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Elizabeth Pilar Challinor

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Staying with the tension: “estranged intimacy” and gendered expectations in the field

Elizabeth Challinor

The position of the anthropologist in the field is discussed, in this article, as a position of “estranged intimacy”, that is to say, the anthropologist occupies an ambiguous position of becoming intimately involved whilst concurrently standing back. This definition derives from reflections upon fieldwork, conducted in the north of Portugal, with Cape Verdean migrant young women and their experiences as mothers. The article discusses two aspects related to the fieldwork. Firstly, the way in which diverse strategies of establishing relations in the field placed me in a position of “estranged intimacy” which reconfigured the meanings I had initially attributed to the term “Cape Verdean women”. Secondly, how becoming unexpectedly involved in a situation of intense conjugal conflict led me to reconsider my understanding of Cape Verdean gender relations. Both cases demonstrate how the endeavour to produce analytical and ethnographical knowledge was shot through with an unstable mix of detachment and involvement and how coming up against the unexpected may contribute towards the reconfiguration of ethnographic knowledge, in this specific case, with regard to the dynamics of gender relations.

KEYWORDS: epistemology, methodology, Cape Verde, gender, migrants.

Conviver com a tensão: “intimidade” alheada e expectativas de gênero no terreno ♦ A posição do antropólogo no terreno é analisado neste artigo como uma posição de “intimidade alheada”, uma posição ambígua de envolvimento íntimo e, simultaneamente, de afastamento. Esta definição resulta de reflexões sobre o trabalho de campo realizado no Norte de Portugal com jovens mulheres migrantes de Cabo Verde, em torno das suas experiências como mães. São tratados dois aspetos relacionados com o trabalho de campo: em primeiro lugar, a forma como diferentes estratégias para estabelecer relações no terreno me colocaram numa posição de “intimidade alheada”, modificando os significados que atribuí inicialmente à expressão “mulheres cabo-verdianas”; em segundo lugar, a forma como o meu envolvimento imprevisto numa situação de intenso conflito conjugal me levou a reconsiderar a ideia que tinha das relações entre gêneros no contexto cabo-verdiano. Ambos demonstram como a produção de conhecimento analítico e etnográfico foi atravessada por uma mistura instável de distância e envolvimento, e como enfrentar o imprevisto pode contribuir para a reconfiguração do conhecimento etnográfico – neste caso, relativamente à dinâmica das relações entre gêneros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: epistemologia, metodologia, Cabo Verde, gênero, imigrantes.

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IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL FIELDWORK, THE ETHNOGRAPHER KNOWS THAT what he or she initially sets out to look for will be altered by events that take place during fieldwork.¹ Despite being prepared for whatever comes, the ethnographer is still usually surprised by the unforeseen events that occur which cause him or her to reconsider the theories and categories which had been taken so happily into the field.

The question of how to integrate the unexpected into ethnographic analysis brings to mind the structural narrative of Roald Dahls' television series *Tales of the Unexpected*. The suspense created during this half hour programme, rests on the knowledge that the last few minutes will take an unexpected turn, causing the viewer to reconsider the events of the whole episode in a completely different light. The viewer consequently watches the programme in a heightened sense of alertness, eager to work things out. Although viewers are expecting the unexpected, Dahl's storytelling skills ensure that it still comes as a shock, precipitating a re-interpretation of the whole story. Anthropological fieldwork is often experienced in a similar, although usually not in such a dramatic, fashion. Yet, unlike the viewers of the television programme, who reach closure and are left marvelling at the ingenuous storytelling skills of Roald Dahl, the anthropologist, whose task is far from over, is faced with uncertainty regarding how best to proceed.

The term "reflexivity" may be useful here, as long as it is understood as a wider process of critical reflection than the reflexive project that came to influence anthropology in the decades of 1970 through to 1990. I agree with De Neve (2006) that the potential power of "critical (self) reflection" has become obscured by "nebulous definitions and uses of the concept of 'reflexivity'", leading anthropologists to dismiss it as "naïve 'navel-gazing', blunt 'narcissism' or plain 'self-indulgence'" (2006: 67).

In this article I will consider "reflexivity" not only as a methodological tool in the field, but also as part of the conditions of knowledge production that enable the anthropologist to integrate the unexpected into ethnographic description and analysis. The article discusses two dimensions of my research with young Cape Verdean women living as students in a town in northern Portugal.² The first relates to my search for appropriate field sites and the need for their reconfiguration. The second relates to my sudden involvement in an unexpected incidence of conjugal conflict. Both of these aspects of the fieldwork caused me, not only to reconsider my own position, but also, to readjust the analytical lens through which I had established the field sites of my research, namely, the categories of Cape Verdean women and the power

1 I would like to thank the editors of this dossier for their insightful comments upon earlier versions of this article.

2 Research funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), Portugal.

dynamics of gender. It is along these lines of specific reconfiguration and active construction of anthropological knowledge that I situate the practice of reflexivity, defined by De Neve (2006: 68): as "reflections on processual interconnections, that is, connections between the process of fieldwork and the process of interpreting and gaining insight". This implies considering participant observation as a two-way process, although different phenomena may be observed on either side. The people the anthropologist studies participate in the ethnographer's research, not just as informants or assistants, agreeing to share aspects of their lives with the ethnographer. As Stocking (1983) has noted a long time ago, they also observe the ethnographer and hold various ideas, opinions and expectations about him or her that the ethnographer may never gain complete access to.

The analysis, proposed here, of how the unfolding of events in the field contributes towards the notion of anthropological knowledge as a process made up of interconnections, draws on the concept of "estranged intimacy". I have adopted this concept from Webb Keane's reflections upon how "ethnographic knowledge has always been marked by a tension between epistemologies of estrangement and of intimacy..." (2003: 223). The ethnographer must constantly shift to and fro between these two epistemologies; engaging with interlocutors' subjectivities and disengaging from them to gain analytical distance. The term "estranged intimacy" thus captures the paradoxical nature of relationships in the field in which researcher and subjects of the study remain "strangers"³ whilst engaging with very intimate issues. As the organizers of this series of articles suggest, dealing with the unexpected is part and parcel of anthropology and may require far more than having to readjust a hypothesis, or alter a questionnaire, because it involves becoming implicated in the research, through intersubjective relations with interlocutors.

"ESTRANGED INTIMACY" AND THE REVISION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC CATEGORIES

When I began my fieldwork in Oporto – a town situated in northern Portugal – in April 2008, an institution which had provided financial support to five single mother students was one of my first ports of call. The secretary rang them in my presence, and obtained permission to give me their phone numbers. This had a snow-ball effect as women contacted each other and passed on new contacts to me. The mobile phone consequently served as an important

3 Although the New Oxford Dictionary (1998: 630) definition of "estrangement" is the condition of no longer being close or "on friendly terms", suggesting there was a prior intimacy that has been disrupted, the dictionary reveals that its late 15th century origin from old French "estranger" was used as a noun to mean "stranger".

means of presenting myself to these Cape Verdean women, usually with an introductory text message, followed up, a few days later, by a phone call. In an attempt to demonstrate my “authenticity” as an anthropologist familiar with Cape Verde, I would usually speak in Creole. On some occasions, this helped to break the ice and even caused amusement; in other instances it was met with a steadfast resolution to converse in Portuguese, so that I would eventually follow suit. I sensed that these women were making a statement about their capacity to speak Portuguese and to integrate into Portuguese society.

In this phase, the fieldwork consisted in accompanying women – whose ages ranged between 19 and 28 years old – in their medical appointments to obstetricians and paediatricians, conducting interviews and in some cases, when we got to know each other better, I also accompanied the women, on request, to appointments with social workers, immigration officials and state cultural mediators. I was also invited to birthday parties and sometimes accompanied them to pick up their children from nurseries or nannies.

My other port of call at the inception of fieldwork was a Cape Verdean association. The president of the association sent a young student, whom I shall call Diana, to meet me because I was unfamiliar with the town, resident in another town seventy kilometres away. Whilst we walked back to the association together, I told Diana about my research, how I wanted to meet Cape Verdean young mothers and showed her a flyer I had prepared. It had an image of a pregnant African woman under which, eager to justify the legitimacy of my interest in Cape Verdean experiences of motherhood, I presented myself as a mother of three children who had lived in Cape Verde and spoke Creole. Diana told me she was a student helping out at the association. Once we arrived, I was introduced to the president and did not see Diana again until the following month, when I attended an event to mark the Day of Africa (25 May). I saw that Diana was playfully holding somebody’s baby so I went to ask her who the mother was and to my surprise she replied “It’s me!”

My tardy discovery of her motherhood raises the question of why, aware that I wanted to meet Cape Verdean mothers, Diana did not tell me on the day she took me to the association that she herself was a mother and also, why I did not ask her. Initially, Diana claimed that she had thought I was delivering the flyer on behalf of somebody else. When I questioned her much later regarding the incident, after I had already accompanied her in appointments with her baby and conducted an in-depth interview, Diana admitted that she had felt too shy to say anything at the time. I remember wondering if I should ask her if she had a baby, but deciding not to, on the grounds that it might be too intrusive and also that if she were a mother, she would probably tell me. I also wondered, given that she was a young student, how likely it would be anyway. Yet, as my research progressed, the majority of Cape Verdean mothers I did meet were students.

My first encounter with Diana – characterized by mutual shyness – elucidates the point made by Rapport and Overing (2000: 205) that when individuals interact they meet, at least initially, “on the surface of their selves”. Yet, the intimate nature of my research topic, coupled with the openness of some of my interlocutors, sometimes plunged us right into the deep end of interaction, creating a sense of paradoxical imbalance: meeting at the surface of our selves, discussing very personal matters.

Three of the women who responded willingly to my interview requests, opened themselves up completely and the two who were students, cried whilst they recounted the difficulties they had experienced during their unplanned pregnancies and early months of motherhood. This type of intimacy did not occur in many of the other encounters which were characterized by respectful detachment. Although in some cases, the distance between estrangement and intimacy corresponds to the stage reached in the linear process of “entering” the field, which involves attempts to win over research subjects so that a gradual increase in intimacy occurs, what I am referring to here is another dimension of the fieldwork experience; namely, the need to keep a balance between intimacy and estrangement. I portray this dimension as staying with the tension of “estranged intimacy”. A woman who was very open and friendly with me, made the point of stating, one day, that despite the degree of ease in our relationship, we were not friends. This to me signalled awareness, on her behalf, of the importance of establishing boundaries.

In one of the first interviews I conducted, a young student mother told me she would like to create an association for Cape Verdean student mothers because there were so many of them. We consequently agreed there and then to establish, what I suggested we call a “support group” which we later named *Djunta Fidju*⁴ that held monthly meetings at the week-end. This helped to appease my unease that I may be trespassing on private land, by offering some kind of concrete, social networking support for the mothers in exchange for their involvement in my research. It also gave me a much more tangible way of talking about my work, although I always made it clear that the group was separate from my research, open to everybody, whether or not I interviewed or accompanied them in appointments.

The creation of the group also brought to light the limitations produced by singling out Cape Verdean mothers as a category; what about the Portuguese and Mozambican women I met whose partners were Cape Verdean?

4 This name is based on the traditional form of cooperative work in rural Cape Verde, known as *djunta-mon* (the joining of hands) in which networks of neighbours and friends are activated to carry out specific tasks, especially in agriculture. Although we first called the group *Djunta Mãe* – the joining or coming together of mothers, protests from some of the fathers who also participated in later meetings led us to change its name to *Djunta Fidju* – the coming together of sons and daughters.

As Rabinow rightly claims, “once a distinction is drawn it carries with it exclusion and blind spots” (2007: 105). Moreover, whilst my theoretical interest was limited to researching the experiences of Cape Verdean women, this could not be artificially severed from social engagement. We resolved this issue by opening up the group to friends of Cape Verde, including men too. This served as a formal justification for not excluding anybody who should wish to become involved. A number of Mozambique and Portuguese women then became involved in some of our events.

Another strategy that I employed for strengthening the potential for student Cape Verdean mothers to associate with each other was to create a social networking site on the Internet, in which the monthly meetings were announced and where many posted photos of their babies and toddlers.⁵ We organized picnics in the summer; the group came twice by train to the town where I lived. We celebrated two birthday parties of the group, organized a baby clothes swapping event so that expectant mothers could receive the clothes that other babies had grown out of. A number of issues were also discussed informally during the meetings.

Having resolved the issue of exclusion from the support group, inclusion in my research also proved to be problematic. Not all of the women appeared to relate to the label of “Cape Verdean mother” and several refused my invitation to enter the study. I consequently wondered whether labelling them “Cape Verdean” constituted an “external definition” which went against the grain of their own “internal definitions” (Jenkins 1994) or subjectivities. I have discussed this at length elsewhere (Challinor 2012).

Although I was eager to meet mothers, some of the mothers were not interested in discussing the maternal dimensions of their lives; especially those who had sent their babies back to Cape Verde to be cared for by relatives. For these women, motherhood was not experienced as a definitive condition and since they did not have their babies with them, they showed little interest in my research or in the support group. It is common, in the Cape Verdean context which is profoundly influenced by migration, for children to be separated from their biological mothers and to be brought up by relatives. I refer to this elsewhere as “extended mothering” (Challinor 2011).

How to position myself vis-à-vis my research subjects was an ongoing concern for which there was no magical formula. In some cases, it became evident that to accompany a woman to a medical appointment on the first day that I met her was not the best strategy, whilst in other cases it worked well. Some mothers were eager to be interviewed and tell their story the first day I met them, others required more time but were very happy for me to accompany them in their medical appointments. My presence in the women’s medical

5 I also sent text messages since many did not have constant access to the Internet.

appointments also generated a degree of "estranged intimacy" since it crossed the symbolic (and on rare occasions, physical) privacy of their personal bodily boundaries.⁶ I usually made a point of asking the women beforehand, if they were sure my presence did not disturb them. Most assured me that it did not and one replied "we are both women".

The expectations placed upon (and created) by me also brought disappointments when my own personal life circumstances made it impossible to accompany women in their appointments. One mother, in particular, with whom I had become very involved during her troubled pregnancy, became angry, when circumstances beyond my control made it impossible to accompany her in several consecutive appointments after the baby had been born. In response to my enquiry regarding the date of the next appointment, she sent a message saying she was too busy to talk to me and there was no point telling me when the next appointment was due, since I would most likely be unable to attend.

ENCOUNTERING THE UNEXPECTED AND THE COMPLEXITY OF GENDER DYNAMICS

As the fieldwork developed, it became clear that I was not in control of how the subjects of my study viewed me. Was I a researcher, a confidante, or a kind of social worker? I noted that when mothers rang me to give me new contacts, or new mothers took the initiative to ring me themselves, I had often been presented to them by their friends as a kind of "good Samaritan" and in some cases my research had not even been mentioned at all.

The issue of whether to intervene or simply observe occurred in a number of instances. In cases related to renewal of visas with immigration officials and cultural mediators it made no sense not to intervene, since I had been asked to accompany the mothers in order to help. In the medical appointments, my position was less clear; although the very act of accompanying the women in these appointments created expectations. Some of the student mothers had nobody else to go with them,⁷ and a few told me that they had found it hard to go on their own and see the Portuguese women accompanied by their own mothers or partners. A number of them also believed that they would be treated better if accompanied by a white woman. In some cases, when the doctors appeared to look and talk to me, instead of to the mother, I felt uneasy because this appeared to confirm their suspicions of potential racist attitudes. Yet, in other cases, when the doctors totally ignored me and only addressed

6 During physical examinations, the women were always separated by a curtain although the doctors were not always careful to pull it along the whole way.

7 Some of their partners were away (in Lisbon or Cape Verde), others were students or working and could not take the time out to accompany them.

the mother, I also felt slightly uneasy, as if I had no business to be there. Upon reflection, I realize that in order to conduct the fieldwork, I had to learn to stay with the tension of “estranged intimacy”.

In each appointment that I observed and in every interview that I conducted, the challenge of how to strike an appropriate balance between estrangement and intimacy was always present; it became poignantly so when I was suddenly and unexpectedly caught up in a specific incident in which one of my interlocutors, whom I shall call Clara, asked me to take a position with regard to a serious conjugal conflict with her boyfriend that led me to believe that police intervention was at stake – due to a presumed case of domestic violence.

The first time I arranged to visit six months pregnant Clara in her flat, we had not yet met in person. Her partner, whom I shall call António, father of the baby she was carrying, had called me weeks earlier, asking who I was, claiming a friend of his had told him about me. When I had asked him if he was Clara’s boyfriend, because she was the only new person I had contacted at the time, he had replied in an aggressive tone, “That is not the question I asked you”. He interrogated me about the activities of *Djunta Fidju* and asked if we were interested in applying to companies for subsidies. Later, when I spoke to Clara on the phone, she said he had insisted so much that she ended up giving him my number. My description of the events that followed is based on edited field notes.

I went up to the fourth floor but didn’t know which door to knock on, so I rang Clara. She asked me to wait because António was downstairs with the key. I wondered if he was the young man I saw when I came up the street, standing outside a café, with a glass of whisky in his hand, dressed in smart black trousers and a white shirt. Eventually the lift arrived and I recognized the same man.

Today was the first time I met them face to face. Both seemed very wary of me. I sat down and told them about myself and my research and gradually they both looked more relaxed. Antonio did most of the talking. He told me he wanted to live in the States. “At least they treat us well. It is not like here”. Since they had Internet access, I showed them the social networking site of *Djunta Fidju* on António’s laptop and sent them invitations to join.

A few days later, I received an e-mail from the social networking technical team, congratulating me on the new network that I had purportedly created. I found my photograph, the same one as in the *Djunta Fidju* site, as the founding and only member of a group called Fight against Racism. I suspected that this had been created, on my behalf, by António but chose not to raise the matter when we met again at a group picnic, a few weeks later.

I saw them approach carrying a cooler box between them that looked very heavy. I went to greet them and relieved Clara of the weight by taking her side of the cooler box for her, commenting that she shouldn't be carrying it. "Told you so" – she retorted to António, who replied that it was good exercise for her.

Following the picnic, I accompanied Clara to a medical appointment, spoke with her over the phone and then, twelve days later, António rang me.

I ask if everything is OK.

"Not really... I am very sorry that Clara is pregnant, but I don't think that we can stay together anymore."

I reply that it is not easy for them, far from home, students, an unexpected pregnancy... He interrupts,

"No. At the beginning, I thought it was not possible, with me as a student, but then, when I found out it was a girl it was me who decided that we would keep the baby. But I can't stand it anymore now."

He complained that Clara was making life impossible for him. When he arrived home, she wanted to know where and with whom he had been. She was constantly checking his mails, his text messages and he couldn't take it anymore. His voice began to shake, he sounded as if he were on the brink of tears.

He then said, "I am scared of what I might do". I immediately took this as a warning that he felt that the conflict between them could get out of control. I said nothing and he continued talking. "You have no idea how I have suffered with her, my poor head. If I go out she nags, if I stay in she nags..."

I said that maybe he should try to understand that pregnancy was a difficult time and if he wanted to, I could also talk to her. I asked where she was and to my surprise, he replied,

"She is here, right next to me, you can talk to her if you want to".

He said he would put her on the phone.

"She doesn't want to talk on my phone; you will have to ring her".

So I switched off the phone and then rang Clara. She answered the phone saying a barely audible "Yes" amidst an uncontrollable crying.

"Oh, dear what is the matter?" Amidst her tears she spluttered,

"I want to get away from here; I don't want to be with António anymore".

She complained that something was hurting, but was crying so much I couldn't make out what. I tried to get her to repeat what it was and she said, amidst floods of tears,

"He pushed me".

I then asked if the baby was OK and finally managed to understand that it was her eye that was hurting.

“It is swollen”.

Clara then said that she wanted to leave but mentioned something about not having a key.

“OK, let me talk to him”.

But she said she didn’t want to pass her phone to António.

I then picked up my other phone and rang him. This time I spoke to them both on separate phones at the same time.

“Clara is crying! You pushed her”. António replied that it was nothing; he had just pushed her on to the bed, she was always crying.

Clara called out that she wanted to get away from António and she wanted the key.

He replied that she was in no condition to go out, adding that sometimes he slept in his friend’s house so as not to have to come home to her and argue again.

I suggested that to defuse the tension he should go out, but asked him where the key was.

“How should I know?”, he replied, and Clara sobbed something about a key that was on the table.

I asked him about this and he replied that it was his and he didn’t know where her key was. I asked if he would be prepared to look for it. We agreed that he would look for the key and once he found it, he would ring me back and I would then return the call.

So I switched off one phone and carried on talking to Clara, who wouldn’t stop crying. I asked her, after a minute or two, if he was looking for the key and she replied, “No”. I asked where he was and she said he was sitting in the living room. I suggested ringing him again to ask why he wasn’t looking for the key and she asked me not to ring him.

By then I wasn’t sure what to do and so began to think aloud.

I told her that if she didn’t want to stay there then she needed to stay somewhere else. Did she have any friends where she could stay? Clara just carried on crying. I asked if he was looking for the key, again she replied, “No”. I asked again if she didn’t want me to talk to him and again she replied, “No”. Given her obvious state of distress, I decided to honour this request. I then mentioned the name of a Cape Verdean mother who I knew would probably put her up for a few nights and said that if she wanted to, I could call her, but she did not reply to this and just carried on crying.

I asked her if she was OK and she replied that her eye was hurting. I asked if she had put ice on her eye and she said she hadn't, adding he had hit her on other occasions in the past.

Clara kept on crying but did not switch off the phone. Given the particular circumstances of this incident in which I was not actually present, Clara's physical condition was unfathomable and I was starting to become very concerned about her wellbeing and her safety. I did not know what else to do. The whole situation was compelling me to act under pressure and I felt very unsure about becoming involved in a conjugal case the outcome of which I would always be implicated in. The focus of my research had made me particularly sensitive to the situation of pregnant women in their potential emotional and physical fragilities. Faced with Clara's persistent crying down the phone, I consequently decided to pose a more risky question. I began by saying I didn't know what else to do. A few more moments of silence passed by whilst I listened to her crying. Clara stayed on the phone. I remembered how António had begun our conversation, saying that he was scared he might do something, implying that he would later regret his actions. And so I took the leap: "Do you want me to call the police?" To my enormous surprise she immediately stopped crying and replied, "Yes". I repeated the question. "OK. So you want me to call the police?" And once again she immediately replied, "Yes".

I dialed 112, the emergency number, and the call was put through to my hometown. I explained the situation and was given a number to ring in the town where Clara and António lived. Finally, I spoke to a policeman who took note of the address, and said someone would be there as soon as possible, as long as the victim was willing to open the door. Once again I asked Clara if she was sure that this was what she wanted and explained to her that she would have to be prepared to open the door herself to the police. Clara confirmed that she would do this.

I then hung down the other phone and kept Clara "company" over the phone with idle chit chat while we waited for the police.

She carried on crying while I talked. I kept checking on what António was doing and understood that he was still sitting in the other room. Then I heard António's voice and Clara exclaimed, "He has given me the key. He knew all along where it was. He didn't look for it, he was sitting there all the time".

I expected him to ring me, but he did not. So I stayed on the phone with Clara for about another thirty minutes until I suddenly heard voices again, and then she said, "I'll ring you back" and switched the phone off.

About an hour and a half later, I received a text message saying, "I am in the maternity hospital, talk later, thanks".

I took the difficult decision to call the police without knowing what the consequences of this decision would be for my relationships with Clara and António and for the wider dynamics of my research. I was also concerned that I had become involved in a situation that could have family and legal implications for both of them. All of this had been totally unexpected and as it changed the dynamics of the relationships between us, it also led me to reflect in more depth upon my own research. The episode had exposed a space of gendered tensions the significance of which began to acquire new meanings for me. Was this another episode of Cape Verdean masculinity? The sequence of events in which I had inevitably become implicated, obliged me to reconsider their significance and to review my possibly over protectionist attitude towards Cape Verdean pregnant women by taking a more dynamic view of the complex nature of gender relations.

My thoughts now turned to António; I was also concerned about him, after all, he was the one who had called me asking for help. Since he did eventually give Clara the key, before the police arrived, there is no way of knowing what António would have done next if the police had not been called. Would he have tried to call me? Was he waiting for me to call him, now that he had given her the key? Would he have gone, leaving Clara alone in the flat? Whilst these circumstantial questions cannot be answered, they led me to address a much larger question: how is this episode to be understood in the light of the nature of Cape Verdean gender relations?

Before I met Clara and António, the single mothers I had interviewed and accompanied to medical appointments complained of the ways in which the fathers of their babies had shirked their responsibilities, in some cases, even denying paternal recognition. I never managed to meet any of these men. Four out of the six fathers I did interview appeared to be in relatively stable, equal relationships with their partners, sharing domestic responsibilities and child care. The little I had witnessed of the relationship between António and Clara suggested that, for António, it was an important medium through which he could be in control, asserting his authority and power over Clara in the pursuit of an idealised, typical “hegemonic masculinity” (M. Vale de Almeida 1996 cit. in Massart 2000: 145). As shall become evident in the edited field notes of our conversation, António felt that my intervention had illegitimately interfered with and undermined his capacity and authority to be in command.

About half an hour later, the phone rang. It was António.

“Why did you call the police? I mean, I ring you to ask for help and you, instead of helping, you made things worse. I trusted you because you were accompanying her in her medical appointments; I thought you could talk with her. Instead of doing that, you have spoiled everything and now she has gone away in an ambulance...”

I explained that Clara was crying, that he had hurt her and thus she needed and asked for help. He replied, "It was nothing".

I said that she was vulnerable and she asked me to call the police. I was only doing what she asked me to do. António replied that Clara would never have taken that initiative on her own, that it was my influence. I said she specifically asked me not to talk to him. I thought she was scared and asked her if she wanted me to call the police. I did what she asked me to do.

He replied, "So, is she the one in command now? [*agora é ela que manda?*]"⁸

This rhetorical question – "*agora é ela que manda?*" – masks a less obvious question: have Cape Verdean men traditionally been the ones in command?

To return to my conversation with António, he appeared to justify his aggression by referring to Clara's constant nagging.

"You have no idea how my head is, how much I have suffered with her".

"You pushed her and hurt her eye. Did you put any ice on it?"

"What's the point?" He went on to complain more about the hard time she had been giving him.

"I had been living with her for a year; she never once had to cook a meal. I cooked all the meals. I paid the rent, she never had to pay (later she assured me she had always paid the whole rent for herself, with money sent from relatives in Cape Verde). "But to call the police!" He continued,

"When I went out, if she left the key in the lock, then I couldn't get in because I wouldn't be able to open the door. My friends tell me I have to be patient, they say that pregnant women get like this, but it has been too much. And you, now, instead of helping, have made things worse".

He said I had ruined everything because now that the police had been called there was no way she would stay with him.

I then said that I understood how he felt and respected his anger. I was ready to apologize and to take responsibility for the difficult decision that I had taken, but at the time, I didn't know what else I could do.

I reminded him what he had said at the beginning of the phone call when he rang asking for help: that he was scared that he might do something. Clara had also told me on the phone that he had hit her before. He claimed this was a lie. I said I understood that he felt that I had betrayed his confidence, I knew he had rang for help, but he had put me on the phone with Clara and she had also asked me for help. I argued that by calling the police, I wasn't making a statement, that he was a bad person. I was simply doing what I thought was best at that moment. I just wanted to help them both.

I suggested that he too should seek help asking, for example, at his local health centre, to see a psychologist with whom he could talk through all of this. I finally told him he could rest assured that I would not comment this case with anybody in the network of people we were both in contact with.⁹ If he helped himself, he was helping Clara and his baby because he was still the father. By the end of the conversation, António had not only calmed down, but he also surprisingly thanked me.

At first, it seemed as though this conversation had put an end to my involvement in the case, but events turned out otherwise. Two days later, Clara rang me again to talk about António and about the fact that he wouldn't stop ringing her, crying down the phone and asking her to come back to him, saying that if she refused to, it was my entire fault because I had influenced her. Clara told me she replied to him that it had nothing to do with me, that she would have left him anyway. She claimed she was fine, but that he was not. He was the one who needed help – she said – and thus asked me to ring him.

I then sent a simple text message to Antonio expressing my concern and gently suggesting that he should look after himself. I added that I was available to talk if he so wanted, but there was no shame in seeing a psychologist; rather, it was a sign of maturity.

My attempt to engage with António, from a “non-gendered” space, suggesting he seek psychological assistance, revealed a desire to mark a humanist position, by going beyond stereotyped categorizations of the abuser who commits violence against women. I wanted to engage with the real person with whom I had unexpectedly become involved in a quandary. By situating this unexpected event within the context of ethnographic knowledge production, I soon realized that whilst his attitudes came close to expressing the Cape Verdean ideal of “hegemonic masculinity”, the whole situation including Clara's attitude, displayed a far more dynamic state of affairs, marked not only by changing scenarios, but also by a large degree of ambivalence.¹⁰ Initially, she did not want to expose the situation (Clara had told me on several occasions that she would never have taken the initiative to call me, as António had done) and yet she chose to expose what had happened by willingly opening the door to the police. António's reaction revealed that he had been deeply humiliated by the appearance of the police which had undermined his authority, threatening his self-worth in the social order (Archer 2000: 9) as an ideal hegemonic male in control of his personal affairs. Not only had Clara exposed what had been

9 Neither António nor Clara ever asked me to refrain from discussing these events with others.

10 This is not to argue that social actors are incapable of gaining a reflexive distance from their gender identifications since this would deny them any agency. See Archer's theory (2000, 2003) upon the role of the “inner dialogue”.

a private affair to the public realm, but, in the discourse of the "masculinity genre" in Cape Verde, she had also made a "fool" of him, by "tricking" him into thinking she was just talking to me when she was actually "plotting" to call the police.

When commenting the case with a colleague, he asked if I thought if it made any cultural sense to António to suggest psychological help, because, in his experience in Conakry, men thought it was normal and necessary to hit their women. A cultural interpretive framework was hence being challenged and the way in which I understood this challenge was undoubtedly affected by my unexpected involvement in the events concerned. If António's aggressive attitude towards Clara could be interpreted in the light of a pre-determined model of masculinity which placed him in a position of authority that could even allude to consented aggression, the string of events that made up the whole episode did not fit this model. I needed to search for a more sophisticated analysis, one which would bring me closer to the lived experiences of Cape Verdean youth.

CHANGES IN GENDER DYNAMICS IN CAPE VERDE

The Cape Verdean study by C. Afonseca Silva (2009: 96) of women's interpretations of their own experiences of conjugal conflict confirms my colleague's point that violence towards women is often seen, in Cape Verde, as a socially acceptable practice. In his analysis of the masculinity genre, Massart argues that the conversations men have in urban Cape Verde about their relationships with women reveal that what is truly at stake for them is the ability to be in command – *manda*: "A man is said to command in his house: he would say to a 'rebellious' woman wishing to have her way '*Kem ta manda li, é mi*' – 'Who commands here, is me'" (Massart 2000: 153-154). The urban men, interviewed by Massart (2005: 250), complained about the changing behaviour of women who now voiced their complaints, nagging and criticizing their partners for going out too often and accusing them of having secret affairs.

Since the ideal of hegemonic masculinity is not called into question and the ideology of patriarchy is also reproduced in the socialisation of children in female-headed households (Silva 2009; Rodrigues 2007), women have traditionally avoided direct confrontation with men in their daily interactions. This has resulted in "distanced accommodations" between the two genders (Massart 2005: 253), with women expressing their complaints in an indirect way, through humorous proverbs and sayings that have allowed men to save face (Carter and Aulette 2009a) and left women to live with the tension.

The transformations in gender relations, precipitated by the economic and social changes that began with the political transition in 1991, reveal a new attitude in women who are now prepared to confront men directly (Massart

2005: 253). Interpersonal violence is often associated with perceived threats to gender identifications (Moore 1994 cit. in Åkesson 2004: 106) and violence against women is widespread in Cape Verde (Silva 2009; Carter and Aulette 2009b). Clara's decision to go beyond words and take direct action – calling the police – took António by surprise. Carter and Aulette argue that gender ideologies tend to inhibit women from reporting violence and requesting court intervention; women are made to believe it will be detrimental to their interests and to those of their children since it is their responsibility to keep the family together (Carter and Aulette 2009b: 134). Such concerns were partially present in Clara's assessment of her own situation and this became clearer to me later, when I realized, during our conversations in the waiting rooms of subsequent appointments, over the next few weeks, that Clara was not sure how to respond to Antonio's constant telephone calls, begging her to return to him. He had also asked Clara if he could be present at the birth; Clara did not know what she wanted. She was clearly experiencing a dilemma, caught in the middle of paradigm changes and pulled in opposite directions by their differentiated gender values, for which she did not have much social support, as the subsequent episodes illustrate.

At first, Clara did not return to the flat. For the first week, she was lodged in a motel, paid for by social security and then a friend took her in, temporarily. In the conversations we had in the hospital waiting room, it appeared as though she was going to move back in with António. She began to tell me about the various conversations she had had with different Cape Verdean friends. Her male friends assured her she would be better off with António, rather than coping on her own with a baby. Following this advice, she then went on to talk to me about António's qualities: she remarked that António was a good person; he always worked in the house, cooking, cleaning, and ironing. Furthermore, she was now worried about what decision to make with regard to the complaint that she had made to the police. Her male friend had told her that António's fate was in her hands. If she didn't withdraw her complaint then he may go to prison or be sent back to Cape Verde. Moreover, her friend argued that when the baby was born, it would surely not want to know that its mother had put its father in jail or that its mother had caused the father to be sent back to Cape Verde. The argument regarding the need for financial and emotional support, within a specific context of maternity was also emphasized by him and brought up by Clara in our conversation. The friend added that she wouldn't be able to cope with a baby on her own; her friends would not have the time to help her. He had made it very clear: she was better off going back to António. This advice did not derive from any kind of disapproval of Clara's actions. On the contrary; her friend had also had a conversation with Clara in front of António in which he had explicitly said that António was entirely to blame for what had happened and that any other woman would have reacted

the same way. "She did the right thing to call the police" – he said. After this conversation, however, he then told Clara in private, that António had learnt his lesson and she should withdraw her complaint.

When we met again for another appointment, Clara had moved back in with António. But she did not stay with him for very long and moved out before the baby was born. She also took the decision not to withdraw the complaint. Later, when I enquired how she had come to this decision, she simply replied that when she was summoned to courts, they had asked her if it was true, so why should she deny it? When I went to visit Clara five days after her baby was born, she told me António had been present at the birth. She had called him because it was a holiday (1st January) and she had no-one else to call and so he stayed with her right through the birth and then left. I asked if they were talking now and she screwed up her nose. António hadn't contacted her yet. "He has legs, doesn't he? He can come and visit me to see the baby if he wants to, just as you have".

This episode and its unexpected effects have provided a window into the complex dynamics currently at play in the relations between Cape Verdean men and women. What is at stake here is far more than just a clash between "modern" westernized models of feminine independence and more "traditional" Cape Verdean models of masculine domination. The complex changes in gender relations and the tensions and dilemmas they precipitate for new generations of Cape Verdeans may best be understood as emerging from the opposing influences of divergent gender ideologies which produce a range of differentiated gendered expectations that co-exist uneasily with each other. Clara's temporary return to live with António in the flat and her request for his presence at the birth bring to light the vulnerabilities of a young woman in need of security but also in search of her own independence. António's desperate pleas for her to return to him illuminate his own vulnerabilities as a young man wrestling with traditional gender ideologies in a changing world. The whole episode suggests that the relations between Clara and António constantly shifted between cultivating dependence, exerting control and seeking autonomy. If their swinging to and fro between the pursuit of intimacy and of detachment characterizes the power dynamics of Cape Verdean gender relations, it also serves, in a different but interrelated way, to characterize the dynamics of social change expressed through the dilemmas lived by men and women within the process of shifting gender values.

CONCLUSION

The unexpected events described in this paper took António, Clara and myself by surprise. Even though domestic violence is common in Cape Verde, I never expected to become so intimately involved in a case of conjugal conflict and

was caught unawares when António rang me asking for help. My description of events has attempted to elucidate the relational, emotional, and analytical dimensions of the ethnographic project which is shot through with an unstable mix of detachment and involvement. Rather than bracketing this paradox out from the analysis, I have tried to demonstrate how becoming intimately involved whilst concurrently standing back is a necessary condition and approach for the production of anthropological knowledge.

Integrating the unexpected into our analyses also requires alertness and vigilance which is far from the sleepy complacency by which our method of participant observation may too easily be caricatured. It requires us to stand back from our categories, from the roles we and others occupy, to stay with the tension and make space for open-endedness and contradictions. The unexpected episode discussed here led me to adopt the contradictory stance of being concurrently “guilty” and “not guilty” of “betrayal”. My personal involvement in the events was an inevitable consequence of how “the instigation for social knowledge arises within sociality” (Keane 2003: 242).

Many authors, such as Massart claim that “gender must not be restricted to dichotomous categories essentialising males and females and affirming the domination of the former over the latter, although this is an experienced reality” (2000: 147-148). How to transform this idea into ethnographic knowledge poses a compelling challenge. The notion of divergent gendered expectations co-existing within the same individual may offer a way forward. The inter-subjective relations we establish with our research subjects require us to think with, rather than about the people we study, but not necessarily to think like them; combining involvement with detachment. Since the outcomes of dialogical engagement cannot be controlled or foreseen, the ethnographic project is like a seed: whether it is cultivated carelessly or carefully, it still harbours unknown potential.

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