Through the looking glass: the emotional journey of the volunteer ethnographer when researching sensitive topics with vulnerable populations

Fábio Rafael Augusto¹ and Ana Patrícia Hilário¹

¹Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, Portugal. fabio.augusto@ics.ulisboa.pt; patriciahilario@gmail.com

This paper extends further research on being both a volunteer and ethnographic researcher and intends to offer some insights on the emotional challenges of adopting this dual role when conducting research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations. While there is some work on the ethical and methodological challenges of conducting ethnographic research on sensitive topics and with vulnerable populations (e.g. Watts, 2008; Whoodthorpe, 2009), there is little information available about the dilemmas faced by researchers when adopting the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer (O’Conner & Baker, 2017). Tinney (2008) and Garthwaite (2016) have discussed the role of being both an insider and outsider, as well as the emotional (de)attachment to the field when adopting this dual role but they have not provided sufficient insights on being a volunteer ethnographer in sensitive contexts and with vulnerable subjects. The intention of the current paper is to overcome this gap and to build knowledge on this matter for researchers to be prepared for emotionally demanding experiences when adopting the volunteer ethnographer role.

The discussion presented here draws upon an ongoing PhD project that seeks to analyze three food aid initiatives operating in Portugal (Re-food, Food Bank and Social Canteen) and the voluntary-beneficiary relationships. This article will focus on the ethnographic participant observation research already developed in a food redistribution organization (Re-food) and the challenges that emerged in the contact with the field. Voluntary work in Re-food involved the direct distribution of food to the beneficiaries and, therefore, made it possible to explore the initiative itself as well as the volunteer-beneficiary relationship. Since the group of beneficiaries is subject to labelling, exclusion and stigmatization processes by the special difficult phase they are facing in their lives, it’s considered appropriate to discuss the vulnerable group concept. Also, since the study focuses on the phenomenon of poverty, particularly food poverty, issues related to the sensitivity of the topic emerge.

This article aims to offer guidance to researchers who intend to adopt the dual role of the volunteer ethnographer for developing their work on sensitive topics and/or with vulnerable populations. It builds awareness on the emotional challenges in the field and discusses potential self-reflexive strategies for researchers to cope with the extraordinary demands posed on them by specific circumstances and subjects. The article shows that volunteer ethnographers, when developing their work, are subject to a wide range of emotional challenges that are related to the functions that they had to develop in the research context itself due to their dual role, as well as to the vulnerability of participants and the sensitivity of the topic addressed. A self-reflexive approach will enable volunteer ethnographers to be better equipped to deal with these challenges.

**Keywords:** volunteer ethnographer; sensitive topics; vulnerable subjects; emotions; food poverty.

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