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Understanding immigration detention: The analytical value of practical and emotional challenges during fieldwork

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Abstract

Purpose: A reflexive ethnographic account of the practical and emotional challenges encountered by the researcher during fieldwork is too often separated from the analytical research results. This article argues that doing so, downplays or even ignores the analytical value of the encountered challenges. Drawing on personal examples from ethnographic research in immigration detention, the article shows that these challenges have an intrinsic analytical value.

Methodology: Ethnographic research was carried out in two immigration detention centres in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. Observations, informal conversations with detainees and staff, and semi-structured interviews with detainees were triangulated. Extracts from fieldnotes are presented and discussed to demonstrate the analytical value of the challenges experienced during fieldwork.

Findings: Three important challenges are presented: i) distrust from organisational gatekeepers and research participants, ii) disruptions of the organisational routines, and iii) witnessing and experiencing feelings of powerlessness. The analytical value of these challenges is strongly connected to theoretical and analytical themes that emerged during the research.

Originality/value: Ethnographic researchers are encouraged to explicitly treat the reflexive accounts of practical and emotional challenges as ‘data in itself’ and as such nested within their analytical results.

Paper type: Research paper

Keywords: Research challenges, Emotions, Field relationships, Reflexivity, Analytical value, Immigration detention

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that conducting (organisational) ethnographic research confronts the researcher with practical and emotional challenges. Frequently discussed in the existing literature are challenges related to gaining access, building trust, maintaining field relations, managing emotions, and leaving the field (see e.g. Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a, 2017b; Celestina, 2018; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Mazzetti, 2016; Nycyk, 2018; Warden, 2013). It has indeed become common practice to share “stories of infiltration, fables of fieldwork rapport, minmelodramas of hardship endured (and overcome), and accounts of what fieldwork did to the fieldworker” in so called confessional tales (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 73). This is no different in criminal justice research (see e.g. Armstrong et al., 2017). Researchers dealing with politically contentious issues, such as security, crime control and migration control (Bosworth et al., 2018), are indeed constantly confronted with ‘tests’ arising from the field they are studying (Lindberg and Eule, this issue).

While conducting ethnographic research in immigration detention facilities in Belgium and the Netherlands, unsurprisingly, I was confronted with several practical and emotional challenges as well. Notwithstanding the value of methodological guidelines and – even more importantly – examples of ‘fieldwork testing’ shared by other ethnographic researchers in the preparation of the fieldwork, one
can never be totally prepared for the messy and unpredictable experiences of doing ethnographic research (Kleinman et al., 1997). Simultaneously, I became aware that the encountered practical and emotional challenges themselves do have a productive analytical force: they contribute to the researcher’s insights in the complex social reality of the field and its everyday life (Davies and Spencer, 2010; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). All too often however, there is a separation between the methodological description of challenges encountered before, during and after the fieldwork on the one hand, and the analysis of research results on the other. In this way, the analytical value of challenges is downplayed or even ignored. The purpose of this article is to explicitly link my confessional field tales with the theoretical and analytical themes that emerged during my research to encourage ethnographic researchers to do the same.

After situating the main argument within the existing body of literature, I will consider extracts of fieldnotes describing frequently encountered fieldwork challenges and reflect on their analytical and theoretical value. A constant challenge was distrust, both from organisational gatekeepers and research participants. From the 1980s onwards, affluent societies have increasingly relied on administrative detention as a means for controlling immigration (Welch and Schuster, 2005). Within criminology, prison ethnography is a well-established research tradition (see e.g. Drake et al., 2015). Immigration detention, however, has long remained a ‘blind spot’ within research on (experiences of) life in detention, not least because of the difficulties researchers have faced in accessing these politically sensitive institutions (Bosworth, 2012). This was no different for my research. However, I will illustrate how insights into the political and organisational layout of immigration detention were gained through the process of securing access to these institutions and its actors.

Scholars have shown the highly elusive nature of life inside immigration detention through ethnographic research (see e.g. Bosworth, 2012, 2014; Campesi, 2015; Turnbull, 2016; Ugelvik, 2016). Yet, I will show how comprehending the seemingly monotonous, yet unpredictable nature of life inside immigration detention centres, was gained not only through testimonies of those subjected to the detention regime, but also through personal experiences throughout the fieldwork: on several occasions I had to face the monotonous character and the disruptions of the organisational routines myself.

Finally, the emotional challenges of the fieldwork will be discussed. As detainees are deprived from their sense of belonging, and legal and social boundaries are (re)produced, yet also challenged on a daily basis (Bosworth, 2014), it is no surprise that immigration detention centres are filled with emotions. Witnessing feelings of powerlessness evidently did not leave me indifferent. I will discuss the analytical value of my emotional experiences during the fieldwork, but also their limits, given that they are experienced by an ‘outsider’ to the forced removal process. I will conclude this article by reflecting more generally on the advantages and the difficulties of considering ‘fieldwork tests’ as analytically valuable moments.

The analytical force of practical and emotional challenges

Organisational ethnography relies on long-term personal engagements and interactions in order to understand and appreciate the complexities of everyday life in the organisations studied (Ybema et al., 2009). The concretisation of methodological tools can therefore only be done in direct interaction with gatekeepers and participants throughout the course of the fieldwork. As Moeran (2009, p. 151) put it: “As a fieldworker, you will invariably find yourself in a series of processual social situations, in which all kinds of unexpected and unplanned events can occur. You will thus be obliged to make innumerable
small decisions at every twist and turn of your daily routine.” The methodological demands of the relatively unstructured research techniques used in ethnographic research are constantly navigated in practice. Purposive sampling strategies, for instance, cannot be considered separate from practical challenges regarding building trust and gaining acceptance in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The methodological implications of long-term personal engagements – sometimes negatively framed as methodological ‘issues’ or ‘problems’ – have been discussed extensively by many ethnographic researchers. Indeed, they have become a standard ingredient of methodology sections.

Practical challenges, such as overcoming distrust or making changes in your predetermined schedules of fieldwork, should not only be looked at from a purely traditional methodological perspective. The answer to encountered practical dilemmas cannot only be evaluated in terms of how it enabled, or obstructed, reliable data collection (Kleinman et al., 1997). There is more to confessional tales than attempting “to shore up the fieldwork craft as a still scientifically valid one” (Van Maanen, 1998, p. 92).

It is equally important to see practical challenges as ‘data in itself’ and to analyse what kind of challenges specifically arose, and what they can tell us about the peculiarities of the organisations studied. Celestina (2018) warned us not to regard trust as a binary concept, but rather to consider it as something that arrives – and departs – in gradations. The extent, and more importantly with regard to which topics, that participants trust the researcher reveals something, and therefore should be considered significant to the research context. In a similar vein, Chege (2015) demonstrated that the participants’ perceived risks and gains of participating in her ethnographic research on ‘beach boys’ and participants of ‘female sex tourism’ in Kenya’s South Coast region, reflected their experiences with different power systems: the power of the press; the power of the West; the power of the state. Regarding the disruption of organisational routines, Rowe (2014) described several moments during her fieldwork in two women’s prisons in the north of England when she became aware of disturbing settled patterns of activity. As she gained more insight in the prison’s hierarchical structures, as well as in collisions and strains between outside and inside selves and statuses of both prisoners and staff, such moments revealed something about the social life of the prison.

A similar argument can be made regarding emotions. As both researcher and research participants are human beings (Scheirs and Nuyltiens, 2013), it is completely understandable that engaging in researcher-participant relationships, as well as blending in with the organisational context can be emotionally taxing (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a; Liebling, 2014; Mazzetti, 2016; Warden, 2013). These experienced emotions are analytically important too and should not be discarded as ‘bias’ (Kleinman et al., 1997). In their seminal work, Kleinman and Copp (1993) urged researchers not to ignore their own emotional reactions during fieldwork, but to consider them as an integral part of their research enabling deeper insights into organisations and particularly in their emotional cultures. Researchers are therefore encouraged to annotate their emotional experiences and other practical challenges in their fieldnotes, and share them with colleagues, supervisors, and a broader audience throughout all stages of the research (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a; Kleinman et al., 1997). In this way, it becomes clear “how certain disavowed and disassociated experiences can be shown to have heuristic, epistemological, and practical currency” (Davies and Spencer, 2010, p. 14; for a similar argument, see Broussine et al., 2015; Harris and Huntington, 2001).

Reflexivity before, during, and after the research, is now a well-established criterion of ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). As described above, several integrated reflexive ethnographic accounts explicitly deal with the question of what practical and emotional challenges they encountered can add to the process of knowledge production by embodying the experiences and reflections of the researcher as part of the ‘data’. Nonetheless, engagement with research challenges in most ethnographic work, is still commonly limited to the methodology section. The full analytical
and theoretical potential of practical and emotional challenges continues to remain largely unused. The remainder of this article describes the study design, before utilising extracts from my own fieldnotes to demonstrate how these challenges deepen the insights drawn from informal and semi-structured conversations and (‘traditional’) observations, and how these challenges should be used to complement the analysis.

**The study**

The ethnographic research I conducted took place in three immigration detention facilities; two in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. The focus was detainees’ detention experiences, their opinions about the legitimacy of forced return, their interactions with immigration detention staff, and the working practices of immigration detention staff. In order to understand “the intertwining agency of the variety of actors” in immigration detention, I used a multi-perspective approach (Achermann, 2009, p. 52). I triangulated observations, informal conversations with detainees and staff, and semi-structured interviews with detainees. In all detention centres, a minimum of 250 hours of observations and informal conversations were carried out. In total, 68 semi-structured interviews were conducted in three languages: Dutch, French and English. The interviews consisted of three core parts: i) life before being arrested, ii) detention experiences, iii) views on future life, particularly being forcibly returned to another country. Dutch and French material included in this article was translated in English as literally as possible so as to capture the original meaning of the words and expressions used. All names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.

The use of a multi-perspective approach, implying that considerable time was spent with both detainees and different categories of staff (security staff, migration officers/social assistants, staff responsible for organising recreational activities), sometimes raised the question of ‘which side I was on’ (Becker, 1967). In general, however, there was no strong oppositional culture between detainees and staff in the detention centres, notwithstanding evident power differences between both groups. Similar to the experiences of Browne and McBride (2015), I discovered that ‘hanging out’ was extremely important in these highly charged political environments, especially at the beginning when I was just trying to be visible on the wing or participating in recreational activities. In this way, multiple informal conversations with both detainees and staff gave me the opportunity to inform them – in addition to formal informed consent procedures that were used – in a dynamic, continuous and reflexive way about the purpose of my presence and the research. I also found it important to develop and negotiate at this stage a clear and visible role as a researcher who was independent of existing field roles (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Extensive fieldnotes, for instance, were openly written and – when appropriate and permitted by the participants – during conversations. Soon, my role was known by both detainees and staff and I became to a considerable extent accepted – although questions about my writings were raised on several occasions as I will show later.

In the early stages of the fieldwork, distrust was avoided by steering clear of the more controversial locations (especially the office of the migration officers) and the potentially volatile interactions in immigration detention (especially conversations between detainees and migration officers about forced return). Once mutual trust was established, and my legitimacy as a researcher was consequently enhanced – due to ‘hanging out’ (Browne and McBride, 2015) – my presence in an established research role was accepted: I asked permission of detainees to be present during the return conversations and no one objected.
This does not imply, however, that I was always completely trusted. I will present several testing moments and examples of distrust with research participants, that in addition to eliciting uncertainty, discomfort and awkwardness, are considered here to have analytical value. In the coding process, I tagged all encountered research dilemmas and challenges with a specific code in view of this article, next to coding these segments of fieldnotes with analytical codes as with all other data. From this overview of encountered research challenges, I was able to select specific episodes to discuss. I included fieldnote extracts describing research challenges that provided valuable analytical insights for two main reasons: because the episodes are a good example of frequently encountered challenges (e.g. encountering distrust or having to deal with organisational routines), or because the episodes had a greater impact on me as a researcher than others (e.g. witnessing forced removal).

Becoming aware of institutional logics through formal permission procedures

Immigration detention centres are complex, low-trust environments (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a). Formal permission to conduct research in these centres is not easily granted. When access is granted, the implicit – or, in the case of Bosworth and Kellezi (2017b, p. 238), explicit – message is generally: “We don’t want your research to embarrass us.” I soon learned however that negotiation processes with formal institutional gatekeepers have analytical value too.

First, these negotiations gave an initial insight in the varying aims that different stakeholders may have. In Belgium, immigration detention centres are operated by the Migration Department, employing all immigration detention staff – including security staff. Consequently, permission to conduct research had only to be negotiated with the Migration Department and it became clear during the negotiation process that the part of the research that focusses on detainees’ opinions about return – referred to on a policy level as ‘return intentions’ – interested the head of the Migration Department the most. Yet, after permission was granted and when I met the managers of the Belgian detention centres individually, it became clear that they were equally or more interested in the penological research questions about life inside and detainees’ detention experiences. This was the first indication that the complex interplay of two different institutional logics – penitentiary logics related to daily life, order and security in the centre and migration logics related to efficient and effective forced removal procedures – required adequate research to fully understand the dynamics of daily life and working practices in these detention centres.

In the Netherlands, however, immigration detention centres are managed by the Prison/Justice Department – not by the Migration Department. Security staff are therefore employed by the Prison Department, while migration officers, employed by the Migration Department, can enter the institution daily to speak with detainees and to work on migration cases. Permission for the research, except for the observations of migration officers, was thus negotiated with the Prison Department. It was no surprise that they were primarily interested in penological questions related to detention experiences and the internal order and safety in the centre. After giving a presentation with the first result of the fieldwork conducted in the Dutch detention centre, the Migration Department granted permission to also observe the work of several migration officers. In the presentation, I demonstrated that the migration officers were depicted by detainees in a rather negative way. As a consequence, several migration officers felt the need to show ‘their side of the story’. As Cleton (2019) observes, there is something that can be learned from this welcoming attitude towards researchers: it can be seen as a part of a larger quest of the Dutch Migration Department for enhancing the public legitimacy for the migration control system by ‘opening up’ about everyday working practices.
There are however other lessons to be learned from the formal permission procedures. As research access had to be negotiated with two different organisations in the Netherlands, it became clear that penitentiary logics and migration logics were more clearly separated in the Netherlands than in Belgium where only one organisation is responsible for both the operation of the centres and the effectuation of forced removal. These insights helped me to explain events I observed during the fieldwork. Compare for instance following situations:

I’m walking to the wing with Lisa [social assistant/migration officer]. She must tell a detainee that a travel document was obtained by the Belgian authorities and a return flight can consequently be booked. ‘It’s Friday, so I’m struggling a little bit with it,’ says Lisa. She explains: ‘Sometimes, if someone has a hot-tempered personality and we legally have the possibility, we wait with disclosing the information till after the weekend. We, social assistants, are not here in the weekend, so the security staff and educators have to deal with the aftermath of the bad news on their own’ [Belgian detention centre 2, 26 October 2018].

There has been an incident on the wing and a detainee was forcedly brought to solitary confinement. All detainees were locked in their room when the incident occurred and are still locked up at the moment. Then, a migration officer enters the wing. He wants to speak with a detainee and is clearly waiting for a security officer to bring him and the detainee to a consulting room. An assistant working for the Prison Department is still at the wing and tells the migration officer: ‘You can better leave the wing with us now. The security officers who are usually working here are elsewhere now and we should really let the peace on the wing return. We can come back later’ [Dutch detention centre, 20 November 2017].

In the first example, the actor responsible for communicating decisions in the migration case – and thus primarily dealing with migration logics – was clearly aware of the penitentiary logics as well: the consequences of her own tasks for the internal order and detention regime were regularly considered. In the second example, the migration officer demonstrated insensitivity to penitentiary logics, or at least lacked the spontaneous reflexivity to adjust to it. The different interests and stakes encountered when trying to gain access to immigration detention centres proved helpful in understanding and illuminating these differences: in Belgium, all staff work for the same employer, and are thus used to dealing with both migration and penitentiary logics; in the Netherlands, security officers work for the Prison Department and migration officers for the Migration Department and are probably less aware of each other’s institutional logics.

These examples show that formal permission procedures, and the way in which organisational actors ascribe meaning to the research, can help to gain insight in the institutional lay-out of the organisation as well as in the different, potentially conflicting goals, that actors adhere to. Procedures to gain formal permission to conduct research thus can be more than just often frustrating and dragging bureaucratic processes. They can both demonstrate and provoke particular dynamics of institutions that ethnographers want to study.

**Seeing distrust as reflections of differential experiences with institutional power and demands**

Manoeuvring in the field as a researcher after the initial permission to conduct research is granted provided even more practical challenges. As illustrated above, establishing trust was sometimes a challenging process, especially since the research participants consisted of different actors sometimes
with conflicting objectives and goals. The challenges to building rapport therefore differed between groups of actors. Consistent with the arguments of Chege (2015) and Celestina (2018), I would argue that the expectations of participants towards the research reflected – and thus showed something about – their position and role within, and/or their dynamic experiences with power systems.

Detainees often raised questions of impact, sometimes confusing ‘research’ with ‘helping people’, i.e. making a difference in their migration case. In responding to these “uncomfortable questions about the purpose and impact of the research” (Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a, p. 129), I tried to keep expectations low, stating that I had no say in individual cases. However, I affirmed that I was interested in their stories and experiences and that the research might one day inspire policymakers to change little things. Many detainees were still grateful for the opportunity to share their story, although they were sometimes worried that their voice would not be heard or would be distorted:

I ask Gregory if I can write down what he told me. ‘Yes, but you should not write down everything. If you do, your supervisors will tell you that your work is too critical. They will ask you to rewrite everything.’ Even after explaining it several times, I cannot truly convince Gregory that I’m doing independent research [Dutch detention centre, 20 November 2017].

The comments reflected other, analytically important, experiences of powerlessness. Most detainees were unable to achieve significant change to their case: despite attempts to demonstrate their long-lasting bonds with Belgian or Dutch society (e.g. having family members, housing, work, etc) to the migration officers, they rarely avoided forced removal, let alone obtained a residence permit. Detainees indeed expressed the feeling that their true story was not heard or adequately considered by their caseworkers.

Detainees sometimes refused to tell me their nationality or claimed to have another nationality than the one mentioned on their badge – information that came from the official database of the Migration Department. Rather than considering this as a threat to the reliability of the data, I think it should primarily be regarded as an important analytical theme. Often, the only way for detainees to try to escape forced removal and ‘hinder the deportation machine’ (Campesi, 2015) is by hiding their identity. As Ellermann puts it:

Knowledge of the individual’s identity is particularly imperative in the case of expulsion. […] International law only obliges states to readmit their own nationals – a duty that hinges upon proof of nationality (Ellermann 2010, p. 414).

In the context of my study, it became more important to gain insight into this mechanism of hiding one’s nationality or identity to avoid forced removal, rather than to have certainty about their nationality. Indeed, the fact that a participant does not reveal their nationality has no bearing on the veracity of their story. Trust is not binary; it is a far more complex and dynamic concept. Hiding information that is considered extremely important in a return procedure, not only tells the researcher something about the vulnerabilities of the research participants, but must also be understood as relative to their specific situation (Celestina, 2018). Worries about their own migration case, an omnipresent feature of immigration detention, also deterred several detainees from participating in a recorded semi-structured interview:

At 10 a.m., Nouri asks me to postpone the interview he agreed to yesterday. It would suit him better at 2 p.m. When I return at 2 p.m., Nouri asks me how many interviews I still have to do. I tell him that I plan to do approximately 20 semi-structured interviews and that I have just started. ‘Maybe you can come back to me when you are somewhere in the middle?’ Nouri suggests. Nouri already answered many of my questions in informal
conversations and allowed me to write his responses down every time, but I get the impression that he does not want to do a recorded semi-structured interview. I ask him if he is still sure that he wants to participate. ‘You’re right... I have some doubts,’ he answers. ‘I am a little bit worried that it will negatively influence my case.’ I explain again that all information he told and will tell me is confidential and that no real names are ever revealed in any publications. I also tell him that it’s no problem for me to just have informal talks. He nods and apologises for not participating in the semi-structured recorded interview. I reply that it is no problem at all, that he is free in his choice to participate and that there is no reason to apologise in case he doesn’t. In the following days, we continue to speak informally about life in the detention centre [Dutch detention centre, 29 November 2017].

Emphasising the voluntariness to participation, and making sure that participants understood the purpose, methods, demands, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and possible outcomes of the research was important throughout, as the previous example demonstrates. Even after informed consent has been given, it is clearly very important to continuously address uncertainties and questions of participants. For this reason, and also in order to address potential language difficulties and illiteracy, I relied primarily on verbal informed consent procedures. It has been acknowledged by various scholars that written informed consent can contradict the principle of irregular and undocumented strategies (Düvell et al., 2010; Bosworth and Kellezi, 2017a). I did indeed witness several struggles between social assistants and detainees over obtaining a necessary signature to assign a free, pro bono lawyer. Although not completely comparable to written informed consent procedures, it was clear that in these situations, rapport between the social assistant and the detainee was obstructed rather than enabled. These struggles can again be related to the detainees’ experiences of confrontation with the deportation system. It also raises questions about the ethics and positionality of me as a researcher, as I become yet another actor who tries to ‘read’ detainees, asking them to fill out forms and their opinions about returning, ad nauseam. At the same time, I agree with Bosworth (2017, p. 61) that focusing on testimonies is one way to humanise the detained persons and to question the legitimacy of immigration detention, notwithstanding that disseminating research in ways that may have impact on people’s lives is riddled with challenges (Fili, 2018, p. 221).

Not only were the signs of distrust shown by detainees analytically important, the actors working in immigration detention centres also raised implicit and explicit questions of the research, the content of which was related to their working roles. I referred above to the two overarching logics governing immigration detention centres, i.e. penitentiary and migration logics. In their questions about my research aims and comparative results, it also became clear that security officers on the one hand and social assistants/migration officers on the other were primarily interested in issues related to the specific logics of their roles.

My presence sometimes gave staff the feeling of being ‘monitored’, as if they were required to justify their working practices, instigating narrative legitimation on their part (Ugelvik, 2016). Such legitimation narratives of security staff were indeed primarily directed to their core task of maintaining order:

I’m standing with Johan [a security officer] in the corridor. A little further, three detainees are gathered together. Without me asking for it, Johan starts justifying himself. Given that it is not allowed for detainees to stand in the corridor, he says: ‘If they are just a few, I allow it for a while. Most of the time, they walk on spontaneously and otherwise, I will gently say something about it. I will never walk towards them in an authoritative way. Of course, we want to prevent a whole group of detainees standing in the corridor’ [Dutch detention centre, 14 November 2017].
This example illustrates how security staff consider maintaining order as their primary task, and can be connected to theoretical discussions on role and function division between immigration detention staff.

It can thus be concluded that distrust from research participants should not only be seen as a methodological issue to overcome, but also as revealing something about settings and power systems people are in. Distrust is, at least to some extent, a reflection of differential experiences with institutional power and demands. By thoroughly reflecting on participants’ expressions of discomfort, analysis can be deepened.

**Getting to know routines and hidden rules**

One of the purposes of organisational ethnographic research is immersion in the daily life and routines of an organisation. Knowing the routines is also important for practical matters, especially scheduling semi-structured interviews with participants. In the immigration detention centres, not interfering with recreational moments, walking time, and internet moments, was key to having a long and quiet conversation. At the beginning of the research, someone just walked out the interview room after less than twenty minutes in order to participate in an optional activity that I was not aware of. Such ‘rookie mistakes’ were avoided once I got to know the daily schedules and informal routines.

Although routines in immigration detention are standardised, they are also unstable, uncertain, and unpredictable. Consular representatives can (suddenly) deliver a travel document, a plane ticket can (suddenly) be booked, or someone can (unexpectedly) be released from detention (Turnbull, 2016). As a researcher, I learned that situations can quickly change without warning:

Elbachir agreed to do an interview and I go look for him on the wing. He is standing outside the office of the social assistant and is ostensibly stressed-out. He tells me that he is not happy with the news he received from his social assistant. It’s clearly not a good time for an interview. I ask him if it would suit him better to hold the interview tomorrow. ‘Yes, tomorrow will be fine,’ Elbachir responds [Belgian detention centre 1, 8 March 2017].

Through these experiences, insights were gained into what is theoretically described as the pains of uncertainty (Warr, 2016).

Aside from these unexpected moments, daily life in immigration detention largely consists of ‘killing time’ and waiting (Turnbull, 2016). Just being on the wing, where the same activities were repeatedly carried out, sometimes confronted me with an overwhelming sense of boredom:

I’m sitting at the wing and I am watching two detainees play ping-pong. Apparently, I look bored – which is a good assessment of my mood – because Jos [a security officer] comes sit next to me and asks: ‘Are you bored? I understand: sometimes, it’s tiresome here.’ After a pause, he adds: ‘And that’s a good thing. I work in this centre for several years and nowadays, detainees have more liberties than before. Therefore, we have far less incidents than in the past’ [Belgian detention centre 2, 3 October 2018].

Mannay and Morgan (2015, p. 176) rightfully noted the importance of analysing experiences in the ‘waiting field’, defining them as “the times where lives carry on before they make room for the intrusion of the data production techniques.” In the above example, unintended emotional participation was recognised by the security staff, which illustrated how feelings of boredom are also part of their job. In contrast to detainees, however, the staff and I can go home when the working day is finished. Jos’ reaction was a further illustration of how penitentiary and security logics are the
primary lens through which security staff observe the detention regime. In short, emotional participation clearly led to an instructive moment.

More interestingly, according to Mannay and Morgan (2015), are the ‘waiting ruptures’ and ‘spaces of interruption/disruption’. The sudden delivery of a plane ticket or release from detention, for example, were regularly witnessed. Sometimes, however, the disruption of the detention regime was unintentionally self-inflicted. In these moments, my own behaviour had a considerable influence on life inside the institution. My aim was to avoid disruptions as much as possible; disturbing the setting was never a research goal, so it was no wonder that these self-inflicted disruptions evoked strong feelings of discomfort:

Around 9.30 a.m., I arrive at the wing. One of the detainees, Ahmed, is sitting at the table. The board game Ludo is laid out before him. I ask Ahmed if he would like to play and we start a game. After five minutes, another detainee comes storming out of his room, points angrily to the dices and shouts at me: ‘Did you come from the outside to wake us up? Why don’t you go play outside?’ He then returns to his room. Ahmed shrugs and sweeps the board game aside. The wing cleaner – also a detainee – comes to us with a magazine and demonstrates that dices don’t make a sound when rolled on a stack of paper. ‘They are sleeping,’ he says apologetically. We decide however to stop playing for a while. The security staff watched us as the whole episode unfolded. I feel stupid to have ruined the morning tranquillity on the wing. [Dutch detention centre, 27 November 2017]

I took as axiomatic that deprivation of liberty is one of the most important pains of detention detainees experience, and maintaining tranquillity on the wing was one of the main aims of security staff; thus it was no surprise that this experience left me feeling ashamed. Although I regret having caused this episode, it did lead to a better understanding of several aspects. Throughout the interviews, for instance, detainees complained about different sleeping patterns: detainees who slept early complained about those who stayed up late, watched television or made phone calls, whilst those who wanted to sleep late, complained about noises in the morning. My own experience helped me to understand the seemingly banal, but important impact of differential sleeping patterns on the regime and routines.

This demonstrates that practical questions arising during the research, were closely related to organisational schedules and informal routines. Moreover, in finding suitable solutions to practical research challenges, insights are gained about these schedules and routines, where the presence of a researcher in a setting can have a – potentially disturbing – influence. Disruptions to organisational routines can therefore be both analytically insightful and ethically problematic, ensuring that reflections on them should be a necessary and integral part of ethnographic writing.

**Witnessing and experiencing feelings of powerlessness**

I was deeply affected by many of the stories I was told during the fieldwork. This section retells the story of the Gashi family; a sequence of events that profoundly affected me. Through (re)living my own emotions, I reflect on how I learned about the pains of forced removal in the most humbling way.

On 6 February, I meet the Gashi family on the activity wing: the father, the mother, the son of 20, Laurent, and the daughter of 18, Katrina. Laurent and Katrina tell me in fluent Dutch that they have been in Belgium for over seven years and left their country of origin even far before, just after their birth. They happen to live nearby my own town and as I know this place, we share stories about it. Laurent reminisces about playing soccer with
the other kids in the street. When I ask him if he still has memories about his country of origin, the answer is negative. [...] He keeps silent for a while, then sighs and says: ‘Pen and paper are deciding about a life in the 21st century…’ [...] I also speak with Laurent’s father. He tells me that he does not understand that they must leave Belgium: ‘I learned the language, I worked here, I paid taxes, I got my driver license.’ He takes it out of his wallet and shows it to me. He also speaks proudly about his children, who both graduated in high school [Belgian detention centre 1, 6 February 2017].

As I knew the town where Laurent grew up, I could vividly relate to the memories he told and our bond was established at that moment: I was immediately affected by what Hall (2012, p. 171) called ‘the imagination of shared worlds’. I could vividly imagine the pain of a forced removal, of being forced to leave your whole life in Belgium – the only life Laurent and Katrina knew – behind. I agreed with them that their place was in Belgium, that they belonged here. They did not possess a legal residence permit, but they had, just as dozens of other people I met during the fieldwork, built a life in Belgium or the Netherlands. Belonging is an important analytical concept in migration scholarship: against the rigid legal notion of belonging as possessing a residence permit, other authors have emphasised its cultural and affective character (Hartnell, 2006). Almost every detainee could speak to such emotive sources of belonging. In the course of observing the confrontation between these people and bureaucratic-legal decision-making processes, a feeling of injustice arose, mirroring their pain in ways theoretically described by Warr (2016) as the deprivation of legitimacy.

My own experiences taught me not only to understand the feelings expressed by detainees in a more intense way, but they also proved helpful in analytically understanding attitudes and experiences of immigration detention staff. Through sharing my feelings with them, it became clear that they could also be affected by the stories they encounter on a daily basis, and also had questions regarding administrative decision-making processes executed elsewhere, by others (Bosworth, 2014). When talking with Stefan [a security officer] about the Gashi family, he stated:

It really sucks... But you cannot do anything about it. Sometimes, I really would like to argue with the decision makers... I mean, that you can say before the judge: ‘Look, this boy is integrated, he speaks the language.’ I mean, if I could do that, I would do it immediately. But those judges decide: yes, no, yes, ... But on what basis, I wonder? [Belgian detention centre 1, 9 February 2017].

Throughout one week, I witnessed how the Gashi family tried to prevent their forced return by talking to lawyers, NGOs and friends; I also saw their despair, and understood their frustrations, when these attempts proved unsuccessful.

On 14 February, the family is forcibly returned by a special flight [a flight chartered for the forced removal of foreigners without a residence permit, who are accompanied by police officers]. Reserving places on this flight was the only possibility to execute the forced removal orders of all family members at the same time, the social assistant told me. I see how Katrina is handcuffed and escorted by two police officers to the bus. Katrina looks at me with dried tears in her eyes as I’m standing on the side lines. I feel ashamed and wonder which thoughts are running through her mind at that moment. At 8 a.m., the bus departs for the airport [Belgian detention centre 1, 14 February 2017].

Without a doubt, witnessing their forced removal was the most emotionally difficult moment of the fieldwork. As Bosworth and Kellezi (2017a, p. 131) remind us: “Transforming human beings into bodies that can be expelled is not just a legal but also a symbolic and affective endeavour. Denial and rejection, inherently, are painful to endure and to witness.” I described in my fieldnotes how I was unable to do anything other than sit and stare in front of me after hearing that the Gashi family would be forcibly
returned. Strong feelings of injustice and illegitimacy ran through me, probably only a small part of the distress that the Gashi family was experiencing now and hereafter. From that moment, it was easier to recognise similar sentiments and behaviour by detainees when they too received unwelcome news or the date of their flight. I experienced strong feelings of both powerlessness and shame when witnessing forced removals, being unable to do anything to ease the painful feelings of Katrina and the others. I now understood what Warr (2016) really meant by the deprivation of certainty, legitimacy and hope.

Immigration detention staff told me that they used ‘distancing’ techniques to cope with these situations. I understood their view as I was also, inevitably, engaging in distancing processes. Yet, it was impossible to distance myself completely from my experiences. Even editing the fieldnotes about the Gashi family, more than two years later, proved to be emotionally taxing.

The events raised questions about my positionality as a researcher: unable to do anything, was I really on the side of the Gashi family? I felt strong feelings of sadness and anger, but these were incomparable to those experienced by people subjected to forced removal. However, my own feelings were somewhat illustrative of the emotional responses that arise when confronted with rigid legal notions of belonging that devalue lives built outside the countries they are forcibly returned to. It certainly helped me understand theoretical notions such as the deprivation of legitimacy in more depth. Despite this, and unlike experienced staff, I was incapable of immediately distancing myself from the witnessed events and carrying on with the daily routines, and it took me longer to process the events. Witnessing vulnerability and forced removal throughout the research helped me to better understand the feelings of powerlessness, and distancing processes, described by the immigration detention staff and documented in the literature (Hall, 2012). Again, it is clear that emotional participation can deepen the researcher’s understanding of the emotional culture of the organisation studied.

Conclusion

A reflexive attitude is crucial when doing ethnographic research: throughout the fieldwork, ethnographic researchers are confronted with several (practical and emotional) challenges that have to be dealt with. Choices made during the fieldwork have a clear influence on research outcomes, but these choices are never solely motivated by methodological concerns; they also reflect the researchers’ personal and academic biographies. A critical and reflexive discussion of how fieldwork challenges are dealt with is therefore with good reason considered a necessary part of methodology sections.

Too often, however, a reflexive ethnographic account of the practical and emotional challenges encountered by researchers is completely separated from the analytical research results. By doing so, the analytical value of these challenges is downplayed. The examples of my own fieldwork in immigration detention in Belgium and the Netherlands, strongly suggests that ethnographic researchers ought not regard these challenges as instrumental methodological concerns to overcome, but rather as events inherent to the research process, as productive, insightful moments that give the researcher and the reader a better understanding of the setting and which puts the experiences of the research participants in context. The complicated process of managing expectations of different research participants, for instance, provided insights into the potentially conflicting goals and interests of different actors and stakeholders in immigration detention. I showed how experiences of gaining access to the immigration detention centres and their staff can be connected to theoretical discussions.
on function and role division. Ethical and practical decisions over how to gain informed consent on the other hand, were closely related to (undocumented) detainees’ views on official documents. I also showed that the inadvertent disruption of routines that might displease or provoke others, was maybe the only way to gain a detailed understanding of these routines. Lastly, the common witnessing of vulnerability – and the associated imagination of shared worlds (Hall, 2012) – gave some insights into the painful feelings of powerlessness and illegitimacy detainees experience, as well as the processes of (emotional) distancing that immigration detention staff employ.

Furthermore, and related to the question of distancing, I found it important to continuously remind myself of my position as an ‘outsider’ to the forced removal process. Is it ever possible then to fully understand the ‘insider’s views’ of life inside immigration detention, and the experience of forced removal? One of the participants once asked me if I had ever been locked in a cell for the night. He was convinced that only then could I truly understand what he was feeling. Yet, even undergoing such a ‘real detention experience’ would probably still be different for me: I come from a privileged background, possess a residence permit in Belgium, hold rights as a citizen of the European Union, and most of all, I would go home the next day. His remark should therefore be an important reminder of the limitations to, and the partiality of, our research. Of course, we should not abandon ethnographic research altogether, but critical reflection on the limits of our work is necessary. I would argue that making use of all available fieldwork experiences to deepen our understanding of the particular settings we study as well as the perspectives of the people in them, is an important starting point for this endeavour.

References


