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Panel 37: Anthropologists and war in the field. A problematic undertaking.

The Ethnography of Violence: Varying participatory roles, the emotional rollercoaster, and moral dilemmas[1]

Introduction

During an unexpected and brief visit back to my research location (Durban, South Africa) in March 2011, I visited one of the private security companies from my research on the Thursday afternoon. Within 10 minutes upon arrival, news came in about an armed robbery that was taking place. Out of routine and without hesitation or doubt on behalf of my informants or myself, I jumped into their security vehicle to rush off to the site in question. But as soon as we drove off, I started to sweat profusely and feel extremely anxious, uncomfortable, and agitated. Everything inside me screamed: "No, no, no! Get out of this car and run away!" If word hadn't come in that it was in fact not an armed robbery, but a theft that had taken place a few hours beforehand, I am certain that fleeing is what I would have done.

I was astonished by my reaction. Previously, rushing off to such incidents was common practice. Between 2008 and 2010, I conducted approximately 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork to analyse the niche of a specific group of private security officers, namely armed response officers, in policing the streets of Durban, South Africa. Participant observation amongst the armed response officers, which implied accompanying them in their vehicles during their 12-hour shifts, functioned as the core of my data collection. Wearing a bulletproof vest and attending call outs alongside them, I entered the world of private policing and was confronted with an

[1] All of the names and references to persons in this paper are pseudonyms.

array of fearful, morally and ethically ambiguous, and outright dangerous incidents - far more than I had expected at the outset.

I had trouble placing this new sense of aversion in 2011. Although I had occasionally disliked doing the research before, the depth of my recent repugnance was new. I seemed to have rejected the enthusiastic and eager researcher that was at the forefront during my preceding fieldwork and I could no longer postpone addressing the emotional and ethical facets of my research. How did I mentally and physically cope in the field, and more importantly, how did I at times even *enjoy* it? What role did I as a white female play in gaining access to my entire research setting and in acquiring the collected data? In a critique of ethnographers' over-reflexivity in portraying their emotions in the field, Beatty (2010: 440) states: "we can't write truthfully about the field until we can leave those feelings behind". Had I reached this state and was I now ready to address and candidly write about these emotions?

This paper is a first attempt. Not only do I feel a personal and therapeutical urge to elaborate on these emotive experiences, but I also feel that it is the responsibility of researchers. The troublesome nature of researching violence is not under-analysed in anthropological, criminological, and sociological fields (Lee 1995, Sluka 1990/1995, Nordstrom and Robben 1995, Rodgers 2001, Punch 1986, Das et al 2000, Ghassem-Fachandi 2009, Schmidt and Schröder 2011, Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2005)[2]. This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by portraying the value of researching violence through ethnographic fieldwork. Although various emotional, moral, and ethical questions arise, participant observation provides particular insights and analytical perspectives that are precious when comprehending violence and its performance.

Zooming in on the method of participant observation with armed response officers and exploring some of the experiences from the field, I argue that there was always a level of participation on my behalf. However, I do contend that there were varying degrees of participation that I distinguish in three different roles: the active participant, the moderate participant, and the passive participant. Although I recognize the blurry lines and grey zones between each role, I have created this typology in order to understand the various roles we as researchers assume in the field. Although

[2] In the last chapter, titled 'Guide to Further Reading' in Ghassem-Fachandi (2009), a review of research and literature on violence is discussed. I refer to this chapter for a more equipped summary of available literature.

these may not always be self-evident, such a categorisation provides a framework from which we can analyse our position, as a participant, in relation to other research participants. In discussing these three roles, I simultaneously wish to address the rollercoaster of emotions and the intersubjectivity between my informants and myself in conducting such "deviant ethnographies" (Winlow et al 2001: 536). Rather than creating a methodological guideline, this paper is an exploration of some of my experiences that portray the poignant and troublesome nature of my research and can hopefully succour others with their own similar impediments.

Methodology and reflexivity

This research was executed through the use of qualitative methodology, based on interviews (ranging from structured to open), life histories, focus group discussions, and data analysis. However, this paper focuses on participant observation amongst the armed response officers as this was the primary source of my empirical data, methodological obstacles, and personal mêlées.

Participant observation is understood here as "a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002: 1). This research thus employed participant observation to understand the policing style and occupational culture of armed response officers. Across 18 months spread over three years, I spent a total of 750 hours with armed response officers in their vehicles during their shifts.[3] These 750 hours were spread across four different companies in order to represent the diversity of the armed response sector: an international-owned company, a Durban-based company, and two community based companies. Although two companies did deny my request, access was granted elsewhere by the owner/managers of the companies after signing confidentiality and liability agreements.

During the shifts, I observed their work and discussed the world of armed response, but I primarily focused on 'getting to know them' through continuous open interviews and informal conversations. I carried a notebook and jotted down keywords while in the car, but I generally relied on my memory afterwards. I also carried my tape recorder and recorded conversations that I then deemed to be

[3] These 750 hours do not include 'off-duty' events, such as social gatherings.

important.[4] After each shift, I wrote up the field notes that I regard as *mosaics of data*, including jotted down keywords, elaborate field notes, and fragments of transcribed interviews. I attempted to write down everything that happened during a shift. Large parts are emotional and reflexive accounts of the research process that aim to acknowledge my role and impact as the researcher and to decipher why certain information was given to me at certain times. I did not make distinctions between personal, field, or methodological notes – they are bundled together and interwoven, resulting in "messy texts" (Denzin 1997) that voice various constituents of the research process. In the coding of my notes, I only distinguished personal accounts when they were overtly explicit and at the forefront - otherwise, they blended in throughout the notes as an interwoven ingredient of the empirical data.

In the past, social sciences generally ignored the emotional self of the researcher in their analysis for objectivity purposes. Primarily due to the 'crisis of representation' and influence of feminist theory, the importance of reflexivity is currently undisputed. It is regarded as an "unavoidable pre-condition" (Madden 2010: 23) to any ethnographic fieldwork in order to "achieve a methodological rigour" (Nilan 2002: 369). Ethnographers must understand their own position and role in the social world that they are studying and recognize that they as persons, with their own personality traits, background, and world perceptions, largely shape the whole research process. Being reflexive also involves exploring "the emotional practice of doing research" (Pickering 2001: 491). This is particularly so when researching violence, because to talk of violence *is* emotional, for informants and the researcher (Pickering 2001). Reflexivity and emotions are thus both analytical tools and data on their own (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000, DeWalt & DeWalt 2002, Lumsden 2009, Beatty 2010, Punch 1986).

Additionally, as understandings and definitions of violence are culturally constructed notions, a researcher's field notes of an incident of violence are interpretations of violence (Stanko 2001, Nordstrom and Robben 1995). The empirical examples that will follow are my own narratives of violence that include my moral compass. Using phrases such as "crying frantically" and "going at it hard" are subjective interpretations. My field notes are thus products of defining and representing violence that differ from my informants, because "Each participant, each

[4] It was practically impossible to record all 12 hours of each shift. I therefore had to make a selection on the spot.

witness to violence, brings his or her own perspective" (Nordstrom and Robben 1995: 5). Reflexivity thus also allows others to understand the foundation and framework of our interpretations.

In understanding my own position in the field, two identifiers came to the forefront: race and gender. I am a white female conducting research in a non-white, male-dominated world, an issue also explored by other female researchers (Marks 2004, Huggins and Glebbeek 2003/2009, Horn 1997, Westmarland 2001, Sharp & Kremer 2006, Gurney 1985/2003, Hunt 1984, Lumsden 2009, Lee 1997). Although gender plays a role in any research, it weighs heavier when researching police institutions due to inherent masculinities exerted through a male-dominated environment (Horn 1997, Hunt 1984, Huggins and Glebbeek 2003/2009, Marks 2004, Westmarland 2001). Although my informants repeatedly tested me, I concur with Marks (2004) and Hunt (1984) that I had more advantages as a woman, a claim that is clarified throughout this paper.

As a female, there were two contrasting images ascribed to me: a potential sexual partner and an understanding listener. When possible, I manoeuvred myself within these two extremes and adjusted the role I inhabited accordingly. Sometimes I was purposely naïve and subordinate, at other times I acted more like 'one of the guys', occasionally I was flirty and playful, and at other times I attained a nurturing role. There were thus various 'selves' (Denzin 1997, Coffey 1999) that were continuously re-shaped through various stages of "identity negotiation" (Huggins and Glebbeek 2009: 9) throughout the research process; sometimes tactically through a degree of "impression management" (Goffman 1959), at other times, reactive and unknowingly. Reflexivity is thus not only about understanding the various fragmented and connected selves in the field, but it is also about how these selves change due to the fieldwork: experiences in the field shape our own identities (Coffey 1999). For example, my research made me completely aware of being a woman and as never before, I analysed feminine traits I may or may not possess and how my identity is expressed and defined through clothing, behaviour and embodiment (Coffey 1999, Hunt 1984).

Besides being a woman, the colour of my skin also played a role, an inescapable effect of the South African context where apartheid legacies of race continue to shape social relations. The vast majority of armed response officers are non-white and my 'whiteness' unquestionably influenced my position in the research.

Similar to other researchers in the field of policing (Horn 1997, Marks 2004), or a common issues for anthropologists in general (Sluka 190/1995, Lee 1995, van Maanen 1988/2003, Nordstrom and Robben 1995), many armed response officers believed I was a spy for either company management, the police, other companies or crime intelligence. Primarily due to my skin colour, many research participants initially assumed that I worked for 'management' and were convinced that access was granted due to my whiteness. It often seemed that my 'whiteness' exuded a degree of authority, automatically pushed me into a certain social status, and thereby opened up several doors (Huggins and Glebbeek 2003/2009, Goldstein 2009).

However, in terms of understanding the impact of myself as a white female in the field, I frequently grappled (and continue to do so) with the required depth of reflexivity and the position this should take within my narrative texts. Although I did not hold back in my field notes where I habitually probe into my own identity, how do I incorporate parts of the 'self' into compressed, academic products, such as this paper? How do I ensure that my narratives are not pure "confessional tales" (van Maanen 1988) and "emotional exhibitionist" (Ellis and Flahety, 1992: 3, in Pickering 2001: 486)? Writing about the self should not be the heart of the ethnography: it is a crucial part of the research setting, but it is *one part* amongst many others. As Madden accurately states: "reflexivity is not really about 'you, the ethnographer'; it's still about 'them, the participants'. The point (…) is to create a more reliable portrait, argument or theory about 'them, the participants'" (2010: 23).

Therefore, to avoid having narcissistic and self-indulgent narratives that overshadow the collected data, I therefore deliberately focused on the relationship between my informants and myself; how my emotions were intertwined with theirs and how our perceptions shaped each other's. In recognizing the impossibility of emotional detachment, I focused on the locus of attachment and the interface and intersubjectivity of emotions, perceptions, and experiences. I concentrated on using my own experiences in the field as a tool to understand the experiences and social world of the research participants.

Three participatory roles

Participant observation is a juxtaposition on its own, as participating and observing are opposing activities. Although this problematic nature is inherent to any ethnographic fieldwork (Marks 2004, DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, Denzin 1997,

Brewer 2000), the practice of participant observation is further complicated when researching violence where an extra set of responsibilities and dilemmas are prescribed that outweigh those associated with traditional ethnography (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, Ghassem-Fachandi 2009). A complete lack of participation, described by DeWalt and DeWalt (2002: 19) as *nonparticipation,* did not exist in my research – I was always there, and thus, always participating. Additionally, full participation, complete immersion, or 'going native' was also not the case, as I always remained an outsider.

In the following section, I identify three varying roles that I inhabited along this continuum. Although it is not a clear-cut typology, I argue that using a categorisation allows us as researchers to further analyse our behaviour and actions in the field which is absent when working under the larger and problematic heading of 'participant observation'. The first is the *active participant* where I actively stepped into my research setting by moving far beyond that of the researcher and concordant to my research population. The second is the *moderate participant* where I participated less actively and differently than my informants. The third is *the passive participant,* where I participated, but where I also deliberately tried to disassociate myself from the situation and operate as an observer.

The active participant: "It's good you were here and stepped in"

In May 2010 I was on night shift with one of the community-based companies and we heard that a cousin of Michael, one of the employees, had just died of an asthma attack. Out of moral support for Michael, the owner of the company and I visited the residence. When we arrived, the whole family was present and extremely upset. Feeling like an intruder into this private matter, I remained outside in the garden. Although we were told that she was already dead, I noticed that some family members were calling the ambulance in the hope to save her. Back in the Netherlands, I had completed a basic first-aid course, including mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, so when Michael shortly afterwards asked the crowd for help to resuscitate her and nobody responded, I stepped in to assist. [5]

[5] In fact, I decided to complete this course due to my fieldwork experiences where I realized the importance of having these basic first aid skills. This is an example of how our experiences in the field shape our identities.

With an adrenaline rush and agitating nerves, I approached the victim. She was lying on the floor in the middle of the room and encircled by approximately 20 family members whom were all staring at me and begging me to save her. When I kneeled down beside her, I felt that she had no pulse and that her body was ice cold. My training told me that she was already dead, but my lack of medical qualifications and the pressure of the entire family surrounding me forced me to proceed to perform mouth-to-mouth. As soon as I placed my mouth on top of hers, it was as if I had literally tasted death; a horribly foul, bitter and rotten taste slipped from her mouth into mine. A wave of vomiting reflexes engulfed me and it was only due to the intensity of my emotions that I was able to restrain myself. Although I asked someone else to assist me (as should be done) and I was guided by an experienced person on speakerphone, I was outright petrified and nervous. I was concerned about doing something wrong or even aggravating the situation. The fight against vomiting and expressing signs of my own fears was overpowered by the mechanical act of resuscitation. When the paramedics arrived after what felt like hours, I could finally breathe, as if I, myself, had just been resuscitated.

After the situation had settled down, I resumed the night shift, but I could not shake off what had happened and continued having gag-reflexes. When I got home early in the morning after the shift, I went to sleep, but woke up a few hours later, drenched in sweat, to vomit. For weeks I had recurring nightmares of the woman's face floating out of a bathtub and coming towards me, on the verge of vomiting over me. Months afterwards, I was infected with typhoid and repeatedly had to vomit as a result of the illness. Every time I vomited, images from that incident and that recurring nightmare come back. It is as if a direct link between vomiting and that incident has been made in my mind. And whenever I think about that incident, that atrocious taste of death comes to my mouth.[6]

This incident shows how I stepped into my research setting through active participation. Although I intervened on the basis of my very limited medical skills, the research participants viewed this differently. For them, I was performing a service on behalf of the company and thus 'working' as an employee. The community's expectations of the company had now changed due to my presence and my informants

[6] Campbell (2002) also discusses an incident where she vomited after listening to a victim of rape and Punch (1986) had a very similar experience as well.

hereafter assumed that I needed to be present at every medical emergency, despite my protest.

I also often became an active participant when we encountered female victims. In almost all instances, I immediately felt that female victims became more comfortable when I entered the room. One particular incident took place during a night shift in December 2009. An elderly, white female was attacked while sleeping, was held up at gunpoint, beaten, tied up, and robbed by three black males. When we arrived at the scene, the woman was tied up, partially naked, and in a state of shock and hysteria; she was shaking and crying excessively. The armed response officer I was with tried to untie her, but this made her more hysterical. She kept looking at me, which I interpreted as an indication that she wanted *me* to assist her. So with her visual signs of consent, I untied her. When her hands were loose, she quickly grabbed mine and refused to let me go. When others, such as the police, arrived at the scene, she declined interacting with anyone else, except me. For the next few hours, I became a 'translator' between this woman and everyone else and I am certain that she sought comfort from me because I am a female.

Such encounters with female victims display how I became an active and essential person in my research setting by operating as a sort of counsellor and filling an obvious gender void. For the armed response officers, it confirmed existing perceptions that women, and not men, are nurturing and "good counsellors". From then on, many armed response officers from this company immediately asked me to step in when female victims were involved: I had thus assumed a role which was thereafter repeatedly ascribed to me. The active participant thus refers to a role whereby the distinction between 'the researcher' and 'the researched' diminishes, particularly in the eyes of 'the researched'.

The moderate participant: "You don't have to shoot, just hide!"

Should I have disassociated myself from these situations? Should I have assumed the observer-role and refused to intervene? At that time, the idea of doing nothing did not cross my mind. However, there were also incidents, often dangerous ones, where in retrospect; I should have remained on the sideline. On May 12th, 2010, I was on night shift with Lushen, the owner of a very small company, and two of his 'volunteer' friends, Gordon and Chris. Whilst having a coffee break with several police officers at the petrol station, we abruptly hear about an on-going hijacking taking place close-by.

Within seconds, all of us soar into our vehicles and race off. Lushen is driving recklessly and all three of them cock their guns and instruct me to put on my bulletproof vest, a difficult task in a speeding car with sharp curves. They are really excited, saying things like "this is going to be a good one" and "finally we get some action". It is only until I have my vest on that the danger of this situation kicks in; my hearts starts beating excessively, my mouth becomes dry, and I start to nervously scratch my face and head. I become even more terrified when I realise that we're in front of the police vehicle and thus the first to arrive at the scene. Whilst driving, Lushen and Chris chaotically give me instructions: to jump out of the vehicle on the opposite side of the suspects when we come to a standstill and to seek cover next to the car's engine. While still trying to absorb their instructions, the car suddenly stops and I hear gunshots. But I have no idea who is shooting and where they're coming from. I get out of the car, crawl to the bonnet, and curl up tightly in a foetus position right next to the engine with my arms covering my head and ears. Shots continue to fire and at one point I am sure that a bullet was not far from my head, thundering over me like a rocket.

And then unexpectedly, there's complete silence and the putrid smell of gunpowder lingering in the air. I remain still and realise that I had been holding my breath the entire time. For the rest of the night shift, I was a nervous wreck, continuously trembling, jumpy, and chain-smoking in the hope to calm my nerves. Although I had previously experienced violence in the field, this was the first time that I had been in a life-threatening situation. I realised that I was completely powerless to do anything but curl up like a baby, sit still, and be quiet.

May 13th, 2005 was an extremely discerning day. Not only did the dangers of this occupation become implicit, but my own safety was dubious. I had just placed myself in "ambient danger" (Stanko and Lee 2003: 4) and I was forced to ask myself whether I should have stayed at the petrol station when news of the hijacking came through. Although no data is worth my life, it unfortunately is not that straightforward. "Risk control" (Jamieson 2000: 61) and outweighing the value of certain data with the potential risk is often unfeasible (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 211). Although one may become more adept in detecting signals and calculating risks over time (Goldstein 2003), certain things are unavoidable or unforeseeable. Bad luck cannot be incorporated into such pre-calculations and perceptions of what constitutes

as danger changes over time (Sluka 1990/1995, Peterson 2000, Lee 1995, Feldman 1991).

However, the decision was made when I decided to conduct this research. Although violence and danger were certainly not daily endeavours and many days consisted of hanging out and chatting, by choosing to step into their vehicles during their shifts, I made a decision to risk exposure to such circumstances, thereby making it impossible to avoid danger and dissociate myself from violence and those perpetrating the violence (Marks 2004, Jamieson 2000, Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000, Rodgers 2001, Hunt 1984). As Liebling and Stanko (2001: 424) state: "Researching violence means we choose to (or become obliged to) explore the dangerousness of violent groups or settings". I therefore do not employ Lee's (1995) notion of being an "involuntary participant"; my presence was not involuntary or accidental. Although the exact details of certain situations are unforeseeable, I think that researchers need to take responsibility for their choices.

In this incident, I argue that I was not an active participant, but a moderate one. I did not directly take part in the shooting and by hiding by the car, I had acted differently than my informants. I had not assumed a specific role, as I had when comforting female victims. However, I was a participant (although a rather useless one) by merely accompanying them, particularly in the eyes of others, such as the hijackers. By being there, I became a part of that incident and my informants had acted differently, such as instructing me on how to act. I therefore refer to this role as a moderate participant; not engaged in "the praxis of violence" (Rodgers 2001: 3), but a part of its manifestation and interpretation.

In contrast to Rodgers (2001) and Venkatesh (2008), I luckily never used force or coercion in the field. As women are regarded as harmless, powerless, less threatening, and in need of protection (Lumsden 2009, Horn 1997, Westmarland 2001), I was not expected to take part. I did not have to impress them with my own war stories and use of force. Although they all took pleasure in teaching me, it did not matter that I did not know how to shoot properly or dismantle a firearm. The perception that I needed protection, as a female, was thus rather beneficial and stopped me from becoming an active participant in such cases.

Unfortunately, my informants were occasionally too protective. An extreme example occurred during a night shift at a public event when a male passed by me and whispered something vulgar in my ear. Although none of my informants knew what

the passer by had said, the look on my face said enough. Kenny immediately approached the man, started screaming at him, and punched him in the face. Out of extreme guilt and responsibility, I intervened and convinced Kenny to let it go, which he fortunately did. For days afterwards, I became increasingly worried when my informants supported Kenny's behaviour. The gender dimension of this case is palpable: Kevin felt that he had to protect me and defend my honour. It leads me to argue that my presence unleashed a specific reaction: as a female, I shaped the macho-subculture that I identify in my research by exacerbating certain masculinities and triggering a particular type of macho behaviour (Lumsden 2009: 498).

In this episode, I had been the cause of the use of physical violence on behalf of my informant, although unwillingly and unintentionally. I had just placed myself in "situational danger", danger that "arises when the researcher's presence or actions evoke aggression, hostility, or violence from those within the setting" (Lee 1995: 3-4). I questioned whether it was appropriate and ethical to continue with the research at all. The question of "Can research on violence lead to violence and what happens if it does?" (Liebling and Stanko 2001: 422) kept surfacing.

The passive participant: "You were just, like, looking at us"

Although I had witnessed the use of physical force and coercion throughout the first few weeks on 'duty', the first time I was appalled by the use of violence and experienced "existential shock" (Nordstrom and Robben 1995: 13) is deeply ingrained in my memory. It happened on a Friday morning while standing outside the company office. During a cigarette break and casual chitchat with several armed response officers, a call came in about the presence of two suspects in someone's yard. Chaos erupted - everyone threw their cigarettes onto the floor, started screaming at each other to hurry up, and hustled to their vehicle. I quickly grabbed my vest and hopped into the front seat of Sipho's car.

As we're driving insanely fast to get to the premises in question, we hear over the radio that the suspects have been apprehended. When we get to the site, I am asked to stay in the car. I see that a group of eight armed response officers are standing around the two suspects whom are lying face down on the ground with their hands cuffed. For the next few minutes, they are repeatedly hitting the suspects with their batons and kicking them. The suspects are howling with pain. More and more members from the community start coming towards the scene to watch what is going

on. The armed response officers continue going at it hard, all bending over them, thumping the suspects, and screaming at them, preaching to them and accusing them of stealing from innocent people. I feel exceptionally uncomfortable to be hiding in the car, especially when I realize that bystanders are looking at me. I feel responsible, as if I'm one of them, partaking in this violent act.

They then pick the suspects up and I finally get a full view. I can see that they're bleeding excessively on various parts of their bodies; face, stomach, arms and legs, and that their clothes are torn. They dump the suspects into the back of two pick-ups, including the one I am sitting in. The car starts to wobble from the beatings and I can hear the landings of their feet into his body. The sound of the suspect's screams and grunts are penetrating my ears. Sipho steps into the front seat. He first asks me whether I'm all right and then says: "Ach, all that violence…" and then smirks, "But I told you we were tough and know how to hit".

Suddenly everyone else gets back into their vehicles to drive approximately 100 meters further up the road. The suspects are then taken out of the car and thrown onto the ground. I am told that I can get out of the car. For the next 20 minutes, they continue to interrogate them and hit them in a playful manner. Two armed response officers cock their firearms, point it at the suspects, and then threaten to shoot them, followed by laughter by everyone. They're teasing and provoking one another. Jokes are made about certain techniques and some are using this as an opportunity to show off their fighting skills. At one point, one suspect makes eye contact with me and I instantly look away, not being able to bare the pain expressed in his eyes. And then it hits me: here I am, standing on the other side of the road, watching a group of armed men in uniform screaming, smacking, and kicking two suspects. And they are enjoying it. I am absolutely disgusted by what I see. I become incredibly nauseous and have to force myself not to vomit on the spot. I crave for them to stop. Everything inside me is screaming, yet I don't make the slightest sound.

Contrary to the shooting where my own safety overshadowed the capability to observe, in this case, I was observing what was taking place. I distinguish this case as a passive participant from the shooting, as a moderate participant, due to my behaviour and the conscious decision to *look* at what was happening. Although repulsion dominated my mind, I was intentionally watching the scene unravel and observing various details, such as the group dynamics and inherent power relations. This is in contrast to the shooting where my own safety was my only focus. Also as a

coping strategy to deal with the horror and nausea, I purposely put on the researcher-cap, by, for example, talking to nearby community members to learn their perspectives. In this case, intentionally being the researcher allowed me to deal with what I was seeing before my eyes, a strategy I used during future comparable incidents. Thus, the passive participant is similar to the moderate participant, but the difference lies in my thoughts at that specific time and the ability to think about what I was doing and act on it. Additionally, in the eyes of the research participants, I had not taken part in this case – for them, I was an observer. This is in contrast to the shooting where they had labelled me as a participant.

But had I made the right decision? Should I have stepped in and told them to stop hitting the suspects? Was my silence unethical? These questions continue to circulate my thoughts. At that specific moment, I was terrified, taken aback, and overwhelmed by what was happening in front of me. Secondly, I knew that an intervention would not have ceased the violence. Rather, they would have laughed it off and regarded it as a weakness or lack of understanding on my behalf. Additionally, I was rather new to this company and I did not want to jeopardize my position. I still needed to prove myself to them; that I could handle their daily endeavours without fainting or breaking down. And although it did make me sick to my stomach, in their eyes, I had passed a test. Being the onlooker, in their eyes, opened up doors and heightened my relationship with them. I had now seen their "ugly side" and they felt free to "let loose". But more importantly, it was not my place to intercede; I was a researcher who was given permission *by them* to accompany them and observe their occupation, knowing that physical violence was a part of the package. I was not there to judge or determine their behaviour, but to analyse and understand it, however difficult this was. At that moment, my role as a researcher was prioritized over my role as an ethical person. The difficulty in witnessing what was happening and recognizing the potentially, valuable data, rose above the desire to escape the situation. But to what lengths are we as researchers willing to go, particularly for the sake of our own well-being?

The emotionality of violence

This section aims to address several personal and analytical questions that arise due to the "emotionality of violence" (Hume 2007: 151). In anthropological research on violence, the majority of the research focuses on the victims of violence, rather than

the perpetrators (Rodgers 2001, Clendinnen 1999).[7] Although researching both 'groups' is emotionally distressing, I do argue that there is a distinction in listening to someone talk about violence they experienced and witnessing someone *being* violent. From my experiences, witnessing violence is more shocking and confrontational, it demands an instant reaction, and places the researcher in far more ethical tribulations. Taking distance and implementing a type of emotional shutdown was easier, for me, with accounts of violent incidents from the past, particularly on behalf of victims. By being a part of the past, and thus taken place without my presence, I found it easier to distance myself. However, seeing violence unfold in front of my very own eyes, I had to have an opinion and I had to act - I could not escape it or shrug it off as something impersonal as it was affecting me right there and then. Thus, participation (at every level) and being there at the moment, presents an extra set of ethical, emotional, and moral dilemmas as researchers do not have the time to reflect and prepare.[8]

Nightmares, insomnia, estrangement, depression, exhaustion, frustration, anger, guilt, and disgust – they were all part of the research experience. I very often felt unable to share my emotions with others, because 'they didn't understand' and 'they hadn't been there' (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009). There were days when I dreaded going on duty and I continuously had to convince myself to 'get over it'. To cope with the "emotionality of violence" and the physical burden on the body (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009), several researchers discuss the need to take distance from the research setting (Hume 2007, Robben 1995, Sluka 1990/1995, Lee 1995, Huggins and Glebbeek 2003/2009). Although this was my initial plan, it turned out to be far more difficult to implement. Riding on a high of collecting fascinating data, I did not slow down, but I kept pushing myself further, only stopping when the physical manifestations of excessive weight gain and hair loss became too grave to ignore. After realizing that literally leaving the research location was crucial to my own well being, I eventually ensured planning in breaks from the field. Although these breaks did assist me in distancing myself from the research setting to clear my head and re-charge my battery, it did also make it more difficult to step back in. Taking distance can help, but it can also make it more challenging to step back into that social world after residing in a safer, more comfortable, and familiar one.

[7] Although I recognize that a clear dichotomy between 'victims' and 'perpetrators' is not rigid, the scope of this paper is too small to delve into this discussion.

[8] This is obviously also the tricky and ambiguous part of it: we don't have time to think and thereby run the risk of doing things wrong and exacerbating the situation.

The emotionality of violence was a constant struggle and forced me to repeatedly address confrontational issues, including those about myself. The primary question I kept posing myself was why I had chosen to do this research in the first place. Am I a researcher who wants to "seek out danger" (Westmarland 2001: 532), who is engaged in "the business of thrill seeking" (Winlow et al 2001: 537), and thrives on the spectacular nature of violence (Liebling & Stanko 2001, Lee 1995, Nordstrom and Robben 1995, Punch 1986)? In relation to Clendinnen's (1999) notion of the 'Gorgon effect', is there something wrong with me that finds violence-related topics intriguing and worth researching (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009)?

Researching violence is often regarded as something exotic, on the edge, and as a way of "breaking new ground" (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle 2000: 10) where bravery and novelty on the behalf of the researcher are compulsory attributes (Peterson 2000: 183). Although the thrill of violence was not my motivation at the outset, doing the research was addictive and certainly kept me going while in the field. One's inspiration changes throughout the research as our experiences in the field influence our motivations along the way. Limits and boundaries that I had initially set shifted in the field. Chasing suspects and escaping injury is a huge adrenaline rush and incites feelings of being invincible. Entering the unknown and repeatedly testing our own limits is a thrilling experience and kept pushing my boundaries further. During shifts where nothing happened, we sat around in anticipation for the next prescription of action and adrenaline. It is a world that one gets easily sucked into and where everything there after is boring and mundane. Nevertheless, I do not want to partake in "sensationalist anthropological "pornography"" (Rodgers 2001: 16) by only showing this addictive thrill and at times dangerously exciting nature of this research. However, I do want to highlight this element as an intricate part of the occupational culture of my research population. Where does the balance lie?

The second question that must be addressed is whether witnessing violence, especially when placed in danger, has analytical value and serves the research objectives. After all, if it doesn't support the core aim of the research, then experiencing emotional turmoil and personal risk is irresponsible and simply stupid. This research argues that participation, as described here, certainly had added value to my research – or better yet – participation was the core of my research. However, there are slight differences with each role that are palpable in my field notes. When I was an active participant, it was impossible to operate as a researcher, particularly

when performing mouth-to-mouth, as all of my focus and strength was centred on what I was physically doing. My field notes of such incidents are filled with emotions and feelings about my own performance and contain very little data about the larger research setting. Hunt (1984) had similar experiences during her research on the police. During a specific case of witnessing death, she discusses how her field notes of that case, written afterwards, are not reliable and contain false information, such as the age of the victim. Secondly, she describes how she was consciously active during that moment in assisting her informants for defensive purposes. She states: "It protected me against a passive identification with the victim" (50).

For me, performing mouth to mouth was a way of assisting, but it also depersonalized the situation, making me view the situation through medical terms rather than emotional ones. The recurrent nightmares that came afterwards, however, were the suppressed reactions that then surfaced. While in the field, I very often had nightmares where close female friends died - can this be linked to the cases where I encountered female victims? Although I am hesitant to delve into psychoanalysis of nightmares - to ignore them is to ignore the personal experience of doing the fieldwork, and thus data, particularly regarding the relationships with our informants.

As a moderate participant, the possibilities for observing the research setting increased, but they remained limited, particularly during treacherous incidents. With the shooting, the first pages of field notes consist of my fears and anxieties, but the second part includes observations made *right* after the incident, something I would have missed out on had I arrived half an hour later. Being there at that specific time was thus valuable. Thus, in concurrence with Nilan (2002), the 'dangerous' events are not the most insightful, but rather, the "data collected after the event or in quieter moments (…) turn out to be the most evocative" (2002: 383). However, to utilize the value of 'the quieter', one must be present at the 'dangerous'.

As the passive participant, I was more capable of observing interactions due to my deliberate change in behaviour. Although this role also served as a coping strategy in dealing with the challenge in watching the performance of violence, my emotions of disgust and personal judgment do penetrate the entire narration of the incident. Nevertheless, there is much more focus on the larger research setting. For example, this incident provided tremendous insight into the power relations between the various employees of this company. Thus, each role had different analytical spaces, with the

passive participant as the most 'productive' in understanding the behaviour and actions of my research participants.

However, active and moderate participation were essential in shaping the rapport with my informants. Ghassem-Fachandi calls this "interrupted reciprocity" (2009: 6), which refers to a specific type of rapport that is established between the researcher and the researched through an encounter with violence. By participating, I consolidated existing rapport and eliminated any possible concerns or hesitations on behalf of my informants. By giving mouth-to-mouth, by standing by female victims, and by accompanying them to the shooting, I had displayed my willingness to help them and engage in their world. Although I remained an outsider, I was closer to 'being one of them'. But more importantly, through my own experiences, I gained deeper insight into theirs. I realised that emotions such as fear, disgust, responsibility, and group pressure are a part of their daily endeavours. But more importantly, due to my own thought process during such episodes, I could better understand theirs. For example, similar to myself, my informants continuously have to decide the role they are going to assume – an active, moderate, or passive one.

To deepen this understanding, I purposely discussed my own feelings about what I had experienced. By disclosing my own feelings, I created a common ground and space for discussion with my informants. They initially presented themselves as tough men; they weren't "sissies" or "faggots" and they could handle the dangers of the job. When I first discussed some of my emotions, they were cold and distant, treating the situations as mundane. They did not take me seriously, which made me irritated and cross. However, eventually, almost all of them conveyed the opposite, sharing stories about traumatic incidents, nightmares, and domestic issues stemming from 'taking the work home'. As a woman, I was not judged for delving into the grief and distress I encountered, because these are regarded as normal feminine emotions (Letherby 2000). Realising so, I took advantage of this perception of women and delved into my own emotions with my informants to encourage them to share theirs. For example, I told some informants about vomiting after resuscitating Michael's cousin. Two informants, weeks afterwards, told me how they had similar experiences when they saw a dead body for the first time. Additionally, laughter and making jokes about these issues was an important technique that many informants felt more comfortable with (Moran et al 2003, Pogrebin and Poole 2003). Thus, the passing of time, the perception that "as a woman, you understand", and disclosing my own

feelings based on fragments of participation, made the emotional side of their occupation (and their personal lives) accessible empirical data.

However, in concurrence with Beatty (2010), emotions are never fully shared between the researcher and the research participants. Although there may be similarities and points of interaction, there was never an absolute shared, common experience. In assuming there would be, I would be "robbing emotions of the personal significance that is – as most authors would agree - their essence" (Beatty 2010: 440). The feelings of a researcher provide insight and a certain degree of commonality, but our experiences are founded upon individual histories and discourses that will always set us apart.

Morality and judgment

Besides emotional distress, research on violence inherently posits a researcher into degrees of judgmentalism (Liebling and Stanko 2001, Rodgers 2001). Any act of violence is "ingrained with moral tension" (Hume 2007: 151) and contains a "deep moral bias" on behalf of the researcher (Rodgers 2001: 3). In my viewpoint, the use of violence was very often morally wrong, a stance that is palpable in my field notes. Although my primary aim was to understand it, my moral standpoints continuously pierced this process. The struggle to remain open-minded and non-judgmental was particularly demanding in my relationships with my informants, particularly with informants I didn't like.

Many researchers do not admit or discuss that disliking informants is a part of the process (Pickering 2001, Punch 1989)[9]. I truly disliked many informants and dreaded accompanying them during their shifts. To make matters more difficult, some were also the most valuable and interesting. An example is Peter: he was one of the most racist and aggressive informants. Yes, he answered all my questions above and beyond, always notified me on any updates, and opened up to me completely. Although I was disgusted by his behaviour and viewpoints, I also truly enjoyed and valued his company. At times their perceptions were far away from my own, and at others, they closely resembled mine. The truth is that I developed very close relationships with some of my informants and I missed them when I left the field. It made me question whether I maybe shared some of these characteristics, or whether

[9] Pickering discusses that she found it difficult to feel empathy and sensitivity for a particular group of women and therefore included them less in her research project.

exposure in the field had made me think differently about violence, in a way that I did not want to. Undergoing these opposing emotions, often within a short frame of time, and repeatedly thinking about my own standpoints and characteristics, is emotionally draining (Armstrong 1993, Punch 1989).

My dislike for several informants was also shaped by their notions of sexuality and perceptions of women. At the outset of the research, I was warned for "hustling" (Easterday et al 1982, in Lumsden 2009: 504) and I expected sexual advances to be an obstacle (Sharp and Kremer 2006, Lumsden 2009, Huggings and Glebbeek 2003/2009). Fortunately, similar to Marks (2004: 881), I did not experience sexual advances as a severe problem. Although several informants did make advances, they were not threatening and did not stand in the way of conducting the research. In fact, I was very often alone with males in their vehicles and I never felt unsafe in doing so.

Sexual jokes and vulgar remarks about a female's physical appearance or sexual acts were common practice and sometimes they were directed at me. Although they occasionally made me feel uncomfortable, they did not offend me and I generally ignored them. At times I even found them amusing, which I attribute to my personal background. I have two older brothers and many male friends, so I often find myself in a male-dominated environment where "guy talk" is common. Although males in my own social environment are less explicit and vulgar, I interpret sexual comments as a "guy thing", as something that "guys do". Therefore, my own perceptions of masculinities and what it means to be 'male' influenced my interpretation of their remarks, and in turn, affected their willingness to make these statements in my presence.

However, it was more difficult when they 'walked the walk'. One example is Kevin who fleetingly shared with me that he regularly visits prostitutes whilst on duty. This situation became alarming when he found out he was HIV-positive (after I encouraged and accompanied him to get tested) and continued to have unprotected sex with prostitutes. I was fully confronted with this during a particular night shift in 2009 when we suddenly stopped at the side of the road. He was initially rather vague about why we had stopped, but he eventually admitted that he was meeting a prostitute. A few seconds later, she arrived and the two of them disappeared behind a bush to return approximately ten minutes later. Not only did I feel uncomfortable and unsafe while sitting alone in the vehicle, I also felt disgusted when he got back into the vehicle and for the remainder of the shift. This was not solely based on the sexual

act itself, but primarily because he had potentially passed on HIV to this woman and could continue to do so with other women that were a part of his relatively promiscuous life. I wanted to scream at him for being so irresponsible and selfish. Having met his wife and children, I was torn by loyalty issues and found it impossible to withhold my personal aversion on the matter. I initially interpreted this case as an indication of rapport; that Kevin felt comfortable to do this in front of me. However, through discussions with several colleagues, I started to question other possible intentions he may have had. Was he trying to prove his promiscuity, manhood, and willingness to engage in various sexual encounters that may include me? Would this have happened if I were a male or did I as a female influence his decision to do this in my presence? Was this another example where my presence triggered a certain type of behaviour?

At the start of my fieldwork, I did not disclose my judgmental opinions about the behaviour of my informants, particularly when physically violent. Rather, I focused on asking them about their behaviour in an attempt to understand it; why they acted in such a fashion, what they believed it accomplished, and what they were feeling at the time. Nevertheless, by merely posing these questions and showing the need for clarification, my judgement and dissimilar understandings of morality surfaced. However, as time passed, I became more comfortable in voicing my beliefs and towards the end of the fieldwork, we often had heated and thought-provoking discussions. Rather than stating that what they were doing was wrong and consciously entering a "hierarchical relationship" of morality (Becker 1967: 240), I concentrated on providing alternatives and explaining that such behaviour was not common in my social environment, back in the Netherlands. In using my environment as a distant comparison, they perceived my questions as less judgmental and understood the need for me to probe into their justifications.

However, in continuously trying to understand my informants' perceptions on violence, morality, race, and gender, I sometimes became a victim of "ethnographic seduction" (Robben 1995) and "overrapport" (Miller, in van Maanen 2003: 372). As I increasingly established bonds with my informants, it became difficult to judge them and place them into morally rigid categories of 'good' and 'bad'. I often caught myself defending them and sympathizing with their views (Jipson and Litton 2000, Rodgers 2001). Although this is common for ethnographic research, researching violence makes such issues more complicated. This is not only due to the inherently

moral fibre associated with violence, but also because by experiencing dangerous incidents with informants, bonds are established more easily. Some armed response officers were my saviours, literally.

Additionally, through my various degrees of participation, I also gained insight into the complexity of their decisions and moral standpoints. As I could no longer clearly distinguish between 'good' and 'bad', I realised that they struggle with this on a daily basis, continuously reconfiguring their moral frameworks and deciding what is 'acceptable behaviour'. Although ethnographic seduction does have implications for the validity of our data (Robben 1995), it does also allow us to enter a certain level of understanding that outright aversion and incredulity would not permit (Becker 1967). The importance lies in recognizing the seducing nature of the research setting and identifying its impact on one's analysis.

Concluding remarks

Although researchers are always participants in any ethnographic fieldwork, additional ethical and moral questions are raised when researching violence. As anthropologists, we are encouraged to participate in ceremonies and rituals while in the field, but when it comes to violence, a taboo rests that (overtly) discourages us to undertake such a similar approach. This paper has discussed three different roles that I enacted in the field, both coincidentally and deliberately, within the spectrum of participant observation: the active participant, the moderate participant, and the passive participant. In discussing these three roles, I have also portrayed the troublesome and emotional nature of my research project and how I dealt with some of these issues.

This paper hopefully shows the necessity of participation, despite these emotional, ethical, and moral tribulations. If I had not participated - if I had declined to assist female victims or give medical assistance; if I had stayed at the petrol station when we heard about the hijacking; and if I had remained at the office when everyone rushed off to apprehend the suspect - my research data would be fundamentally different. In fact, certain analytical insights would be absent. Participation, in its various levels, is indispensable in understanding the social reality of the research setting. But this moves beyond understanding their experiences of stress, fear or disgust. Through participation, similarities and transgression takes place on a much larger level. For example, I argue that I placed myself in such dangerous situations

when I decided to conduct this research, although I could also not foresee everything. Similarly, when deciding to work as an armed response officer, they know they will encounter such situations, but they are also not able to predict the exact details. And they too, have boundaries that are pushed further by the adrenaline rush of it all. Just as I struggled to maintain categories of 'good' and 'bad' behaviour, they continuously struggle with this moral dilemma. Just as I question the ethics of my decisions, they too habitually question their actions. Participation is thus not only about 'I was scared, so I understand that you get scared', but it provides an analytical lens into wider and larger processes of the entire research setting.

This paper therefore argues that similar to 'safer topics', participant observation amongst perpetrators of violence is possible, and necessary if we want to comprehend the complexity of violence. However, I do realise that not everyone is capable of doing such research – many colleagues and friends have declared me insane and frequently state things such as "I could never have done what you did". So it leads me to ask myself, as others have done, whether certain people are more capable to conduct this type of research and the necessity of certain personal attributes. Do you need to be strong-minded and courageous? Perhaps. Do you need to be willing to step into the unknown and dangerous? Yes. But it is much more than that. Flexibility, versatility, common sense, and being able to 'read' the research setting are essential. Honesty and professional integrity (Sluka 1990/1995) are also indispensable: draw lines and analyse when these are trespassed. Recognize personal limitations and continuously scrutinize one's own role and perceptions, however difficult and confronting this may be. Furthermore, no matter how frightening or painful some experiences may be, a mental switch to step away and turn off the research experiences is crucial. As my own experiences in this paper show, this is certainly not easy, and it took me months to find that switch and learn how to turn it on and off. But I do believe that if I hadn't trained myself how to do so, this research would have capsized.

But eventually, no matter how sappy it sounds, I believe that it all comes down to passion and personal commitment (Punch 1989). It is passion that gets us into the field, it is engagement that forces one to keep going out into the morally ambiguous and troublesome research setting, and it is fervour that guides along the way. One has to really *want* to research violence, despite its ugly nature. And it is exactly this, this

passion and determination, which was missing from my recent visit in 2011. Re-entering that world without that drive and perseverance – I simply couldn't do it.

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