the field remain marginal (Delamont 2016). Discussing it is not simply a matter of wrapping up, but rather involves managing adjustments, expectations, and relationships. Moreover, leaving the field is a moment where we 'begin the critical process of reflection, analysis, and contextualization' (Feldman and Mandache 2019: 238). Whilst fieldworkers might temporarily leave the field, I focus upon the moment whereby research ceases, marking a rupture of connection.

In this chapter, I reflect upon my experiences of leaving a post-industrial town after a long period of study. Over fifteen months, I was employed as a researcher on a project¹ in Merthyr Tydfil (Merthyr), a post-industrial ex-mining and steel-making region in South Wales, UK. Once a hub of industrial activity, Merthyr suffered a deep decline owing to deindustrialisation and the closure of industries underpinning the rituals, routines, and rhythms of community life. Along with being confronted with a deep political abandonment, Merthyr is often subjected to popular stigmatising narratives that feed into pejorative configurations of the working-class via 'poverty porn' outputs (Elliott et al. 2020; Thomas 2016; Thomas et al. 2018). The project involved working with young people living in Merthyr to explore their perceptions and experiences of living in their community. We collected data using a range of different methods, including semi-structured interviews, observations, video and photo methods, focus groups, and soundscapes. With colleagues, I was embedded in this community for over a year. My employment contract ended in mid-2015 and, as such, I left the research site.

I discuss my disengagement from the field with respect to three matters. First, I trouble the popular narrative of 'leaving' as a voluntary and deliberate decision ordinarily made with reference to data saturation, research fatigue, and/or competing personal and professional commitments. I discuss how my abrupt departure from the site prompted, for me, questions and anxieties about researcher responsibilities and commitments. Second, I highlight the affective nature of leaving the field. In

¹ The project ('Mapping, Making, and Mobilising in Merthyr: Using Creative Methods to Engage Change with Young People') was part of the ESRC/AHRC-funded 'Productive Margins: Regulating for Engagement' collective (grant number ES/K002716/1).

conjunction with feminist approaches to research (Huisman 2008; Irwin 2006; Stacey 1988), I argue that extracting myself from the research site led to conflicting feelings of sadness, relief, debt, and guilt, revealing the interpersonal intensity of the relationship between researcher and participants. Third, I reflect upon my trepidation about writing once I had left, particularly about how my claims would be received by residents. Together with doing justice to residents' complex worlds over a short period of time, I was bothered by the prospect that my writing may further stigmatise a maligned community, and how my hasty exit possibly weakened the opportunity of resolving any points of contention. Having become a fixture of the scene, I was worried about relationships with the participants post-fieldwork and how they perceived my own interpretation of their worlds, especially given that there were no plans to return. This contribution does not sketch out the reasons *for* leaving the field but, rather, what concerns emerged *because of* my departure. I argue that researchers must treat disengagement as a serious matter of analysis – pragmatically and analytically – that rarely leaves us unaffected.

Leaving the field: unfinished business?

One of the most common suggested reasons for leaving the field is data saturation. Researchers are frequently urged to stop fieldwork when research yields diminishing (analytical) returns; we should admit the incomplete nature of research and halt 'when you have gained an understanding of the setting or slice of social life that you set out to study' (Taylor 1991: 242). Likewise, David Snow (1980: 102) argues that the researcher 'leaves the field when enough data have been collected to sufficiently answer pre-existing or emergent propositions, or to render an accurate description of the world under study'. For Snow, researchers must determine how much data is *enough* and fight impulses to stay owing to a sense of 'unfinished business', especially since researchers – and particularly ethnographers – 'usually collect more data than they can handle' (1980: 105). Snow's exit from the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement was due to both data saturation and practical constraints (e.g. time pressures, personal role conflict, physical/mental exhaustion). Nonetheless, he struggled to disengage owing to the attitudes of participants, the intensity of some relationships, and a sense of indebtedness to his participants.

Other reasons for leaving include competing personal and professional commitments, participant conflicts, and research fatigue and boredom (Delamont 2016; Ortiz 2004; Stebbins 1991). In their study of organ replacement, Renée Fox and Judith Swazey (1992: 10) decided to leave owing to 'participant-observer-burnout'. They found some of their participants' (health professionals) practices troubling – especially their reluctance to accept the limits of the human condition – and felt that their departure was a statement against the perceived excesses and over-zealousness of organ replacement efforts. In her discussion of the physical burdens of research, Tessa Diphooorn (2013: 214) describes how she became compelled by data collection and only the intervention of a concerned colleague prompted her to leave the field. Others have an easier time of departing, such as when participants live a nomadic lifestyle and expect frequent departures (e.g. Kaplan 1991).

Some researchers recommend a slower process of disengagement, in which they gradually wind down efforts. For instance, Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahlema (2003) propose a solution of not making a full exit to ease the transition process (e.g. follow-up interviews). Others, though, suggest an explicit cut. Mette Høybye (2016: 468) suggests that this is particularly important in mediated environments (e.g. online spaces) as, otherwise, researchers can remain 'hooked up' with networks indefinitely, and distance is required to produce an analytic interpretation. Similarly, Brent Luvaas (2017: 257) proposes that the significance of the 'extraction event has been substantially reduced' due to the growth of social media as we retain a capacity to remain in touch. For Luvaas, we 'take the field with us' and 'linger in the ethnographic present indefinitely', to the point that distance remains elusive (2017: 257).

These reflections appear to frame leaving the field as a voluntary, deliberate decision. Excepting a small number of contributions (Snow 1980; Taylor 1991), there is little recognition of *practical concerns* as opposed to *research considerations*. For instance, the researchers in Roberta Iversen's (2009) project varied in their disengagement strategies related to their disciplinary and epistemological orientation, researcher and participant relationships, researcher and participant role perceptions, and the pattern of research funding. My own employment contract ended in mid-2015 and I had been offered a job role elsewhere. Whilst I would still be geographically near to the research site, my own roles and responsibilities had shifted. This is an ongoing issue for people

working in academia who face precarity and insecurity, are employed on short fixed-term contracts for project-based research, and face explicit encouragement to be mobile. For such researchers, practical concerns likely dictate when a study ends and when writing begins. Whilst research arguably 'suffers when it is rushed or concluded prematurely' (Taylor 1991: 243), the decision to leave can be taken out of the hands of researchers, thereby troubling the common narrative which assumes that leaving the field constitutes an active decision made by the researcher.

My departure from Merthyr felt abrupt and premature. It also ignited worry about responsibilities and commitments to participants. Having spent over a year in the community, I was concerned about how my exit would be perceived by young people and workers at the youth centre who were crucial to my fieldwork. I was unsure what obligations I had to them. They had been so welcoming and benevolent that I felt exiting would be perceived as impolite and ungrateful, despite their reassurances that this was not the case. Similarly, I was troubled by a lingering thought that participants might feel abandoned. This sentiment is particularly acute in Merthyr. Several youth workers conveyed their dismay at previous researchers parachuting into the community, sucking its lifeblood (as 'data'), and departing without a trace and with little reciprocation. Likewise, young people were cautious of 'outsider' representations of *them* and *their place* that may leave them feeling betrayed and bruised. Residents were initially sceptical of outsiders, including those from 'the University' (where I was employed), since they may fuel disparaging representations (I revisit this later). I worried that I would be perceived in a similar manner.

One solution I considered, along with reminding participants throughout the project about its end-date, was to slowly remove myself from the community. Unlike Robert Stebbins (1991: 249), who was often 'free to slip away with little or no need to make a formal exit' in his studies, doing so here would have been odd, if not discourteous, and I felt entering into a dialogue of closure was a moral and ethical imperative requiring careful thought. This 'weaning' (Hall 2014: 2187) involved me consistently reminding community members about the project end-date, but noting that they could contact me via email and social media platforms². Once it had ended, I occasionally revisited after my exit for social events and catch-ups, but other professional and personal commitments blunted my capacity to do this as often as I would have liked. My drifting away was likely stimulated by the physical distance between the research site and my new office. Many of the people – young people and workers – had also moved onto new pastures, some voluntary (e.g. employment) and some forced (e.g. closure of institutions due to austerity measures). My perception was that many of those I worked with for the study, particularly the young people, had no interest in the research (or me) following their engagement. In addition, I felt that the research team and I would benefit from having some distance from the field and data (Hall 2014; Ortiz 2004).

In this section, I have attempted to diverge from previous accounts of leaving the field to capture how an exit is not always the choice of a researcher. In many ways, our research is 'always partial and unfulfilled, begging for further inquiry and, at the end, always denied completion, fullness, the whole story' (Fitzgerald 2019: 167). This perception is particularly acute when research *must* end.

Affective fieldwork

In his research on evictions, Matthew Desmond (2016: 336) identifies how leaving, rather than 'getting in', constitutes the 'harder feat for any fieldwork'. Indeed, various researchers identify how they leave the field with mixed feelings, and perhaps occasionally with some relief too (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983). When researchers withdraw, relationships with participants can be fraught with difficulties, especially if researchers align with feminist approaches to research which value close relations³. For Judith Stacey (1988: 26), leaving marks an extra inequality in research relationships, that is, the potential and likelihood of 'desertion by the researcher'. Reflecting on her study in a health clinic in South India, Catherine Riessman (2005: 485) describes feeling 'bad' about leaving because her research team had 'provided a needed service'. There

² Jennifer Reich (2015) argues that social media affects our capacity to fully leave the field and exposes, if not already, the researcher's *personal* self. Indeed, new media makes it 'possible for participants to potentially embed themselves within the researcher's world' (2015: 408), which raises questions about whether one can truly 'leave' and/or sever ties when they are always reachable.

³ Katherine Irwin (2006: 160) critiques this stance, namely how becoming close to participants 'can do more harm than good'.

may be a sense of indebtedness too, in which the ethical dilemma 'is not how to respond when asked for help, but how to respond when you are given so much' (Desmond 2016: 336). Researchers may simply just miss being in the setting as well. In *Street Corner Society*, William Foote Whyte (1955: 342) wrote 'I have moved around many times in my life, and yet I have never felt so much as though I was leaving home'.

Such 'affective engagement' (Høybye 2016: 468) is understandable; long-term fieldwork regularly involves forging deep, sometimes permanent, ties to participants, and this can introduce a complex set of considerations and emotions (Hall 2014; Irwin 2006). As Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (1983: 122) remind us:

It can sometimes be strange and disorienting for people in the setting to find that the [researcher] is no longer going to be a part of their everyday world. Informants must adjust to the fact that someone they have come to see as a friend is going to turn back into a stranger.

Relationships can place researchers in 'an awkward or uncomfortable position' when they announce their departure (Taylor 1991: 244). Moreover, ending fieldwork can cause a rupture to the self, 'terminating a big part of [our] identity, both personally and academically' (Delamont 2016: 13). I felt many different emotions just prior to, and after, leaving Merthyr. Initially, I felt indebted to many participants. I believed I was always honest about the realities and possible outcomes of this project. Nonetheless, I worried that 'I was gaining much more from this group than they were going to receive' (Irwin 2006: 162). I could only offer friendship, some small gifts, and an aspiration that my work would help others to make sense of their world/s. Moreover, in a setting plagued by political abandonment, I worried that I was also deserting them. I had spent a considerable amount of time and energy cultivating relationships and attempting to understand participants' beliefs, norms, values, and concerns, and so to leave felt as if I was, in some ways, walking out on them. This sense of abandonment may be attributed to an anticipated mismatch of expectations between researcher and participants. In her study with Bosnian Muslim refugees in New England, Kimberly Huisman (2008) found that her participants' expectations to stay in contact far exceeded her own. Huisman's extended period of time with this community resulted in greater social obligations and her closeness ignited worries around exploitation and betrayal, especially as some participants found it difficult to trust people following the Bosnian War. Whilst I personally did not encounter a mismatch of expectations regarding keeping in contact, this did not negate a feeling of desertion and guilt. Becoming emotionally involved in the community meant that I may have inadvertently, and insensitively, intruded on participants' lives in the name of research and, in turn, to advance my career without fully confronting the structures of domination (Ellis 1995; Huisman 2008).

I also experienced a sense of loss and sadness as I had become 'attached' to participants (Taylor 1991). I had established friendships with several participants, particularly the youth workers who were close in age to me; the same skills, tactics, and attributes which make fieldwork progress with relative success may make the process of disengagement more difficult. Charles Gallmeier (1991) experienced feelings of alienation, guilt, and sadness after leaving the field, particularly as he had befriended several of the participants (minor-league hockey players). Yet, Gallmeier also described feelings of relief on account of no longer having to navigate players' sexism, his irritation with physical fighting, and his annoyance at pranks at his expense. Others have discussed feeling relieved once fieldwork pressures had subsided (Irwin 2006; Ortiz 2004; Reich 2015). Stebbins (1991: 248) describes the joy of finishing fieldwork and how such moments 'number among the happiest of my life' owing to 'now-predictable stages of fatigue and theoretical saturation'. In my study in Merthyr, whilst I was sad at the prospect of leaving, I did also feel some small relief. My exit would free me of some of the worries outlined above as well as the exhaustion and frustrations which sometimes come with fieldwork. There were occasions where I worked late into the night or where I had spent several hours preparing for research activities with young people, only to turn up at a closed youth centre or a school to discover they had forgotten about our visit. Moreover, the research involved liaising with lots of different organisations and its members as well as other stakeholders (some of whom did not get along). This could be challenging and draining, yet despite some difficult experiences, the dominant emotion on departing was sadness – reflecting, perhaps, the interpersonal intensity of my interactions during the fieldwork.

Here, I have dissected how fieldwork constitutes an 'affective engagement', a process which rarely leaves researchers unaffected – and, in some cases, unscathed. Reflecting upon this is to confront 'the moral complexities of fieldwork' that are occasionally 'dulled by repeatedly grinding it against the same issues', such as rapport, confidentiality, and codes of conduct (Bosk 2001: 205). In the third section, I unpack one final concern on leaving the field: writing about a stigmatised place.

Writing about a stigmatised place

Leaving the field...is a ritual of completion, the final stage in a rite of passage, where we reintegrate, with a new status, into the community from which we came. After months, perhaps years, of immersion, we extricate ourselves and retreat to neutral ground. We go home. We gain distance. We reflect on our experiences from a comfortable remove. And then we write (Luvaas 2017: 257).

Researchers can carry a heavy responsibility; they want to minimise harm, but some people may 'suffer from publication' (Whyte 1955: 342). Publishing work can expose participants to injury and open up feelings of exploitation, betrayal, and abandonment by the researcher (Stacey 1988). After publishing a book based upon her research with fishing communities, Carolyn Ellis (1995) encountered considerable anger from participants about it due to participants' lack of knowledge about plans to publish⁴, unflattering language and interpretations, and identifiable pseudonyms. Ellis (1995: 86) was unsettled and horrified by their discontent:

[I]s doing significant research still more important to me than respecting the lives of the Fishnecker? Does another publication prospect outweigh the possibility of more feelings of deceit and betrayal? Does this article make amends or merely reiterate what bothered Fishnecker in the first place? Will my revelations of personal vulnerability and apology serve as "corrective facework" or will the remainder of my (and their) lost face (Goffman 1967) embarrass and strain our relationships further? Is there any way to be a fieldworker and not be a "fink" (Goffman 1989: 125), "who by definition is operating against the interests of the observed group" (Fine 1993: 272)?

The topic of betrayal has been explored elsewhere. Snow (1980: 115) claims that participants may feel 'conned, betrayed, or used' as they possibly provide information in the spirit of friendship, not as part of a research dynamic. For Charles Bosk (2001), betrayal can occur twice: once in turning relationships into data, and twice in researchers retiring to desks to transform experience into text. Like Bosk and Snow, and drawing upon Goffman (1952), I was worried that I may be perceived as a 'con artist' who set up 'marks' and, after gaining confidence and 'taking' them (as well as data), disappeared – but without 'cooling out' the marks. I may have told them exactly what they wanted to hear, however genuine and well-intentioned this was – namely, a promise to tell 'the subjects' world from the subject's point of view' (Bosk 2001: 212).

The primary concern, with respect to worries about betrayal, was around publishing. I was anxious that my claims would possibly intensify the wider stigmatisation of Merthyr. How could I talk about the stigmatisation of Merthyr and its residents without attending to and amplifying the toxic, unfair, and abject external portrayal/s of them? This highlights the difficulties of writing about the hold of stigma without tightening its grip. This unease was undoubtedly strengthened by holding positive relationships with participants. Describing her research on policing, Diphoorn (2013) expressed her dislike of many participants and, despite offering valuable and interesting data, dreaded accompanying them during their work. Unlike Diphoorn, I was extremely fond of the people that I had encountered as part of fieldwork. Our interactions were never limited to what can be loosely described as 'research talk'; we played games, joked around, and discussed work, social media, TV programmes, food, family, community gossip, among many other things – so much so that it was easy to 'settle down and forget about being a sociologist' (Goffman 1989: 129).

Nonetheless, the analysis of data occasionally revealed information that would likely reflect unfavourably on some participants – or, more commonly, fuel an already venomous representation

⁴ A participant told Ellis (1995: 79): "I thought we was friends, you and me, just talkin'. I didn't think you would put it in no book'.

of *them* and *their place*⁵. I was also worried that revealing this post-fieldwork would not provide me with an opportunity to crosscheck these interpretations with participants. My response was to be honest about my own interpretations and to attempt to provide a fair, accurate portrayal – that is, offering an analytical account as opposed to passing judgement on settings, behaviours, or situations. This involved not denying the challenges facing young people and others in Merthyr. In his study with drug dealers, Phillipe Bourgois (2003) did not want to contribute to a inferiorising narrative of poverty, whilst also not sanitising the suffering and destruction on inner-city streets; to do so Bourgois argues, would make him complicit with oppression by further exerting power over subjects. In a similar way, I did not want to sanitise accounts, yet I made a concerted effort to ensure that subsequent accounts of their worlds are not read as a hostile depiction of them and their town. In reality, very few participants requested to see follow-up work (e.g. publications) from the project and, when we did talk post-fieldwork, as I did with several youth workers, we frequently discussed others matters instead (i.e. about our personal lives).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have sketched out my experiences of, and reflections on, leaving a post-industrial town once fieldwork had concluded. I discussed my disengagement from the field with respect to three matters. First, I disturbed the narrative of leaving as an intentional decision. I identified how my (abrupt) exit prompted questions about researcher responsibilities and commitments, such as how/if to keep in touch with participants. Second, I highlighted the affective nature of leaving the field and my conflicting emotions of sadness, worry, debt, relief, and guilt. Third, I discussed my anxieties about publications and how my claims would be received by stigmatised residents. The construction of the researcher self occurs before, during, and after fieldwork endeavours – including in our writing – showing how conducting such research is a pragmatic, intellectual, and emotional achievement (Coffey 1999). Reflecting upon fieldwork is a process continuing long after leaving the field. It raises questions and concerns about roles, responsibilities, and relationships. Unpacking this has analytical potential. It allows us to further understand the world/s that we study, bolsters a commitment to reflexivity, and offers an opportunity to reflect back on all aspects of the research process (Delamont 2016). This chapter is neither exhaustive nor final with respect to thinking through the process of leaving the field. Its aim is more modest: to stimulate a greater level of reflection and attention to disengagement. My hope is that it is not read as narcissistic and unnecessary navel-gazing, but rather as contributing to a growing literature acknowledging leaving the field as worthy of further attention. Disengagement processes are not uniform. The strategies that other researchers use to leave, and how they think about and account for this, will vary across contexts and will reflect the values and situations of individual researchers and/or teams (Huisman 2008; Iversen 2009). Yet, offering such tales can offer grist for the mill, leading to fresh insights around managing the challenges of leaving sites. Only by writing accounts of this process can we ‘make comparisons, improve our techniques, develop better strategies, and learn from our mistakes’ (Gallmeier 1991: 231).

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⁵ For example, many young people blame the stigmatisation of Merthyr and its residents on others (e.g. drug users). Reading this data in isolation would cast an unflattering light on them. However, as I have shown elsewhere (Thomas 2016), I show that whilst young people may internalise and further enact place-based stigma, the discourses of vilification circulating about their community were often generated, and maintained, by powerful outside agents (i.e. media rhetoric and political talk). Moreover, many of the young people were keen to counter such pejorative representations.

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