

Ethical Challenges in Participant Observation: A Reflection on Ethnographic Fieldwork

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In this essay I reflect on the ethical challenges of ethnographic fieldwork I personally experienced in a female gambling study. By assuming a covert research role, I was able to observe natural occurrences of female gambling activities but unable to make peace with disturbing feelings of my research concealment. By making my study overt, I was able to fulfill ethical obligations as a researcher but unable to get female gamblers to speak their minds. I responded to such ethical dilemmas by adjusting the level of involvement, participating in female gambling culture as an insider and observing it as an outsider. This fieldwork suggests that the ethics of participant observation should be addressed in relation to the sensitivity of the research topic, the vulnerability of the researched individuals, and the plasticity of field membership roles. Key Words: Participant Observation, Female Gambling Culture, Sensitive Research, Research Ethics, and Field Membership Roles

Introduction

After completing my doctoral study in education, I received a one-year postdoctoral fellowship from the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Center to investigate female gambling culture at the department of sociology. In order to understand how women come to gamble and develop gambling problems, I employed two integrated ethnographic data collection methods, participant observation, and in-depth interviewing. While participant observation aimed to uncover the world of female gamblers with first-hand exploration of naturalistic gambling settings, in-depth interviewing intended to reveal the meanings of female gambling by attending to women's personal perspectives and interpretations. This labour-intensive ethnographic work was paid off with rich and informative narrative data. However, due to the disturbing emotions of ethical dilemmas I experienced in the field as an embedded participant researcher, in preparing the final report, I did not include some of my field encounters.

Although the ethical pitfalls inherent in participant observation are a well-recognized concern in ethnographic research, confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988), especially unexpected mistakes occurring in the field, are less addressed in the literature. A few years have passed, but I still feel that this gambling research experience should be told to re-inform ethnographers, particularly the novice researchers, about potential and often unforeseen contingencies of such fieldwork.

In this reflective essay I first outline the necessity of using ethnographic methods to investigate sensitive topics involving vulnerable individuals or groups; then I detail

ethical dilemmas and socio-emotional discomfort I encountered in the field; and finally I reflect on the lessons I learned from conducting this gambling study.

Ethnography and Sensitive Research

It has long been acknowledged that, when studying non-mainstream groups in society such as the marginalized and the stigmatized, researchers must tailor their data collection methods to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of research subjects (Goffman, 1963; Hobbs, 2002; Lee, 1993). Because observational research does not intervene in the activities of the people being studied (Alder & Alder, 2000), ethnography is, in particular, suitable to investigating sensitive issues because such work can provide rich, detailed descriptions about the unknown or the little known. As the only field method that allows researchers to observe what people do in “real life” contexts, not what they say what they do, ethnographic participant observation can supply detailed, authentic information unattainable by any other research method (Homan, 1980; Humphreys, 1970; Gans, 1999).

Since participant observation has the greatest potential to uncover contextualized, honest data, otherwise inaccessible, it ontologically and epistemologically underpins human quests for understanding multiple realities of life in context (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). Furthermore, in revealing what lies beneath, ethnographic research can empower the very people being studied, transforming the “public consciousness” and “common sense” about the disadvantaged in society (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2003).

Ethical Dilemmas in Participant Observation

In order to discover, describe, and represent the world of the researched, ethnographers such as cultural anthropologists and symbolic interactionist sociologists have traditionally committed themselves to the first-hand exploration of research settings with naturalistic field methods (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, & Lofland, 2002; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hume & Mulcock, 2004). Ethnographic participant observation could be overt or covert, with or without revealing research purpose and research identity to the researched. Although covert participant observation is more likely to provide detailed portraits of contextualized social realities, it stirred much controversy and debate on research ethics, mainly regarding the deception and the absence of informed consent from the people being studied (Bulmer, 1980, 1982; Dingwall, 1980; M. L. Wax, 1979). With increasing limitations imposed on covert research, recent writings on this topic remain rare.

Nevertheless, researchers with an advocacy and emancipatory paradigm, especially those who aim to experience and represent social lives of the disadvantaged people, continue to challenge ethical restrictions on covert research methods. For example, in a feminist analysis of doing research with homeless women, the researcher contends that the unique context of the lives of these women demands a re-definition of the conventional ethical constructs to uncover unheard stories of troubled lives, so as to prevent a perpetuation of the stereotyping, stigmatization, and marginalization they face on a day-to-day basis (Paradis, 2000). Since ethnographic research consistently yields more detailed, contextualized findings than consent interviews and other overt qualitative

data collection methods, the distinctive contribution of this embedded fieldwork should be recognized (Charmaz & Olesen, 1997), and ethnographic research should receive more support from the ethics review board (Tope, Chamberlain, Crowley, & Hodson, 2005). The position taken by these researchers has significant implications for sensitive research involving with vulnerable participants, as I explain next.

Gambling as a Sensitive Research Topic

Although many social and cultural phenomena can be considered as “sensitive” in general terms, sensitive research refers to the study of secretive, stigmatized, or deviant human activity and behaviour involving vulnerable research subjects. Gambling is a sensitive research topic because it is characterized by a mixture of popularity, glamour, secrecy, and stigma in contemporary context.

In the past decade legal gambling in Canada has been increasingly accepted as one of life’s legitimate pleasures, emerging as national pastime. According to the data released by Statistics Canada, net revenue from the government-run lotteries, video lottery terminals, and casinos rose from 2.7 billion in 1992 to 12.4 billion in 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2005). The economic impact of the gambling industry is evident in measure, as numbers do not lie. However, the social, psychological, and health costs of gambling addiction remain largely unknown because stories behind such staggering gambling revenue growth are rarely told by gamblers themselves. Although public attitudes towards recreational or social gambling in the West have been rapidly shifting in parallel with the expansion of legal gambling, excessive or problem gambling remains a sensitive topic people are afraid of talking about. This reality has posed enormous challenges to gambling studies in general and to treatment research in particular (Toneatto, 2005).

With accelerating gambling prevalence, more and more women are lured to games of chance, investing their time and money in this previously male-dominant activity. Compared to male gamblers, female gamblers are more likely to use gambling to get away from their personal and family problems (Brown & Coventry, 1998). Not surprisingly, women who struggle with adverse life circumstances are particularly vulnerable to gamble out of control (Boughton & Falenchuk, 2007). Perceiving unspoken stigma attached to female gambling and negative consequences of gambling exposure, women tend to keep their gambling experiences personal and private (Hraba & Lee, 1996; King, 1999). They often safeguard their gambling behaviour from being known to outsiders or non-gamblers, including family and friends. Needless to say, the chance for women to willingly share their private gambling experience with a researcher is very slim because a researcher is perceived as in the position of public knowledge production (Lee, 1993; McCorkel & Myers, 2003). Such psychological tendency not only subjects female gamblers to negative consequences of gambling alone, in silence, but also prevents them from seeking help and participating in research.

Although female gambling is becoming increasingly popular, women’s ways of gambling remain under-researched and poorly understood due to the sensitivity of the topic, the vulnerability of female gamblers, and the lack of alternative paradigms and methodologies in gender specific gambling research (Hing & Breen, 2001; Lesieur, 1989; Mark & Lesieur, 1992). Because it is difficult to recruit female participants who are

willing to provide honest and accurate information commonly shared backstage among gamblers, a covert data collection method is needed to help gain research access to female gambling culture.

Participant Observation as Embedded Gambling Research

According to Alder and Alder (1987), when studying a subculture particularly a deviant group, “researchers must assume social roles that fit into the worlds they are studying.” (p. 8). Generally speaking, the more secretive and amorphous are the activities of the researched, the more necessary it is for the researcher to participate in their activities to learn about their culture. In order to have an insider’s experience and point of view, I set out to explore everyday realities of female gambling by immersing myself into the culture I studied. Entering into the field as a participant researcher, I intended to take the perspectives of female gamblers, to see the world through their eyes, to feel what they feel, and to experience what they experience.

Because this study was designed to reveal backstage realities of female gambling largely unknown to public, using covert participant observation was well justified in this gambling research. First, since the data collection took place in constant changing public social settings with a flow of gamblers from all walks of life, the disclosure of my research identity was neither necessary nor practical because doing so would interrupt gamblers’ routine activities. Second, given the sensitivity of female gambling, revealing my research identity could potentially cause gamblers’ unnatural reactions such as fleeing from the scene or acting as “good participants”. Third, since I intended to record physical gambling settings and activities without identifying the people I observed and interacted with, this ethnographic work would pose minimal risks on the anonymous informants I came across in the field.

Participating in female gambling culture as an embedded researcher, I frequently reminded myself to walk in the shoes of female gamblers. However, as a non-gambler, who gambled with the budgeted research money, I found myself incapable of becoming a complete participant, or “going native” to join them as a real gambler. In the absence of shared values and objectives, I could not live through the same emotional ups and downs experienced by real gamblers, such as the excitement of winning and the fear of losing. However, by taking part in their activities and bearing witness to their joys and sorrows, I learned that the lives of female gamblers were complex realities, different from the statistical results generated by quantitative studies. From my perspective, women’s gambling choice, participation, and addiction cannot be fully understood without taking account of the socioeconomic and personal circumstances in which their lives evolved.

The naturalistic observational technique I employed in this study allowed me to observe and document both physical settings and social activities of female gamblers as the flow of gambling scenes naturally unfolded. However, the field practice of ethnography was much more complex and ethically challenging than what I had originally anticipated. I learned first-hand that socially sensitive research could pose special ethical problems for the researcher (Sieber & Stanley, 1988). On a number of occasions my disguised social interactions with female gamblers caused disturbing feelings of awkwardness and uneasiness in both parties. I became concerned about harmful psychological consequences of my covered research work, wondering to what

extent I could adjust my research role to the complexity and the dynamics of field social relationships. This concern eventually resulted in the shifting of membership roles I assumed as a participant researcher, as I detail next.

Fieldwork Encounters in Gambling Settings

Undertaking this gambling study as a participant researcher the first time, I was more curious than apprehensive at the beginning of the fieldwork. Although I was aware of the embarrassing and frustrating situations reported by other ethnographers, without first-hand field experience I was psychologically unprepared for ethical challenges embedded in ethnography until encountering a parade of problems in the field.

After obtaining ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Board at the university with which I was affiliated, I started my solo research endeavour. I made about 40 field trips to the three largest casinos in southeast Ontario, regularly taking shuttle buses with casino-goers. The round-trip bus ride to each casino took about two to three hours. For each trip I was out around 10 am and back home around 7 pm. My routine fieldwork as a participant researcher included, but was not limited to, observing female gambling activities, playing slot machines with the budget research money (\$20 per trip), and interacting with female gamblers whenever possible. To avoid sceptical reactions from gamblers, I did not take field notes on the spot. Usually I recorded what I had seen and heard when I was alone in casino cafeterias or outdoor gardens. Some notes were condensed and some expanded (Spradley, 1980), depending on the research relevance of the situations and occurrences I observed. I also kept regular journal entries to reflect on positive and negative experiences I had encountered during each trip.

Since anyone over the age of 18 is legally eligible to play in Ontario casinos, I obtained a “player’s card” from each casino I visited, identifying myself as a beginning player who was curious about recreational gambling entertainment. Once I entered the field of public space, riding buses and playing in casinos with other gamblers, I had no control over mobile social settings such as what would happen and whom I would meet. Maybe because of my petite Asian appearance, or my ponytail and casual student outfit, or I simply looked out of place, at the very beginning I was stopped many times by casino gatekeepers to check my identity card. Some female gamblers I met in the field also mistook me as a young university student. A few of them even initiated to lecture me about the addictive nature of casino gambling. Three dramatic field encounters led me to adjust my field membership roles from covert to overt and finally to peripheral participation.

First Field Scenario: Encounter with Three Chinese Female Gamblers

In my first visit to one of the casinos, I became acquainted with three Chinese women, two seniors and one middle-aged. This acquaintance came naturally because we are all recent immigrants from Mainland China who speak Mandarin. While walking back to the slot machines from an outdoor chit-chat, one of the seniors drew me aside, asking me why I came to gamble and what did I do for a living. I told her I worked at a university and it was my first trip to this casino. She was very worried about me and initiated a serious discussion about the consequence of my gambling participation. She

warned me that casino gambling was dangerously addictive, and that it would ruin my life if I came here to gamble regularly. At that moment I felt really guilty and uneasy about my research deception, so I told her not to worry about me because I was there for the purpose of research. She was quite taken back by this unexpected disclosure, but in the meantime she looked appeased because obviously I would not become a gambling victim. After discovering my research role, these Chinese women became curious in my study. I briefly explained my project to them and also gave them some of the research flyers I prepared in the Chinese language. The flyers clearly outlined the research purpose, the interview procedure, the eligibility and confidentiality of participation, and also the monetary compensation of each interview session. Initially, two of them were interested in attending interviews, but later cancelled their appointments due to firm family objection. They explained that their family members objected to their gambling participation in the first place, let alone to talk about it to a researcher from the same cultural background.

Second Field Scenario: Encounter with a White Female Gambler

On my return bus trip from the casino, I sat down by the window looking out the greenery landscape. After a while, a middle-aged White woman left her seat, politely asking if she could sit beside me. We started to chat together. Later I figured out that she came to talk to me for the sole purpose of educating me about the consequence of casino gambling. After relaying her gambling stories, especially how she was lured to slot machines by “beginner’s luck” and gradually developed a powerful urge to casino gambling, she asked me why I came to gamble. I simply responded that it was my first casino trip. She became very concerned and warned me right then and there.

It is ok for people like me, but you are too young. You should not come to play those games. You can learn lots of things elsewhere but you will learn nothing here. Trying once is more than enough. Forget it! Don’t come again!

Once again I felt pressured to reveal my research role to ease her worries, so I did. Upon my disclosure, she was somehow embarrassed for mistaking me as a university student, a potential gambling victim she felt obligated to rescue. I expressed my appreciation for her good intentions and then briefly talked about my gambling study, hoping that she would be willing to participate in consent interviewing. At that moment I wanted to recruit her as a participant because from our conversation I saw a potentially rich informant who would have a lot to tell from her two decades of gambling experience. Furthermore, she was very open, articulate, and persuasive; a strong woman who was not afraid of speaking her mind. I gave her a flyer of my research advertisement when she was about to get off the bus. However, I never heard from her.

Third Field Scenario: Encounter with a South Asian Female Gambler

Another day I was chatting with a South Asian woman who sat beside me on the return bus trip. She asked me if I had any luck, and I told her I lost \$20 (the research

money) in the casino. She commented that it was nothing compared to her loss of the day, “you know how much I lost today? \$300! I have lost about \$50,000 in three years.” I asked if she ever tried to quit, she responded, “I want to stop but I keep coming back ...” By this time her cell phone was ringing, the driver asked her why she did not answer the phone, her voice dropped lower, “I know who is calling, it is my husband.... I have three sons... they are very sad that their mom is a gambler...” I was very empathetic and felt compelled to help her. I suggested that she could call gambling helpline or go to get free professional counselling on gambling addiction. I also told her about my gambling study, suggesting that the confidential research interviewing could also serve as a potential outlet for the release of repressed psychological and emotional distress. Despite my good intentions, she stopped talking about her gambling stories right after I disclosed my role as a researcher. She did take a research flyer, but never contacted me.

Since these women did not attend my interviews, I did not know who they were, nor did I know what circumstances and motivational forces had driven them to gamble, and gamble compulsively. However, to this day I still vividly remember these field trip encounters. On the one hand, I treasured this fieldwork experience and believed that these casual conversations that occurred in the field truly reflected the hearts and minds of these female gamblers; on the other hand, I struggled with ethical dilemmas of my research deception because these women volunteered their information before knowing who I was, but with my research role shifting from concealment to disclosure, their attitudes towards me accordingly changed from sharing to silence.

Responding to Ethical Challenges and Adjusting Field Membership Roles

Performing as an undercover researcher, I was emotionally disturbed by these unexpected awkward situations that occurred in the field. I felt that my disguised interaction with these female gamblers had unintentionally infringed their right to privacy, and also subjected myself to psychological pressure and inner conflicts. I also felt that in order to carry out an ethical research, I should not use the end to justify the means, even though the potential research benefits would outweigh psychological risks. To avoid ethical dilemmas inherent in research concealment, in the subsequent field trip I was determined to make my research overt. It was out of question for me to unveil my research inside casinos, but nevertheless I decided to try it on the bus. After obtaining permission from the driver, I announced that I was doing research on women’s gambling experiences and I would appreciate their information and participation. Female gamblers generally took my flyers, but they rarely offered to participate in research. A woman expressed her concerns, “I don’t want to talk to you about gambling because you work for the government.” Another woman explained further,

You know why I don’t want to come to your study? I would feel guilty if I come to your interviews because I know I would lie to you. I don’t want to talk because I don’t want my private life going public. Believe me - the gamblers who come to you will lie to you. You won’t get the truth.

From this woman’s honest remarks on the discrepancy between public accounts and private lives of female gamblers, I started to understand why it was difficult for

women to tell their gambling stories. Regardless of my efforts, the overt approach I attempted was unsuccessful because my research disclosure immediately changed social relationships and silenced voices. Once female gamblers were made known of my research role, they started to view me differently, treating me as a suspicious outsider who should not be entrusted because I did not share their experiences. This perception and suspicion immediately created a more awkward social space between me and them, the researcher and the researched.

As the overt approach did not work in the field, I decided to make another change, adjusting the level of my involvement and participation from active to moderate (Spradley, 1980). I still took part in women's routine gambling activities, but intentionally limited personal contacts in the field. Instead of actively engaging personal interactions or substantial conversations with female gamblers, I mainly recorded the gambling activities I observed and the spontaneous conversations I overheard during my field trips. In other words, by primarily assuming a covert, peripheral membership role (Alder & Alder, 1987), I became a detached insider.

The peripheral membership I assumed in the field turned out to be a good fit with the uniqueness of female gambling culture. This adjustment not only helped me avoid similar ethical dilemmas I experienced at the beginning of this fieldwork, but also gave me a much-needed psychological space to participate in women's gambling activity as an insider and observe it as an outsider. For the rest of my fieldwork, I did not encounter further awkward situations or experience emotional uneasiness and discomfort.

Participant Observation and Consent Interviewing as Complementary Research Methods

Although none of the female gamblers I met in the field offered to come to my interviews, I received about two dozen responses to my research advertisement placed in public places such as community centers and grocery stores. After screening all responses by telephone, I successfully conducted two sessions of consent interviews with seven women from five different cultural backgrounds (Eastern Indian, English, French, Native Canadian, and Pakistani), who regularly played various games of chance, such as slots, bingo, and poker.

When the woman I met on the bus informed me that the female gamblers who came to my interviews would not tell the truth, I worried if the data I painstakingly collected would be valid at all. In order to establish trust and rapport with the vulnerable participants, and also elicit reliable and authentic information from them, I conducted all interviews in a respectful, friendly, and non-judgmental manner. Before interviewing I repeatedly explained the purpose of the study to make sure these female gamblers understood the benefits and risks of their participation, particularly their right to privacy and confidentiality. As the interviews progressed from simply telling gambling stories to reflectively interpreting the meanings of gambling, these women became more and more comfortable sharing their private gambling experiences. Their openness yielded detailed and in-depth information on how they came to gamble and what gambling meant to them. The findings showed that these women progressed from gambling entertainment to gambling addiction by emotionally relying on games of chance as their hope, escape, therapy, reward, and social life (Li, 2007).

Regardless of the ethical dilemmas I encountered in the field, two integrated ethnographic data collection methods made a complementary contribution to this study because they helped me sketch a fuller picture of female gambling culture. Looking back over this fieldwork experience, I feel that in sensitive research, ethnographic participant observation should not be simply measured and judged by the same ethical guidelines for consent interviews or other overt data collection methods. Rather, a great emphasis should be placed on how to handle unavoidable ethical challenges and unexpected situations in the field.

Reflections on Ethical Challenges of Participant Observation

From this ethnographic gambling study I have learned that in sensitive research the revelation of hidden realities and the pitfall of ethical dilemmas are co-existed realities that are not easy to reconcile. As I have illustrated, in a constant-shifting gambling environment, I came across different female gamblers in every field trip, thus it would be awkward for me to identify my research before starting a conversation with female gamblers. However, without informing them about my study, the conversations and interactions I engaged in the field for the purpose of research unintentionally violated the privacy right of the informants, and also subjected myself to psychological conflicts.

From this ethnographic work I have also learned that the characteristics of the researcher can shape field social interactions in unexpected ways, which often gives rise to problems of relational ethics.

Researcher's Personal Characteristics in Sensitive Research

It has been noted that the evolving researcher-participant relationship in field research is often conditioned by the researcher's personal characteristics such as gender, race, and age (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2003; R. H. Wax, 1979).

Firstly, gender mattered in this study. As a female researcher participating in women's gambling activities, I had easy access to female gamblers as I was not perceived as threatening to them. This gender advantage in field research has lent support to the position that in order to understand women's life situations and experiences, more studies should be conducted by women and for women (Ettorre, 1989).

Secondly, culture mattered in this study. Having the same racial and cultural background as the researched is usually advantageous in fieldwork. However, in this gambling study my cultural background did not help me gain access to Chinese female gamblers' private experiences. During my field trips I witnessed a significant Asian presence in all three casinos I visited. Needless to say, behind such a popular scene there would be countless stories to be told by Asian female gamblers. Although I made an effort to recruit Chinese female participants, none of them were willing to attend or consent to interviews. Two interrelated cultural accounts may provide explanations to this paradox. First, in Chinese culture gambling is historically viewed as one of five vices and institutionally opposed by the government. Second, as a result of the Confucian prescription on morality, Chinese people tend to hold strong feelings of shame and honour about cultural undesirable or desirable behaviours. Perhaps because exposing a culturally undesirable behaviour to a researcher from the same culture would activate

strong negative emotions, Chinese female gamblers chose to restrain themselves from participating in my study.

Thirdly, age mattered in this study. Some teacher-student relationships accidentally occurred in the field, which were obviously triggered by my age; the appearance of age being perceived by the public. The Chinese senior took the initiative to talk to me because it was culturally considered a noble social practice for an elder to educate the young about the negative consequences of their choices. Similarly, the middle-aged White woman felt compelled to save me from the devastating consequences of gambling addiction because she perceived me as a young university student who ventured out in a wrong place.

Although these women did not know who I was, they made an effort to prevent me from becoming a victim of gambling addiction. Having been trapped in a vicious gambling cycle and suffered negative consequences of addiction, they did not want to see the young falling into the same pitfalls. Contemplating these dramatic field encounters, I have realized what motivated these women to open their hearts and minds to a complete stranger was deeply rooted humanity that unites all of us. By taking actions, these women sent out two important messages: (a) prevention is the best treatment for gambling addiction and (b) the general public, especially the young, should be educated that their gambling choices are not free from negative consequences. I believe the revelation of these stories can counteract public stereotypes as well as research biases, which often simplify complex realities of female gambling world, blaming victims for their irresponsible choices.

Unforeseen Field Circumstances in Sensitive Research

As qualitative researchers we tend to connect ourselves to the researched individuals on both cognitive and emotional levels (Mitchell, 1991), therefore our lives are often embedded within our fieldwork experiences in such a way that all of our interactions in the field involve moral choices (Tedlock, 2000). Everyday social realities are fluid, unpredictable, and fragile because they are largely shaped by situated and often unforeseen circumstances produced by the people who come into contact with each other (O'Brien, 2006). As such, ethnographers who engaged in distant settings have no choice but to situationally solve many on-site relational ethical problems they encountered in the research process (Clarke, 1975; Ellis, 2007; Etherington, 2007).

Doing ethnography in sensitive research is like walking a tightrope, as such field work requires ethnographers to keep a mindful awareness of ongoing relationships and to make frequent adjustments accordingly. In embedded research, good intentions do not always result in smooth social interaction but sometimes produces awkward outcomes (O'Neill, 2002). As this gambling study has revealed, in conducting ethnographic sensitive research with vulnerable individuals, social relationships and interactions between the researcher and the researched are extremely fragile, subject to break downs. However, such disruptions can always be repaired with appropriate field strategies. Certain skills, such as the psychological preparedness for the unforeseen occurrences of ethical dilemmas and the flexibility of adjusting to different field circumstances, are crucial in successful fieldwork because "an understanding of a number of potential

difficulties and capacity to be flexible may sooth the way to dealing with some pitfalls that revolve around sensitive topics, regions, and methods” (Laine, 2000, p. 93).

At the beginning, I made field entry as a covert participant researcher to learn about the world of female gambling, but only discovered that the very people I intended to study wanted to protect me from the ravages of gambling addiction. When the female gamblers expressed their concerns about my gambling participation, I was pressured to unveil my research because I wanted to ease their worries. I also intended to recruit them for consent interviews because from their actions I saw the richness of gambling experiences they would be able to provide. However, due to my inexperience in handling the pressure of unpredictable field situations and my eagerness to recruit potential participants, the solution to one problem naturally caused another; my disclosure took away their worries, but simultaneously silenced their voices.

Similarly, when I shared my gambling experience with the South Asian woman, she promptly offered her personal information in exchange. This exchange also ended abruptly after I informed her about my research. Obviously her initial openness was activated by an understanding that she was sharing her stories with a like-minded peer, a misperception led by my concealment. When this woman perceived me as an insider, she felt psychologically safe to share because a fellow gambler would not judge her from the perspective of an outsider. Most likely, if she was made aware of my research in the first place, she would not have volunteered the same information.

My active gambling participation not only created the awkward situations and dramatically changed the behaviour of the female gamblers, but also subjected me as a researcher to psychological risks. I felt uneasy with my disguised research role because, by pretending to be one of them, I successfully obtained the information for the purpose of the research, but the data was obtained at the expense of the autonomy of the female gamblers. To avoid such disturbing inner struggles and conflicts, in later field trips I adjusted my membership role and reduced the level of involvement. There might be other possible solutions for this ethical dilemma, but I believe I made a good field decision given the field circumstances in which I was situated. With my ongoing adjustment, in the later stage of my fieldwork I was able to document the female gambling culture by moderately or peripherally participating in their activities as a detached insider, without experiencing further ethical problems.

Lessons Drawn from Fieldwork Reflections

In revealing private lives and telling others’ stories, field researchers often face ethical dilemmas and moral choices that cannot be easily resolved with general ethical guidelines. At the field entry, although my interactions with female gamblers ended in uncomfortable halts, those encounters helped reveal gambling stories different from public perceptions and stereotypes. Given the pros and cons of participant observation, it is difficult to draw a clear line between the ethics and the politics of ethnographic fieldwork (Murphy & Dingwall, 2002, Punch, 2000). This is because when a study aims to supply both evidence and ground to contest against social prejudice, the research process itself becomes praxis and advocacy (Lather, 2004). From this standpoint, I feel that in order to conduct an ethical study, researchers must always prepare themselves psychologically and technically for the unexpected, willing to make adaptive changes in

mobile field settings. The ethical and moral responsibilities of ethnographic research should not be simply aimed at eliminating covert research to avoid ethical dilemmas, but to take full consideration of the sensitivity of the research topic, the vulnerability of the researched population, and the plasticity of field membership roles.

First, it is important for researchers to tailor their data collection methods to the sensitivity of the research topic. Although every effort must be made to avoid research concealment, under circumstances that an overt fieldwork is unpractical, or likely to trigger emotional reactions from the researched, the covert approach should be considered because it can help reveal what lies beneath without altering the nature of reality. As this gambling study illustrated, a covert researcher should take caution about performing such a role and set limits on personal interaction in the field. If done skillfully, the potential social benefits of covert work often outweigh its ethical risks, as the data collected can help push the boundaries of our current understanding of disadvantaged individuals and groups in society. Such understanding can serve as advocacy to inform better policy and practice, ultimately bringing positive changes for people being studied.

Second, it is important for researchers to adapt their data collection methods to the vulnerability of the researched. Because the existing social order and classifications systematically marginalize and stigmatize certain groups, the individuals being assigned such labels are virtually made invisible and voiceless in our society. As this fieldwork clearly showed, female gamblers did not want to seek help or participate in research because they were afraid of exposure and judgment. Researchers undertaking sensitive ethnographic studies should always make effort to fulfill their social responsibilities in field interactions, protecting the vulnerable from further stigmatization or marginalization.

Third, it is important for embedded researchers to psychologically prepare for the plasticity of field membership roles. Given the uncertainty and complexities of field social interactions, participant researchers should not assume certain fixed positions at the field entry and then cling to them from start to finish. They must adjust their levels of involvement and participation, should the ethical issues arise in the field. In this gambling study, after experiencing the awkward situations at the beginning of my research trips, I subsequently adjusted my research participation from covert to overt and then to peripheral. These field adaptations not only prevented negative and disturbing emotions the informants would feel about deceitful interactions in which they were unconsciously involved, but also helped me avoid experiencing further uneasy emotions and inner conflicts derived from ethical dilemmas.

From this fieldwork I have also learned two practical techniques. One is that when conducting covert fieldwork, the concealment of research role should be maintained from start to finish, so as to minimize psychological risks of such work posed on both the researcher and the researched. Another technique is that in sensitive research an embedded researcher should not attempt to recruit participants in a constantly changing environment because the possibility of establishing trust and rapport with the informants in mobile social settings is rather minimal, if not impossible.

Conclusion

As an embedded researcher participating in female gambling culture, I have learned first-hand that the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork are centred on the issues of quest for knowledge and ethical dilemmas. By assuming a covert research role, I was able to observe natural occurrences in gambling settings, but unable to make peace with disturbing feelings of my research concealment. By uncovering my research identity, I was able to fulfill ethical obligations as a researcher, but unable to get the female gamblers to speak their minds. This fieldwork has illustrated that ethnography as a research methodology has the greatest strength and the greatest weakness (Hume & Mulcock, 2004). The mastery of this naturalistic data collection method comes with the lessons learned and experiences gained from the field. Given the fact that in covert participant observation the search for truth is often at odds with the conformity to conventional research ethics, field researchers must be psychologically prepared to negotiate two opposing forces that co-exist in constant tension.

In retrospect, this fieldwork not only drew me closer to the world of female gamblers, but also offered me an excellent opportunity for reflexive research practice. On the one hand, my participation in women's gambling activities helped me understand their subjective experiences; on the other hand, it allowed me to enrich the data by adding personal and emotional depth to my work (Smith & Kornblum, 1996). Although the research process of ethnography is challenging and difficult, the outcome of such work has proven its worth and benefit.

Ethnography is both a process and a product. As I reflect on the experience of participant observation, especially on how to balance the search for truth and the ethical challenges that often co-exist in parallel in ethnographic sensitive research, I come to realize that there may be no easy or universal solutions for the inherent dilemma of this unique field method. Given the active voices I heard in concealment and the immediate silence I encountered after my research disclosure, I contend that in sensitive studies research ethics must go beyond the simple avoidance of research covertness to a mindful consideration of the well-being of marginalized individuals and communities being studied because as researchers, not only should we aim to uncover and interpret the voices, but also to understand the silence.

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