**Lost Ethnographies**

**Exorcising an ethnography in limbo**

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**Abstract**

I feel haunted; troubled by the ethnography that I conducted some years ago of a new partnership group that was attempting to set up a community learning centre. I’m aware that it doesn’t sound like a particularly alarming research topic, and perhaps that is where some of the issues began. I did not expect an ethnographic haunting to occur. The partnership recruited me less than a year into the creation of the project and I spent two years as a sort of ‘researcher in residence’. The original idea was that I would observe the initial development of the project and then, when the community learning centre was established, I would research the centre’s activities and how they were experienced by village residents. However, fairly soon into the project, problematic dynamics developed within the group, leading to irreconcilable conflict between members. The community learning centre was never established and I was left to piece together an ethnography of a failed partnership. Researching an increasingly dysfunctional partnership was an emotionally exhausting activity, especially when relationships between members became progressively hostile. Managing data collection and analysis at this time was difficult, but I was shocked that, a number of months (and now years) later, revisiting the data for publication purposes remained uncomfortable. I managed to produce my PhD thesis on the back of this study, but I have not felt able to go back to the data, despite there being findings worthy of publication. This ethnography is in a state of limbo and is at risk of becoming lost forever. In this chapter, I explore the reasons for this and discuss lessons learned for future projects.

**Key words**

Emotional labour; participant conflict; researcher discomfort; early career researcher; ethnography.

**Introducing the ethnography**

Over a decade ago, I carried out a two-year ethnography as a PhD student (Vigurs, 2010). The research investigated conflict and consensus within partnership working through an in-depth, qualitative study of the Broadley Vision (BV) partnership; a joint venture of individuals emanating from a range of sectors and organisations which tried to set up a community learning centre in a village in the Midlands, England. However, after two years the partnership collapsed, failing to achieve its original aims. At the beginning of this chapter I will introduce you to the BV partnership, its members, my involvement as researcher, the methods I used to conduct the ethnography and its main findings. I will also explain how the resulting ethnography was somewhat accidental given the changes that occurred to the original project (Fujii, 2015). In the second half of the chapter I will identify and discuss a number of factors that led to this ethnography becoming lost (unpublished) since I completed the PhD. In order to preserve the anonymity of the village (and the partnership members), I have changed all names and provided pseudonyms.

Broadley was selected as the location for the project due to the involvement of Alan Grogan, a long-term village resident and established Labour councillor for Broadley. At the time of the fieldwork Alan was also the Leader of the Borough Council, and had access to a large, vacant, council-owned building in Broadley. In my first interview with Alan he told me that he had wanted to see some sort of community learning centre set up in Broadley for over thirteen years. However, it was only when he was introduced by chance to Ronnie Smith (a local businessman with similar aspirations) at a conference that the idea was discussed and began to develop into what would become known as the BV partnership. Thus, the resulting partnership could be described as serendipitous, having been jointly and informally initiated by the unplanned meeting of two individuals, who then recruited other partnership members. The BV partnership was formed voluntarily and did not receive any funding to meet the costs of partnership working. The costs were therefore absorbed solely by the participating individuals and/or the organisations that they represented. The partnership could also be described as cross-sector in that the partners were drawn from the public sector, the private sector and the voluntary sector. The majority of the partners were men, none were from minority ethnic backgrounds and most were in their fifties and sixties. At a superficial level what they appeared to have in common was a commitment to the setting up of some sort of community learning centre in the village of Broadley.

I was recruited as a PhD researcher through an advertisement on the job pages of the local newspaper. I had recently moved back to my hometown in the Midlands (England) having completed a master’s programme in London and I had also given birth to a baby boy six months prior to seeing the PhD advertisement. The PhD project was described as seeking to evaluate the impact of a (not yet established) community learning centre, a subject which strongly related to my master’s qualification, so I applied and subsequently won the scholarship. A member of the BV partnership (Howard Barber) was on the PhD interview panel as well as my two academic supervisors. It transpired that Howard had met one of my supervisors at a public event and this supervisor had raised the idea of attaching a PhD researcher to the project, an idea previously not entertained by BV. Howard, a senior manager, then gained funding from his employer (a multinational telecommunications company) to financially support a PhD for three years. When I entered the field the partnership could still be described as nascent, even though it had been developing incrementally for nearly 12 months. At this early stage the partnership had four visible partners: Alan Grogan (local councillor), Ronnie Smith (local businessman), Ann Harrison (a local voluntary sector project manager) and Howard Barber (a private sector national programme manager and personal friend of Ronnie Smith). Over the next two years a further eight partners became involved.

The BV partnership, and Howard Barber in particular, were interested in the role that a researcher could play in generating data with local community groups in the village that could feed into the development of the BV project. Thus, alongside my study of the partnership’s operation and trajectory, I worked with three community groups in Broadley. Howard expected that this community-level data would contribute to the development of an initial qualitative baseline that the resulting impacts of the community learning centre could be measured against. Indeed, it was uncritically envisaged by Howard that my research role would ultimately feed into the documentation of the partnership’s success. The collapse of the partnership, however, meant that this aspect of my role did not develop past my initial work with the community groups (Vigurs and Kara, 2017). Consequently, I was not able to draw on any of this community-based research in my PhD thesis and the study became solely focused on the ethnography of the BV partnership.

It is important to hold in mind that at the outset my role was not conceived by Howard, or any of the other partners, as playing a formal formative or developmental role in relation to exploring the inner workings of the BV partnership. I suspect this was partly because they did not anticipate that the BV partnership would fail to sustain itself or achieve its objectives. It is also consistent with the partnership’s founding members collectively overlooking the need to build in any formal reflective practice at that time. Some of the partners (Alan, Ronnie, Ann and Howard) separately reported to me that each had successfully worked in other partnerships before, which may have contributed to a false sense of confidence about BV succeeding. However, when I first encountered the BV partnership it was already showing symptoms of fatigue and inertia and had made little progress towards its goal despite having existed in name for eleven months. Furthermore, on entering the field I was immediately intrigued by the unreflective way in which the BV partnership appeared to be operating. I observed issues of tension, confusion and apathy from my earliest days in the field, which suggested that re-focusing the research on conflict and consensus within the BV partnership may be fruitful as the subject of the PhD.

The ethnography developed rich, nuanced and detailed data that would facilitate rounded and contextualised understandings of conflict and consensus during the partnership’s operation and trajectory. When I write about the study I do so with an ethnographic sensibility of valuing thick description of the social context and practices that were taking place (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This thick description was constructed from a range of data including: detailed field notes, which recorded my observations of unfolding events and partnership interactions over two years in the field (18 partnership meetings and 13 partnership-related activities); participants’ accounts of their experiences, through semi-structured interviews at two different time points in the partnership’s life; and partnership artefacts, such as meeting agendas, minutes, emails and letters of resignation from the partnership. Together these data show that partners differed in how they interpreted what was taking place within the BV partnership. The ethnographic research methods I employed generated just over 100,000 words of data and I used NVivo software to help me manage, code and analyse the data.

Whilst I was in the field I started reading round the subjects of partnership (as a means of contextualising BV) and community (in relation to the community group research I was conducting in parallel). When analysing the ethnographic data the existing partnership literature helped to provide initial explanations for some of the issues being raised in the data. However, early data interpretation also pointed to limitations in the partnership literature, raising questions around where heterogeneity, and specifically conflict, between partners might stem from, how it could be managed, and how dynamic social ties between partners might be implicated. In the field I had been struck by the relative strength of some partners’ relationships, and by the apparent isolation of others. The partnership literature only superficially outlined the source and management of partners’ heterogeneity and conflict, and did not help me understand the function of dynamic social ties at all. This prompted my re-engagement with the community literature in order to explore whether this body of literature could support analysis of the issues outlined above.

My development of the inter-related concepts of overlapping communities and dynamic social ties draws on conceptual debates found in the community literature, but is primarily grounded in the ethnographic data and findings I generated. Through analysing the data and interpreting the life of the BV partnership, I was confronted with a number of perplexing questions: What contributed to the partnership’s collapse? What kept the partnership going for so long given its fragility? In what ways is it appropriate to understand the operation and trajectory of the partnership in terms of overlaps between communities? What was the role of dynamic social ties in the formation, development and collapse of the BV partnership?

The ethnography on which my PhD thesis is built should be contributing to knowledge concerning the development of partnership policy and practice, and to approaches to researching partnership working. In terms of an addition to partnership theory there is no study that develops the concepts of overlapping community memberships and dynamic social ties in the analysis of conflict and consensus within partnership working. Conflict and consensus have been referred to in different ways in existing partnership literature, but my ethnography teases out how these elements can be understood. It demonstrates that the existing body of research and theory on partnership is deficient in two key respects. Firstly, it does not explicitly refer to partners’ multiple community memberships, aspects of which partners will inevitably bring with them to the partnership setting. Nor does it conceptualise conflict in partnership as stemming from instances of overlap between partners’ communities. Secondly, the partnership literature does not address the implications that a mix of dynamic social ties within a partnership might have for creating and sustaining co-operation between partners, and for managing and mediating instances of community overlaps. This ethnography developed an original approach to analysing and conceptualising conflict and consensus within partnerships, whether they ultimately succeed or fail. Furthermore, most partnership studies present their findings thematically, abstractly removed from the chronological order of events and episodes. However, in my ethnography I saw narrating the story of the partnership as necessary, so as to provide contextual detail to enable an assessment of whether the findings flow from the data. The inclusion and valuing of such a narrative offers a small contribution to ways of presenting findings from partnership research.

Finally, in relation to partnership practice, the conceptual developments made through the ethnography could be used to aid understandings of relational processes that can underpin and shape the development of conflict and consensus within partnership working. This could provide an important foundation for the reflective practice of partnership practitioners. The ethnography’s findings could be used to develop tools for locating the roots of conflict in partnership working and providing direction in how to go about negotiating solutions. In this sense, the ethnography challenges accounts of partnership policy and practice that assume that working in partnership will produce positive outcomes for all involved, and that it is always underpinned by altruism and rationality. The findings from the ethnography could be used to assist those struggling to understand the complexities, stresses and strains of partnership working.

At this point it is clear that an ethnography *was* carried out and *was* written up as a PhD thesis, so in what sense might it count as a lost ethnography? I consider it ‘lost’ in that I have tried writing it up for publication, but to date I have found that going back to the data – data that is marked by participants’ increasing anger, distress and hostility - always results in me getting stuck; I become paralysed by the emotions of ‘then’. Not just the emotions of the participants, but also the memory of the emotions I felt when generating the data. At the time, as a new researcher, I found myself feeling powerless, incredulous, highly anxious, unsupported, out of my depth and angry at partners’ behaviours. Despite many years having now past, returning to the data brings these uncomfortable and unsettling emotions back. Thus, I have not yet been able to publish from this study, which means the ethnography’s findings and implications for policy and practice that I have outlined above remain hidden in my PhD thesis.

**Getting lost**

I now move to explore in more detail what contributed to the ethnography ‘getting lost’ at the end of the research process and why I haven’t yet been able to easily find my way out of this situation. On reflection, it seems that I underestimated the emotional challenges of conducting in depth fieldwork over a prolonged period and the lasting impact that this would have. This is an issue that is increasingly recognised in the research methods literature (McGarrol, 2017; Fareen Parvez, 2017; Emerald and Carpenter, 2015; Davies and Spencer, 2010; Holland, 2007; Widdowfield, 2000). However, I did not anticipate in the beginning that my study would lead to the handling of complex emotions. Superficially it did not appear to be an ethnography that would be researching sensitive or distressing topics; after all I was not to be observing illegal activities or working in places where participants may be overtly vulnerable like hospitals or prisons (Drake and Harvey, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Pearson, 2009). I suppose part of the reason for this naivety was my then lack of sociological and applied social research experience. This ethnography was my first research project, and the nature of the project also meant that I entered the field at the very beginning of my PhD scholarship. There was no easing myself in. I was recruited as a PhD student one week and the next I was in the village of Broadley observing my first BV partnership meeting. Thus, despite reading widely on ethnographic research methods from day one, it is likely that I was under-prepared for dealing with the complexities of fieldwork. Interestingly, my supervisors thought that early entry to the field was important so that I could observe the setting up of the BV project as well as evaluate the eventual impacts of the community learning centre (which of course never happened). The genesis of a PhD scholarship specific to the enterprise of the BV partnership meant that I was privileged in being able to gain access to situations of conflict and tension in the field. I did not have to spend months trying to gain access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This ‘access all areas’ position is rare in the field of partnership research and ended up being essential for the ethnography that was produced. Had I been asked by the partnership to not attend some meetings (such as Ann’s ‘clear the air’ talks at meeting 15) or to refrain from taking notes during moments of conflict, or if partners had censored themselves from talking about the partnership problems during interviews, this would have inhibited the generation of sufficiently detailed data from which to develop new theoretical concepts. Other partnership researchers have not been so fortunate, being barred from interviewing certain partners or having their requests to observe meetings declined (Anning et al., 2006; Fitzgerald and Kay, 2008; Carter, 2009).

At the time of starting my scholarship I also did not realise how unusual it was to have a PhD scholarship in the field of social research funded by a private sector multinational company. Howard later explained his perception of how this came about ‘you came along as a surprise, a new opportunity through my meeting someone at the University, I just thought, hey, we could get some academic stuff going with this as well’. This raises questions about the nature (or lack) of strategic planning in relation to the role of the research. The way the PhD study came about and how it was funded also made me feel anxious at times during the fieldwork process. Specifically, as the dynamics between partners became increasingly dysfunctional it became clear that the PhD I’d been originally recruited to conduct was no longer possible as there was no community learning centre to evaluate and no community learners to engage with. The process of renegotiating the focus of the study to be the rapidly failing BV partnership itself was awkward for all concerned and I worried that the partners gave their consent to this shift to allow me to be able to complete the PhD rather than because they saw value in research about the partnership.

As alluded to above, gaining physical access to the field was not an issue for me, however, establishing and maintaining field relations with partners became an ongoing site of emotional labour. What I hadn’t realised was how linked our life courses would become over the duration of the fieldwork (Lewis, 2017), and how divisive partners would become in trying to establish ‘whose side I was on’ as the conflict within the partnership increased (Morris et al., 1998). It was at this point that I suddenly found myself conducting progressively sensitive research in a conflict zone (Carroll, 2013; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Wood, 2006), something that I had not anticipated or prepared for and that saw me develop multiple selves as a way to preserve relationships with multiple participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Initially, I was seen as a non-participant observer of meetings and activities, but over time I became treated more like a member of the partnership. To a degree the support that I gave to partners with discrete practical activities (such as delivering leaflets and painting walls in the community centre) was my attempt at implicitly paying back partners for the access and openness that had been afforded to me. This meant that I found myself moving at times between the ‘multiple selves’ of researcher and partnership project worker (Coffey, 1999). This led to several instances where partners asked for my opinion on issues, and spoke to me informally before and after meetings. Over time it became increasingly difficult to remain neutral in how I felt about the partners and their behaviours and, even though I think I achieved this neutrality in front of the partners, I had to use my field notes and research journal in order to be able to tolerate situations, actions and people that I increasingly disapproved of or found shocking (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 72).

My field notes were often a site of reflexivity during the fieldwork process. I routinely questioned the extent to which aspects of my social and cultural make-up might be influencing how I was interpreting what I was seeing and hearing in the field and how this might affect how participants perceived me. I include two excerpts from my field notes below:

‘In the meeting today I could feel myself wanting to side with Ann, although I didn’t let this show. There are several aspects that are driving this. The most obvious is that we both have experience of the voluntary sector [I had worked part-time in the voluntary sector for a number of years before starting the PhD]. We have similar reference points. I feel like I understand how she is thinking. I have to keep reminding myself that I am a researcher in this context… I also can’t ignore that we are both women in a male dominated partnership.’ (Field notes after Meeting 3)

‘Today I conducted my first interview with Alan. We met in the Council Leader’s Office at the Borough Council. It was a bit awkward at first. I felt like a school pupil in the headmaster’s office and found it hard to strike up rapport with him… Also, he made a bit of a thing about whether I really came from the local area. I told him I was born and raised in the city, but he said “Well, you wouldn’t know. Where’s your accent gone?” I didn’t know how to respond to this, but I felt embarrassed, challenged and patronised.’ (Field notes after interview with Alan Grogan)

To some extent the reflective field notes I kept helped me to continuously analyse what was shaping my relationships with people in the field. For example, I thought that being female and my previous experience of the voluntary sector might have influenced how I was pre-disposed to feel positively towards Ann (in the beginning at least). In relation to my initial relationship with Alan, I felt the age difference and the position of authority he held affected how I felt in his company, and possibly affected how he positioned me (young, inexperienced). His comment about my lack of a regional accent, and the assumption that I would have had one once and had since ‘lost’ it, also suggests that he was broadly positioning me as being unlike him in terms of social class and background, which may have affected the level of rapport we were able to build (Smyth and Mitchell, 2008).

Sometimes researchers are called upon to make commitments to one individual or group of participants in preference to another, to ‘take sides’. During the fieldwork process I found myself having to manage very carefully issues of confidentiality between partnership members, which at times placed me in a difficult ethical position. For example, during my second interviews with Ann Harrison and Ronnie Smith, each attempted to extract information from me about what the other had said and where my sympathies lay. Newby (1977: 118) found himself in a similar situation when researching rural communities:

‘One assurance I readily made and was determined to keep… was a guarantee of total confidentiality. This seems to me the right of every respondent, and it had to be firmly adhered to despite occasional nudges and winks over cups of tea to pass on the replies of others to certain questions.’

Like Newby I was very conscious of the need for confidentiality between partners. I also had to be careful when partners asked me what I thought was going on in relation to the operation and trajectory of the partnership. I managed to avoid breaking confidences during the fieldwork process, but as I was writing up the PhD thesis I began to feel nervous about partners reading my thesis in the future. I became increasingly concerned that I would not be able to protect partners’ anonymity and confidentiality if a member of BV chose to read the thesis. For example, despite the use of pseudonyms they would be able to work out the identity of each participant and that means they would also be able to read what others said about them in interview. I still feel uncomfortable about this aspect for ethical reasons.

One of the issues that caused me the most stress as a researcher during the fieldwork was witnessing the way that Ann, Ronnie, Alan and Howard behaved towards one another over time. The main theme was that Ronnie and Howard were dissatisfied with Ann’s role in the partnership. They saw her as ineffectual and incompetent. Whilst Ann saw Ronnie and Howard as a destructive clique that used bullying and obstructive behaviour to get their way. Meanwhile Alan cut a shady figure who seemed to be able to manipulate each side into thinking that he supported them and not the other. Observing increasing levels of conflict between participants created a permanent tension when collecting data and I strongly objected to seeing the emotional and psychological impacts of the conflict on individuals. Things came to a head when I conducted the final interviews with Ann and Ronnie a few days apart. These interviews left me feeling unsettled and shaken. Below I share some extracts from these interviews so that you can see what happened.

This is an extract from Ronnie’s interview where he condemns the way that charities operate (he is really talking about Ann) and explains his new dislike for working in partnership.

Ronnie: One thing I’ve learnt through this project is we don’t mix, business and charities, and to a certain extent local government just don’t mix… They don’t operate in a business-like way whatsoever… so certainly, I’d never ever get involved in another project with a charity.

Katy: And were you concerned about that to start with?

Ronnie: No, that’s developed. They just don’t operate out of the same set of values… They have no work ethic that I can see. They don’t work as hard as we do. I feel very bitter about it… If I was to do this again, I would go the same way we always go, we would have very clear contracts… And I’d sue them if they didn’t deliver or sack them if they worked for me. Simple as that. None of this airy fairy partnership stuff [*Ronnie’s face became increasingly blotchy during this exchange. He spoke quietly but urgently and aggressively (not towards me). It felt like he was spitting the words out with real animosity*].

This contrasts with an excerpt from Ann’s interview where she blames the private sector (she’s really talking about Ronnie and Howard) for bringing about the downfall of the BV partnership.

Ann: There is a lack of understanding from the private sector contingent in relation to how, for example, government, local and central, works. And I actually am doing them a great favour by saying that there is a lack of understanding because I actually think that they understand it very, very well. What they’re not prepared to do is work with it. So there is a down right disregard for processes.

Katy: How does this affect the development of the project or the effectiveness of the partnership?

Ann: It’s completely decimated it, there’s no other word. It’s ruined it. [*Ann’s voice was full of raw emotion when she spoke these words, so much so that I asked her if she wanted to end the interview or take a break. It was clear she took Ronnie and Howard’s behaviour personally and was deeply affected by it. It wasn’t long after this interview that she formally resigned from the BV partnership.*]

Another example of sabotaging behaviour was exhibited this time by Ann, who reportedly tried to prevent Ronnie from getting access to the community centre:

Ronnie: …a week later I needed the keys to the centre and I find that Ann has demanded them because she heard that I wanted to use them. I mean, that’s bloody pathetic, ‘I own the keys’, it’s like stamping your feet. Well, I’ve solved that problem now [spoken with conspiratorial tone], we’ve all got keys… Alan’s on our side, he’s definitely with us.

Ronnie was able to circumvent Ann’s attempt to exert power over him by using his increasingly off-stage relationship with Alan to navigate such problems. For example, in this case he asked Alan to arrange for him to have his own key to the council-owned community centre, despite refusing to attend partnership meetings or deal with any partners that weren’t Howard or Alan. This in turn made Ann feel progressively powerless, impotent and marginal:

Ann: Howard’s communication with me started to dwindle off and I haven’t heard from him since Christmas. And even though I have sent him numerous emails, asking him for updates, for feedback into the partnership meetings in his absence, asked for numerous sorts of information, he hasn’t got back to me at all… I think I can cope with most things but I can’t actually cope with being totally ignored [*looks visibly upset*]… If you can’t get together and sort this out, you know, for Ronnie and Howard to hand out a paper that was basically a complete and utter slating about what happened at the community launch event and then to not be present to discuss it, I find it abhorrent [*red in the face and holding back tears*].

In my final interview with Ronnie after he had spoken so disparagingly about the partnership and about Ann’s role in particular, I asked what was stopping him from contacting Ann and saying ‘What’s going on?’

Ronnie: She’s uncommunicative, and besides, I don’t need to. I don’t need to have that special bond. I mean I have no power as far as she’s concerned [*laughs slyly*] so I now just ignore the partnership completely. I mean I would just take it out altogether, I would just move it to one side. And that’s what’s going to happen; they just don’t know it yet. They will become increasingly marginalised. I mean if Howard weren’t so honourable, we would have done it a while ago.

Having spent two years conducting this ethnography of a partnership, and having developed relationships with each partner, it was upsetting to see the relationships between the core partners deteriorate to such an extent that they were being emotionally and psychologically affected in negative and damaging ways. It was also hard to passively receive their angry views and opinions in their one-to-one interviews. At times it felt that they were using the research interviews as a space to exorcise their own emotions, perhaps not considering how this might affect me. As I said earlier, it was difficult for me to handle the emotional challenges of conducting such acrimonious interviews at the time of the fieldwork, but what became more problematic was how these emotions did not subside over time, which ended up affecting my ability to go back to the data to pursue academic publications.

Something else that occurred at the end of my ethnographic fieldwork was a wholesale change of supervisory team, another unsettling moment for me as a developing ethnographer. My two original supervisors, who specialised in higher education ethnographies and qualitative evaluation methods, both gained promotions at other institutions, which meant that I needed to find a new supervisor. My PhD project and I were taken on by a different principal supervisor who was an established and experienced educational researcher, but whose discipline was economics. My new supervisor was also an expert in quantitative methods. He was genuinely interested in my project and we discussed at length whether it would be a problem that we were not rooted in the same academic discipline. It was decided (again perhaps naively) that given that I had already completed the ethnographic fieldwork that our differing disciplines would not interfere with my analysis and writing up. The literature had supported this idea. For example, authors like Coffey (1999) and Elliott, Ryan and Hollway (2012) are absolutely clear that ethnographic fieldwork is physical and emotional work, but less was written at the time of my study about the potential ongoing emotional impacts from fieldwork once data collection is finished. There is a growing literature that now warns researchers of the possibility of ongoing researcher discomfort and distress post-data collection (McGarrol, 2017; Punch, 2012; Woodby et al., 2011). Unfortunately, my new supervisor and I were not prepared that I would encounter difficult and uncomfortable emotions when analysing the data and writing up. Neither of us knew how to best handle this nor the academic writing paralysis that followed. I wrote in my research journal at this time:

‘I think my supervisor thinks I’m being silly or lazy or a qualitative data drama queen. He can’t seem to understand why I find it difficult going back to the data. But the 100,000 words of field notes and interview transcripts are so full of participant anger and negative emotions. It’s really wearing going through it again and again. And what’s worse is that I know how badly the BV experience affected some of the participants, and my research wasn’t able to make the slightest bit of difference to them. I feel like I failed them. When I tried to explain this to my supervisor he was sympathetic but ended by saying “This doesn’t happen with statistics”, which felt undermining of the whole situation.’

It is uncomfortable re-reading my research journal post-fieldwork stage as I was clearly looking to make sense of my experience but instead I was met with a lack of suitable ethnographic mentoring. It is also noticeable that my research journal entries get fewer after this entry, which suggests my confidence in both the ethnographic methods and myself as a researcher began to diminish. Once I had achieved my PhD, this supervisor also moved institution, which I actually felt relieved about. Not because I didn’t respect him or enjoy working with him, but because it felt like a fresh start for me as a post-doctoral researcher. However, this fresh start began with me immediately mothballing the partnership ethnography so that I no longer had to face how the data made me feel, and this is where it remained until preparing for this chapter. This chapter provided the impetus to reflect deeply upon the unpublished ethnography in way that felt legitimate and productive. It also prompted me to read more widely round the phenomenon of emotional labour in ethnographic research and its impact on the researcher, which means I am now less inclined to position the ethnography as a failed project.

**Conclusion**

At this point in time my ethnography remains lost in the sense that I have not felt able to publish findings from the study. This is because I continue to experience revisiting the data and the rewriting required to publish from the study as uncomfortable, unsettling and anxiety provoking. I have not yet found the support or developed the strategies to recover from this academic paralysis and this, in turn, feels like I have failed as a researcher. However, this does not mean that I haven’t learned anything through this experience. In some senses my lost ethnography has provided deep professional learning, which has contributed to my strengths as an effective and supportive doctoral supervisor, and to the way I facilitate learning about qualitative research methods with higher education students. I also learned a lot about setting up research projects and how to (re)negotiate the role and expectations of the researcher, particularly in formative evaluation contexts where the researcher is implicated in the development of the project.

It is frustrating that there are insights for wider education policy and practice that remain absent in the field due to the findings of this ethnography being caught in limbo. Partnership working is still a dominant theme in social policy and education. For example, in 2017 the National College for Teaching and Leadership explicitly advocates on its website ‘partnership working for school improvement’ stating that ‘working in isolation is no longer an option, and partnership working is a central feature of the current [education policy] context.’ However, despite the concept’s ubiquity in policy and practice it remains under-researched and under-theorised, especially with respect to conceptualising relational processes that can shape conflict and consensus within partnership practice. The concept of partnership working continues to be applied uncritically. My (currently unpublished) ethnographic study would challenge naïve invocations of partnership working. It would contest the simplistic, recipe-based formulas for achieving partnership success by richly illustrating what can happen when partners do not develop sufficiently strong and balanced sets of social ties between one another. In the course of the BV partnership ultimately failing, it presented many problems and dilemmas for the partners (and those seeking to make sense of it), and understanding such conflicts would be valuable for developing theory around partnership working.

Revisiting the ethnography nearly ten years on has made me realise that it produced knowledge about partnership working that is still worth sharing. It should be of interest to policymakers, particularly those considering the expediency of partnership working in the field of education. The conceptual framework of partnerships as instances of overlapping communities, mediated by dynamic social ties, would still be useful in unpacking ‘messy’ partnership practice. I can now see that there remains value in communicating the concepts of overlapping communities and dynamic social ties as theoretical instruments for aiding the reflective practice of those engaged in partnership working. The concepts have instructive implications for partnership practice, as they describe relational concepts that could depersonalise conflict and support the development of shared, empathetic perspectives. This is something that I will now seek to pursue.

Writing this chapter has been cathartic. It has performed the role of a sort of ethnographic exorcism in that the negative effects of the original ethnography are beginning to subside and I am starting to feel that I can move through the academic paralysis that I have felt for so long in relation to this project. In fact, since preparing to write this chapter, I have also managed to publish a methodological paper elsewhere on the back of the study (Vigurs and Kara, 2017), which gives me hope that the ethnography of a partnership failure is not in fact lost forever.

**Word count:** 6454

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