

**The Loneliness of the Long Distance Ethnographer:  
A Journey of Research in the Whole School Setting**

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**Tying Laces (the abstract of every run)**

I have just returned from one year in the field, the ethnographer at the finish of a long distance journey. As the miles went by I had nothing but time to reflect, “thinking so much while I’m running” (Sillitoe, 1959, p.10). For an entire year of my doctoral research I was embedded in a local high school. My methodology was critical. I was an agent of change as much as a social scientist. I aimed to help a school in New Zealand improve its practice towards students with disabilities, and hopefully make the school a better place for all students. This challenged and threatened some. At times I angered people. At times I caused dissonance. This dissonance or anger may have allowed for the examination of values and beliefs, but I often left ‘the field’ feeling far from elated. While being welcomed with open arms, I remained for the year an outsider on the inside. I was always the guest sleeping on the couch. Participants became friends, and strong relationships were formed, but the distance caused by being the researcher was always present. It was at times a lonely journey. But loneliness is sometimes a necessary part of journeys. My journey is told through the use of vignettes, four hundred word images capturing a researcher coming to terms with the ethics of his trade.

### Warming up

My supervisor kept suggesting that I write ‘a day in the life’ or vignettes about the participants in my study, and I initially resisted the idea. Something intuitively didn’t feel right about it. I have come to trust my intuition, even if its only purpose may be to merely slow me down and give me time to think. Some time passed and like she knew I would I started to write vignettes. Vignettes, ‘what can be written on a vine leaf.’ A picture in words, or what I like to call ‘the poetry of ethnography.’ Only these vignettes were about me, the researcher out to save the world, one school at a time. This paper consists of some of those vignettes, from entering the field to finally leaving it. They tell the story of a researcher learning the reality of his trade; the well documented loneliness but also the hardening that comes from being in ‘the field’ day after day.

There is a British film from 1962 (adapted from the short story written in 1959 by Alan Sillitoe) titled: *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. In this story our young man, played by Tom Courtenay, is sent to Borstal Academy, a reform school for delinquent boys. The Head Master sees potential in him as a runner. The Head Master has hopes of winning the school competition that year. So our young delinquent, called Colin Smith in the movie, is given the freedom to leave the grounds and run. Freedom! But while he runs he thinks, and these flash backs make up the bulk of the story. They tell his story, how he got there, what he sees, and why, ultimately, he makes the decision that he does. As he ran, he too was constantly reminded of himself, and in the final scenes it gave him the strength to do what he had to.

What a great metaphor for the research process, or specifically, in this case, the long term research placement—and I am going to run with it. “If you’ll play ball with us, we’ll play ball with you,” the Head Master advises. That is actually a great scene, Colin Smith standing before the desk, his first hours at the academy. These moments are hard to maintain, the energy, the newness, the expectations. My field is education and my study looked at the process of change in a whole school as they developed more inclusive practices and values. I was spending the entire school year as part of that high school, volunteering for any roles that were offered—soccer coach, literacy tutor, café taster, report proof reader...but primarily I was the *critical* ethnographer, not there to observe a culture but to participate in changing it. The principal of the school always knew that was my role, just as the Head Master knew Colin’s was that of delinquent. And just as Colin had his target, remembering who he was as he got through and got out of his ‘academy’, I had mine. I was there to improve the school primarily for the most marginalized students, those labeled ‘special’ by the system. And, of course, to learn, and remember, who I was as a researcher.

Having that target can be a strength. Still, it can be easy to get confused, if only for fleeting moments. Colin had his own in a final scene this will tie into. The intimacy of being on the inside, welcomed, made ‘part of the family’, almost forgetting...

#### ***Vignette: Day One***

*I stand with the year 9’s, and any new students joining the school, waiting outside. All the other adults were watching--the parents or aunties or uncles. The kuia (female elder) begins to sing and we move forward. Haere mai! Haere mai! Welcome, welcome, come in. This is the annual powhiri (welcoming ceremony) for new students and staff, the traditional Maori*

welcome. This is officially the first day of school, but the main activity will not be form classes and school rules. The main activity is taking place.

*Haere mai! Haere mai!*

*We walk slowly to our seats, the boys taking the front rows, the girls taking the seats behind, as is the custom. As senior male I take the second seat in the front row. I am relieved to see Papa M\_\_ walking just in front of me. He will take the first seat and speak for us. Although I have found myself sitting in that seat on previous occasions, my reo has grown rusty through neglect. Papa M\_\_ works in the Maori department and though well past the age of retirement continues to contribute to the cultural life of the school. He looks down the row, gives the girls behind an encouraging nod, and with a discreet signal tells us all to sit.*

*Across from us sit the entire school staff, as well as the senior students, including the head boy, head girl, and prefects, all wearing their blazers and ties that come out for special occasions. This is a special occasion. After a moment of silence the principal stands and begins to speak. I catch a few words, a phrase here or there. Even if they can't do that all the new students listen intently. The principal grew up speaking te reo. His address is melodic. Finally, he stops, the facing staff and students stand, and they sing to us.*

*When they finish they sit down and Papa M\_\_ stands, speaking for us, and when he is finished uses another discreet signal we all instantly understand. Standing, we sing. The staff and students facing us make the greeting line and Papa M\_\_ and I lead the hundred or so new students down the line. Kiss on the cheek for the female teacher or student, a hongi, the rubbing of noses, to male staff and students. It is a very long line, but every cheek or nose is touched. The last in line is the principal, personally greeting every new student to his school.*

*Tena Koe.*

*And with that we are in. This is now our school too.*

During Colin's first run the exhilaration is contagious. As you watch you feel as if you are running with him. The gate lifts, the music, a smooth jazz, picks up its tempo. He leaves the road, tears through the woods. It is autumn so the forest floor is littered with leaves. He is now the long distance runner and I recognize the look on his face, having done many miles myself. He jumps down a bank and lies on his back, and lets us see inside the mind that is becoming clearer in the open country side. 'The open field' would be more appropriate in my case. All that was missing for me was the cool jazz, replaced instead by school bells. Flash back to Colin's dying dad. Flash back to mum frenziedly spending the compensation, to meeting her new man, to Colin sitting beside a photograph of his father with his share of the money in one hand, slowly setting it alight with a match held by the other...

### **Running the course...**

"Smith," he is awoken early the next morning. "Come on, get your skates on." And he is alone again on the road with only his reflections.

Colin keeps running and like all runners, at least the type I was, he learns that you can't escape yourself, you just can't ever run that fast. Reflexivity is a term used a great deal in

ethnography. I came to understand it as something private, having very little to do with making data ‘valid’, ‘trustworthy’, or as Brewer (1994) would so cleverly put it, an ‘ethnographic critique of ethnography’.

Sometimes I think that I’ve never been so free as during that couple of hours when I’m trotting up the path out of the gates and turning by that bare-faced, big-bellied oak tree at the lane end. Everything’s dead, but good, because it’s dead before coming alive, not dead after being alive (Sillitoe, 1959, p. 10-11).

That is Colin from the short story, where he is known only as ‘Smith’. Time on the road or the trail, or in ‘the field’, there is the freedom to think and reflect, about what has been seen and done. Reflexivity is considered an ethical responsibility, because reflection asks us to look at ourselves and consider what type of person, or what type of researcher we have been and aspire to be. And here is another truth Colin and I learn: the freedom to think and reflect is also a weight you carry as you run.

The school in which I was researching had a special needs unit that housed eight students categorized as ‘high needs’. In my field notes I would try to process what I saw, what was done and what I didn’t do. At times the notes recount how I turned away near the door unable to face the people there. As the year progressed I didn’t have to worry about that as much as the door was closed ever more firmly to me.

***Vignette: Tea time***

*I enter the unit. It is before school, a safe time. I had been dropping in during lessons, joining the students, trying to model for the teacher aides how to converse with the students and not over them. Trying to get an understanding of how the people here expressed school values. But my cover is blown now and I am no longer the friendly doctoral student interested in their part of the school. I am the inclusion advocate out to threaten their very way of life.*

*“Can you not come during lesson time, the teacher aides find it very distracting?”*

*“Can you not come during form period? That is when we are organizing everything for the day ahead.”*

*Nobody said anything about lunch times...or before school for that matter. I approach the door and see Mike inside. We exchange good mornings and shake hands. He has a contagious smile. I find myself doing the same. I seem to have interrupted a conversation just starting.*

*“Do you want to use the kettle to make a cup of tea?” the unit teacher is asking Mike. “That is fine, but if you want sugar you have to now come to me and I will spoon out your sugar. Six spoons of sugar were gone yesterday from you and Luke drinking tea, so from now on I will keep the sugar here above my desk and all you have to do is ask.” Then she growls about the grass tracked in on his shoes and tells him to clean it up, which he immediately begins to do. He doesn’t get to finish though as the unit teacher soon shoos him away.*

*“Oh, somebody else will sort that out!”*

*Words scribbled later in the columns of my field notes: Denigration. Bully. Fucking bitch.*

*As Mike is walking to the back of the unit, the part with the seldom used kitchen, the unit teacher says to me that maybe he and I can go talk elsewhere as she is busy sorting things out. Properly chastised I go back to join him and when he notices me he visibly flinches.*

*“Sorry,” he tries to explain, “I thought you were Miss.”*

*“I bet you did,” I say. “I can understand why you would be worried.”*

*He begins to make a cup of tea and asks if I would like one. It has to be without sugar though, he adds apologetically.*

### ***Vignette: Fish and chips***

*Friday was always fish and chips for lunch so that was a good excuse to visit. Place an order for one of those big sausages and then come down to hang with my buddies. Eating next to Brian is always a treat, he is so careful, so meticulous in how he approaches the task. What is dinner like in his home? I imagine calm conversation, maybe even soft music in the background. I love getting Kevin talking about his uncle the helicopter pilot, or watching Luke wriggle out of cleaning up again--that guy has got skills. And at the head of the table sits tall and amiable Mike, the senior student, making sure we are all OK. Lunch is eaten in the back of the unit--all the staff remain in the front, chatting together below the big screen television that always seems to be tuned into women's programmes. After lunch all the students are told to leave the unit. They can usually be seen sitting on the benches in front of the entrance leaving the ladies to enjoy their TV uninterrupted.*

*So I like to eat sausages and chips with my friends, to drag out the experience and piss off the ladies.*

*But I have to catch the unit teacher early and make sure I hand over my \$3.20, so I am there before the bell. Tall and amiable Mike has beaten me to it and is placing his order, wearing that Friday morning smile. The unit teacher handles all these transactions. All the students do in this 'life skills' exercise is hand over money. Before Mike can pay, however, the unit teacher seems to have decided that this is a teaching moment. Maybe because I just walked in and she wants to show off. Mike has a ten-dollar bill which earns him some derision. She gives him a paper and pencil. He writes \$3.00 and beside it \$2.40, (one fish, one chips), sits down and begins to sweat.*

*“Next time bring the right change,” the unit teacher tells him. And then to me, “I just don't know what is wrong with these boys. Last term Luke could count to 2000 and yesterday he just looked at me blankly. And Kevin, he even has a cash card, you can tell it isn't used at home...” She is looking intently at Mike who is still struggling with the numbers.*

*I interrupt as moments like these fill my mind with images of violence to unit teachers. “It's great there are shops so close, you could really use those in your teaching...” but I am cut off.*

*“It is \$5.40 Mike, \$5.40. Write that down. Good boy, you deserve a lollipop, do you want a Lollipop?”*

*“Yes, please,” Mike answers in the only way possible. He takes the candy, collects his change, and leaves the room.*

*He isn't smiling anymore.*

Standing by while my new friends were spoken to or treated in ways that were they my friends outside of this setting would have sparked me to act, to defend. But there I was, meekly walking to the back of the unit, or too weary to even knock on the door. Ethics—that thing university committees takes so serious (and sure, there are very good historical reasons for that) but it is exactly in those moments where ethics are continuously tested. There is a scene at Colin's house, flash back, where mum's new man is taking over and Colin shoves him across the room. Mum comes in, words fly until finally the last ones: “You brought your fancy man in here before me father was cold...” Slap! Actually, the last words were his mum's, spoken quietly: “Get out.” Were these the words I was afraid to hear?

There is a very fine line where what is considered appropriate behavior in ‘the field’ becomes simply an excuse for inaction. Should I have stood my ground on those far too many occasions and defended those students? Should I have silenced the teacher aid and her negative comments? Should I have...but questions like that come after the time to act, when failure has already been achieved, when there is no sugar for the tea. In the 1980s Steven Taylor (1987) found himself in a much, much worse situation. He was studying the ‘care givers’ who worked in what was referred to in that time as an institution for the mentally retarded. He saw criminal abuse, violent attacks, sexual assaults. He asked the question, should I have...? But absolves himself, at least in an academic paper, by taking the position that had he acted he would have lost his research site, his participants' acceptance of him, and in what to me sounds like guilty denial, he even recalled his ethical responsibility to uphold the confidentiality of his participants. The whistle was finally blown at that ‘institution’ but not by him. He stayed and continued to watch and develop his ‘grounded theory’ of institutional abuse.

If you watch Colin Smith's face as the movie progresses it takes on a hardness. His smirky grin is replaced by something else, or more accurately, there is something deeper, harder, behind it. This is the hardness I spoke of when we began this run, from mile after mile on the road, from day after day in ‘the field’. I can't watch pictures of myself to see that happening, but I have the notes. Naïve hope and excited expectations slowly change. Day after day in ‘the field’ meant I couldn't forget who I was and why I was there. It is a slow process, this hardening, this remembering. Smith never forgot, except, I think, for a moment at breakfast towards the end. Mostly, his resolve grew stronger. I found I never forgot either, even though I may have wanted to, and when the opportunities arose to direct eyes or plant thoughts, I took them. Something deeper and harder was forming behind my grin.

***Vignette: Deliberate vinegar***

*I watch the assembly and see how inspiring it is. The tattooed speaker, dynamic and polished. He has the slides, he has the history. He did the drugs, he lost the friends. He also has every student in the hall in the palm of his hand. I want to enjoy his talk but I have trained myself*

*over the years to notice not who was there, but who was missing. I spot that in the first moments of the talk.*

*I am standing in a doorway--the hall has several doors that open into a sort of court yard between administration blocks. Standing beside me is the Te Kotahitanga facilitator. I identified her from our previous chats as a potential ally, so seeing she is enjoying the talk as much as the students present I turn to her and ask, "Where are the unit students? They would get so much from this." Shit stirrer. That isn't a question, it is an aggressive comment and she knows that I know that that is what it is.*

*"They are probably in their unit," she answers.*

*I turn from the assembly, as if it is suddenly something distasteful. "How can they ever be part of the school if they are kept in a fucking closet?" I ask as I walk away.*

Three weeks later that teacher spoke to me again. Three weeks of cold shoulder was a price I was willing to pay. Her thinking was forever changed. With another teacher it was eight weeks before we got beyond the obligatory good morning when passing in the hallway and had an actual conversation. "Do I feel like an outsider?" I would be asked at one point. Watch Colin, the outsider, as he remembers backward and thinks forward. The jaw tightening, the eyes hardening. I can see what no other person can or will because it is all locked up tightly in my field notes—the same tightening, the same hardening. And here we can turn to that oft described loneliness, because the ethnographer/researcher is the 'outsider on the inside'. And the *critical* ethnographer? There is that look again, the hardened jaw and the sullen glance we see so much of in Colin's face as the film progresses.

***Vignette: And now to stand back and watch***

*The principal is at my office door. He looks tired. It is 9:20 in the morning and he has already lost his tie. "Chris, can you spare ten minutes?" he asks apologetically. "I put on a brew."*

*I say, sure, of course, I am only pretending to work. He looks at my laptop and sees my Facebook page. This gets a chuckle at least.*

*I follow him into his office. He sits at the table and I head straight to the pot. I indicate to his mug but he says he has had enough for now. We usually drink ourselves sick on the black medicine. I sit down across from him.*

*"I just want to ask you a question," he starts. "Do you think people who have been doing the same thing for so long can ever change?"*

*"That really depends on the person," I answer after a suitable pause.*

*We're talking in code because we have to.*

*"I was going to have a dean here, bring in somebody else, but then I thought, nah, that's just the same as I have been doing, skirting about the issue," he says.*

*“Yeah,” I answer. I am upfront and direct now. “If things carry on like they are the school will get a reputation, and not one it is trying to build. The school will probably not get another student with high needs either. Parents will be advised to send them elsewhere.”*

*Then I add, “Sometimes you have to hit the nail with the hammer and stop trying to dig it out from underneath.”*

*“That’s exactly where I am at right now,” he admits. He had to try everything else, it’s his way. He is much more patient than I am. “I just have to bite the bullet now,” he says.*

*“I’m gonna have to kick you out as I have a meeting now” he adds after a moment silence. “Thanks a lot. I know we have more mahi to get through so I’ll catch up with you later.”*

*I say no problems and leave, noticing the teacher waiting in the adjoining office.*

The loneliness of the long distance runner. Nobody sees the whole race except the runner, and nobody can see inside their heads. During the final race, the climax of the film, the Head Master checks his watch and comments to the visiting dignitaries that the runners must be half way by now. It is effort unobserved, solitary. Only Colin could run his race, and only I could write mine. No matter how much this may be reflected on by generations of ethnographers, I cannot see how or why it should change. The loneliness is a key ingredient; it makes the ethnographer. It makes the person. While Colin ran through the woods I worked in the shadows, and as we will see, we achieved similar victories.

### **Approaching the Finish**

Now if you listen close you may hear the cheering at the finish. Colin’s mind is whirling. That scene at breakfast I alluded to before, where he is enjoying his position, cutting through the line to get his food. “You better drop back mate, this guy’s daddy.” But the ‘mate’ turns out to be from Colin’s old neighborhood, his partner in crime. Now Colin was the Gov’nor’s blue eyed boy. Watching Colin lap up the attention at the breakfast table his mate finally says in disgust, “Whose bloody side are you on all of a sudden?” It is a slap as resounding as the one he earned from his mum, only it hits him on the inside. That was the question Becker (1967) wrestled with almost fifty years ago. Back then it was an issue that had to be argued, but like Taylor, I think Becker was looking too far outside himself. Among the multiple selves that Colin could be, whose side was he on? Among the multiple researchers I could be, whose side, indeed.

Cut to race day, cut to the race, and the thoughts come quick fire. Colin knows who he is, and he knows what he will do. He has his target, his goal, and the resolve to achieve it. It was not about good guys, or bad guys. The Head Teacher, or the unit teacher, are not caricatured in black and white. I am sure they felt their own isolation. Felt under valued. Misunderstood. That look in Colin’s eyes, at the very end—you’ll see—and my drive away from school...it wasn’t about good and bad.

I don’t even think it was personal.

### ***Vignette: Goal Setting***

*“When will she see me as her biggest threat?” I asked, and my friend answered sage like, “The question is, when will you notice that she has?”*

*There was even a short time when I asked, “When will she notice that my being there will benefit her?” I even wrote that one down and posted it on my office wall. But I didn’t look at it all that much. My unspoken goal early on, after seeing more than enough, was to get her removed from the position she was in.*

*That sounds bad.*

*By the end of the year I succeeded. Big changes were on the board, exhilarating times. I got the news, as usual, under the table. I was told, “Act surprised when you hear it elsewhere,” which is a skill I have honed. The question I ask myself leaving ‘the field’ that day is, “How does this news make me, as researcher, feel?”*

*The only answer I can come up with is...nothing. It isn’t an achievement I can celebrate around anybody at school, and outside school nobody would understand. They would probably just think, “What an asshole.” They wouldn’t be far off; it’s part of my job: academic asshole.*

*So I’ll keep any feelings, if I feel them, to myself. The new head of department will have an exciting year, building an exciting programme within her school. I’ll just be that figure in the shadows and ‘write up’ as their exciting project moves forward.*

*Now I am just getting clever with titles. “I Get How David Carradine Felt”? No, might be confused with Bangkok habits. “Kwai Chaing Caine Walks Away”? That last one is smart, but people hardly remember the programme let alone the character’s name. And...it’s still lame.*

*How about one lonely researchers will understand: “You’ll always drink alone.”*

And there is Colin taking the lead, pulling ahead by a long way. He finally crests the last hill and the finish is in sight. The race is his. There the people are all waiting, cheering, but Colin doesn’t hear that. He hears the voices of memories, of flashbacks, of vignettes. And so he slows as he listens, until he stands there, panting, watching them all. He slowly grins and the Head Master’s smile fades as comprehension dawns. Colin Smith isn’t going to win his race, but he hits his target. He has stopped before the finish line. Colin Smith made his ethical choice. He chose to be honest to himself and the direction that took shaped the rest of his life.

At the end of my own run I can see that Colin’s choice was easy, because it was only *one* that he had to make. My moments of decision are not so clear cut as Colin’s. Hardened enough by the distance and the loneliness, by the miles and the miles and the days and the days, I realize that every time I write a paper, or take to the field, or accept a post, or report on findings, or watch an injustice, I will be like Colin Smith and have to make a choice. Those choices will be there throughout and even well after my time in ‘the field’ and my time in the ‘academy’, each time a test of my character and of my ethics.

“By God,” I now hear Colin’s voice, “to say that last sentence has needed a few hundred miles of long-distance running.” (Sillitoe, 1959, p. 13).



**Other Runners**

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