

“I’ve never told anyone this before”: Co-constructing intimacy in sex and sexualities research

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This paper explores the co-construction of a temporary yet intimate relationship between researcher and participant when discussing participants’ personal lives in fieldwork interviews. Through the case study of a project exploring how men who have sex with men use geolocative mobile phone apps for social and sexual encounter, I explore how the researcher and participant can experience moments of striking intimacy while maintaining personal and professional boundaries. The paper contributes to sex and sexualities research by arguing that intimacy can be cohered spatially and in limited timeframes, contrary to critical approaches suggesting that longer term and more intimately involved ethnographies are necessary for rich empirical results. In an environment of restrictive institutional ethical norms, this paper provides a methodological road-map for scaffolding an environment for intimate relating that maximises participant engagement while managing (inter)personal boundaries.

KEYWORDS

ethics, Grindr, interview, intimacy, queer, sexuality

1 | INTRODUCTION

Consideration of intimacy in the social science research field is not new, with feminist and queer scholarship exploring intimacy via the relationship between interviewer and participant to great effect (Bain & Nash, 2006; Bondi, 2003; Brown, 2001, 2008; Cupples, 2002; Detamore, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Kaspar & Landolt, 2016; Valentine, 2002; Wimark, 2017). However, in a contemporary research context that places increasing emphasis on adherence to institutional ethical codes of practice (Detamore, 2010; Mueller, 2007), how to generate a productive, intimate, and ethical space for fieldwork deserves closer study. In this paper I use some of my own experiences of interview research to explore questions arising around intimacy and personal/professional boundaries in sex and sexualities research. I contend that intimacy can be successfully brokered through co-constructing intimate spaces for temporally limited meetings in public places, rather than via more sustained, more private, or more intense social (or even sexual) longer term relationships. My emphasis is on co-producing interview spaces of intimacy that respect (inter)personal boundaries for both researcher and participant.

I begin by defining intimacy and situating qualitative interviews as intimate ethnographic tools in sex and sexualities research, before outlining a queer technology case study and its suitability for an interview methodology. I then explore the co-construction of intimacy in a fieldwork environment, arguing that this relationship is valuable because it can simultaneously generate rich data and a secure discursive environment for the participant to express themselves without constraint. Contrary to more involved ethnographic approaches, I argue that intimacy can be constructed in short- rather than long-term

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engagements, and in public rather than private spaces. I explain my rationale for identifying myself as an academic researcher throughout the fieldwork journey and why the uneven power differential in this dynamic is still preferable for me than entangling participants in intimacies which could disadvantage them more precipitously. I also explore several “roadblocks” to co-constructing intimacy, including positionality and navigating desire in the field. This paper progresses debates around managing researcher–participant relationships within professional boundaries and institutional ethical requirements. It extends both sex and sexualities research and methodologies scholarship by contending, perhaps unfashionably, that one-off interviews in a public space without an ongoing relationship need not preclude valuable, intimate fieldwork experiences for researcher and participant alike.

2 | BACKGROUND

Intimacy is popularly defined in human geography as thinking about personal lives by focusing on bodies, identities, and “public–private dichotomies” (Valentine, 2008, p. 2097). Valentine (2008, p. 2106) draws on Jamieson's (1997, p. 1) theorisation of intimacy to define it as a “specific sort of knowing, loving and caring for a person” that can span not just sexual relationships but also affective structures such as friendship. Laura Ann Stoler positions it as something that, for many, cannot be “measured by physical distance so much as the degree of involvement, engagement, concern and attention one gives to [nearness]” (2006, p. 15), although whether this nearness is something experienced physically, emotionally, or both, is less defined. As researchers in sexuality and space studies have noted, the relationship between researcher and participant can develop an acute sense of intimacy in the research setting (Cupples, 2002; Diprose et al., 2013; McDowell, 2010; Smith, 2016). This is often explored through intensive long-term ethnographic methodologies, but there is no reason why shorter qualitative interviews cannot equally constitute spaces of intimacy. Even where research does not explore sex or sexualities, the interview may constitute an intimate environment by virtue of its production within people's own homes (see for example Pilkey, 2014), or its involvement in highly personal oral histories (see for example Brown, 2001).

The qualitative interview occupies a complex history in the social sciences tradition, attracting ongoing debate among scholars regarding its value and format (Latham, 2003; Laurier & Philo, 2006; Thrift, 2000). Nevertheless, qualitative interviews offer a vehicle for exploring the experiences of people who might have historically been misrepresented or ignored (Byrne, 2004, p. 180), including sexual minorities and their health, behaviours, identity, and online practice (Bondi, 2003; Brown, 2001, 2008; Browne & Bakshi, 2013; Wimark, 2017). These approaches influenced the interview methodology discussed in this paper, conducted as part of a larger research project examining the impact of locative media technology among men who have sex with men (MSM), including but not limited to gay and bisexual men (Miles, 2017a). The project investigated how geolocate mobile phone apps including Grindr, Tinder and Hornet impact on social and sexual practices for MSM in London, United Kingdom (UK). Thirty-six participants were interviewed for the project, variously recruited by responding to study posters in public spaces such as libraries and health clinics; “snowball” volunteers who heard about the study from previous participants; and those who contacted an institutionally approved recruitment profile on Grindr and Tinder.¹ The sample ranged from openly gay men to those self-defining as heterosexual. Participant age ranged from young adults taking their first steps in “coming out” in their late teens to others “in the closet” in their 60s.

There are, of course, different ways of “telling” about society (Becker, 2007), including focus groups and participant observation in the field. Recent scholarship has explored the value of different approaches to conducting sensitive fieldwork research, including self-reflexive life course approaches (Lewis, 2017; Ng, 2017; Wimark et al., 2017) and for MSM apps specifically, media “go-alongs” (Jørgensen, 2016) as well as occasionally erotically involved insider ethnographies (Brown, 2008; Moser, 1998; Race, 2015). It is certainly true that more intensive ethnographic approaches can glean impressive results in research involving intimacy: take for example the personal involvement of John Campbell's (2004) work with MSM online chatroom communities, or Laurier and Philo's (2006, p. 353) “unstaged” ethnomethodological approach proposing an attention to the “just this-ness” of the interview experience. However, the individualised nature of smartphone use makes participant observation difficult (Leszczynski, 2017), especially given its imbrication with (largely) privatised sexual practice.² Following the approach to its end point could take the study into unethical scenarios, which would involve viewing participants' sexual practices. As an alternative methodological approach for deeply involved research, covert ethnography has found success in the field (see for example Bain & Nash, 2006; Parr, 1998) but was not something I felt comfortable undertaking, considering that my participants were, by the fact of their app membership, seeking connections that I would not be returning (although see Race, 2015 for sexual self-disclosure in intimate settings, and Humphreys, 1970 for a now-infamous MSM covert ethnography). Deciding on in-depth public interviews meant prioritising the construction of a conceptual space within the physical public for safe participant disclosure.

3 | DISCUSSION

3.1 | Co-constructing intimacy in the field

How we relate in interviews involves intimacy on several different levels – in building a rapport between participant and interviewer, in divulging personal details and narratives, and in being willing to mirror back those narratives, even if not literally by recounting one's own intimate experiences. Whereas in-the-field ethnography is mediated by researcher observation, interviews rely on knowledge co-production between interviewer and interviewee. This collaborative undertaking reflects in many ways co-production scenarios explored within social justice (Cahn, 2000), healthcare (Felipe et al., 2017), and the arts (Miles, 2017c; Richardson, 2016), but becomes somewhat more reliant on intimate rapport in a fieldwork setting involving discussion of sex and sexuality.

Intimacy is routinely imagined as a kind of closeness or emotional connection between individuals, but an interview is not automatically predicated on this connection, and nor is that affect necessarily fostered within the interview itself. The interviewer–participant dynamic is never neutral, and establishing the interview space as an ostensibly ethical, safe space is not objectively measurable nor universally definable. Work on the relational creation of research environments shows that setting up a “safe” space is not in itself sufficient to guarantee meaningful participation from strangers (Jenzen, 2017), especially given that this construction of safety is subjectively framed by the researcher and may not reflect reality for the interviewee. What is required is an affective relationship into which the participant invests, and is invested in. This construction relies on the participant's willingness to co-produce a space for involved, uninhibited communication, and this investment cannot be assumed by the researcher. In this research project, several participants had rarely or never before spoken about their sex lives, or even sexuality: as the participant quoted in the title of this paper muses: “I've never told anyone this before.” These are highly personal disclosures. While the researcher is motivated not just by the desire for a fulfilling encounter but also by the pursuit of meaningful data, for the participant, multiple and even conflicting goals may shape their participation, and those goals may be subconscious as well as explicated.

My aim was to scaffold an intimate space between researcher and participant by establishing an environment of trust and confidentiality. However, there was nothing that *required* participants to make an effort to emotionally involve themselves in the interview scenario beyond a temporary rapport built with myself, or a positive response bias. The fact that many participants did emotionally engage suggests – insofar as one party can reflect on the dynamic of the whole – that researcher and interviewee can collaboratively build intimate spaces to explore sensitive sexual histories, or indeed that intimacy can coalesce as an *outcome* of these personal disclosures. The key way in which this intimacy was co-constructed in this study was spatially.

3.2 | The road to spatial intimacy

Like online space, physical space mediates different bodies and environments (Bain & Nash, 2006; Brown, 2008; Longhurst, 1997; Miles, 2017b; Nast & Pile, 1998). The space in which the interview takes place can yield important information regarding the way respondents construct their identities (Sin, 2003), and this environment came to play a key role in the way that participants and I constructed our interview scenario. Participants chose their meeting venues, mostly cafes in central London. These were not neutral environments: they brought with them distinct dynamics that informed our relating and my methodological practice. The fact that participants chose venues with personal connections, often nominating a “favourite” local venue, invited the co-construction of a dyadic, semi-private conceptual space suspended within the larger physical one. Meeting in a space chosen by the participant helped in a modest way to rebalance the intrinsically uneven power imbalance between researcher and participant. For some participants, the familiarity or intimacy of this environment supported conversation about intimate topics, but for those who were not publicly “out,” their choice of venue seemed striking given the highly personal and, by normative standards, controversial topics discussed in this space. For individuals who do not publicly disclose their queer identity, meeting in a public space risks unwanted exposure, limiting involvement from the widest possible range of MSM technology users. Surprisingly however, among those who volunteered for the project, participants who were not “out,” or only selectively “out,” consistently chose public spaces over semi-private bookable spaces, suggesting that anonymity may supersede privacy in this discursive environment.

Beyond the choice of locality as a broker for intimacy, meeting participants for interviews mimicked meeting an app user for a “blind date,” with its concomitant anxieties. After all, I wanted to build a relationship through which they would warm to me and share with me, and this is a desire shared by anyone preparing for a first date with a stranger. Interviews were conducted with men who I knew almost nothing about, and had become acquainted with only through brief online

conversation. The “relationship building” work of interviews has been shown to be an active, rather than passive, process (Moss, 2002), and this proved particularly important in discussions around sexuality and sexual practice. For our interviews, a shared sense of identity – London residency, gender, sexuality – engendered rapport, but there was invariably much that diverged – age, “out”-ness, serostatus, socio-economic background, and ethnicity. Moss's (2002) relationship-building work was therefore dependent on me offering empathy (after Bondi, 2003) rather than straightforward identification in cases where shared experiences or histories were likely to be limited. Unlike more intensive ethnographic research – a women's bathhouse (Bain & Nash, 2006), for example, or cruising sites (Brown, 2008) – my participants were aware at all times of my researcher role. It is impossible to know if this compromised the extent to which our shared identity could be operationalised, but this decision felt more ethically comfortable for me, even while I recognise counter-arguments against covert ethnography as automatically problematic (see Parr, 1998) without consideration of local context.

Further, unlike a bathhouse, I wasn't putting my body in a “deliberately sexualised space” (Bain & Nash, 2006, p. 101), insofar as a café table is “public,” with little opportunity for re-appropriation or queer (mis)use. This was a deliberate choice, guided as much by my own desire for a productively intimate meeting that would not cross the boundary into an erotic one as it was down to any institutional ethical requirement. In this sense I was responding to Mathias Detamore's interrogation of methodological choice: “What parts of ourselves do we subvert, highlight, lay exposed in light of the comingling of ethical backgrounds and confounding complexities that studying human subjects place before us?” (2010, p. 169). If we accept Detamore's point that intimacy is risk (p. 171), it follows that we should pay attention to what methodological and ethical choices we choose to make in order to scaffold an *environment of* intimacy. Identifying myself as a researcher, and conducting the research in a blandly quotidian spatial context, cohered a different space than the covert ethnographer in a sex environment. However, this did not necessarily foreclose intimacy, and nor did it invite ethical impasses that might complicate a more involved ethnography. This is not to say that institutional ethical norms or requirements never restrict intimate potential (Mueller, 2007), but that in this project, time spent evaluating the spatial and more-than-representational conditions of the chosen fieldwork environment proved key to cultivating a valuable discursive interview space in time-limited, public conditions that might not at first glance correlate with intimate relating.

3.3 | Intimate roadblocks

Intimate fieldwork brings with it positionality issues. Andrew Sayer cautions that social scientists must be wary of “projecting their contemplative, discursive relation with the world onto actors who have a more practical relation to the world” (2011, p. 15). Self-reflexivity is an important methodological strategy to distance ourselves from what Gillian Rose (1997) recognises as the false claim of neutrality and universality in research, but even this awareness has limitations: it cannot “elude the dynamics of power” (1997, p. 316), despite the researcher's best efforts to equalise the balance. The historical tendency to attribute objectivity to the interviewer as representing a context-free forum for knowledge collection has been replaced over time by approaches that argue for an awareness of the discursive act of the interview itself (Becker, 2007; Sultana, 2007; Thrift, 2000), as well as the subjectivities inherent within social science research (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Rose, 1997) and critical self-reflexivity of the researcher in sexual environments (Bain & Nash, 2006; Hill, 2004; Valentine, 2002). I was as located in social, political, and cultural terms as the people I was interviewing, and felt in some way compelled to recognise this located position in order to build a rapport.

Rapport-building between researcher and participant is not only invited in an interview involving the disclosure of sensitive material, I would argue that it is *required* to empower the participant to feel that they are in a sufficiently safe space to not have to self-regulate their disclosures, which in this project included drug use, sex as trade, and politically contentious views on sexual health. My own methodological choices, not just participants' decisions, mediated these encounters. Like Bain and Nash (2006), I was simultaneously within and outside of the worlds of the men I interviewed. My status as “researcher” exploring the experiences of a “participant” placed me in a specific position with historical and socio-political markers. Equally, as a self-identified gay male Londoner, my research had the potential to fall into traps of ethnocentrism because I was observing and interacting with a demographic in which I located myself as an “insider.” This “insider” label suggests a shared identity that overlooks significant differences: given the hyper-diversity of this “global city” field site (Datta, 2012; Sassen, 1991), my participant sample comprised a range of ethnicities, socio-economic backgrounds, and age groups, but as a Caucasian researcher in my early thirties, my own experiences and perspectives could afford me only a partially situated knowledge. Co-constructing an intimate interview space could not rely on utilising perceived commonalities, but instead on building up relational spaces (as per Moss, 2002 and Valentine, 2002) based on trust. Theoretically I should have been disadvantaged by the limited time and space in which to scaffold this trust, but conversely my

“researcher” label seemed for many participants to be something that invited trust, encouraging lengthy and uninhibited narratives. While the “researcher” label skews power to the interviewer, the construction of “the university” held a cachet for participants as an institution that inheres trustworthiness. It functions as a kind of “phantom body” that legitimates the research process as something ethically regulated, and as a result, the researcher as an agent who can be trusted with intimate details that may not be disclosed elsewhere. This phantom body is, of course, socially constructed and may itself disguise human slippages in practice, but it is worth reflecting on the paradox that the institutional ethical processes fomenting complaint among social scientists problematising its strictures (see for example Detamore, 2010; Mueller, 2007) can conversely imbue precisely those processes with a (socially constructed) professional legitimacy.

Nevertheless, successfully navigating relational negotiations provokes difficult questions about how the researcher grapples with participant behaviours when the research invites emotional connection or even flirting (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016). Research does not exist in a vacuum, and I had to consider whether, given our dating app-brokered meetings and highly personal conversations, fieldwork constituted a fulfilment of desire for some participants. This paradoxically reflected motivations for app use itself among some users. Justin, aged 45, interrupted a question early on in our interview to say: “I only met with you because you're cute.” In response to my uncertain pause, he edits his response: “no, I'm teasing you! I'm teasing you [short laugh].” My pause is uncomfortable, but the larger concern for me as interviewer lay in not alienating the participant, meaning that I moved the conversation on. However, this may in turn affect the participant, who here manoeuvres from desire to humour to mitigate for the interpersonal slippage. No doubt other ethnographers would play more in this liminal space, but I did not feel comfortable doing so. Paradoxically, in my efforts to support the participant environment for disclosure, I did not take stock of my own discomfort until long after the event, mirroring Diprose et al.'s (2013) slow journey to processing participant desire. Being a “well-behaved” queer researcher may restrict some of the more radical potential of fieldwork for those who like to play in these liminal erotic zones, but my own personal boundaries meant that acquiescing with exactly this kind of “play” from Justin would not just feel ethically inappropriate (although it also would do) but personally uncomfortable. For me the tension as a researcher lay in making the participant feel safe, and free to relate however they wished, while honouring my own personal boundaries. The methodological work lay in smoothing those demarcations to minimise disruption to the intimate environment.

We see, then, that the relational dynamic between interviewer and participant is not merely conventional or orthodox, but potentially sexualised (Cupples, 2002; De Craene, 2017; Diprose et al., 2013; McDowell, 2010). Understanding the body as a tool for data collection in ethnographic fieldwork (Bain & Nash, 2006) – we are not, after all, interviewing without a face, voice, or gestures – I had to grapple what it meant to minimise my own verbal or physical disclosures. Rather than embracing my body as a “research tool” (Bain & Nash, 2006), I decided to scaffold intimacy through empathic identification with participants. I used this empathic identification to broker commonalities and familiarity, building on Liz Bondi's work on empathy as an “oscillation between observation and participation ... that provides a way of understanding other people's experiences in the context of both similarities and differences between researchers and research subjects” (2003, p. 64). Adopting an empathic approach also mitigated the issue of positionality and difference between researcher and participant. As Bondi notes, “responding to people empathically creates psychic and intersubjective spaces in which experiences of difference and similarity can be respected without necessarily being remarked upon or even consciously recognised” (2003, p. 73). Choosing an empathic, rather than erotically inflected “play” approach, supported an intimate environment because it scaffolded emotional connection even in cases where shared identity features were limited. Invariably, every researcher will develop different personal boundaries and conceptualise different methodological approaches. The point here is not to proscribe behaviours within a single ethical framework but to encourage reflection on one's own boundaries before, during, and after intimate fieldwork – a regular “checking-in” with the self to establish what “feels” right in the field.

4 | CONCLUSION

- Interviewer: So thinking about sexual contact, that was something that you did more when you arrived in London?
- Participant (35, Tanzanian-born Londoner): Yeah, I think my first proper sex was when I first arrived in Europe, but London was where I went to Soho, the gay bar, and I saw a guy and he winked at me and I winked at him back, and we decided to do it properly in a nice way, [where] you don't have to hide from anyone, you are holding hands in the street, and that was a powerful moment where I said you know what, this is me now. And start to shine! [Both laugh]

This exchange exemplifies the kind of narrative that can result from the collaborative co-construction of a temporary intimate interview space in sex and sexualities research. Interview research can offer an environment where intimate details are discussed in ways that may never have been articulated – indeed, it is one of the key arguments for qualitative methodologies – but this paper has extended the contours of this often taken-for-granted affordance by showing how intimacy can be co-constructed by researcher and participant in time-limited and public venues rather than via deeply embodied, longer term and more private ethnographies. Achieving this qualitative richness in a less intensive ethnographic format is made possible by collaboratively co-constructing a temporary, intimate public space for interviewing which “makes legible” the participant in the research process (after Domosh, 2014). This paper has offered a route to intimacy fostered through an empathic approach that facilitates meaningful identification between interviewer and participant even where identities diverge.

Working in ways that “manage the boundaries of intimacy” (Kaspar & Landolt, 2016, p. 107) while supporting the co-construction of an intimate environment for knowledge creation (Lewis, 2017) is not without issues, including positionality, desire in the field, and boundary work. As Bain and Nash (2006) have pointed out, intimacy can be inhibited by emotional distance, but in this paper I have contended that the intimacy that a temporary, private-within-public space can support provides a route to recognising participant–researcher boundaries while mediating a mutually fulfilling fieldwork experience. Further, intimacy in fieldwork may be collaboratively constructed, but I would argue that the responsibility remains with the researcher to monitor the social and ethical boundaries of this affective relationship. We have clearly come a long way since the positionality of the researcher went unexplored, but the relationship between participant and interviewer remains contested. Thirty years of feminist research into the researcher–researched dynamic highlights the intrinsically unbalanced power relations implicit in qualitative fieldwork. As social scientists, it is our responsibility manage the intimate, unpredictable nature of the human research field. How we *mediate* this environment cannot be proscribed, but must be reflexively evaluated by each researcher in the field, via both personal positionality and relational negotiations of intimacy with others. This requires deep reflective work.

Finally, shining a light on the “hindrances” (Detamore, 2010, p. 175) of institutional ethical review boards is valuable, but we might also think about how to navigate these processes in ways that can foster productive, bounded intimate research. We must not lose sight of the contexts in which institutional frameworks protect researcher and participant. Indeed, this paper has shown how the “phantom body” of the institution can imbue the research process with a sense of trust that, while socially constructed, may engender deeper participatory engagement in fieldwork processes. Beyond institutional guidance, it is crucial that we as researchers reflect on our personal boundaries to inform our professional practice. This paper has offered one of many possible “roadmaps” for those reflecting on their position in the field, with the aim of progressing debates in methodologies, intimacies, and sexualities research.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The researcher only responded to those who contacted the recruitment profile; active recruitment online could compromise an app user's autonomy in choosing to volunteer for the project.

² That said, its public (and often visible) use, for example in shopping malls or public transport, has been explored elsewhere (Jørgensen, 2016; Miles, 2017b).

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