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Inside the Notebook

Sharing fieldnotes: Collaborative learning at the summer music festival

Eveleigh Buck-Matthews

Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

Correspondence
Eveleigh Buck-Matthews, School of Social Sciences, Birmingham City University, The Curzon Building, 4 Cardigan Street, Birmingham B4 7BD, UK.
Email: eveleigh.buck-matthews@bcu.ac.uk

Abstract

Sometimes there are moments within fieldwork that are unplanned and that point to the potential of new research practices. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at summer music festivals in the UK, this paper considers two moments when fieldnotes were shared with participants, both during and after the festival. I explore the potential of these moments for expanding our understandings of the field but also highlight some of the issues with this way of incorporating people into our studies. Overall, I suggest that sharing fieldnotes can encourage a greater level of understanding of those we research, and promotes a higher level of involvement between research participants and research process.

KEYWORDS

ethnography, fieldnotes, music festival, young people

> Like cats – once you'd earned their trust you were adopted in. Loving, warm, cuddly, and genuine. I was more tactile with them than I am with many of my oldest friends and most nights we fell asleep on one another, cuddled up or leaning against each other. Like cats, once you've gained their trust they crawl all over you.
>
> (Ethnographic Note, Bestival 2014)

Many of us are well aware that ethnographic note taking can be very useful in documenting and describing social contexts. Indeed, they can often form the foundations of valuable new theories about life within them. It is less often considered how note taking can lead to new ways of collaborating with and relating to people in our research. In this piece, I consider an instance of intimacy amongst a group of festival goers that I recorded as part of my fieldnotes. These notes were subsequently shared with the festival goers involved. This leads me to reflect on three related aspects of my note taking that emerged as beneficial to me: first, my shift from private to public note taking; second, my experience of sharing notes inside the festival; and third, sharing notes afterwards.

The instance comes from my PhD fieldwork which took place at a range of large UK music festivals between 2014 and 2018. Festivals only last a few days for those camping at the event and produce unique kinds of social relations. As Hitchings and Latham (2020) consider, often ethnography takes a more immersive approach on home soil. My research very much falls on the side of ethnographic geography that forms authority by staying close to home (Hitchings & Latham, 2020, p. 973), drawing strength from insider knowledge and perspectives. This in some ways allowed me to circumvent issues around acclimatisation to the field and enabled me to quickly develop relationships with participants. Although music festivals are

short-lived (my bursts of fieldwork often lasted between 3 and 10 days), they also allow for intensive involvement. My exploratory research sought to understand why these spaces held such importance for young attendees, using creative mapping, ethnography and surveys to explore how they used the space. It also looked at how short-lived, but nonetheless meaningful, communities were made in these campsites and fields. Being temporary themselves, these festivals allowed me to fully immerse myself in communities that were newly forming. I was somewhat an 'insider' having attended several festivals before. However, as Wilkinson and Kitzinger (1996) suggest, we are often both insiders and outsiders (p. 251) in research.

As far as possible I conducted 'overt' research, relating the purpose of my research to those that I was researching. However, I was unable to claim complete overtness given the number of festival attendees. I was sure to inform, if asked, what my purpose was for being there but I also recognise the limits of this openness. Following many other ethnographers before me, my fieldwork started with taking part, making connections and becoming part of several festival groups. My experience was wholly sensory, as anyone who has been to a music festival can attest to: the shared experience of camping, the uncomfortableness, lack of showers and exposure to the weather, cemented my status within one group in which, as Pink (2008) explores in her reflection on eating with participants, my sense of connection came through the shared sensory aspects of camping and working together.

A group with whom I spent time, and shared a strong connection, became known as the 'Honey Badgers'. They were made up of a collection of festival workers (volunteer stewards and bar workers). I met the group at a festival called Bestival on the Isle of Wight in 2014. The group of young people had volunteered their time to steward in exchange for a festival ticket. It was a large group, whose members were aged between 18 and 30 and attended multiple festivals each year; they often knew each other from previous years. In total, I camped with the group at six festivals over four summers. At Bestival, where I wrote the above entry about being with the Badgers, there were eight young people from across England and Scotland, and its name emerged from the festival.

The origins of the name Honey Badger for this group are lost; however, before it was the name of the group in my notebook, the term 'Honey Badger' was a tool we used to maintain the group during a festival where the crowds numbered in the thousands. Whilst not working and navigating the site as a large group, we began the tradition of shouting 'Honey Badger' – mainly because it would not normally be something you hear – at which point all members would freeze in the position of a growling animal to allow for the group to reform. It was a tool used to avoid people getting lost or being left behind and gradually became the label the group self-identified with inside Bestival and outside for years. One of my participants has named her canal boat 'Honey Badger' in memory.

The fieldnotes on the Honey Badgers, and Bestival 2014 in particular, changed how I did ethnography. As I now discuss, it encouraged me to share my notes in a way I had not expected.

1 | SHARING NOTES IN THE FIELD

Before I started researching the Honey Badgers, my note taking had been private for two main reasons: first, as a force of habit, the comfort of taking notes in the way one always had done; and second, the festival was a loud, busy and chaotic place, not the best environment for note taking. This forced me to make notes in the privacy of two locations: in the daytime I used the relative solitude of the festival's bathrooms to avoid being seen writing, as well as to avoid inquiry into what was being written; in the evenings, I had the sanctuary of my tent. This is a concept that Hodgson (2001) reflects on in his work in health, and education ethnographers reflect on in a school setting (Walford, 2009): the art of writing up notes out of site/sight. Unseen and performed privately. Although this was my habit, for similar reasons; not wanting to attract attention, private note taking in the quiet of the evening was also a necessity. I had somehow developed a process of doodling and writing notes that mainly took place at the end of the day. Some doodling of the positioning of objects and surroundings took place in real time but mostly I would write up my reflections alone in the privacy of my tent. I was also using a range of other forms of data collection, what Duggan (2021) calls a carousel of methods, which included paper questionnaires and mapping. As these needed collecting with people during the day, they took precedence and fieldnote taking took place once I was alone. However, this changed at Bestival. There, partly because of the Badgers, I moved from note taking in private to note taking in public. With transparency and trust, I became comfortable to share my reflections on the group with the group. But, as I now discuss, this wasn't always easy.

The excerpt that starts this paper comes from the notes I made one September evening before the festival opened to the public. I spent these days hanging out and 'going along' (Kusenbach, 2003) with the Honey Badgers. Partly because this was the time before the festival began, several took an interest in my research: how and why was I researching festivals? My participants were curious, at least at the start. Normally I would have been shy about opening my notebook to reveal my thoughts and scribblings about others. As I've said, initially I was doing this writing in the privacy of my tent.

However, after a while, I started writing these musings out in the open. At first it felt embarrassing to show others my rudimental notes. However, living in such proximity meant that it also felt disingenuous not to share. After all, they were very much part of the story being narrated and we'd also shared plenty of other things about our lives already. One night back at the campsite we were sat in camping chairs talking. As it got late, people fell asleep where they were sat. As it got colder, people sat closer together wrapping arms, sharing blankets, and resting legs on each other. Reflecting on this experience and scene I wrote the above note about how they seemed to me, at that moment, to be like cats.

It did not take long for the group to express curiosity about what I was noting down. I felt I really ought to show them what I was writing, but doing that also felt terrible, I must admit. I feared offending the group by describing them in this way. I was also describing a fairly intimate moment and I worried they'd think I was reading too much into the night. Exposing how I was more tactile with this group than I am normally felt like a risk too. I was afraid I would reveal too much of myself. They were a very tactile group and by my observation and self-reflection, I did not want to 'out' myself for not being the same. Compounded with the fear of misrepresentation, or that I may be mocked for my emotion and candidness, it was not an easy thing to pass around my notebook. However, a hectic day of live music followed by the calm of the campfire convinced me to share the observations I had noted. It is worth mentioning that my notebook contained many other extracts and doodles, but the cat extract attracted the most attention. After some initial jokes about being called cats, the group was not, as I had feared, offended. All agreed that it was a good analogy. One enthusiastically agreed. I had affirmation! I was not misrepresenting, and importantly, by sharing it, I felt that I had gained validation. This also strengthened the trust I had in what and how I was documenting. I felt emboldened to no longer write my notes so privately. I became happy to show my scribblings to my participants. This ended up being quite a liberating experience for me. There was less questioning about what I was doing after this point, and I was now able to take notes publicly without feeling like I had to hide. This meant that the amount of real-time notes increased too. I was less reliant on my memories of the day and could write when situations occurred. It became normalised.

Reyes (2018) outlines three models for increasing the transparency of ethnographic fieldnotes; by naming places, by naming people and by sharing notes. If we look at the boundaries of this sharing, Reyes only acknowledges the benefits of including students and other academics in this sharing. I suggest a fourth category: participants could be included by providing a transcription of notes or, as I did, raw fieldnotes in the field, to illicit collective reflection. Reyes's (2018) model, although useful, does not quite cover other important agents in research: the participants themselves. There is more direction if we think about the collaborative fieldnotes taken between researchers (May & Pattillo-McCoy, 2000; Wojcik et al., 2020), and, although there is also literature looking at the coproduction of notes with participants (Tatham-Fashanu, 2023), there is less on sharing for reasons of transparency and on how the variety of ways we share notes can impact both the researcher and the researched. Sharing notes can create space for in-depth critical thinking with people (von Unger et al., 2022, p. 4). This was certainly the case for me at Bestival. It also allowed me to build a greater level of trust with the participants. Yet it can still be an uncomfortable experience for the researcher both when it takes place, as previously mentioned, but also when it is laid bare in an article such as this. Perhaps that is exactly why it is worth talking about these matters. Latham (2020) highlights three forms of learning about how to practically do geography research: 'through the guidance of a mentor, the careful practicing of techniques before starting a research project, or simply through mucking in and learning whilst doing research' (p. 666). This first instance of sharing fieldnotes corresponds to Latham's last form of learning, born through research instincts and the social situation at the festivals as a space of fleeting encounters in which the time to collect data was limited for me.

2 | SHARING FIELDNOTES AFTERWARDS

After the success of sharing in the field, I decided post-festival to reach out to five members of the Honey Badgers, whom I had previously made fieldnotes about at other festivals. I hoped that they would want to read, comment and be involved with my analysis. These events included the end of festival firework display at Bestival, how the Honey Badgers had formed, a record-breaking giant disco ball installation, the experience of camping together, and the act of applying someone's glitter face paint. I had come up with initial thematic codes that I also shared, alongside the raw data, in the margins of the fieldnotes. My aim was to illicit reflections outside of the festival and deepen participant engagement with the analysis. We had experienced things together and I wanted to increase 'the degree of engagement of participants within and beyond the research encounter' (Pain & Francis, 2003). The first challenge came with attracting participants. Put bluntly, participants did not respond. I believe some read the extracts. But there was little input from them afterwards. It is tempting not to discuss moments like these; Hitchings and Latham (2021) go as far as to call it a taboo. However, it is important to showcase when things go contrary to the ideal. My notebook had elicited emotions and conversations in the temporal space of a festival; in the 'real world' the spell

was broken and life for my participants took precedence over my notes. It is important to reflect on failure, for as Jupp (2007) explains, we must reflect 'on moments of failure and difficulties to open up, rather than close down, how we think about participation in social science research' (p. 2834). I did illicit reflections from one participant. He commented that it had made him cry (happy tears) remembering the event. I found his response personally moving, but what if my participants thought I had misrepresented them. This is, of course, the risk with sharing notes; it could derail much of the rapport I had built with the Honey Badgers. It is also worth noting the extent to which people wanted to share. The Honey Badgers had time around the campsite at the festival. When they were back at work, my endeavours were easily forgotten.

3 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

I often assume researchers do not share their notebooks because of the belief that those initial findings are too superficial, or messy, or perhaps because they represent understanding in its infancy. For me, it was the latter, mainly due to the imposter syndrome, the idea that by showing the faltering way in which I was formulating my ideas about the festival would somehow delegitimise my position as a 'proper' ethnographic researcher who immediately made insightful notes. My ethnographic notes were, and still are, very messy, something that many ethnographers reflect on, some of whom use this obscurity to successfully deter participants from reading raw notes (Walford, 2009).

There is a need to pull back 'the shroud' (Hitchings & Latham, 2020) that much ethnographic writing in the social sciences places over its research practice. By illuminating my process, I feel I not only generate practical examples for students and others to learn from but also enable others to avoid possible pitfalls. They allowed me to bridge the distance between myself and my participants, as well as validate reflections along the way. For Wolfinger (2002) fieldnotes can have 'the crucial role of connecting researchers and their subjects' (p. 94). For me, by sharing them at this moment, I connected with people and consolidated relationships. That provided a useful prompt for reflection, both for me and the group, as well as breaking down researcher mystique to enable greater intimacy.

A useful lens to draw on for such times of reflexivity is feminist methodological approaches: a lens that highlights the relationship between the researcher and participant in order to disrupt dominant, traditional power relations in research, and one that recognises the importance of creating more democratic and participatory research spaces (Cahill et al., 2007; Kindon et al., 2007), primarily to reduce the exploitative nature of research for those that are researched. Caretta and Riaño (2016) expand to consider how the researcher does not purely hold the power in a research partnership, discussing how 'each partner has a different form of power that can be used for different times and spaces' (p. 263). This was felt in my research in the ways participants decided to engage, or not, at different points. Although at times challenging, drawing on a more participatory framework of research and analysis created a more nuanced understanding of the research moment captured in this notebook.

As a researcher, I observe the social world and I want to share my reflections and understandings with the people I observe. Though doing so comes with a string of challenges and ethical considerations, I believe that all social researchers should be prepared to explain to their interlocutors why they are interested in involving them in the research, what the research is about, and what it will entail. Otherwise, there is the risk of extraction without explanation, the creation of a distance between the researcher and the researched. Although I do not argue that sharing notes should always be done, here I have shown how there are times when collaborating, sharing and being transparent in this way can support the emergence of new co-created knowledge that is all the more robust for having been co-created in this way. In the case I have detailed, the Honey Badgers had shared a moment of intimacy whilst exhausted around a fire, and my noted description of them as cats had conjured enthusiasm in the group. When I shared my notes, they recognised the similarities in the same way I did, the moment could have passed unnoticed to any of them, but because my scribblings were shared, the feeling that was also shared became more tangible and is still remembered fondly to this day.

Many researchers may want to guard fieldnotes as traces of inner thought processes that are preferably kept private. However, sharing them with the subjects of our observation can, in some circumstances, lead to deeper connections and fuller understandings. Having said this, we also must be conscious that not everyone would be so welcoming, and sometimes people may show no interest in them at all. In this respect, I would say that it is vital to respond to your research instincts, or use what Hitchings and Latham (2020) call the ethnographic practice of thinking on your feet in the field (p. 974). Sharing notes led to greater trust with my participants and a greater confidence in representing them. So, it worked, to an extent, for me. Though it has not always been easy to depict my research in this way, this paper has shown you some of the backstage work of a festival ethnographer. And though we cannot assume that participants will be interested or have the time to respond to them, I would nonetheless conclude that, when it works, sharing notes can benefit the study, participants and the researcher alike.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Pure Portal; Coventry University at https://pure.coventry.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/41605815/Buck_Matthews2018_PhD.pdf.

ORCID

Eveleigh Buck-Matthews https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2546-291X

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