

BINGO

BRIAN MCGAHEY

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY, UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN

Sitting.
Sitting.
Sitting.
'Forty-seven'.
Stroke.
Sitting.
Sitting.
'Sixty-two'.
Nothing.
Sitting.
Sitting.
'Eighty-four'.
I need to get milk on the way home.
'Nineteen'.
'Check!'
Who won? I don't know her.
Sitting.
Sitting.
Coughing.
'Are you okay, Jean? Jean?'
'Yes! Fine, thank you'.
Sitting.
Sitting.
Sitting.

'Bingo' was written during my fieldwork in a day centre for older people in Northern Ireland as part of my dissertation research on loneliness amongst older people. In the poem, I wanted to highlight something I did not expect to encounter during my fieldwork: boredom. Writing this poem helped me to attend to and channel my feelings of boredom, rather than suppress, regulate or become estranged from them. It also allowed me to understand the role of emotional labour, which includes the regulation of emotions in a professional setting (Hochschild 1983), on the centre's staff and how it may be influenced by various factors, including an overfamiliar work routine.

Like the day centre's fulltime carers, my time as a volunteer at the day centre was also set within a fixed, daily schedule. I would arrive at the day centre for 10:00 to serve tea and biscuits as the service users settled at the centre and chatter began to emerge around the dining room. Once they finished their tea, the service users then moved into an activity room. Depending on the group, a limited variety of activities took place, including baking, bingo, and bocce. Afterwards lunch was served and by 15:00 the service users put on their coats as they waited for the bus to pick them up.

At the beginning of my fieldwork I was very eager to begin and enthusiastic to meet all of the staff and service users. However, as the weeks progressed and I became more accustomed to the above routine, I would occasionally wake up tired or in a bad mood and go to the day centre reluctantly. On such days, it became hard for me to maintain an upbeat attitude and I began to understand why the other carers would at times be agitated or impatient with the service users. I found the repetition of activities demotivating, as did the carers, increasing the emotional strain of care work in the centre, causing the carers to, at times, appear frustrated with their work.

Poetry was a means for me to express this monotony and provide my ethnographic account with greater atmospheric depth that could not have otherwise been achieved by prose alone. Did the account happen as the poem portrays? No; the numbers were not called in that sequence, no lady called Jean was in the room and the concerns about buying milk were not present at the time. However, the experience is no less real, I lived it, but in writing it down, the experience is inherently transformed into something new. As Denzin (1997) warns, anthropologists should not presume to be able to 'directly capture lived experience' (p.3), but by acknowledging its fictitiousness we can focus instead on the lived experiences which made this writing possible. It is rooted in a truth; partial and subjective, one that provides a nuanced verisimilitude of my experience conducting fieldwork at the day centre.

References

- Denzin, N., 1997. *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Hochschild, A., 1983. *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.