

Adrenaline, disgust and laughter: conflicting emotions while researching violence

Tessa Diphoorn¹

¹Utrecht University, Cultural anthropology, Utrecht, The Netherlands

t.g.diphoorn@uu.nl

How does one react to the performance of a violent act by an informant? How does one reconcile with the fact that despite their violent outbursts, these individuals are insightful and perhaps enjoyable? Are there particular rules and ethical guidelines that researchers must adhere to when researching the performance of violence? This paper explores some of the issues that surround the wide range of emotions researchers experience when witnessing and analyzing acts of violence conducted in the field. This paper aims to pose questions about the impact of these emotions in the interpretation and analysis of these experiences that complicate intentions to remain as 'analytical' as possible. To what extent does one's ethical and moral framework affect the data analysis and how do personal traits and characteristics of the researcher determine the nature of the collected data? Although addressed by other scholars (Robben & Nordstrom 1995, Rodgers 2001, Lefranc 2002, Huggins & Glebbeek 2003, Hume 2007), this paper aims to expand on the issues that surround the methodological facets of researching violence. These explorations are based on experiences endured during a 20-month period of ethnographic fieldwork conducted amongst private security officers in Durban, South Africa. This research project analyses the niche of a particular group of security officers (armed response officers) in policing the streets of Durban, South Africa. Through qualitative research methodology, particularly participant observation, a large amount of time was spent 'on duty' with the private security officers and various acts of coercion and violence (physical and emotional) were witnessed by the researcher. The adrenaline rush that preceded an incident, the feelings of aversion and disgust when violence emerged, and the personal, amicable relationships with the informants created a constant rollercoaster of emotions that affected the entire research process. Experiencing, absorbing, and analyzing these contradicting emotions within a short frame of time was an integral part of the fieldwork. But to what extent must these feelings be incorporated in the research process, such as the writing up of the field notes? This paper aims to address some of these questions that linger in the domain of the anthropology of violence by analyzing specific experiences from the fieldwork period.

