Notes from the field: emotions of place in the production and interpretation of text

HELEN CYLWIK

Focusing on the emotions generated by place, this paper describes a journey of emotional reactions to place, emotional reflection around cultural difference, followed by later reflection and reassessment. It is argued that the use of emotions as data can provide a mirror through which the taken for granteds of the researcher can be made visible. An example is given of the way that the concept of distance and the intersectionality of emotion, time and space as a confluence of culture and subject positions, can be used to operationalize emotions as data.

Introduction

In the past some research has failed to acknowledge the researcher as influential on the research process. Implicit in this is the belief that as researchers, individuals can occupy a neutral unbiased position, i.e. are devoid of culture, or can put their culture to one side and be 'objective'. While one is able to identify broadly one's own 'culture' there always remains much—the taken-for-granted—which is hidden (Barthes 1993). Indeed awareness of our cultural behaviour(s) may only become clear when confronted with alternative behaviour(s) (Ribbens 1998). Given the inherent difficulties of being able to identify our own cultural assumptions, the notion of researcher neutrality is nonsensical. Edwards and Ribbens (1998: 4) argue for 'reflexivity and openness about the choices made throughout any empirical study' emphasizing the dilemmas and ambiguities of 'simultaneously speaking in an academic voice and producing academic, public, knowledge while retaining research participants' and their own personal, private voices and knowledges' (p. 6). The challenge facing the researcher is one of how to make transparent who she is, given that much of her sense of self is taken for granted, and then to use this self knowledge to show how she 'enters and manages' the data she collects and disseminates.

The impact of emotions on qualitative research is beginning to be recognized and documented, but most information available is confined to interpersonal relations between researcher and interviewee and the

Helen Cylwik, Department of Social Policy and Administration, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, WC2A 2AE, UK; helen.cylwik@btinternet.com

relationship between researcher and topic (Kleinman and Copp 1993, Lee 1993, 1995). More recently attention has been given to the theoretical and methodological perspectives of emotion (Hochschild 1998, Duncombe and Marsden 1993). However, information on how the physical environment (bricks and mortar) enters into and affects the research process is hard to find. While prior to fieldwork novice researchers may be alerted to the emotional effects of interviewing, rarely is the physical environment *per se* mentioned unless it might pose a threat to her safety.

This paper explores the emotions generated by place rather than people and how a researcher can utilize feelings and systematically use them as data. It is suggested that place in a physical sense does not produce emotions but rather it is the way that people, as individuals and groups, culturally and socially construct place and give it meaning that produces emotions. When a place—the layout, construction materials, contents, smell, lighting, etc.—triggers off our memories and challenges our own experience and pre-conceived culturally determined ideas, of how, in this example, home should be, we have emotions both positive and negative. These emotions have an impact on research.

My fieldwork was not undertaken in a single place, but in the different places that were 'home' to the older Greek Cypriot men and women who made up my sample. All participants were living independently so for them 'home', in the sense of domestic housing space, varied from privately owned houses and flats to council owned sheltered accommodation. The paper will focus on just one aspect of the study—feelings generated during a number of visits and interviews at one of the places that was home—a high rise sheltered housing block run by the local authority, and the impact of these feelings on subsequent data analysis and text production. The paper describes a research journey, not a linear journey from 'a' to 'b' to 'c', but a reflective journey of methodological discovery and realization. It is a journey of my emotional reaction to place, my emotional reflection around cultural difference, and, after the intercedence of distance (emotional, temporal and spatial) a reflection and reassessment of my initial position.

Methods

I think it is important to begin by placing myself within the parameters of the study, as this paper deals largely with emotions evoked in me during fieldwork and through the research process. I am a second-generation Greek Cypriot woman. My background and personal experience have been instrumental in my interest in the migrant experience and in particular the white migrant experience which, in Britain, is largely overlooked in terms of social policy.

The aim of the study was to survey 10% of the older Greek Cypriot population (53 interviews out of approximately 883 people) of an outer London borough to provide data on material conditions and personal circumstances, and information on expectations, networks and support.

Interviews took between one and two hours, and questions posed were both closed and open ended. The questionnaire covered a range of topics

pertinent to everyday life and question topics often provided opportunities for participant-generated accounts. From the outset I decided that even though I was administering a questionnaire I would not follow it rigidly, the interview would be flexible. I would let participants veer off the questionnaire schedule and take over the direction of the interview whenever they wanted. So enabling me to collect quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. The interviews were largely conducted in Greek, although a few were conducted in a combination of Greek and English. The decision regarding language used was left to the participant. The intention was that all interviews would be tape recorded, translated into English, and partially transcribed. The decision to tape record was based on perceived difficulties of simultaneously translating and making notes and engaging with the research participant. Tape-recording proved to be invaluable for capturing the stories I was told. Some participants did not tell stories wanting just to get through the questionnaire as quickly as possible, others told stories but did not give consent to have the interview recorded. The majority however did tell stories of varying numbers and extent and consented to tape recording.

Text production

Emotions foregrounded

Sometime prior to my first interview at 'High Rise', I interviewed the sheltered housing officer for the area. During the interview she described 'High Rise' as being a 'community', a place where residents positively chose to live that was close to all amenities. To me this conjured a picture of a place that was distinctive, full of character, welcoming, homely and vibrant with the hum of people who knew each other. It was a place not dissimilar to that described by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1973) in *The Unexpected Community* where older people could 'dance, sing, flirt, joke and talk frankly' (p. 141).

I was taken aback by 'High Rise' on my first encounter. A tall grey, concrete building with square windows whose entrance led directly onto a covered market. The market was equally grey for it was not an open air market with stalls but rather a draughty, dirty, two storey concrete space beneath the flats and a railway bridge. Like 'High Rise', the market buildings and paving were made entirely of concrete. Being covered, it seemed to be in perpetual darkness and relied on artificial lighting. There was little air circulation so it was smelly particularly during the summer months when I was researching. Although one could buy most necessities in the market, it was not an inviting place, or somewhere where one would choose to spend time.

The exterior of 'High Rise' was not very welcoming either. The entrance door and the ground floor windows were covered by steel bars. To gain entry into the block the tenants had to tap in an entry code rather than open the door with a key, this I felt was more appropriate for a public place, e.g. hospital or offices, rather than a private place, e.g. home. For visitors

there was an entry phone system. I pressed the bell and waited. Nothing happened, but fortunately someone else, possibly a resident, was coming into the block and so I walked in with him. Not having been formally let in by my interviewee was unnerving as I felt like an intruder. Whilst there was a security system, the absence of a reception and concierge made entry into the block relatively easy. Entry on my second visit was even easier as the front door was propped open.

I felt as if I had walked into an impersonal institution that did not even try to make any effort to be welcoming. The entrance hall was bland and characterless; bare walls, partly tiled gave the visitor no indication that it was a place where people were 'at home'. There was a notice board, but again this gave no indication that the place was 'home' being covered with information about activities in the block, forthcoming events, and events that had been, in the borough. The staircase was utilitarian—about 8ft wide and made of concrete with metal railings which further reinforced my feelings that I was in a hospital or very large residential home. Not only did 'High Rise' have the physical appearance of an institution, it also had the smell of an institution. The block was not well maintained, the public area was dirty, and the lift smelled of urine and was covered in graffiti.

Once into the body of the block I felt as if I was in a huge dormitory. There was nothing to distinguish one floor from the next except for the numbers on the doors. Everywhere was identical—long dark concrete corridors with doors evenly spaced along them. So strong was the sensation that I was in a dormitory or large residential establishment and about to enter someone's room that I always knocked at the door with my hand rather than use the door bell. It simply did not feel like an apartment block.

I did not recognize the extent of my feelings until I returned to 'High Rise' for a second time. The second time I was interviewing there I felt so physically sick and short of breath that I could not enter the block. As a researcher I felt that I had to be in control, not showing or feeling any emotion. It was this instance that made me aware of the emotional impact of the building. Instead I turned back and went for a walk round the market before I could pluck up the courage to go in. I do not think that I was prepared for the 'emotional cost' that place could produce in me.

During the fieldwork my feelings of unease did not go away entirely and I hurried through the interviews as quickly as I could so that I could escape. Although there was probably no danger, I did not feel safe in the block and always felt a great relief when I left.

Making connections with cultural difference

The first person I interviewed, a Greek Cypriot man, Mr Pavlou, aged 83 and living alone, undoubtedly contributed to my impression of and feelings about the block. His flat was very squalid, the wallpaper was peeling off the walls, mould was growing in the bathroom and toilet, and to add to his misery he had had a fire in his kitchen two years ago and the walls and ceilings were still black with soot. In the 17 years Mr Pavlou had been living at 'High Rise' his flat had not been redecorated. He had only one

friend and spent most of his time alone. His only pleasures in life were cooking and having a drink.

Mr Pavlou's description of living at 'High Rise', which he gave spontaneously and out of context is very graphic:

> *Helen*: Do you use public transport?
> *Mr Pavlou*: For us the best thing that exists is the bus, because it is free, it is a great convenience. If we had to pay, that would truly be a prison. This place is a free prison not a home, instead of the police having the keys they have given them to us, and you can go out and return whenever you want. These are prisons, nothing else, they say they are homes, but what can you do? You have a hutch that you burrow into like rabbits. Can't do anything about it, sometimes I sit down and cry. This is no life.

There seems to be a conflict between the symbolic meaning that the word 'home' encapsulates for this older Greek Cypriot and the reality of his flat in 'High Rise'.

Some time later I revisited 'High Rise' as part of a group of British and German based researchers. On that occasion we were escorted whilst in the block by an elderly English woman who took charge of us when she found us wandering round the blackened wire and concrete cages that were the communal clothes drying area. She told us about the history of the block and the district and showed us around her flat. She spoke positively about the block emphasising its central location, close to shops and transport, and facilities. Her flat, unlike those of the Greek Cypriots I had interviewed, was sparsely furnished and functional in character. Not for her the knick knacks gathered over a lifetime dotted around the place. The only personal item 'on show' was a photograph of a niece. She spoke enthusiastically about her view from the 20 something floor. She told us that her husband, who was now dead, had been in the army and they had spent most of their lives in married quarters. At the time, her 'institutional' style of home furnishing further reinforced my feelings about the block. Looking back I have to ask whether her feelings about living in 'High Rise' related to her experience of 'institutional' living or whether they were a manifestation of cultural differences in the meaning of 'home' between the indigenous population and Greek Cypriots.

Journeying

What effects did my emotions have on the research process in terms of how I used the data? My first interview at 'High Rise' was emotionally charged, not only was there emotion on my part, but Mr Pavlou was also visibly very emotional; the interview was punctuated by swearing and sobbing as he told his story. During the interview I did not consciously identify with Mr Pavlou on any level—being of Greek Cypriot origin myself I could and did identify with other participants on the migrant experience. Identification with this person only occurred later with the production of text from speech (the process of transcription).

On listening, translating and transcribing, a process devoid of face-to-face interaction, I became aware that I identified with Mr Pavlou's

description of 'High Rise' and that it reinforced my feelings. His use of the words 'prison', 'hutch', and 'burrow' as metaphors to describe 'High Rise' were evocative of the undesirable. They did not describe a real home and conjured negative connotations. A point of identification emerged, sparked by Mr Pavlou's words in the absence of his physical presence created through emotions that were primarily about the place of the interview.

Young and Lee (1996: 101) say that 'first person accounts often contain statements of causal attribution (I felt X because of Y). The difficulty is that alternative accounts or explanations for these processes are rarely offered in the first person account'. In the above account, identifying with Mr Pavlou I used his account to validate my own feelings and arrive at an interpretation which constructed the meaning of 'home' differently for Greek Cypriots and the indigenous English population—a quantum leap which needed further interrogation. I interviewed a further four older Cypriots (two women and two men) who did not express such strong feelings about living in 'High Rise', but I did not make connections with what they were saying because my emotions were operating as a barrier. My emotions had lulled me into a false sense of security. When my feelings towards 'High Rise' were clearly challenged by an English resident I put this down to cultural differences between the meaning of home between Greek Cypriots and the indigenous population particularly as the sheltered housing officer (who was also English) seemed to hold similar views. How secure was my interpretation? I needed to reflect, pose questions to myself, identify my position and re-search my data.

Graham (1984) suggests that in 'research-structured interviews, the respondent becomes a repository of data, while interpretation and analysis remains the prerogative of the investigator. In stories, data and interpretation are fused, the story-line providing the interpretive framework through which the data are constructed' (pp. 119–120). Having employed a methodology which is within the former paradigm I needed to question whether in the process of transcription I had not merely 'put meanings into my interviewee's words' by transferring my feelings to the data and giving his words a different significance and meaning. The possibility exists that Mr Pavlou was not only using prison as a metaphor for home, but also in turn using 'home' as a metaphor for old age. Indeed, I re-searched my data and found that another interviewee, also a man, had used prison as a metaphor for old age. Is it possible that I had transposed the ideas of home and old age and that I missed the meanings that these older men attributed to the words. Any interpretation must remain insecure without much more targeted interviewing.

Temple (1997) argues that 'who the researcher ''is'' is important in the sense that there is no way in which it is possible to separate them from their text, they are part of the context of data production' (p. 608). Denzin (1997) quoting Springer similarly states that 'interpretations are produced in cultural, historical, and personal contexts and are always shaped by the interpreter's values' (p. 35). Denzin goes on to say that 'Discourse is always productive . . . the utterance encompasses the visible (what is seen), the auditory (what is heard), and the sensory (what is felt). This context rests on shared knowledge and taken-for-granted assumptions that are unique to the moment.' (pp. 37–38). Ideally Denzin is right, but when knowledge and

the taken-for-granted are not shared, meaning becomes insecure. Using emotions (i.e. the sensory), which often remain unacknowledged in the research process, as data can tease out the researcher's taken for granted assumptions.

Data are interpreted within the framework of the researcher's own social experiences and belief systems that often remain invisible. It is possible for researchers to fail to acknowledge their emotions whilst doing research. Emotions that are unconsciously triggered and evoked while doing research can be utilised and used by the researcher as signposts, pointers that can help her to understand and contextualize her own taken for granteds and in so doing place both herself and the people she is interviewing at the centre of her research. This is easier said than done as Birch (1998) concludes: 'I was able to say, yes, this is my story of others, and this is how my story of others is produced' (p. 182), rather than 'these are our stories' which was what she had set out to do. Even when we set out with the notion of retaining interviewees' subjectivities, the transformation of data to text inevitably places one person, the researcher, in the authorial/ editorial position.

The concept of distance (emotional, temporal and spatial) and intersectionality of emotion, time and space as a confluence of culture and subject positions, can be used to operationalize emotions as data. Distance, in terms of emotion, time and space, facilitates an awareness of feelings, their meanings and how they enter the research process. Distance through and between the various axes is fluid with the circularity of movement foregrounding the researcher's taken for granted beliefs and assumptions producing different subject positions. In the example here, it is the interplay of movement between researcher, place and interviewees that is important and the effects of this interplay on text production. Initially, I was so 'close' to 'High Rise' both emotionally and physically that feelings generated within the interview between myself and the interviewee were displaced, particularly as my, as yet unacknowledged, feelings towards 'High Rise' were reinforced by the interior of Mr Pavlou's flat. It was not until my second visit to 'High Rise' that I became aware of the intensity of my feelings. And it was not until I was translating and transcribing the interview (the interjection of yet a different intersection of emotional spatial, temporal distance) that I 'connected' with Mr Pavlou and arrived at a position where identification with him was possible. This stage was also marked by a position of security regarding cultural differences in the meaning of home. With increasing distance I was able to reflect, re-interrogate the data and reassess my position. With this distancing of emotion I was able to use emotions as data and begin to deconstruct my own subject positions and question the subjectivity I had imposed on the study participants.

Rather than being ignored or marginalized and added on as an afterthought, emotions (past and present) should occupy a central position in the research process, or at least as central as possible. How exactly this can be achieved is another matter. The use of emotions as data can provide a mirror through which the taken-for-granteds of the researcher are made visible. Thus emotions that are produced contextually and relationally can

be used as a tool to reveal some of the researcher's own beliefs and assumptions. The emergent emotions data, or insights, can be utilised to provide pointers to contextual tensions and difference teasing out participant (interviewer and interviewee) subjectivities and enriching the process of text production. By utilizing emotion as data the opportunity arises for researcher and interviewees to be acknowledged as subjects in the process of interrogation and textualization.

In conclusion, by treating my emotions as data and operationalizing them through a concept of distance, I became aware of how emotion had unconsciously entered the process of text production firstly to give me a false sense of security in my attribution of meaning and secondly to challenge that attribution. I had fallen into a 'culture trap', that is, I noted what I believed to be differences in the meaning of 'home' and assigned these to cultural differences between Greek Cypriots and the indigenous population. Once I was able to back away from the security I had imposed I was able to identify insecurity of meaning. This is a necessary position for research that aims to give subjectivity to all its participants.

Acknowledgements

References

Barthes, R. (1993) Myth today. In S. Sontag (ed.) *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage).

Birch, M. (1998) Re/constructing research narratives: self and sociological identity in alternative settings. In J. Ribbens and R. Edwards (eds) *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (London: Sage).

Denzin, N. K. (1997) *Interpretive Ethnography* (California: Sage).

Duncombe, J. and Marsden, D. (1993) Love and intimacy: the gender division of emotion and 'emotion work'. *Sociology*, **27,** 221–241.

Edwards, R. and Ribbens, J. (1998) Living on the edges. In J. Ribbens and R. Edwards (eds) *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (London: Sage).

Graham, H. (1984) Surveying through stories. In C. Bell and H. Roberts (eds) *Social Researching Politics, Problems, Practice* (London: Roultledge & Kegan Paul).

Hochschild, A. R. (1973) *The Unexpected Community* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall).

Hochschild, A. R. (1998) The sociology of emotion as a way of seeing. In G. Bendelow and S. Williams (eds) *Emotions in Social Life* (London: Routledge).

Kleinman, S. and Copp, M. A. (1993) *Emotions and Fieldwork* (London: Sage).

Lee, R. M. (1993) *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London: Sage).

Lee, R. M. (1995) *Dangerous Fieldwork* (London: Sage).

Ribbens, J. (1998) Hearing my feeling voice? An autobiographical discussion of motherhood. In J. Ribbens and R. Edwards (eds) *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research Public Knowledge and Private Lives* (London: Sage).

Temple, B. (1997) Watch your tongue: issues in translation and cross-cultural research. *Sociology*, **31,** 607–618.

Young E. H. and Lee R. M. (1996) Fieldworker feelings as data: 'emotion work' and 'feeling rules' in first person accounts of sociological fieldwork. In V. James and J. Gabe (eds) *Health and the Sociology of Emotions* (London: Blackwell).