The ethical bottom line for sociologists is, ‘first, do no harm’. This can mean taking care that how we present our research does not add to raced, classed and gendered oppressions, and equally, avoiding a well-meaning shrug and a response of ‘It’s complicated’. At its best, sociology takes seriously the personal, everyday struggles and inconsistencies of individuals; but it does this while also keeping in mind the larger structural forces that shape those everyday struggles and give them meaning.

Social life is nuanced and complicated, and capturing and representing this complexity in research is difficult. When producing our analysis we at least have time and space for reflection, for multiple attempts to get it right (or to fail again, but fail better – following Samuel Beckett but also Michael Keith’s (2005: 133) application of this formulation to social research). But we can face more immediate challenges in our data generation, which go beyond the questions of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and fidelity to the data which are covered by most discussions of research ethics. Often in empirical research we can face unanticipated challenges of how to comport ourselves as researchers, and simply as human beings.

One example of such challenges in our project is illustrated by this extract from Emma’s fieldnotes of a focus group she held in Glasgow with asylum seekers and refugees:

Things got very emotional when the older woman from Zimbabwe started talking about her situation, including not being able to afford to repair her broken glasses that are held together with Sellotape, being refused a bus pass and most of all her separation from her children. She is in tears, as are two other members of the group and I am also blinking back tears trying to remain ‘the researcher’. I reach for the older woman’s hand and hold it for a
few minutes while she carries on talking. Her upset is laced with anger at the injustice of her situation. A few minutes later she describes the impossibility of her living situation and then looking me in the eye asks ‘would you look after me in your house as well as you would look after yourself?’ I am rather floored by this, even though it is a rhetorical question. But the message is, sympathy is not enough here.

(Emma’s fieldnotes)

How would you behave in this situation? If you have been trained as a sociological researcher, you have probably thought about questions such as objectivity, positionality, reflexivity and rapport. But all of this training and reflection in advance cannot remove the discomfort and confusion from moments like this. Moments like this provoke questions about the practices we use to produce data, as well as the meanings of the data. They also, often, force us to think about what it means to be a researcher in these interpersonal situations. How you might behave in this situation depends on who you are, what you have experienced, and your personal and political beliefs, as well as your training as a researcher.

As anti-racist feminist researchers, we have not aimed for objectivity because it seems to us that this is always an illusion. Objectivity is the idea that there is a single truth about the way the world exists, which researchers can aim to find, without being biased by their own opinions, experiences or expectations. The idea that any interpretation of the world can be objective has been challenged by theorists who demonstrate that all knowledge is situated – that is, everything we know is informed by our ways of knowing, from the language we use to make sense of the world to the parts of the world we think are important or irrelevant (see e.g. Haraway, 1991; Rose, 1997). Instead, we have sought to recognise our positionality – that is, to consider our own role in the research environment and generation of data, alongside the people we are studying. This means recognising that how researchers interpret the world is informed by our training as academic researchers in a particular discipline, who have read and been convinced by certain theories. It also means recognising that our influence on other people and the way we understand and interact with the world is informed by things other than our professional selves – for example, our gender, ethnicity, age, class, accent, the way we dress, the ways we talk to other people, the political and ethical views we hold, our personal values, and our previous experiences. We believe this is true of all research, and so these elements need to be taken into account when we conduct research,
and when we analyse what our research encounters mean. This is what is meant by reflexivity – not just acknowledging that everyone is positioned differently in relation to knowledge and power (much less, suggesting that as a result any interpretation is equally valid), but recognising that all knowledge is the product of specific relations in specific times and places, and that specificity is part of the essence of understanding and making sense of research.

So what are the specifics of the interaction described in Emma’s fieldnotes above, and how can we think about dealing with these kinds of moments as researchers? This was a situation in which a white British researcher employed by a university was in a room with a number of people of varying ethnicities and nationalities, all of whom had come to the UK to seek asylum; some of them had secured refugee status, others were still waiting to see if they would be allowed to stay and therefore very precarious in terms of their legal status, their living conditions and what they could expect in their future. Emma had not met the group before, though a worker from the community group with whom we were conducting the research was there too, and knew others in the group. Emma had explained the reasons for the research to everyone there, explained how we would use the data, asked for their permission to record the meeting and made it clear that they could withdraw if they wished. This is known in researcher jargon as gaining informed consent and is partly a way of addressing power inequalities between researchers and those they research, by aiming to ensure that people being researched are willing and know what they are getting into.

Nevertheless, as a result of taking part in the research, the participant became visibly distressed, and explained a painful situation in which she still found herself. The researcher recorded this for use in her work (the story became data), while the participant herself would continue to have to live in this situation. The researcher was sympathetic and tried to express her sympathy (for example, by holding the participant’s hand), but then was ‘floored’ by the recognition of a direct challenge to the value of this sympathy when faced with the material conditions of their different situations.

The reason for pointing to this uneasiness in the research encounter is not to identify ways of (the researcher) being more comfortable with similar situations in future. Nor is the intention to put the researcher (or her feelings) at the centre of the situation, since the purpose of the event was to explore the experiences of the participants. Elsewhere in this book we have tried to show how we have listened to and analysed the experiences and data we gathered for our research, and situated these within wider social structures and
power relations. But here we think it might be helpful for other researchers who recognise these ‘uneasy’ situations we enter and provoke in our work, to think about what it means to practise research in this way – and to think about ways of acting in these very immediate situations when they occur.

There are a few more things to keep in mind when thinking about these uneasy research situations, and the ethics of bringing them about (however inadvertently), acting in the moment, and writing about them afterwards (see also Dreher, 2009). First, the role of the social researcher is important. If Emma had been present at the focus group as someone who could help to fix the research participant’s housing or immigration situation, she might have been of more practical help – but she would not have been able to document the longer-term experiences of the group in the way she has as a researcher. One of the values of sociological research is to document social relations, to provide analysis of individual stories and wider trends, and to make the links between these. There is a value in this just as there is a value in the very different role of providing advocacy or support, and as long as it is made clear to participants _why_ the researcher is doing what they do, this does not make the encounter ‘unethical’.

The notion of informed consent in research is important. Too often the practice of gaining consent is treated simply as a way of demonstrating the ‘good practice’ of the researcher. However, if it is meaningful, then the giving of consent and participation in the research is also a purposeful act by the research participant. Their choice to share their ideas and experiences with the researcher should be respected. In situations like the one described here, people are sharing their experience willingly, if not in conditions of their choosing (they might prefer, for example, not to have the kind of experiences that merit sharing in this way). Power inequalities are ever-present, but that does not mean that research participants, however vulnerable, should be treated as if they do not have their own agency and ability to make choices about sharing their lives – and, as in the example above, to question the situations in which they find themselves, including the research situation.

We are not able to provide any easy solutions to how researchers ‘should’ behave when such moments happen – except to suggest that they are important moments on which to reflect, when power relations are sharpened or perhaps shift slightly. To this end, we have provided below some questions for researchers or aspiring researchers to reflect on, which might help you to prepare for similar situations in your own fieldwork. You might find it helpful to discuss the questions below with others, particularly if they have different
experiences of research (or life) from yours. You could also think together about why your responses are different or similar, share similar experiences you have encountered in research, and ask the same questions of those situations with hindsight.

How would you respond in the situation described in Emma’s fieldnotes?

Try to imagine the situation and place yourself in it rather than thinking about what the ‘right’ response might be. What would your immediate reaction be? How might others present react, both to the initial situation and your response?

How far do you think your response relates to your own presentation of self, and the ways others might perceive you? Might your reactions be perceived differently if you were a researcher of a different gender, ethnicity, nationality, class? How might previous personal relationships (or their absence) affect your possible response?

Finally, what effect might your possible response in these situations have on the data you could collect? Would it produce different data in terms of responses from participants? Would your feelings about the situation make it into your analysis – explicitly or otherwise? How far do you think the interaction itself is important to analyse?

You may also find it useful to access an online video resource we have prepared based on another situation in our research, which raises similar questions. This can be found at https://youtu.be/GbvwuXOVLHI.

References


