

Somewhere Between a Stopwatch and a Recording Device: Ethnographic Reflections From the Pool

Journal of Contemporary Ethnography
2024, Vol. 53(1) 31–50
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DOI: 10.1177/08912416231200642
journals.sagepub.com/home/jce



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Abstract

As has recently been highlighted, despite the prevalence of methodological “confessional tales” in ethnography generally, the challenges of undertaking ethnographic research specifically in institutional sports settings remain underexplored. Drawing on data from a 3-year ethnographic study of competitive swimming in the United Kingdom (UK), here we explore some of the practical challenges of balancing different elements of the researcher’s role when undertaking ethnographic “insider” research in familiar settings. In particular, we consider the difficulties of balancing the role of a doctoral researcher and the chosen research role of a volunteer coach with a competitive swimming program. Employing the anthropological concept of liminality, we also analyze the lived challenges of leaving a highly familiar field and entering a state of liminality, where the researcher was caught on the threshold betwixt and between a return to full-time employment in the former “known” role of coach, and a move forward to embrace a new “unknown” role as a full-time member of academic staff.

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Keywords

ethnography, reflection, liminality, researcher role, insider

Introduction

Ethnographers have often been encouraged to “come clean” about the messy nature of their research, and in so doing to portray the complex realities of undertaking in-depth research with specific social groups with which they might lay claim to a degree of “insider” status. As Bowles and colleagues (2021) highlight, such methodological “confessions” constitute an established genre of ethnographic writing, and yet despite their prevalence, methodological reflections on the specific challenges of conducting ethnography in institutional sports settings remain underdeveloped. Furthermore, as ethnographers, we can also be reticent about writing “confessional tales” (Van Maanen 1998) about researching groups with whose members we have developed relatively long-lasting personal relationships, with sometimes intimate knowledge and shared experiences (Ellis 2007; Owton and Allen-Collinson, 2014). Yet, the highs and lows, stresses and strains, and moments of confusion, elation and despair that can occur while in the field are often the very aspects that keep us engaged in, and inspired by, ethnographic research and the myriad social encounters of which it is comprised. In this article, we seek to illuminate some of the tensions, challenges, and also pleasures that were encountered while conducting an in-depth ethnographic study of the lived experience of competitive swimmers (McNarry et al. 2021) in an institutional setting in which the first author, Gareth, became a member, joining the coaching team as a volunteer assistant. Gareth had long experience of being both a competitive swimmer and a coach to competitive swimmers and found himself drawn, at times willingly and at times less willingly, back to the latter role (see also, McMahon et al. 2020). Furthermore, balancing these fluctuations between roles and role demands necessitated substantial and ongoing work to maintain his ethnographer identity, perspective, and professional role during the study. We also analyze here the particular challenges of leaving a fieldwork site that has offered much more than just data collection opportunities to the researcher; for him, the research setting also provided something of a familiar haven, replete with warm, collegial, and reciprocal relationships whilst simultaneously being a place of opportunity and temptation. Subsequent to successful completion of his doctoral research, Gareth in many ways entered a state of liminality, caught on the threshold betwixt and between a return to full-time employment in his former “known” role of coach, and a move forward to embrace a new and “unknown” role as an academic in UK university employment.

The concept of liminality on which we draw here was originally employed by van Gennep (1960/1909) in his ground-breaking anthropological study of *rites de passage*—*The Rites of Passage*. The first English translation was made available only in 1960, but had a substantial impact, both in academic circles and more widely. As Kertzer (2019, vii) notes in his introduction to the second edition of “Rites” (van Gennep, 2019): “Even now, well over half a century since the (English) translation was published, hundreds of scholarly publications in a vast array of disciplines refer to the book every year.” Indeed, the concept of rites de passage/rites of passage has entered the general lexicon, portraying how our lives encompass a whole series of role transitions or phases (some highly formalized, others more informal), structured by the wider socio-cultural context that we inhabit. These phases, for van Gennep, are threefold, comprising (1) separation from the old role; (2) a liminal period between roles; and then (3) the adoption of the new role. Derived from the Latin, *limen*, meaning threshold or doorstep, the concept of liminality thus refers to the state of being between two stages of life or modes of existence, and describes being “betwixt and between” states (Turner 1974), often involving a high degree of ambiguity. As Kertzer (2019, xxvii) notes, two of the most influential anthropologists to find their inspiration in van Gennep’s work were Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, both of whom based some of their key works on the concept of a marginal or liminal state. Turner (1974) also employed the concept of “liminoid” to describe a situation of optionality in contrast to “liminal” states, which are characterized more by obligation, or lack of choice.

In contemporary times, the concept of liminality continues to thrive and is still widely employed in a range of anthropological and sociological research, and within social science writing more generally (see e.g., Mälksoo 2012). In sociology, it is often used to describe a person’s temporary or transitional status, for example, when undergoing training at a pre-qualification stage for entry to a profession or occupation (Bamber et al. 2017), undergoing transition rituals in youth groups (Corsaro and Johannesen 2014), constructing journalist identities on Twitter (Lê and Lander 2023), and moving transnationally (Jones 2013), to give just some examples from this wide-ranging literature. It can also be used to describe a temporary, in-between condition where organizational structures and systems are “suspended” (Bamber et al. 2017; Sturdy et al. 2006), and has also been applied to liminal spaces, such as changing rooms, where individuals transition from, for example, their everyday selves (and clothing) into a sporting or leisure role (Evans and Allen-Collinson 2023). Rarely, however, has it been used in relation to sports and/or physical-cultural contexts (Sydnor 2000), and particularly to ethnographic research in formal, institutional sports settings. Here, we use the concept of liminality to theorize Gareth’s state of uncertainty regarding employment

post-completion of his doctorate, including the uncertainty about whether he would return to a former status of swimming coach or, after successfully negotiating the *rite de passage* of gaining a PhD, decide to seek entry into academia. First, though, we introduce the research project from which our reflections are drawn, before discussing Gareth's ethnographic role(s). Subsequently, we portray analytically the challenges of balancing dual roles as a researcher (participant and observer, in various combinations) and swimming coach, and then entering a state of occupational liminality betwixt and between very different occupational roles.

Back in the Swim—Reflexivity and Researching the Swimming Lifeworld

Before commencing the doctoral research project upon which this paper focuses, ethical approval was granted by the relevant university ethics committee. The purpose of the doctoral project was to study ethnographically the everyday routines and embodied, sensory experiences of competitive (or performance) swimmers in the UK. To gain a range of varied experiences, data were collected by Gareth over the duration of a full swimming season (September to July in the UK) from two “performance” (i.e., Olympic standard) groups of competitive swimmers aged between 18 and 22 (a total of 36 swimmers), who were based at one of the top ranked sporting universities in the UK (to be referred to with the pseudonym of Aegir, Neptune, Poseidon [ANP] Swimming henceforth). As Gareth was well acquainted with the lifeworld of competitive swimming, as both a former swimmer and then as a swimming coach, one of the key initial challenges was to render the familiar strange. We, therefore, engaged in bracketing endeavors as a research team (see also Allen-Collinson 2011; McNarry et al. 2019), with the co-authors/doctoral supervisors acting as constructive “critical friends” (Smith and McGannon 2018), who sought to help identify and problematize Gareth's insider knowledge and assumptions about the lifeworld of competitive swimming, to facilitate the thematization of these ways of knowing. The precise ways in which we engaged in bracketing and reflexivity explorations form the focus of an earlier article (McNarry et al. 2019), but we give a “feel for” these discussions and endeavors below.

One of the supervisory team, Adam, had also been a competitive swimmer himself in the selfsame setting within which the current research took place. Hence, although many personnel in this space had changed (although the current head coach had been a former team-mate), Adam was also familiar with the spaces, sights, sounds, smells, and general sensoriality of the swimming lifeworld within the research setting. Although he had not competed in over

a decade, Adam's recollections of competitive swimming, including the heavy training workloads over long hours, and the sometimes "intense embodiment" sensory elements (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015) of being in the pool—*this* pool—remained vivid. Our discussions strongly rekindled many of these memories and feelings, and Adam's specialist insider knowledge of swimming terminology, meanings, and practices, made him a strong sounding board. Furthermore, having previously conducted research on leisure and non-competitive experiences of swimming (e.g., Evans and Allen-Collinson 2016; Evans et al. 2017), Adam could bring his research experiences to bear on our discussions of what made competitive swimming distinctive from non-competitive swimming, and so he sought to challenge various taken-for-granted assumptions Gareth had about the latter. In contrast to these insiders to the physical-cultural world of competitive swimming, Jaqui was a complete outsider, with very little experience of swimming at all. She would regularly pose "naïve" questions to her experienced swimmer colleagues, including seeking to challenge their taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings of competitive swimming practices. Jaqui did, however, have an in-depth embodied experience of endurance sport and the training practices associated with developing mind-body endurance in distance running, including sensory "intense embodiment" (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015) experiences. Her positionality as an outsider to the physical culture of competitive swimming, but an insider to the physical-cultural world of endurance sport, afforded her a different perspective from her two experienced swimming colleagues.

In addition to these "bracketing discussions" (Allen-Collinson 2011; McNarry et al. 2019), and prior to entering the research field, Gareth also engaged in self-elicited reflections on his own experiences of the swimming lifeworld. Having been retired from competitive swimming as a swimmer (but not as a coach) for 14 years, Gareth "re-entered the pool" with the express purpose of undertaking a swim session, and recording in-depth his sensory, embodied reflections on this experience. These auto-methodological (Pensoneau-Conway and Toyosaki 2011), self-elicited reflections were then analyzed as part of the overall data set. Being out of competitive swimming for such a long period meant that many of the previously familiar, mundane, and taken-for-granted sensory feelings and practices Gareth had encountered as a swimmer were suddenly rendered strange, unfamiliar, and corporeally challenging. The following extract taken from Gareth's reflective notes post-swim illuminates his lived experience of such "strangeness":

I enter the last 15m of the 50m, and I can feel my hands starting to ache. Muscles have been working at their maximum capacity for 35m and the tingling

starts in the tips of my fingers. It's like lots of little pins being stuck into my skin and it's starting to spread. . . I fully expected that perhaps my triceps or shoulders would tighten, but they feel ok. This is strange to me. . .

[As I finish the 50m] I become overtly aware of my beating heart and gasping breaths. I find the sensations oddly pleasurable and discomforting at the same time. Pleasurable due to feeling alive, feeling my heart pulsing fast. . . knowing that freshly oxygenated blood is being moved around my body. . . but also, I feel discomforted. I don't consider myself to be an unfit or unhealthy individual, yet here I am after 50m of fast swimming, gasping for air and hanging on the end of the pool like I've just completed the most grueling training set ever. It's frustrating because these things used to come so easily [and] here I am feeling drained after only 50 m.

The above excerpt exemplifies some of the ways in which we sought to mitigate the insider researcher's familiarity with a "known" physical culture being researched; this very familiarity with the swimming world did, however, offer considerable advantages, not least in gaining access to the ethnographic research site (see also Hutchings et al. 2018). This process was initially facilitated by a discussion at a swimming competition with the then director of swimming at ANP Swimming, Clark,¹ early in the research project. This initial discussion led to further email correspondence between Gareth and the coaches at the target research site, to clarify the purpose of the study and their own requirements. Once satisfied with this information and explanations, the coaches then invited Gareth to speak directly to the swimmers themselves, to gauge their interest in being part of the study. Gareth and the study were well received by all, and an initial data collection phase was set for later that year, when it was agreed that Gareth would adopt the role of a volunteer assistant coach, drawing on his extensive knowledge and experience of being a swimming coach.

In adopting this role, Gareth was well-placed to select information-rich cases in the form of participants with considerable lived experience of the performance-swimming lifeworld. It also accorded him privileged access to the field (or pool, in this case) where he completed, in total, over 300 hours of observations across three, five-week "immersions" (see also Hutchings et al. 2018) in the field site. These observations were recorded via Gareth's iPhone, with detailed notes subsequently written up immediately after every session, indicating what was going on in the session, including who went in which lane, how participants looked physically, the activities undertaken, such as the content and intensity of the session in terms of time, repetitions, kick, pull, swim, and any equipment used, and how the swimmers responded, for example, physically via body language, actions, effort level, or verbal expressions regarding one another's performance. Notes were drafted about specific

incidents or moments that stood out from the mundane activities of the pool, but also, and importantly, notes were kept systematically about the normal, everyday routines of the swimming sessions. Fieldnotes were written primarily in the form of Gareth's first-person narrative, giving him space to reflect upon the more nuanced behaviors he observed. In addition to these detailed observational notes, data were also collected via semi-structured interviews (19 individual interviews conducted during the first data collection immersion and three group interviews conducted during the third data collection immersion), to elicit participants' feelings, attitudes, and general swimming embodiment, in their own words. It is on Gareth's own experiences as a neophyte researcher that we focus on here, however; theorizations drawn from the interviews can be found in other articles (e.g., McNarry *et al.* 2021).

Data analysis of interview transcripts and field notes was undertaken by drawing on the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach portrayed by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2019). This process comprised Gareth familiarizing himself with the data by repeated listening to the recordings, and via multiple readings of the transcripts and notes. He then proceeded to generate initial codes, followed by identifying and defining themes, all in discussion with other members of the research team, who acted as "critical friends" (Smith and McGannon 2018) throughout. As Braun and Clarke (2019) emphasize, RTA represents more of an "adventure than a recipe," requiring researchers to move back and forth between data and analysis, carefully refining and redeveloping the initially generated themes and concepts. We next address considerations of Gareth's specific researcher role in the pool environment.

Participant Observation: Entering the Pool

As has been well documented (e.g., Gibson-Light and Seim 2020; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Sparkes and Smith 2014), the researcher's role within an ethnographic project can take many forms along what might be conceptualized as a continuum running between the position of complete observer (rare in contemporary ethnographic studies) and complete participant. Most fieldwork is, however, hybridized and situated somewhere between these two poles, with the researcher shifting—sometimes rapidly—between degrees of participation and observation, according to context and data collection requirements. As Seim (2021) notes, whilst participant observation presents more opportunities for mobile positioning, outward gazing, and inscription, observant participation presents more opportunities for fixed positioning, inward gazing, and incarnation, highlighting the advantages of mixing these styles into a hybrid approach when feasible. In the current research, this hybrid approach provided a level of flexibility that allowed Gareth to move

along the participant–observer continuum as necessary, and as suited to his purpose, or the interactional requirements of the setting, at any point and in specific contexts. For example, when Gareth re-entered the pool himself as part of the auto-methodological process portrayed above, he entered a more observant participation mode. As delineated above, Gareth adopted the role of a volunteer assistant coach, providing support to the coaches and swimmers, giving him the option to observe from differing degrees of proximity. This position is one with which Gareth felt comfortable and confident, having been both a swimmer and swimming coach, rendering him a “cultured insider” (Evers 2006) to the field site. As we have previously noted (e.g., Allen-Collinson 2013), however, it is debatable whether anyone—particularly in their research role—can ever be deemed a complete member of any social group, but it is likely to be more accurate to posit degrees of insiderness and outsiderhood, which change over time, place, and social context. As Trzeczyska (2022) similarly argues in relation to ethnicity, the “nativeness” and “strangeness” of the researcher are always contextual. Furthermore, Bowles and colleagues (2021, 694) note in relation to their insider research on cricket, a researcher can be an “insider to the context” in Dandelion’s (1997) terms, in being fully socialized into a particular sport and familiar with its peculiarities and “eccentricities.” In our own research, while an experienced competitive swimmer himself, Gareth was not previously familiar with the specific ethos, training regimes, language, or social actors of the particular university program where the research was being undertaken, as the following fieldnote/reflection illustrates:

One of the challenges I am currently facing is adjusting to different language and symbols used at ANP Swimming. For example, they use colors to represent training intensities. I am so used to referring to “beats below maximum” heart rate that I’ve found myself trying to convert colors to numbers and vice versa. This challenge was further highlighted when one of the freshers asked me what “Red” was and I had to explain it to them in other terms such as “threshold” or “30 Below” (30 beats below your maximum heart rate). Each coach in the program also has their own specific language and acronyms that I will need to get an understanding of moving forward. (Fieldnote, October 2017)

Keeping this insider–outsider continuum frequently in mind, Gareth was aware that although his role had been agreed upon as a volunteer assistant coach, his insider-to-outsider status remained very much in flux throughout the project, generating its own specific possibilities, challenges, and limitations (see also Thorpe and Olive 2016; Trzeczyska 2022).

To Coach, or Not to Coach?

Being a “cultured insider” assisted in the process of gaining access to the research site and provided Gareth with a head start in identifying what the significant issues, concepts, and themes of the investigation might be. This insider position afforded him the opportunity during initial observations to “walk the deck” (i.e., walk poolside), engaging with the swimmers in informal conversations, which helped to build trust and rapport. Gareth’s intention at this stage was not to be perceived as a member of the coaching team, but as a less formal member of the team. As part of his “materialistic identification” (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007; Perinbanayagam 2000) in terms of the clothing worn, Gareth did not wear any team kit, in an effort to present and identify himself as “different” to those members of the coaching team who were paid employees. With regard to his “vocabularic identification” (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007; Perinbanayagam 2000), Gareth always referred back to his role as a researcher when speaking to staff and swimmers alike. However, despite Gareth’s best efforts to remain informal, it was swimmers “Matthew” and “Wade” (pseudonyms) who inadvertently confirmed Gareth’s acceptance socially as an insider to the swimming team when they asked if he would be attending a competition with them during immersion one. When Gareth responded that he would not, both Matthew and Wade asked why this was not the case, given that Gareth was now deemed a “member of the team” by both them and other athletes. This remark signaled a significant point in the fieldwork process for Gareth, indicating strongly that his position within the research setting was shifting from that of an outsider to more of an insider, but never a complete participant.

Alongside the benefits of his cultural “insiderness,” there were, perhaps inevitably, challenges posed by Gareth’s position. These included the need to maintain a degree of analytic distance from which to work effectively as a researcher, and from which to represent the participants’ views. A key dilemma centered on trying to avoid becoming too greatly identified, by the swimmers, with just one side of the coach–athlete dyad, and Gareth sought to maintain a neutrality of social location so that the swimmers would not perceive him as primarily a coach. Being cast in the coaching role might well have limited the swimmers’ willingness to talk openly and freely whilst in the company of Gareth; indeed, he had often noted the swimmers refrained from talking in their usual open and informal manner when in proximity to the team’s employed coaches. Over time, however, Gareth’s fieldnotes indicate mounting frustration at trying to maintain such a position of neutrality, when his experience and skills as a coach were increasingly called upon by the coaches themselves, to provide advice on planning, session design, technique, and disciplinary matters:

To say I'm getting a little frustrated is an understatement. I know "Tony" [the head coach] has been away quite a bit lately and it's great that they [the coaches] trust me to fill in, but it's also frustrating. I feel as though I have definitely been more of a coaching insider as opposed to researcher over the last few days or week. I am really finding maintaining a [neutral] position challenging. . . I never thought that it would be this difficult and I'm finding it harder and harder to balance being coach, researcher, confidant etc. I'm not their coach, but I *am* part of the coaching group while I'm here. I'm also a researcher, however, and having to strike that balance is proving more and more challenging the longer I am here. It's even more challenging when I always end up with the same group. I understand that I can only observe what is in front of me but it's also frustrating as I feel I am missing out on other things going on in the pool. Additionally, as a result of feeling frustrated, I'm then not really focused on what I am doing and what's directly in front of me (Fieldnote, 8th February 2018).

This was not an isolated occasion, and similar kinds of incidents occurred more frequently as time in the field progressed, and Gareth's researcher/voluntary assistant coach role balance was constantly in flux, sometimes generating a considerable degree of role conflict. At one point, this balancing act even drew comment from a former coach at ANP Swimming, who jokingly feigned concern at whether Gareth was still able to undertake his academic research as well as the coaching work. To manage such challenges, Gareth had continuously to engage with reflexivity work (McNarry et al. 2019), in an attempt to sustain bracketing. This was undertaken via video and audio self-reflections on what was witnessed or experienced each week, as well as discussions with other insiders and outsiders to the swimming lifeworld, attending workshops and research seminars, and reading other ethnographic accounts of different sporting or physical cultures (e.g., Hughes 2016; Spencer 2012; Vaitinen 2014) to compare and contrast these with his own knowledge and experience. This helped to regain what Dwyer and Buckle (2009, 60) refer to as the "space between," allowing him to "see" more acutely and to question the events and practices observed.

Having presented some of the challenges generated by balancing researcher roles, we now move to consider the range of emotional challenges engendered when Gareth came to the end of his data collection phases and began to contemplate, with some reluctance, leaving the field.

Exiting the Pool for the Final Time

While the emotional aspects and challenges of exiting ethnographic field sites at the end of a research project have been addressed in relation to researching sensitive populations (e.g., Watts 2008), they have more rarely

been considered vis-à-vis ethnographic studies of sporting and physical-cultural social groups (Ortiz 2004; Smith and Atkinson 2017). When the process of exiting the field is addressed at all, as Smith and Atkinson (2017) note, it is often framed through methodological “roboticism,” and principles such as data saturation, deadlines, or funding restrictions. As active participants in a research setting, however, qualitative researchers, and particularly ethnographers, often develop close bonds and even friendships with those whom they are researching (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann-Healy 2003), which can make leaving the research setting a more emotionally complex process than simply packing away our notepads, voice recorders and, in Gareth’s case, his stopwatches.

As Gareth came to know the swimmers and coaches more closely through each data collection immersion, he developed a greater level of emotional connectedness to his colleagues and the cultural practices of the programme. Through the team’s acceptance of him, he became part of their swimming experience, playing a role in the swimmers’ development by lending an ear to listen empathically to their thoughts and feelings or offering advice and encouragement where needed. In this process, the swimmers’ and Gareth’s experiences became intersubjectively entangled or enmeshed (Ingold 2007, 2008), and also intercorporeally interwoven (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2017), via shared embodied practices and experiences, thus co-producing the research through engagement with the field. The social connectedness between the swimmers and Gareth was poignantly foregrounded during some of the 1-day visits Gareth made between immersions. These short visits were made with a view to maintaining relationships and dialog, but when the swimmers asked if Gareth would be back with them for another few weeks, everyone—Gareth included—expressed sadness and great disappointment when he replied that it was just a “flying visit” for one session only:

It was nice to be back among the coaches, swimmers, sights, sounds, and smells of the pool today. It was particularly nice to have Wade and Eddie ask me during their pre-pool how things were going with “the book” (how the swimmers referred to my project) and how long I was back for this time, only for all of us to express or feel disappointed with my response that it was only for this session. Wade and Eddie expressing their feelings saying that it was a shame as they “enjoy having me around,” and me feeling the mixed emotions of happiness at their comment, but also the sadness and pull of wanting to be back poolside working among them.

For Gareth personally, with his previous experience of swimming coaching and his continued interest in the specific sport and the discipline of coaching more generally, the research came to mean much more than just a doctoral

study of swimmers and coaches. He came to feel deeply and fundamentally “at home” in the ethnographic site, feeling grounded in the physical setting and enmeshed in the interactional milieu. Furthermore, data collection also evolved into a professional learning experience, where Gareth developed additional skills in terms of working with senior performance swimmers, coaches, and staff, in an environment that was initially unfamiliar in terms of space, people, and specific language or practices, but then subsequently became home. Nowadays, Gareth draws on these skills and his wider coaching experience in his lectures and seminars, filling the role of what has become known as a “pracademic” (someone who has experience in a professional practice, or divides their time between practice and academia). This brings direct, real-world knowledge to the university classroom so that Gareth is able to help students connect theory to practice, and also to navigate their own research settings. These opportunities do sometimes provoke deep emotional responses in Gareth, however, as reminders of these significant episodes in his career, and they bring to the fore a life sorely missed, and the intense feelings engendered during fieldwork and in the exit process.

For Gareth, times of shared social and physical space during the fieldwork, of social connection and friendship, affected him not just as a researcher but also as a person and a swimming coach. Breaking these physical and emotional attachments, and withdrawing from the field to the gray, uninspiring, windowless, dungeon of an office that he occupied as a doctoral research student, was therefore something that Gareth found extremely challenging, leaving him feeling bereft and a little lost each time. He found himself in a situation of uncomfortable and discomfiting liminality (van Gennep 1960/1909), having developed a sense of deep “somatic empathy” (Allen-Collinson and Owton 2014) with the swimming team, engendered by shared somatic sensations and experiences. Although he was analytically aware of the dangers of over-empathizing with research participants, particularly the need to avoid “merger” with those involved in the research with whom he had developed friendly relationships (see also Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Smith et al. 2009), Gareth nevertheless felt great empathy with those in the swimming lifeworld. His “dis-emplacment” from the field and attempts at “corporeal re-habitation” (Smith and Atkinson 2017, 637) into the office environment left him feeling betwixt and between roles in a state of ambiguity and liminality. Such emotional and corporeal “dis-emplacment” remains relatively under-analyzed in the extant literature on doctoral students, but has been portrayed by some ethnographers, such as Hockey (2016), who struggled to transition back to the role of doctoral research student, after a period of intensive (emotional and physical) fieldwork with a group of infantry soldiers in the British Army.

Struggling to cope with these feelings of liminality and to return “fully” to the role of a doctoral student, Gareth often found himself following the exploits of the swimmers and the swimming program he had left, via text messages or emails with the coaches, the team’s Twitter page, and live streams and result sheets from events where the swimmers were competing. Only very gradually did the process of detachment become easier as Gareth’s day-to-day involvement with the program ceased and he found himself in a more distanced position, more firmly located in the role of doctoral researcher—from where he could begin to cast a more analytic researcher eye on the data gathered. Slowly, his role commitment began to shift, so that Gareth felt more attachment to the doctoral researcher role, with the felt responsibility of representing the lived experiences of those so deeply involved in the physical culture he was tasked with studying.

As Smith and Atkinson (2017) highlight, detachment from the field is never a clean, precise, or simple methodological process, but involves the disentanglement of oneself from place(s) and people. Furthermore, this process is never fully completed as we always carry a part of the places, and people we encounter with us in memories and often in our subsequent research. Gareth’s transitional journey out of the field was thus gradual, and even to date, years down the line, not fully completed. Initially, he felt placed back in a position of outsider to ANP Swimming, although not the same kind of outsider as when he started the project, due to the experiences, knowledge, and social connections amassed. Upon further reflection, it also became apparent to Gareth that this period of transition was marked by more than just his leaving the ANP Swimming setting. He had been involved in swimming from a very young age, and his exit from the field and ANP Swimming felt like he was leaving a part of his life and himself behind, placing him into an uncomfortable liminal state between his former swimming self and a future academic self. He felt caught on a shifting threshold “betwixt and between” states (Turner 1974), unsure whether to opt for a return to his familiar, professional role of swimming coach, or after negotiating the *rite de passage* of gaining a PhD, to seek entry into academia. The availability of jobs in either field was, of course, a crucial factor in Gareth’s decision-making.

Gareth experienced an emotional rollercoaster that traveled from the high-energy, drama, and excitement of following the twists and turns of a performance sports environment, to working his way around feelings of loss, sadness, and withdrawal, where, with hindsight, he could honestly say that he was difficult to live with for a while. Subsequently, having eventually regained some balance and perspective about his transition from fieldworker back to deskworker, he was able to begin the process of data analysis and writing-up the thesis. Gareth did, however, undertake several visits back to ANP Swimming,

to maintain a social and emotional connection to the field and its social actors so that his analysis and writing did not become too disembodied from the place and people whose stories he sought to portray not only accurately and in-depth but also with empathy. During these re-visits, Gareth once again experienced mixed emotions and feelings. On the one hand, these fleeting visits allowed him to reconnect with the space and place of ANP Swimming, including its various sights, sounds, and practices, in a way that brought forward moments of clarity of thought, and also joy at having had the opportunity to become emplaced in this particular physical-cultural lifeworld. On the other hand, it brought moments of deep reflection and questions as to “what comes next?” As noted above, at the time of the research, Gareth had been involved with swimming for over three decades, which inevitably left significant embodied sensory, emotional, and cultural imprints upon him. Each time Gareth returned to the pool these imprints—such as the sounds, smells, language, and connection to the sport—were rekindled and resurfaced. Gareth had often been asked by colleagues and coaches during his doctoral study about what he envisaged would follow in his occupational future. These moments were at times very poignant and gave him pause for thought about what the answer might be. It is to this next phase of the ethnographic journey that we now move, to analyze the rites of passage and liminality Gareth experienced at this stage.

Same, Same but Different: Back to the Pool and Then Out Again

At this juncture, Gareth’s occupational journey took another twist. Not long after the successful completion of his doctoral study, and after a brief period of employment in the community sector, Gareth secured employment with ANP Swimming, thus throwing him once again into a state of flux and a degree of liminality. Although a year had elapsed from being in the field as a site of data collection, Gareth encountered many athletes who had been either participants in his research, or present during his data collection immersions. Having already established relationships with these athletes in his previous role as a coaching assistant, Gareth then had to engage in “identity work” (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007) processes of reinventing and repositioning himself as a “full” member of the coaching team. The challenges involved in this particular “presentation of self” (Goffman 1969) were well encapsulated by the comments of Bruce (a swimmer and participant in the research) after Gareth had been in his new coaching post for several weeks. At that point, Bruce asked if he needed to do another interview this time around. When Gareth clarified that he was now employed as a member of the coaching team, Bruce looked back at Gareth with seeming disbelief and said, “you’re joking

right?" At this point, the only way Gareth could convince Bruce of his new status was via the "materialistic identification" (Allen-Collinson and Hockey 2007; Perinbanayagam 2000) action of showing Bruce his recently minted staff card; even then Gareth was unsure whether Bruce actually believed him, so firmly had Bruce cast Gareth in the researcher role.

Gareth was eventually able to convince these former research participants of his new position and remained with ANP Swimming for a further two and a half years, until lightning struck again and he found himself packing away the stopwatches, and preparing to return to academia. This move had certainly been envisioned for a more distant future time but was accelerated due to Gareth's growing family and his partner's desire to return to her home pastures. This again threw Gareth's role and identity into a state of flux, ambiguity, and transition, and even at the time of writing, there continue to be feelings of loss, grief, and sadness at not working day-to-day with a group of athletes who are so deeply meaningful within Gareth's biography. Gareth's new role, as a lecturer in sports coaching, still provides him with a means of engaging with his passion for pedagogical performance, while also seeking to shape the future direction of coaching, bringing to bear insights garnered from his embodied ethnographic encounters with the lifeworld of competitive swimming.

Conclusion

In this article, we contribute fresh understandings to the often glossed over, messy nature of engaging with, and particularly disengaging from, ethnographic fieldwork, by exploring some of the practical and emotional difficulties encountered when attempting to balance different elements of the ethnographic researcher role. Employing the concept of liminality, we considered the lived challenges of leaving a highly familiar research environment and entering a state of uncertainty and liminality. In this case, Gareth, as a doctoral researcher, was caught on the threshold between a return to full-time employment in his former and familiar role of swimming coach, and a leap into the unknown via joining the ranks of full-time academic staff. As a point of reference, Gareth was 35 when he began his voyage from coaching to doctoral student to research assistant to coaching and finally back to academia. It has been a journey seven years in the making and one generating moments of joy, pain, happiness, stress, anxiety, worry, and also pleasure. A pleasure to be able to interact and work with a wide range of people, including highly talented athletes. Pleasure at the memories and friendships created.

As other ethnographic and qualitative researchers have highlighted, in our research role, we sometimes develop close bonds and even friendships with

our participants (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014; Tillmann-Healy 2003). Field sites can provide us with the warmth of shared social and physical space. Rupturing emotional attachments to place and participants can be painful, especially when we have developed a high degree of “somatic empathy” with participants, founded on shared somatic sensations and experiences, as may occur in ethnographic studies of sporting and physical-cultural domains. Such emotional and corporeal “dis-emplacement” remains under-analyzed in the ethnographic literature on sports and physical cultures, and further examples are needed, to inform and potentially prepare inexperienced ethnographic researchers for what can be very demanding and challenging elements of undertaking this form of research. While we ourselves are not educationalists, it may be that those responsible for doctoral education programs and training for ethnographic researchers would wish to consider providing such preparation (as far as this is deemed possible), including the ethical and emotional challenges involved in undertaking ethnographic work.

We hope that this article provides researchers, new and experienced, with a point of reference, highlighting not only the various stages of liminality connected to fieldwork but also emphasizing how those feelings of joy, loss, pain, and pleasure are all “normal,” part and parcel of the research process, and, of course, part of the wider human experience.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note

1. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

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