Coming to terms with the missing pieces: toilet paper and ethnography in the neoliberal university

Dr Edward J Wright

Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Criminology, Nottingham Trent University

Edward.wright@ntu.ac.uk

Introduction

Failure is beginning to be re-thought within the academy (e.g. Harrowell et al., 2018; Smith and Delamont, 2019; Clare, 2019). This can be understood as a form of resistance, or a means of working to reconstruct the academy, against neoliberalism, in which failure, like everything, is misrepresented in individualised terms (Gill, 2009; Ball, 2012). This article extends this discussion of failure in the neoliberal university, particularly in relation to ethnography. It is based on doctoral, sociological research grounded in the empirical context of white-collar boxing. This study is outlined in greater detail elsewhere (Wright, 2018; Wright, 2019), though in summary, a six-month ethnography was conducted, formed of daily participant observation at a boxing club in the Midlands of England. The objectives of the research were broadly threefold: 1) to understand white-collar boxing in relation to other forms of the sport, 2) to understand practice and interaction within the sport in relation to social divisions, and 3) to understand what this form of boxing means for existing accounts of late modernity and identity construction.

The discussion held in this article is largely methodological, but ultimately relates to the second of these objectives. In summary: someone was recurrently stealing the toilet roll from the boxing club, and I have no knowledge of why. This scenario exists counter to my understanding of the boxing club overall, that it is a crime-free space, ensured through a strict gender order. During my doctorate, I became obsessed with thinking about what might have happened to this toilet roll, and what it means in terms of my understanding of the field site. However, I do not have answers to these questions. This dynamic does not feature in my doctoral thesis, and a complexity of the fieldwork site is written out of existence. Taking heed from Smith and Delamont (2019: 4) my intention here is not simply making this 'failure' visible, but making visible 'challenges and frustrations of ethnographic research', and then situating these in relation to broader disciplinary challenges centring on the toilet as an overlooked space, and the competitive individualism of neoliberalism, in which failure is denied a structural existence.

The missing pieces

Boxing clubs have been referred to as islands of order (Wacquant, 2004: 17), and the boxing club in this research can be understood in this way. Whilst boxing might be (mis)construed as uncivilised, as will be discussed further below, the hypermasculine ethos of the club actually ensures that it is a highly organised, civil – and importantly here – strictly *crime-free* space (see Jump, 2017 for a nuanced discussion). The following fieldnote,

whilst speaking to this narrative, also presents a challenge to it. It is around this field note, what it indicates about toilet roll, and what it indicates for the above understanding of the club, that this article rests:

> It was unusually quiet at The Club. No one there, apart from me and one of the coaches. One of the club members comes in. He left his boxing gloves here the other night and is back to look for them. He asks the coach if he's seen the gloves, who says he has probably put them 'out the back' but doesn't actually know where they are. In jest, I ask: 'what if they've been nicked?' The club member responds: 'you'd have to be a suicidal maniac to steal from here'. I then ask the coach, more seriously: 'has anything ever been stolen from here?' His response: 'Nothing, apart from toilet roll' apparently, and he has no idea why. Every time he replaces it, someone (and he has no idea who) nicks it again. Although, he added, that once somebody stole a car from outside The Club and when they found out who it was, the man 'had to leave town'. I don't know if he was being serious about the man and the car (adapted from fieldnotes, April 2015).

What is clear from this story is that stealing is not tolerated at the club, and moreover that within it the formal avenues of criminal justice are supplanted by a particularly punitive form of populist justice. As the club member notes: 'you would have to be a suicidal maniac to steal from here', the implication being that there would be serious repercussions for doing

so. Within the localised space of the boxing club, the threat of physical violence, which can be understood to be a product and producer of a physical hypermasculinity that often orders interaction within such spaces (Matthews, 2016), entails that – at least for its membership largely composed of white, heterosexual men – it is an *unusually* safe arena. There is also a close, homosocial, emotional bond in and between boxing club members underpinned by the same heavy, collective investment in tough manhood. This means that whilst the gym, like many boxing gyms, becomes exclusionary, most of those included respect and indeed love one another, to the extent that violating one another becomes (almost) unthinkable.

These principles of social interaction are connected: within the social logic of the club, breaking such a deeply-felt loving, homosocial bond, produces an extreme, retributive reaction. Though it largely remains unarticulated in this way, fear thereby becomes a way through which social interaction is ordered: the boxing club is therefore an unusually safe space for its membership, *for as long as its ethos is reproduced by them*. In summary, all of this means that the same principle that often informs property law and social morality, *thou shalt not steal*, is reproduced in the boxing club, though it is renewed by a strict, at once caring and punitive ethos, which in being underpinned by an intensified gender order, differs from many sectors in the world beyond it.

Equally, within this fieldnote, there is evidence that this morality is not always upheld, and that this principle of interaction is not unyielding: despite the *prohibition* of stealing, there is not a complete *inhibition* of stealing. Someone recurrently steals the toilet roll. And what's more, I have no idea of the who or the why. I can picture a hand taking it, but the vision I have becomes blurred as it pans out, revealing an anonymous figure. I do not know to whom the hand belongs, or why they do it. I could take a guess as to why someone is doing it, but I do not know *per se*. Even now I am presuming that it is only one person who takes the toilet roll, and I do not actually know this. Knowing, in the broadest empirical sense relies on experience of some kind, and from my ethnographic position this was impossible. Though club members sometimes complained about the lack of toilet roll, they presumed that it simply was never stocked in the first place. Its theft was not spoken about at the club, nor were others definitely aware that it even happened.

Where ethnographers write, but don't observe

It might be initially tempting to dismiss the scenario discussed above. *How could toilet paper possibly be sociologically important?* Well, generally, toilets and toilet paper are part of everyday life (Greed, 2003), and it is precisely the mundane materiality of everyday life that social scientists *should* take seriously. Toilet roll in the asylum, for instance, takes on new meaning: its institutional rationing becomes one of the many techniques

through which self-determination is disrupted and thereby the self is defiled (Goffman, 1961). And more specifically, here, at the boxing club, there is a specific tension that centres on toilet roll: someone had applied a five-finger discount to it, which was highly unusual given the club ethos.

I wanted to know why this the case, and who does it, not because I wanted to turn the ethnography into a *whodunnit?* but for the reason that it presents a scenario counter to the shared understanding of the club, which forbids stealing, and is ensured by the physical danger of doing so. However, beyond the rudimentary fieldnote above which indicates that such a dynamic does exist, I have no data on this. For reasons discussed below, the toilet presents a blind spot within my theorisation of the club – it is a space about which I essentially know nothing.

No ethical approach to ethnography could allow for collection of data relating to this. The boxing club toilet comprises a single cubicle which is not within a larger room; observing it therefore, could not be squared with research ethics which emphasise the need to uphold privacy. Sight is not the only way in which data can be collected, but my view at the time was that interviewing on this issue would simply not work. Stealing is reliant on secrecy: those who did not take it would be unaware of the dynamic, and those who did know about it would be unlikely to admit that they knew. And, moreover, what would producing such data mean within a context underpinned by a particularly punitive form of justice?

There are idiosyncrasies involved in all research projects: here, toilet roll takes on a particular meaning, not present in all aspects of social life. However, the absence of reflection on toilets is a feature of ethnography more broadly too. Whilst introductory textbooks on ethnography often contain anecdotes regaling researchers retreating to the toilet stall in order to take fieldnotes (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 178; Emerson et al. 2011: 39), from reading most institutional ethnographies, you would not know whether there are toilets on site or not. With some exceptions (e.g. Cahill, 1985; Halberstalm, 1998; Skeggs, 2001), the toilet is an ignored ethnographic space. The privacy of the toilet within the social life is reflected within ethnographic practice, and actively used by ethnographers for its privacy, which results in it being a space where the ethnographers' gaze fails. That is, whilst ethnographers frequent toilet stalls to record 'covert jottings' (Emerson et al. 2011: 39), they typically fail to actively construct the toilet as a meaningful space within the research site, and by extension within social life more broadly.

Ironically, what this does tell us is that the toilet is not only used for urination and defecation: the privacy that the toilet affords allows for a manner of different activities to be undertaken undetected. Cahill (1985) discusses similar: the toilet is a site through which personal fronts (see Goffman, 1963) can be managed and maintained prior to interacting 'front stage'. This kind of insight into the reproduction of public social life through backstage interaction in the toilet, however, is all too rare in ethnography.

The private confines of the toilet and the meaningful activity taken therein tends to be overlooked in terms of the reproduction of public social life.

It is only now whilst I write this that I realise the importance of the boxing club toilet as a private space through which the public is reproduced: another of its uses is to clean one's face of blood post-sparring. Whilst I have fieldnotes relating to this, my notes halt as fighters enter the toilet: 'he goes to the toilet to clean up the blood [end of field note]' (fieldnotes, February 2015). I only now make the connection to facework (Goffman, 1967) – cleansing in private here allows one to return to the front stage of the club, physically unblemished. This can be extended further as a gendered phenomenon. As Skeggs (2001: 303-304) argues: toilets 'are un-comfortable liminal zones where gender is tested and proved', to which could be added here, 'maintained' (Goffman, 1956: 18). Again, though, at the time of the ethnography, I overlooked the toilet for its social significance. This is not something unique to me: ethnographers have overall tended to fail in actively casting their gaze on the toilet.

There is, however, a broader scholarly understanding that individualism as a social morality produced the private toilet as a feature of social life (Kogan, 2010). The toilet is a 'civilising' technology (Blumenthal, 2014; Slater et al, 2018) through which our biological functions became constructed as moral failure: the toilet as an enclosed space is a site that reproduces a sterile understanding of the human world, and of humans. Whilst defecation is 'a bodily process that is crucial to life itself' (Desai *et*

al. 2015: 101) it is socially contingent, constructed differently depending on context. The general instruction for ethnographers is *actively question the rhythms, routines and rituals* within research sites, and seek to locate these within a wider structural frame. The organisation of toilets and action in and around them, are far from natural. However, they are largely unaddressed by ethnographers, and through using the toilet as a safehouse in which to write fieldnotes, this social organisation is actively – unwittingly – reproduced.

To this extent, Van der Geest (2007: 384) has noted that 'Shit is an intimate product. We part with it in private and there it should remain. By talking and writing about it, it becomes a matter out of place; it disturbs the order of proper behaviour'. Ethnographers actively use the cover of an intimate activity to take covert fieldnotes, and by doing so reproduce the toilet as a private, off-limits space, despite there being activities within it which actively reproduce the social. My blind-spot at the club reflects the discipline, which reflects social convention, despite a central tenet of sociology being to transcend and explain the taken-for-granted. Both the theft of the toilet roll from the boxing club, and the ethnographers' failure to gaze on the toilet, are produced through the social construction of defecation as moral failure. Nonetheless, whilst in the field, and whilst writing my doctorate, prior to this broader interrogation of the relationship between the ethnographer and the toilet, I felt failure around this issue in individualised terms. This can be located within the academic subjectivity of the neoliberal university.

The individualisation of failure

Let me interrupt myself at this stage, to say that I do recognise the absurdity of my fixation with toilet roll in the context of a boxing club ethnography, and that though there is a loss involved here, the project was not altogether 'lost' (see Smith and Delamont 2019). The absurd fixation over this loss, is, however, ultimately the product of an environment in which perfection is demanded: the neoliberal university.

Failure is a central, structural feature of social life (Malpas and Wickham, 1995), academia included. Knowledge production is a social endeavour, which routinely entails failure (Knorr Cetina, 1999). In fact, it is actually 'far more common than is success' (Bills, 2013: 270). As Dorling (2019: 4) notes: 'I regularly fail people. It is a significant part of my job'. Failure is to social life, what defecation is to the body: crucial, unavoidable, normal.

Whilst 'commonplace' (Clare, 2019: 1), however, the neoliberal approach to knowledge production obscures the normalcy of failure, and produces a scenario in which 'academics are unable to fail and yet do so regularly' (Harrowell et al 2018: 231). That is, the neoliberal university produces a new form of academic subjectivity (Morrissey, 2015) requiring unrelenting success, to be recognised on an individual level, in competition with others. Metrification (see Berg et al. 2016) actively produces the conditions for success and failure in individualised terms. As Gill (2009: 240) notes, within this mode, not being successful is 'misrecognized - or to put that more neutrally, made knowable - in terms of individual (moral) failure'. Failure

becomes unusual, a pathology. Despite its normalcy, failure becomes a taint, something that we do not talk about, rather than a routine aspect of knowledge production.

Within these conditions, producing research wherein there are straightforwardly dead-ends, like the case of the missing toilet roll, becomes problematic (see Jemielniak and Kostera, 2010: 336). Whilst 'limitations' are readily discussed in research contexts, these tend to be guarded, through being based around matters about which ultimately we know *something*. Seldom is it the case that as bold a statement is made as *I altogether do not know what was happening with regards to this scenario* whilst reflecting on limitations of ethnographic research. However, apart from rehearsing the idea that the toilet affords privacy, which allows for it to be taken, I have no idea what was happening with the toilet roll during this ethnography.

Being in a position to make this statement is perhaps the biggest source of fear for the academic, which is itself independent of our current, marketized university. Fear is, however, like all emotions, social and relational (Barker, 2009), and within such a highly competitive context in which perfection is mandatory, fear is not only reproduced but intensified. As Ball (2012: 20) notes: those who 'under-perform' in the neoliberal university 'are subject to moral approbation'. Admitting that you do not know within the neoliberal academy – a scenario in which nothing but *research excellence* is tolerated – becomes morally risky, in a Goffmanian sense: it endangers having one's

identity publicly spoilt (Goffman, 1963) as not only one who has failed *at* something in particular, but as someone who is a failure *per se*, in ontological terms.

Under these conditions, moreover, the microscopic flaw is magnified. My doctorate does not hinge on being able to successfully theorise the theft of toilet roll, but the idea of being clueless about it, within a frame wherein only excellence is tolerated, becomes troubling. Researchers come to conduct failure examinations *on themselves*, they inevitably find and produce failure and then hide it: within my doctoral thesis I did not mention the dynamic surrounding the missing toilet roll because I do not know how to explain it. It is as if this scenario does not exist within the field.

In their deliberation on failure in the neoliberal university, Harrowell *et al* (2018: 231) argue that ethnographers tend to 'sanitize the realities of field work into persuasive chunks'. Rather than being permitted to actively address the messy, complicated realities of the field, within the neoliberal university there is a compulsion to produce linear, smooth accounts, which whilst counting as excellent within a metric, misrepresent or 'distort' the field. On these grounds, the missing toilet roll is a source of hidden frustration, it nags at me, to the extent that years after the fieldwork, I continue to think – and now write – about it. It is not that I do not know about toilet roll *per se* that is the problem, it is rather feeling as though injustice is done through doing ethnography within a neoliberal frame, through discouraging engagement with the quirks entailed in being human,

the toilet paper being an example of this. Without these dead ends and failures present in analysis, the field is reproduced in a sterile and static capacity, which does not reflect social life, in effect, *as life*. The neoliberal intensification of success and failure, by not allowing for critical reflection in these terms, for risk of being constructed as the latter, actively hinders the theorisation and understanding of the human world.

Conclusion

The 'failure' on which this article theorises concerns the toilet of a boxing club, and its absence from my previous ethnographic writings, which becomes salient when considering a circumstance at the club around which ethical data collection was problematic. The absence of the toilet from the ethnography, in hindsight, can be located in the anxieties of operating within the neoliberal university, though also reflects the ethnographic genre more broadly. Whilst toilets are not *entirely* absent from ethnographies, they are an overlooked space, which I proffer can be understood to reflect the social construction of defecation as moral failure.

Whilst to defecate is to be human, the one who defecates in public becomes morally dirty. Likewise, whilst failure is a routine aspect of knowledge production, within the neoliberal university, the academic who publicly fails becomes similarly tarnished. Just as shit is an intimate, private product, so is failure. Neither, however, are necessarily so. By talking and writing about them, these constructions can be disturbed. Given that, 'the proper' order of the neoliberal university is one of excellence, and one in which it is denied

altogether that failure is a possibility, a disturbance to the order of proper behaviour should be invoked. This would produce a more humane academy, and encourage vitalistic, unafraid ethnography. So, what's the bottom line of all of this? Wipe away the veneer of excellence and bring out your failure!

Reference List

Ball, S.J. (2012) 'Performativity, Commodification and Commitment: An I-Spy Guide to the Neoliberal University', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 60 (1): 17-28.

Barker, J. (2009) 'Introduction: Ethnographic Approaches to the Study of Fear', *Anthropologica*, 51 (2): 267-272.

Berg, L., Huijbens, E.H. and Larsen, H.G. (2016) 'Producing anxiety in the neoliberal university', *The Canadian Geographer, Le Géographe canadien*, 60(2): 168–180.

Bills, D.B. (2013) 'Comments from the Editor: The Sociology of Failure and Rejection', Sociology of Education, 86(4) 270–271.

Blumenthal, D. (2014). *Little Vast Rooms of Undoing: Exploring Identity and Embodiment Through Public Toilet Spaces*. London: Rowman & Littlefield International.

Cahill, S.E. (1985) 'Meanwhile Backstage: Public Bathrooms and the Interaction Order', *Urban Life* 14 (1): 33-58.

Clare, N. (2019) 'Can the failure speak? Militant failure in the academy', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 33: 1-4.

Desai, R. McFarlane, C., and Graham, S. (2015) 'The Politics of Open Defecation: Informality, Body, and Infrastructure in Mumbai', *Antipode*, 47 (1): 98-120.

Dorling, D. (2019) 'A new kind of rigour for British Geographers', *Emotion, Space and Society,* 33: 1-7.

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I., and Shaw, L.L. (2011) Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes Second Edition, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Gill, R. (2009). Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia. In Secrecy and silence in the research process: Feminist reflections, ed. R. Flood and R. Gill, London and New York: Routledge. pp.228– 44.

Goffman, E. (1956) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre: Edinburgh.

Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums*, London: Penguin.

Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma – notes on the management of spoiled identity*, New York: Simon and Schuster.

Goffman, E. (1967) *Interaction Ritual – Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour,* Middlesex: Penguin.

Greed, C. (2003) *Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets*, Oxford: Architectural Press.

Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (1995) *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.

Halberstam, J. (1998). *Female Masculinity*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Harrowell, E., Davies, T. & Disney, T. (2018) 'Making Space for Failure in Geographic Research', *The Professional Geographer*, 70 (2): 230-238.

Jemielniak, D. and Kostera, M. (2010) 'Narratives of Irony and Failure in Ethnographic Work', *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 27(4): 335–347

Jump, D.L. (2017) 'Why we should think some more. A response to 'When you're boxing you don't think so much': pugilism, transitional masculinities and criminal desistance among young Danish gang members', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20 (8): 1093-1107.

Knorr Cetina, K. (1996) *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press.

Kogan, T.S. (2010) 'Sex Separation: The Cure-all for Victorian Anxiety' in Molotch H., and Norén L. (Eds.), *Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing*, NYU Press, pp.145-164.

Malpas, J. and Wickham, G. (1995) 'Governance and failure: on the limits of sociology', *ANZJS*, 31 (3): 37-50.

Matthews, C.R. (2016), 'The tyranny of the male preserve', *Gender & Society*, 30 (2), pp. 312-333.

Morrissey, J. (2015) 'Regimes of performance: practices of the normalised self in the neoliberal university', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 36 (4): 614-634.

Skeggs, B. (2001). 'The toilet paper: Femininity, class and mis-recognition', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24 (3/4): 295–307

Slater, J., Jones, C. & Procter, L. (2018) 'School toilets: queer, disabled bodies and gendered lessons of embodiment', *Gender and Education*, 30 (8): 951-965.

Smith, R.J. and Delamont, S. (2019) 'Editorial Introduction' in (eds.) Smith, R.J and Delamont, S. *The Lost Ethnographies: Methodological Insights From Projects That Never Were*, Bingley: Emerald, pp.1-17.

Van der Geest, S. (2007) 'The Social Life of Faeces – Systems in the Dirt' in van Ginkel, R. and Strating, A. (Eds.) *Wildness & sensation: anthropology of sinister and sensuous realms*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, pp.381-397.

Wacquant, L. (2004) *Body and Soul. Notebooks of an apprentice boxer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wright, E. J. (2018) 'Fast-track fisticuffs? An ethnographic exploration of time and white-collar boxing', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690218815139

Wright, E.J. (2019) 'On white-collar boxing and social class', *The Sociological Review*, 67 (6): 1400-1416.