Reflections on Positionality: Pros, cons and workarounds from an intense fieldwork

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During a project an ethnography team immersed itself in the lifestyle of lower socio-economic class women. From the different worldviews between these groups, we discuss positionality and access to data, i.e. the ways characteristics such as socio-economic, education, social status, and gender influence the research. The idea is not to set 'rights' and 'wrongs', but to ponder on how successful (or not) were our attempts and reflect on unforeseen effects of our own work.

INTRODUCTION

During a project in Brazil an ethnography team immersed itself in the lifestyle of lower socioeconomic class women who work as independent sales representatives for a direct sales cosmetic company. Taking into consideration the difference in worldviews among the ethnographers, participants and the client, we present this case study and discuss positionality, methodology and access to data, i.e. the ways characteristics such as socio-economic, education and gender helped or harmed the research. During the project we received some surprisingly and involuntary reactions, feedbacks and responses from the participants with whom we ran the ethnography. Some personal stories (one such story was about a woman who got a divorce during the course of the project) and some well known ethnography guidelines we had to ignore due to the circumstances (such as disclosing that the client was present at the interviews) made us ponder on who we are and where we are headed as a community of ethnography practitioners.

The initial perceptions regarding this fieldwork framed notions of positionality which are the basis of the reflection aimed by this paper. Firstly, we present the project scope and briefly discuss the specificities which pushed us to reflect on positionality. Secondly, after a summary of the anthropology literature on positionality and its implications, we go through the three main areas from which we draw our reflections: ethnography and the client during the fieldwork, ethnography and gender, and ethnography and different social status. Finally, we debate positionality implications into ethnography practice (whether it is academic- or private-sector driven). The idea is not to set rights and wrongs but to ponder on how successful (or not) were our attempts and reflect on unforeseen effects of our own work.

PROJECT SCOPE AND HOW WE GOT INTO THINKING ABOUT POSITIONALITY

The source of the debate discussed in this paper has been a five month project at a Latin American innovation consultancy which was conducted in 2012 for a Brazilian cosmetic direct sales corporation. The objective of this project was to provide strategic basis for an internal project the client was conceiving: a new digital learning platform for an ongoing online training support about cosmetic sales. The development of this online system should be focused on the needs of different profiles of the independent sales representative all over Brazil, therefore the methods adopted were intense in ethnographic research,[1] focusing on understanding the lifestyle, needs and motivations of those independent sales representatives. We got in touch with more than 60 people while traveling to 17 cities, including the 5 geographic macro regions of the country, ranging from small towns (28,000 inhabitants) to the main Brazilian capitals (11 million inhabitants).

The interactions were guided by in-depth semi-structured interviews and by immersion in the lifestyle and typical venues of our participant routines (their houses, their workplaces, the venues where they gather for training which was conducted by this direct sales company etc.). During these interactions we also had the chance to get in touch with other people close to them, such as their relatives, close friends, colleagues, etc. The fieldwork was conducted by a four people team, which was split in two pairs (in order to be able to work simultaneously in two different areas). Each one of these pairs was composed by one male and one female researcher and most of the time someone from our client team (always a woman) followed us.

The fieldwork was divided in two phases. Firstly we ran a more exploratory research in which the focus were house-visits and individual interviews aiming at identifying lifestyle, learning related needs and technological profiles of the participants. The second phase involved a more generative research in which we opted for group activities – usually asking key participants to invite friends over (other independent sale representatives of the same corporation) – exploring their routines and habits related to their professional activities and proposing projective exercises which sought to validate a hypothesis and to create design principles for the development of the platform.

Due to the characteristics of this cosmetic business in Brazil, this ethnographic research was conducted mostly with women, as they are the vast majority of the independent sales representatives our client has. We interacted with people from different socioeconomic levels, however the women from the lower classes were the ones who motivated us to reflect about our experience and to write this paper. Although they were the poorest from our sample, the financial issue was not at the core of our differences, i.e. at the core of the situations that pushed us to think about who we are, who they are and how complex is to do the ethnographic interactions from the point of view of these assumptions. From Bourdieu

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[1] We opted for the generic 'ethnography', but we are assuming – from the scope of the paper and from the EPIC context – it is a corporate ethnography project: a private-sector project in which "ethnographers must adapt academic theory, method and timelines to suit their research needs" (Ladner 2013:9).

(1979) we can consider that each one of us (researchers and participants) had different life paths and through them we have been internalizing different values and aspirations. From these different paths, and in spite of an overall low level of education and instruction, it is noteworthy that these women from the lower socioeconomic levels clearly have traces of entrepreneurship. And although their socioeconomic condition has always been an issue for them, they have found direct sales as an opportunity to be more independent, not only economically, but also in the sense of achieving freedom in a wider sense. This is important because historically in Brazil those women were dependent and faced restraints under a sexist environment dominated by men, sometimes including domestic violence by their husbands. All that configures a scenario where our participation as researchers ought to be carefully planned regarding thinking about how to best access the data (while still of course respecting the ethical nature of our professional activity).

Finally, it is important to note that we returned to some participants from the first phase during the second phase of the project (as key participants[2]) and thus it was possible to observe and analyze the influence the researchers may have had on the participants' lives. Thus, it was possible to draw a set of reflections regarding the role of the ethnographer in terms of positionality related to client presence, gender and social position.

POSITIONALITY AND THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LITERATURE

As briefly mentioned before, the objective of this paper assumes that our own position during the fieldwork as researchers has had influence over the access to data. In our case, we are pondering on how our personal characteristics, our personal path and our methodological strategies helped or made it more difficult to be accepted in our participant households, to promote rapport and to make the fieldwork experience a rich source of data.

The origin of the idea of an ethnographic enterprise is not to directly question people about the topics the researcher is interested in, but to experience their culture, lifestyles, routines, and to talk directly and in-depth with them in order to gather enough experience in that community to be able to infer about the ways that this culture operates. As Brewer (2000:11, emphasis in the original) suggests, ethnography is a specific method of data collection, which differs itself by its objective and approach, respectively: "to understand the social *meanings* and activities of people in a given 'field' or setting" requires "close association with, and often participation in, this setting", involving "intimate familiarity with day-by-day practice". On that topic, Malinowski (1922:9-10) states:

> Though we cannot ask a native about abstract, general rules, we can
> always enquire how a given case would be treated. Thus for instance, in
> asking how they would treat crime, or punish it, it would be vain to put to
> a native a sweeping question such as, "How do you treat and punish a
> criminal" for even words could not be found to express it in native, or in
> pidgin. But an imaginary case, or still better, a real occurrence, will
> stimulate a native to express his opinion and to supply plentiful
> information. A real case indeed will start the natives on a wave of

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[2] Key participants were the ones in charge of inviting friends to compose the group session.

> discussion, evoke expressions of indignation, show them taking sides –
> all of which talk will probably contain a wealth of definite views, of moral
> censures, as well as reveal the social mechanism set in motion by the
> crime committed.

This passage highlights the importance of the interaction between the ethnographer and the people involved in the fieldwork. From the 1920s until today a lot of methodological debates suggest interviewing techniques and other fieldwork guidelines to empower this interaction and to promote rapport[3] – and, moreover, learn from the difficulties emerged from that challenge, considering it as a part of your findings (Harrington, 2002). Nevertheless positionality proposes a different approach to that same issue: the ethnographer is a person with a background, with certain characteristics that unavoidably say something about her on the first glance – such as age, gender or ethnicity etc. – and, therefore, the ethnographer may have some influence over the fieldwork and how data is accessed.

Considering Malinowski's example about setting a conversation around crime punishment, if the imagined crime is a case based on racial issues, any difference in terms of ethnicity of the interviewer and of the interviewee might be crucial to understand and interpret what is said during this conversation. From the 1960s, with the emergence of the postmodern critiques to the epistemology of knowledge, which questions the existence and accessibility of a 'reality' to be uncovered by science, ethnographers started to question their own methods:

> [Postmodern] ethnographers question the ability of any method to
> represent 'reality' accurately on three grounds: there is no one fixed
> 'reality' in the postmodern understanding of nature to capture
> 'accurately'; all methods are cultural and personal constructs, collecting
> partial and selective knowledge; and since all knowledge is selective,
> research can offer only a socially constructed account of the world
> (Brewer, 2000:22-23).

This reflexive approach is widely discussed within the anthropology literature during the last decades, assuming that "ethnographic fieldwork characteristically invokes a conception of knowledge modeled on subjective vision" (Asad, 1994:57). This subjective vision embraces the notion that the one who writes about ethnography is not a generic or a neutral scientist – i.e. it advocates the rejection of the concept of the ethnographer as the subject in charge of discovering the truth about her or his research objects through the fieldwork. As Chiseri-Strater (1996:119-120) argues "while there is no formula for locating oneself within this delicate ethnographic terrain, I would suggest that we take no more risk in adopting subjective and reflexive roles as researchers than we would in presenting ourselves as objective and detached, a stance that most postmodernist fieldworkers would reject". Back (1993:217) adds feminism to this epistemological and methodological change: for him, "the feminist criticism has resulted in the death of an academic discourse which has viewed male

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[3] See, for example, Kvale and Brinkman (2009).

accounts of society as generic"; consequently "the male ethnographer has been made visible".

Indeed, the feminist approach is one of the boldest within the positionality debate, offering a rich literature about it. For example, Ganesh's reflections about her experience within the Kottai Pillaimar community detail the difficulties and successes in accessing the community members, and, moreover, compare the ways she was treated with the ways other women around were treated: "A lone ('unprotected') upper-caste woman with the appropriate behavior is more likely to be treated by men with respect. Women from the bottom of the hierarchy would doubly have to prove their 'goodness' and even so might be open to rough treatment" (Ganesh, 1993:134).

Hence, the objective is to look back on the project having in mind that "the growth of postmodern and reflexive anthropology constitutes a significant diversion for those who are serious about developing a sensitivity to the gender-loaded context in which fieldwork takes place" (Back, 1993:217). We suggest that gender is just one issue among others which constituted the differences between the research teams and the people we got in touch with and we argue that these differences influenced the results of the ethnography. As Chiseri-Strater (1996:119) suggests, we must write about these topics as part of our ethnography: "turning in upon ourselves as researchers makes us look subjectively and reflexively at how we are positioned" – and, we would add, how this position influence our work.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE CLIENT

The first point we would like to discuss is the client's presence during the fieldwork. It is a kind of common sense within most of innovation consultancies which use private-sector ethnography that the client's presence during the whole process benefits the project.[4] For instance, it could reduce the client's anxieties and align the project progress and partial results by avoiding gaps in the analysis and creative phases. It could also help the client to be more comfortable and confident with the final results. Nevertheless, it is also recommended not to disclose the name of the client during the corporate ethnography practice, making the presence of clients during the research confidential to participants. By these means we aim at minimizing the risk of any influence on the research results. This is more critical in research for which there exists some kind of validation or hypothesis test, but in general it is recommended for exploratory activities, as well.

As mentioned, the ethnography teams were composed of three people: two researchers and one client. The members from our client team who joined us for the fieldwork had not had any previous experience with ethnographic research. In spite of our recommendations they did not want to hide their identities as member of our client team – they argued that it was not aligned with the ethical principles of the company they work for. Thus their ethical restriction and their inflexibility to change their approach generated concerns for the research team: as we would talk about the relation between the direct sales company and the

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[4] For example, see the presentation from gravitytank at IDSA 2012 Midwest Design Dialogue Conference – even if their subject in that talk is focus groups, most of the arguments are still valid for ethnographic methods (Schiffman and Civelekoglu, 2012).

participants of the research (independent sellers of this company) and we considered it risky. If the client's presence was revealed, participants could feel constrained to freely talk about how they perceive this relation (and understanding this relation in-depth was crucial to the results of the project).

In order to address this complexity we reached an agreement with our client: the name of the company would be revealed in the beginning of the in-depth interviews and their identity as company employees would be revealed only if it was explicitly asked by participants. Otherwise, they would be presented as 'part of the project team' (which was not a complete lie, but neither was the whole truth). From that, we would like to delve into two aspects of this experience: awareness about client presence and awareness about the client company.

Awareness about client presence

The first disclosure about the client presence to participants during the interactions happened at the third in-depth interview, when a participant directly asked if anyone of us was from our client company. As we had previously agreed, we had no choice but to properly introduce the member from the client-side. To our surprise, the disclosure of this information actually helped the participant to open up with us, apparently because she felt valued, since someone from the company that she 'works for' wants to listen what she had to say. Obviously we cannot state with absolute certainty that this did not inhibit the participant during the fieldwork, but comparing this interview with the previous ones we did not perceive any trace of inhibition on the participant behavior. From that, we decided together with our client that henceforth we would reveal their identity in the beginning of the in-depth interviews in order to align ourselves with their ethical principles – and observe how the participants respond to that.

In the subsequent interviews what we perceived was no inhibition at all; on the contrary, our guess was reinforced: we had more access to the participants since they felt themselves valued by their company. A story that clearly illustrates it is the one about a woman from a small city (214,000 inhabitants) in Southeast Brazil. We had scheduled and arranged to meet her in plenty of time, but when we arrived at her place to the interview she decided not to participate in the research anymore. She argued that her friends had warned that it could be a scam. After unfruitful dialogues explaining that we were professional researchers behind an international consultancy, our client decided to reveal her professional identity, showing (with ID badges) the company she worked for. Unlike the innovation consultancy identification we had used in our favor a few minutes earlier, our client was a very well-known company for the participant, and this approach allowed us to have access to this woman. We realized that she was very suspicious of people she does not know, and that it was very common in Brazilian small towns. As we felt that we could face these same issues in the next interactions we repeated the technique in several other interactions. That was very helpful not only to (literally) 'open doors', but also to make participants more confident (e.g. about inviting us in and about freely talking to us).

Awareness about the client company

The awareness regarding the client by the participants initially generated insecurity in the research team since we were afraid that it could inhibit participants to talk about important issues about their relationship within the company – and that was extremely relevant to the project research objectives, as mentioned before. In spite of these worries, we noticed after a few in-depth interviews that in our case, things were different: once the participants knew who was the client, they immediately expressed their feelings and anxieties they have towards the company as if they wanted to change and improve the reality they face on the day-to-day of direct selling. Even if they were unsatisfied with certain proceedings or policies stipulated by the company, they still had a strong sense of 'being part of' it, what pushed them to openly criticize, intimately feeling that this critique would be heard and taken into consideration by the company. They felt we could be a shortcut to the formalized relation they had in their selling activities and to the institutionalized phone and internet support channel they had.

Disclosing the client name granted us a better access within the ethnography, it encouraged participants to talk more, more passionately, and more in-depth about the exact topics we were aiming at. We believe this behavior occurred due to a strong relationship and clinging that the different direct seller profiles had with the client's brand, which led them open up once they knew for whom the project was. In addition, as they knew who we were working for, they assumed we knew our client structure and jargon, which helped them to express themselves in a detailed way, pointing out specific pain points, positive aspects and relating them to the whole process they were involved in.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND GENDER

The second issue we discuss in this paper is gender and how it could influence the fieldwork dynamics and the research results. Gender became a relevant issue as some of the ethnography team members were men while the participants were mainly women talking about their personal life and beauty products. Moreover these women, as mentioned, were from the lower socioeconomic levels, a profile that in Brazil often faced restraints under a sexist environment dominated by men, which leads them to be more closed and to struggle to open up with strangers.

The first concern was about the research theme itself: despite the increasing consumption of cosmetics by men, it is still seen as a "woman thing". Cosmetics and beauty is a common theme for discussion and concern among women and it is not commonly discussed between women and men in Brazil. In this context, research team was uneasy since because we believed that the participants would not go into details that we would like to access during the research; we were afraid they were not used to talk about that subject with men, and probably they would not be comfortable in doing so. At the same time, this theme was not a something that the two male researchers were familiar with. Thus, to minimize these risks we used their lifestyle as a subject to begin the interview and, consequently, as a structure for the whole interactions, immersing deeper in the cosmetic, beauty and intimate

themes only when we realized that the participant was feeling comfortable during the conversation.

The second concern was about the gender difference in the context of the lower socioeconomic level participants: since they live in an environment where they were usually economic dependent on men (husband, son etc.), they could not feel confident to talk about intimate topics in the presence of a man. This topic puts on the agenda the different roles and powers regulating the relationship among relatives living together – and that was important for us, since the independent seller position these women had can restructure this setting within a household. As men, we were afraid to harm the access to data simply by being present in the interaction. Due to the historical background about restraints and domestic violence, talking to an unknown man could pose a threat not only for their husbands, but for themselves due to the tension of their relationship with men. This scenario would lead them to distrust or (at least) not to feel comfortable enough during our interaction. Therefore, not only was difficult talk to them with a man on the team but talking about intimate matters was an even bigger problem.

Consequently, we decided that the female researchers of each fieldwork team would conduct all the interviews, while the male researcher would assume secondary roles – e.g. taking notes, helping with support material, taking pictures and anything else that was secondary in nature. Furthermore, we also improvised some alternative scenarios in our effort to minimize possible harms on the data. For example, the male researcher could pretend to be more feminine than we truly are[5] so as to make them feel more comfortable to talk about intimate feminine issues and thereby reducing the barriers that they might have to talk about it with us.

Although the alternatives and strategies used by us to minimize barriers more or less were successful, our positionality as male researchers may have already been enough to influence the research with these women. However, since the project results strongly suggest that we succeeded in our aims then we believe that gender was a minor issue. Perhaps our worries and workarounds were useful but it turned out that during the fieldwork we faced some other situations in terms of positionality that subsequent reflections on them suggest that they were more meaningful in terms of access to data and this is discussed in what follows.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL POSITIONS

The previous sections described a set of methodological issues we were worried prior to the fieldwork or during the first interactions. From the literature (whether it is academically or private-sector driven) we had our reasons to believe that disclosing the client, or going to fieldwork with a man on the team to talk about beauty products could be a problem: maybe our participants would not be confident enough to criticize our client, maybe they would not

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[5] The idea was not to pretend to be gay as it would require acting skills we probably lack and, moreover, it would raise further ethical issues. However we avoided being explicitly masculine (perhaps making the participant wonder if we were gay or not, or at least to make it clear to her that we do not produce or support any kind of sexist behavior).

feel free to talk about certain issues with a man around (such as their relation with their husbands), maybe we (the men on the team) would not understand some female issues (such as how women deal with beauty). As mentioned, these issues were not as important as we thought. In addition to what we pondered in the previous pages, there were issues we were not able to foresee that were pretty helpful to the success of the project. And that is what this session is about.

We identified two different sources within our reflections on positionality that were important to understand how we could promote rapport and build rich ethnographic interactions. The first one is related to the way participants perceived us within society in a wider sense. The second one is related to the way they perceived the purpose of our visits, i.e. to really understand them, to listen to them, to really get into their lifestyles. Both of them were completely unimagined scenarios. We had a lot of theoretical preparation to take the best of this fieldwork, however if we succeeded the reasons were not the ones we had thought of beforehand, but contingencies that appeared on the way and that we understood them after reflecting on why that project had touched us so deeply.

Status differences

The suspicious way we were received in some households (mainly in small towns), as described in the *Awareness about client presence* session, recalls the literature about positionality and our differences: ethnicity (all of us, including the client members, were basically Caucasian), the fact that we come from the richest part of Brazil, that we had access to high quality education, etc. When we consider the people we focused on this paper, i.e. women of the lower socioeconomic levels, we felt compelled to reflect on our differences and use the theories and experience to try to work around these differences in order to better understand what is it to live like they do. Basically, what we did was to follow the basic guidelines of ethnography, such as trying to adapt our language to theirs, not to judge them, to understand and join any kind of habit, ritual, or way of living they had in their houses etc. – just as we can find in any ethnography reader.[6] However, even if these basic techniques were as useful as important, there are some issues that are just impossible to dismiss, they were there: the research team was Caucasian, some of us were males and some women we were talking to were victims of domestic violence with their husbands being the aggressor.

Fortunately, despite our worries about these differences, we were caught by surprise. The fact that we had a completely different path throughout our lives was not an obstacle in approaching these participants: even the ones who were victims of domestic violence were seeing the male researchers in a completely different way. These researchers were considered completely different people, in a positive way, in a manner that made them engage in the interaction and share any kind of thoughts. In different opportunities we got statements such as "my son was shot due to his involvement with drugs, with dealers… but you, you don't have this problem, you studied, you have a job, you should get married." The idea underneath these comments was that they disapprove of drunk and violent husbands, drug addicted sons and so on and they believed us to be 'decent' men, extremely different from

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[6] For example, see Brewer (2000).

their closest male relatives – and this was perhaps what drove them to trust us even if they hardly ever trust other men in their daily lives.

Similarly the same happened with the female researchers and clients: while our participants were struggling to avoid the kind of men and sons we used as example above, they encouraged the girls from the project team to take different attitudes towards their own lives. They usually used statements such as: "you shouldn't be so attached to any boyfriend, you have a college degree, you have a good job, you're a an independent woman!" They pictured the female researchers as definitely independent from any man, while they (the participants) felt they could not get a divorce, could not live without depending on the money their husbands (or sons) bring home, etc. Hence, the differences inherent to the research teams also – and surprisingly – worked as positive aspect in terms of positionality and access our participants.

To have someone truly listening to you

Ganesh's research includes a passage representing a similar situation to what we felt in most of the interactions we had. As she narrates (1993:136), at a first glance the participants of her fieldwork would question what was her purpose in getting so deep into their lifestyle. However, after a while, reciprocity emerged from their relation and the interaction was empowered:

> The KP [Kottai Pillaimar] women also wondered what I was getting out of the whole exercise. 'Well, at least a Ph.D.,' I would joke, but they were not convinced. Why should anyone leave family and city comforts to spend weeks at a stretch wandering around the KP villages? Nonetheless, once they had got the drift of the questions I asked, their responses were quick. They felt that I was genuinely interested in what they had to say, I remembered the smallest things they told me and followed up next time. We were soon locked jointly in the enterprise of discovering their history. Reciprocity was not an issue any more.

We clearly felt that in the beginning of each interaction: participants were suspicious about what was going on. Some of the subjective looks and manners they used to welcome us were clear in demonstrating that they were not sure about whether to trust or not the new visitors. A short story from a woman from a very poor neighborhood of a 220,000 inhabitants in a city in the Northeast can summarize it. She ended up being one of our best informants, bringing interesting insights to understand how it is to be an independent seller in her context. But for a while we suspected that she would cancel the interview: she refused to meet us at her home and ask us to wait for her in a grocery store nearby. We could notice that she was a talkative person, but she was not comfortable, mostly producing short sentences as a response to whatever she was asked.

Once we got to talk with her, with almost no formality, just asking about her neighborhood, for how long she was living there, and paying attention to every detail, she started to realize that our group was really interested in her. We met her again during the second phase of the project when, whereas it is quite subjective, we could interpret her look

and the way she started to talk (not exactly what she was saying, but the tone, the subjective signs of what she was feeling from our conversation): we were someone who asked 'hey, how are you?' and who were really interested in the answer. We infer from her context – i.e. a poor neighborhood, a tough lifestyle with money issues, violent husband, depression background (including three suicide attempts), a son living 2000km away from her, taking the responsibility of looking after her niece, depending on a lot of social security policies and initiatives from the state and an endless list of difficulties she had to face – that this was a rare event in her life: she was not used to have anyone truly listening (and enjoying to listen) what she had to say. And she felt extremely valued when she realized that three complete strangers had taken a plane, flew across Brazil, knocked on her door just to listen to her.

It is similar to what we suggest in the *Awareness about client presence*, but it is deeper and perhaps more personal. It is not only that a certain company had never listened to her before; nobody had done in her life lately. That kind of reaction happened a lot in several other interviews with women from the lower socioeconomic levels. We can suggest that their life does not offer a meaningful opportunity for them to be listened. That woman is just a remarkable example, as she changed from a suspicious behavior towards us to a completely open and talkative profile, engaging herself in very intimate sessions, with crying taking place a lot during our interaction, with warm goodbye hugs and invitations to get back soon (she offered us a sightseeing tour of the wonderful nature Northeast Brazil offers – unfortunately, we did not have free time during our fieldwork). She shared her life experiences in a way that deeply touched us. And we understand that we just got that level of access to someone's life because visiting her was something unique for her, was something that had the potential to value her – and she felt that.

To complement this session, there is an important issue we must comment on. When we got back to certain women during the second phase of the project we noticed that our first meeting had touched our participants as well. The most meaningful example of change is about a woman, victim of domestic violence, who clearly stated during the interview when she was asked about divorce "that's not how it works here, if we broke up, he'll beat me, even threaten me with a machete or something". She said that in hopeless and voice. A couple of weeks later, when we met for the second phase interaction, we received some unexpected news surprised: she was divorced, her once sad eyes were now shining under a beautiful make-up, her face that was always looking down was marked by a contagious smile, she was well dressed and proud of our meeting. And she was also thankful; literally saying 'thank you' to us several times. Of course we were surprised and we also consider that to be good news: she took the risk to reaffirm herself and she successfully did it, with no violence, with no downside at all – just taking advantage of the confidence she got after being listened to by us, the stranger researchers who traveled across the country just to talk to her. The outcome of our ethnography, for her, was that she felt stimulated to deeply reflect about her own life, something that probably she would not do in her everyday life. We said nothing special to her and we never acted as a 'psychologists' but the very fact of being there listening to her was enough to change the way she perceives herself.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND SOCIAL POSITIONS

When thinking about the woman who get divorced between (and, at least partially, as a consequence of) the first and second phases of the project it seems that there are a lot to be considered. It is not only that we were surprised by her change but this incident was also a strong reminder about the responsibility we have in our everyday work. We were there to study her lifestyle. Since she opted to change drastically change parts of her life, to adopt a different point of view, she was not the woman we met in the first place. Only by doing our job, we had an influence over the people we were talking to; we actually changed our source. This leads us to reflect on the influence that our practice has on the research object and on the research results – and all the ethical issues involved in that.

Therefore, the debate suggested here considers three different spheres. The first one is to invite every ethnographer to rethink and reconsider every methodological issue we face: the peculiarities and contingencies of each fieldwork can challenge the rules, as well as, its effects. We are not saying that studying methodology is useless, but to walk the line and sometimes misstep can be fruitful if you can understand what is going on. As De Vaus suggests[7] (2002:7) methodological guidelines "are like signpost or a map to provide some direction and give us clues as to where to go when we get lost", and "you should not try to follow each step slavishly. Use the method: do not let it use you". The second sphere is to question to what extent it is possible to consider that we got to know the lifestyle of our participants, since now they could be different people from what they were before, and since the very fact of doing the research with them was the catalyst of that change. And finally, the third sphere is to ponder if we have the right to get into someone else's life and, without notice, drive them to make changes in their live as was the case in this project. All those are unavoidable consequences of the work we do – and we cannot afford to do it without reflecting on them.

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[7] Even if he is introducing a quantitative method book, the arguments still valid for our case.

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