QUESTION FOUR

How do issues of gender and sexuality influence the structures and processes of qualitative internet research?

Lori Kendall

Responding Essays by John Edward Campbell (p. xx) and Jenny Sunden (p. xx)

It's three in the morning. I'm extremely sick to my stomach and unable to sleep. I'm wondering if you're supposed to eat the orange peel segments in the Orange Beef I shared with others earlier this evening. Or perhaps the cause of my malaise is just the combination of fatigue, rich food, and nervousness. Worse, I'm lying in the guest room of a condominium belonging to someone I know fairly well online but am not completely comfortable with in person. How nice of him to give me a place to stay while interviewing him and others from his group. How awful to be here sick in the middle of the night and not at home.

Finally, I get up and reluctantly looked through the medicine cabinet in the bathroom for something to calm my stomach. This feels wrong to me, as if I'm snooping, and I hope my host is asleep and can't hear me. But no, as soon as I return to my room, I hear him get up. I feel immensely lonely, embarrassed, and exposed, and about as uncomfortable emotionally and physically as I've ever been.

This discomfort is made all the more intense by the fact that earlier this evening I felt powerfully attracted to my host. During my interview of him, I struggled with

feelings of sexual arousal. It was distracting, but I worried that if I completely

suppressed my feelings I might seem cold or awkward. I managed finally to enjoy the

glow but give no sign of it. (Or so I think.) It's not so much that I feel it inappropriate to

flirt with someone I'm interviewing for a research study. It's more that I know with a fair

degree of certainty that my feelings are not reciprocated. So ego as much as ethics guides

my behavior.

Now here I am, sick in the dark, while out there in the hall I can hear the

movements of someone on whom I have a powerful crush. If this were a romantic

comedy, or perhaps if I were younger, more daring, more attractive, the end of this scene

would be racy. Instead, I finally manage to get a little sleep (sitting upright against the

wall). Neither my host nor I ever mention the incident.

In her groundbreaking article on sexuality in the field, anthropologist Esther

Newton notes: "Rarely is the erotic subjectivity or experience of the anthropologist

discussed in public venues or written about for publication" (Newton 1993b p. 4). She

points out that many fieldworkers are young and unattached and that, in the long months

of fieldwork (often, for anthropologists, in places far from home), "fieldworkers and

informants do and must get involved emotionally" (p.5). In "My Best Informant's Dress"

and in her ethnography of a gay resort community, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993a),

Newton discusses her erotic (although not physically sexual) relationship with her

primary informant, Kay. Preliminary reviewers of her book warned that "[t]his manner

of working poses the danger of 'uncritically adopting [the informant's] point of view'"

(1993b, p. 15). However, Newton argues that ethnographers need to be more

forthcoming about their sexual feelings and actions during the course of their research.

[U]ntil we are more honest about how we feel about informants we can't try to

compensate for, incorporate, or acknowledge desire and repulsion in our analysis

of subjects or in our discourse about text construction. We are also refusing to

reproduce one of the mightiest vocabularies in the human language. (p. 16,

1993b)

While Newton discusses her own flirtation with an informant in her Cherry Grove

research, her article does not really provide a clear example of what difference the

attention to sexuality makes in the analysis of fieldwork and writing of ethnography.

I want to push her analysis a step further. Taking to heart the insights of those

few who have written on the topic of sexuality in the conduct of qualitative research, I

explore what difference this might make specifically to those of us studying online

interactions and doing fieldwork about people's use of computers and the internet in both

online and offline settings. In the following, I revisit previous work I've done, with

greater attention to the erotic aspects of my experience. I make the case for doing

qualitative work with the whole body, and not cutting off certain types of experiences as

irrelevant or inappropriate, even in situations, such as wholly online social interactions,

where the body might seem relatively unimportant.

Other Accounts of the Erotic in Fieldwork

Prior to Newton's article, accounts of sexuality in the field were few, and rarely

integrated into the primary analytical work resulting from fieldwork. The famous

anthropologist Malinowski's sexual feelings and exploits were relegated to private

diaries, published posthumously. Other works were published pseudonymously (Cesara

174

1982), or analyzed other fieldworkers' experiences, often in ways that were dismissive of both the fieldworker and his or her subjects (Wengle 1988, as discussed in Kulick 1995).

Since Newton's article, the discussion of sexuality in qualitative research remains rare, with a few notable exceptions. Perhaps the best work on the topic is a 1995 edited volume entitled *Taboo: Sex, identity and erotic subjectivity in anthropological fieldwork* (Kulick and Willson). In his introduction to this work, Kulick provides a hint of where sex in the field might lead us. He suggests that:

> [F]or many anthropologists, desire experienced in the field seems often to provoke questions that otherwise easily remain unasked ... The questions are basic, quite uncomfortable ones. They are questions about the validity and meaning of the self-other dichotomy, and about the hierarchies on which anthropological work often seems to depend. (p. 5)

This positions the acknowledgment of sexual desire as a methodological issue. Suppression of the erotic in the experience of fieldwork potentially cuts off an important source of knowledge. That suppression can occur in the field, but also in the resulting text, further limiting the knowledge gained and transmitted through qualitative work. As Altork (1995) says, "By funneling data gathered in this way through the senses, fueled by access to the full range of human emotions, it is possible to create texts which I contend will better enhance our understanding of other cultures (or groups within them) and of ourselves" (p. 109).

This is also, then, an epistemological issue. How do we know what we know? What do we tell people about how we learned what we learned in the field? These issues relate to questions of objectivity and the status of qualitative research as science. As

Goode (1998, p. 320) writes in *Sex with Informants as Deviant Behavior*, "What better means of maintaining the traditional social science fiction of objectivity than to pretend that all ethnographers remain completely celibate when they conduct their research?" Despite the (now not so recent) turn to reflexivity in qualitative research, the ideal of the disinterested, "objective" observer lingers. All emotions, not just sexual feelings, can be suspect in ethnographies. As Kleinman and Copp (1993) note, "fieldwork analyses reflect our identities, ideologies, and political views. Yet we often omit them from our published accounts because we want to present ourselves as social *scientists*: objective and neutral observers" (p. 13). Writing conventions in academic venues discourage the reporting of strong feelings about informants. In the post-Freudian Western world, sexual feelings are taken as a given to be "strong," seen as inspiring everything from artistic creation to murderous rage.

Providing information about our own erotic lives exposes us as researchers to risks. Even those of us who eschew the possibility of complete objectivity and neutrality in social research may worry that others will see our accounts as overly biased. The exposure of personal information may also feel uncomfortable, and may impact other relationships, both personal and professional. These risks need to be balanced by significant analytical and ethical gains. By discussing several specific examples from my own research, I suggest some of these potential gains.

What Difference Does It Make?

My book *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (Kendall 2002), an ethnography of an online group, certainly includes reports of my own experiences and, to some extent, my

176

feelings. Some of these made it into the main text, rather than being omitted altogether, as is most common, or at best relegated to the methodological appendix (Kleinman and Copp 1993, pp. 16-17.) However, even my methodological appendix contains very little specific information about my relationships with the other BlueSky participants. For instance, as excerpted below, I wrote that henri's early support of my project was probably instrumental to the success of my research.

> Highly respected on BlueSky for his wit and intelligence, henri contributes more to the mud environment than most other BlueSky participants. ... His high status in the group and the early interest he took in me and my research were instrumental both to my being accepted as a newcomer on BlueSky and to the acceptance of my research project. ... henri's introspective disposition, his long history of very active mudding with the BlueSky group, and his place at the emotional center of the social group made him particularly useful in this regard. (Kendall 2002, p. 237)

What in retrospect is notably absent from this description is that henri was one of a handful of BlueSky participants on whom I had a crush. I can't recall whether I consciously considered whether or not to include such information, but I'm sure that not doing so was influenced by the same factors that Newton and others have identified. I (probably rightfully) feared that people might assume that everything I wrote in my ethnography reflected an uncritical acceptance of henri's (and other participants') point of view. This demonstrates the importance people give to sexual feelings. Although other emotions are also suspect, other types of relationships with "informants" do not result in as strong a suspicion of bias.

Yet, importantly, nothing inherent in sexual feelings makes the researcher less likely to be critical. To some extent, including information about my very personal emotional and erotic feelings would perhaps not add greatly to the analytic points I made in my write-up. However, as I review my interview notes and reflect back on the sexual attractions and repulsions I experienced, I believe that consideration of these feelings does illuminate some aspects of online and offline relationships and connections between them. I think I was a bit too quick to think of these feelings as a "side issue" in the conduct of fieldwork. In addition, including more information about my own relationships with my online informants might well have made for a better ethnography.

For instance, as I've noted previously, the culture on BlueSky included a significant amount of sexism, and was often uncomfortable for me. Yet, I mostly enjoyed my many years of participation there. Reading sexist remarks and jokes disturbed me much less than hearing those same statements. As I put it, "'I find it *much* easier [online] to ignore the sexism and other things that are obnoxious'" (Kendall 2002, 166). So on one hand, the text-based online conversation muted reactions to disagreeable aspects of people's personalities and of the group culture. This I've already reported.

What did not get highlighted, although I briefly mentioned it, is that positive things can also be enhanced through solely text-based discourse online. This point is demonstrated by the duration of my crushes. The people on whom I had crushes on BlueSky had many personable qualities. Yet, in every case, we were also incompatible in many ways. These were not, realistically, likely to become romantic relationships, and I think more face-to-face time spent with any one of them would have significantly

decreased my erotic interest. But the fact that these were primarily online relationships extended that period in a romantic relationship sometimes called "limerance." In this intense early period, one imagines and enhances the good qualities of the romantic partner. In limerance, in fact, one does not see the person for who they really are, but sees only those aspects that meet the criteria for an idealized potential mate. This is even easier to do in an online relationship. The limited cues of the online environment allowed my crushes to perpetuate, and probably enhanced my relationships to these people online by increasing my good feelings towards them and my pleasure in participating.

Erotic interest in others in online fieldwork situations may also be paradoxically enhanced by the *lack* of sensual information. Altork (1995) connects the erotic imagination of the fieldworker to the sensual experience in general of the field site. "It has been my experience that any new locale sends all of my sensory modes into overdrive in the initial days and weeks of my stay" (p. 110). Since physically my fieldsite was the familiar environs of my apartment it did not engage my senses in this way. Further, the physical experience involved in online interaction ranges primarily from the banal to the uncomfortable. There is nothing pleasurably sensual about fingers tapping computer keys. The physical boredom and discomfort resulting from hours and hours spent online provides an incentive for creating situations that provide more pleasurable physical sensations. Feeling sexual attraction to the online participants sometimes made the time spent online more interesting, emotionally and physically, which enabled me to remain engaged intellectually.

Here then is an insight about how online interaction facilitates relationships, especially romantic ones; an insight that is lost without paying serious attention to the

erotic dimension of fieldwork. My erotic reactions point to a specific effect of online interactions on relationships. Erotic attachments to others online may make text-based online communication more interesting, and long periods at the keyboard more tolerable. This is a point that warrants further research, and one that could potentially yield important insights into online participation and activities. For instance, it might provide a clue to the success of pornographic and other sexual industries online, beyond the more obvious advantages of allowing people access to sexual materials in the privacy of their own homes.

That my full participation on BlueSky included my erotic imagination points to the richness of that experience, and perhaps more of that belonged in my reports. My subsequent research projects have not included as in-depth involvement. Possibly I have resisted getting that involved again. But aside from my personal wishes, the difference between my BlueSky experience and subsequent projects also contributes to the particularities and importance of context.

For instance, I noticed that in my interviews with LiveJournal participants for a later research project, many of my interviewees noted with relief and approval that I did not ask them too many "personal" questions. Yet many of them included quite personal information in their LiveJournal posts. Information received online did not necessarily translate into the offline relationship. Online personal revelations did not lead to a greater feeling of closeness in person. In contrast, although BlueSky interviews with people I was meeting for the first time in person sometimes started out with some awkwardness, as the interviews progressed, we easily referred to online experiences, and often ventured into the expression of personal feelings.

BlueSky's group identity and cohesion contributed to a more across-the-board acceptance of me as a group member and allowed each interview to start from that position of safety. (Which is not to say that some of the interviews of BlueSky participants weren't still quite uncomfortable.) With LiveJournal participants, by contrast, while some interviewees were interconnected, each clump from my set of connections had to be negotiated separately, and each interview started almost as a new relationship, despite the exposure to each other online.[1] Notably, I had crushes on none of my LiveJournal informants, and found none of them particularly attractive (let alone distractingly so) during the interviews. I believe this highlights a difference between the kinds of relationships and group identity (or lack thereof) formed in different online situations. BlueSky constituted an online community, with a distinct group identity. LiveJournal on the other hand follows a pattern of what Barry Wellman (2002) has termed "networked individualism," with much less group cohesion. This too I've discussed elsewhere (Kendall 2005), but again, not including the full range of feelings and experiences that might help illustrate that difference.

Gender, Power, and Embodiment

Most of my crushes began after meeting people in person. In short, they were physical attractions. For instance, I was attracted to one participant's androgynous good looks. I found him very cute and more personable offline than online. Another participant had graceful hands with long expressive fingers. These physical features came to mind during my online interactions with those participants. This is another area

[1]The exception is the few BlueSky participants who were also part of my LiveJournal study.

181

of online experience that is difficult to explore. I asked BlueSky participants, many of whom have met each other, about how they pictured others online, but didn't get much information from them about the importance of people's physical presence to later online interactions. These are difficult experiences to articulate, and many people are reluctant to acknowledge the importance of physical attractiveness, especially for non-sexual relationships. Thus my own reactions provide important information missing from other sources.

But perhaps physical attraction was only part of the equation. It is worth noting that all of my crushes were on high-status, high-profile participants. There were certainly high-status people I found physically and emotionally repellant, but I can't discount the possibility that my feelings expose in me an attraction to people I perceive as more powerful than me. That perhaps tells us more about me than about BlueSky (and perhaps more about me than you wanted to know). This also exposes one of the dangers inherent in self-reflexive strategies of qualitative research; that the researcher's expressions of his or her own feelings and experiences can be interpreted as somewhat narcissistic or unnecessary.

Yet when taken in context of the different social locations involved, these revelations also illuminate aspects of power and gender relations, and the intersection of those issues with both fieldwork and sexuality. Despite my own openness to such feelings, I did not, for instance, develop crushes on any of the women participants on BlueSky. In fact, my impression during most of my interviews with them is that they didn't like me very much, and I wasn't sure I liked them very much either. Here's an example from field notes taken after one such interview:

Don't like Susan much. Looks kind of sullen and seems a bit suspicious of me. This contrasts with how she was earlier (on-line and in the group meeting last night). Her answers are short and she says "I don't know" a lot. We're crowded on a little loveseat. I'm trying to eat snacks. She almost can't move without her feet touching me. It bothers both of us. (handwritten fieldnotes, 9/10/1995)

This is quite a different kind of physical discomfort from that provoked by the arousal experienced in the interview I described at the beginning of this chapter.

Susan was not a very frequent participant, nor particularly high in status on BlueSky. She was also one of the few women participants. Each of these women described a history of involvement in groups and activities in which they were the only, or one of the few women participants. They were all quite used to being the exception. Often, for women in circumstances in which they are in the minority (as in non-traditional occupations), the experience of exceptionalism leads to a distancing from other women. As Kanter (1977) explains, "some women … bend[] over backwards not to exhibit any characteristics that would reinforce stereotypes" (p. 237). When there were only a few women in a male-dominated occupational group, Kanter found that they resisted the group's tendency to pair them together "by trying to create difference and distance between them and becoming extremely competitive" (p. 238). Bagilhole (2002) similarly found that "many women [in non-traditional occupations] … do not want, or do not feel able to associate with other women or to be seen to be concerned about 'women's issues'" (p. 161).

While not an occupational setting, BlueSky was similarly male-dominated, both in numbers and in culture. Like the women studied by Kanter and Bagilhole, many of the

women I interviewed made a point of differentiating themselves from women they perceived as more "traditional" or feminine.

HalfLife: It seems like there are a lot of women on DeepSeas who play really stupid characters. Airheaded, bubbly, and they're not treated very well except by people who support them and want them to be bubbly. ...

Lori: Give me an example of a bubble-headed one.

Halflife: Sparkle. A lot of them I don't pay attention to ... Trillian is sort of one of them.

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Beryl: Have you talked with Sparkle?

Lori: No. Well, I've talked to her some online.

Beryl: I consider her very much a traditional female. And Tina – Tina's her real name, what's her mud name? – Melissa. She really was traditional. She acted like there wasn't a brain in her head. She went around chasing guys.

Lori: Is this Susan?

Beryl: Not Susan. Susan, even though she chases guys a lot, you know, she's an engineer, she enjoys computers, she enjoys science fiction. She's one of us. [laughs] But Sparkle, and Tina, and there've been a few other women who have been what I've considered traditional. Tina even said that, if you asked her what she'd like to do, she really wanted to be a housewife. You don't hear that much.

> ... And now she's not online anymore, because she found a nice
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> rich guy and she's a housewife.

These women reject anything that seems at all stereotypically feminine, such as a bubbly demeanor, or the desire to be a housewife. Beryl even specifically identifies interest in computers and engineering as not traditionally feminine, demonstrating that even women with such interests perpetuate the idea that these are masculine pursuits.

There was not, in short, a lot of female bonding amongst us around our identity as women, or in reaction to sexist behavior by the men. Each woman's position in the group, their acceptance as smart, funny, and witty (all qualities especially valued on BlueSky), in short as "one of the guys," depended somewhat upon their ability to show that they were *not* like other women. While this did not preclude friendships amongst us, having to play by the boys' rules (or perhaps, what we perceived as the boys' rules) left us with a somewhat impoverished basis for connection.

This points to the complexities of gender identities, especially as expressed in relationships, as well as to the importance of considering sexuality in conjunction with gender. My relationships to the participants on BlueSky, and their relationships to each other, varied not just according to a simple notion of gender (male or female), but also with consideration of different ways to be male or female. For instance, Beryl distinguishes between "traditional" women and women who are "one of us." HalfLife explains that the poor treatment of some women on BlueSky stems from their portrayal of themselves as "stupid" or "bubbly." To cultivate positive relationships with both men and women on BlueSky, it was important that I was also perceived as non-traditional.

Thus, like many gender theorists, women on BlueSky portray gender as a spectrum rather than as a duality. Sexuality and sexual identity also create variation in the gender spectrum. People have different understandings of each other's gender, and different relationships to others' gender identities, based in part on their sexuality and sexual preferences. Sexuality also can best be viewed on a spectrum, or perhaps on several axes of variance. Dating back to Kinsey's famous sexuality studies, scholars have often viewed homosexuality and heterosexuality on a scale, with few people being exclusively one or the other. But people also vary greatly in levels of interest in sexual activity, and in other aspects of their sexuality. (For instance, there is considerable difference in sexual identity between a heterosexual person interested in "mainstream" or "vanilla" sexual activities, and a heterosexual person very actively involved in the sadomasochistic subculture.)

Even in non-sexual situations and non-sexual relationships, these aspects of identity influence interactions at the most basic and minute level. This is one of the reasons online participants so often attempt to ascertain each others' gender. As one participant who was flirting with me online put it after asking if I was "really" female, "I don't like being switched genders on … so I don't inadvertently use the wrong social mores with anyone" (Kendall 2002, p. 124). How we behave towards people, even people we never expect to see again, varies according to our own and their gender identity, which includes attention to sexual identity as well.

Scholars have long considered the effect of the researcher's gender on the information obtained. Denzin (1989) suggests that interviewers need to share identity and background with their interviewees as much as possible (p. 115). I find this an

almost unrealizable goal, and too limiting for most research projects. But researchers should be aware of differences and similarities between their own identity and that of the people they research, with attention to how those similarities and differences might affect interactions and responses to questions. I believe most researchers are accustomed to doing this with regard to gender and suggest that sexuality must also be taken into consideration.

Sex and Power

The advantage, once accepted as a member of a predominantly male group, is the increase in status this entails. In theory, at least some of the usual intergender tensions decrease as well. As I've noted elsewhere, the women on BlueSky said they appreciated the lack of sexual innuendo on BlueSky, contrasting this favorably with other online spaces. My own erotic feelings, and my own enjoyment of the sexual humor on BlueSky should have caused me to question this more. Looking back at logs of BlueSky interaction and at my interviews with the women participants, I find that in fact there are several contradictions to my depiction of BlueSky as a haven from the sexual harassment prevalent elsewhere online.

On the one hand, BlueSky norms precluded most overt sexual activity or flirtation, especially if affectionate or romantic. As Peg reported, concerning her relationship with another BlueSky mudder, evariste, "if evariste and I are demonstrative, it's like 'Get a Room!' They don't want to see that." Yet other types of sexual attention and innuendo occurred frequently on BlueSky.

Peg: I think actually because I'm not available it gives me license. The guys can feel like they have more license to do lustful things.

Lori: They can tease you.

Peg: Say "Woo Woo!" ... It's known that I'm attractive. ... People talk about that because it's always been talked about. It's okay. ... Usually I ignore those things, because if I respond to them it reinforces it. ... So now it's to the point where I'll come home sometimes from work and [evariste] tell[s] me that he's been online and people will ask him questions about our sex life or something like that and they'll say like "Peg, Woo Woo!" or something like that. And instead of saying "yeah well" or something like that he'll go the other way – I'm trying to think of [what he does]...

Lori: He says "don't you wish?!"

Peg: Yeah and they'll be like "sigh" and he'll be like "yeah I'm going to go have sex with Peg RIGHT NOW!" And he's like "you guys asked for it" and they're like "you're a cruel man" or something. But that happens mostly when I'm not there. But I don't know if it's because ... they don't want to offend me?

Thus not only did many of the men on BlueSky openly avow their attraction to Peg, but her husband, evariste, blatantly tormented them for it. He often made comments online that highlighted his sexual relationship with Peg, and taunted the other BlueSky men with the knowledge that he had sex with her and they could not.

Another interviewee, BlueJean, reported an incident in which a BlueSky participant began calling her at home. I happened to mention this other participant during our interview, and reacted to a face she made at the mention of his name.

Lori: [laughs] Did you have an experience with Rockefeller? What was that?

BlueJean: There was a point where we were talking online once and he was getting kicked out of his computer lab and he convinced me to give him my phone number.

Lori: Huh. And he called you up?

BlueJean: [annoyed tone:] Several times.

Lori: That doesn't sound like it was a good experience.

BlueJean: [there's a pause; she seems reluctant to talk about it] It...was...an interesting experience. And then as soon as I mentioned that online, everyone was "oh god no! why'd you do that? Why'd you give him your phone number" and I was "oh no!"

Lori: Yeah he has kind of a reputation.

BlueJean: Yeah, he has a definite reputation. But I figured it was my dorm number and I'd be out of there in less than a few weeks anyway, so it couldn't hurt. Interesting guy. I mean, I can't say, I haven't met him in person, but I guess talking on the phone.

Lori: Is he still calling you?

BlueJean: No. He doesn't have my current phone number.

Lori: Well that's good.

BlueJean: Yeah. I mean, he would – crazy hours. My roommate would be

              like "that guy from Missouri called again." ... Usually when I was

              [on BlueSky] ... there weren't usually a whole lot of females. So I

              get a lot of attention.

In looking at the contradictions between women like Beryl and Susan, who both

reported feeling very comfortable on BlueSky, and the experiences of Peg and BlueJean,

I note that my own interpretation sided more with Beryl and Susan. I too perhaps was

seeking to distance myself from the experience of being female. Possibly also, my

attraction to men who I knew to have no reciprocal interest led me to empathize less with

those women who attracted sexual attention on BlueSky.

Within the unequal power structures of a patriarchal culture, sexual attention both

regulates and delineates status positions. Unwanted sexual attention that women receive

positions them as sexual objects, limiting their role and status. However, sexual attention

also illuminates finer distinctions, positioning some women to benefit more from the

existing hierarchy than others. Hegemonic masculinity represents an ideal for men that

positions all men to benefit to the degree that they fit that ideal. Emphasized femininity

similarly represents the hegemonic ideal for women. However, while women benefit

from the degree to which they meet that standard, it is always seen as inferior to

masculinity, and thus for women there is an additional cost to conformity (Connell 1995).

Women like Beryl and HalfLife criticize women who meet the standard of emphasized

femininity, siding with masculinity, despite never fully benefiting from it.

Women on BlueSky and other similar male-dominated forums must carefully

negotiate their own status with regard to their gender and sexual identity within these

hierarchical constraints. While an understanding of this dynamic informs my earlier writing on BlueSky, the more carefully I consider my own reactions and feelings in that situation, the better I am able to articulate the particular maneuvers and power plays that occur in day-to-day interactions.

Conforming to emphasized femininity carries both costs and benefits. Some women manage to lean more towards masculine identity (as in avowing interest in activities deemed masculine). These women accrue some benefits from masculinity's higher status. But some women neither conform to emphasized femininity nor successfully perform a masculine identity. These women are likely to be the most denigrated group in a male-dominated culture.

At the other end of the spectrum of sex talk about BlueSky participants from the acknowledged longings for Peg were repeated allusions to an image called "tawny.gif."[2] Tawny was a past BlueSky participant, still friends with some current participants, but not at all active on BlueSky. She was known to have slept with one of the other participants, but as he was at that time affianced to another BlueSky participant (later his wife), the topic of that liaison was one of the few out-and-out taboos on BlueSky. Tawny was also a very large woman, and tawny.gif was an artistic nude photo of her that circulated online during my research on BlueSky. BlueSky participants often made negative references to tawny.gif, calling it nausea-inducing and jokingly threatening others with it. In the following conversation, one of the women on BlueSky (Alisa) reacts negatively to a typical discussion of Tawny by several BlueSky men.

BJ says "alisa doesn't wear clothes"

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[2]Just as I have changed the names of participants herein, I have changed the name of this file.

191

Dave says "neither does tawny"

Steve EEEE   **[<– Steve's representation of a scream]**

Alisa makes a note never to put a n00d jpeg of herself on the net so bozos on

muds can

  scream with horror at how fat she is.

BJ, for one, is thankful.

Alisa says "since net.guys seem to like them starving thin with silicone balloons

in their

  tits."

BJ is not too picky, but hell. There's LIMITS

Such discussions outlined the hierarchy of female attractiveness on BlueSky. Petite,

friendly (and relatively demure) Peg, whose looks some compared to the actress Gillian

Anderson (of *X-Files* fame), inspired fawning and crushes, while fat (and absent) Tawny

became a joke punchline and the very standard of repulsion. In addition to not fitting the

norm of feminine attractiveness, fat women's bodies highlight the association of women

with the body and bodily functions. Thus, a fat women -- especially a fat woman who

dares to see herself as attractive and to publicly exhibit her body -- is seen as one of the

furthest identities from masculinity, and thus becomes one of the most denigrated.

Within this hierarchical spectrum, I could only see myself as being on the Tawny

end. Not only am I also relatively fat, but I was quite a bit older than most BlueSky

participants. These factors, at least as much as my professionalism, kept me silent about

my own sexual feelings for group members. Whatever discomfort this caused me might

matter little, except as a methodological issue. However, issues of sexuality, of perceived

attractiveness, and especially of expressed standards for women's attractiveness, were very much part of what I analyzed. For instance, in *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*, I recount discussions in which BlueSky participants depict "nerdettes" as fat and unattractive. My own feelings as the potential butt of these jokes therefore became part of my analysis, but that is nowhere represented in the text. Making that linkage clear could only have strengthened the analysis.

In general, I spent much more time analyzing the sexuality of the men on BlueSky than that of the women. Had I more fully accepted my own erotic feelings as data, this might have been different. My analysis of several men on BlueSky portrays them as "heterosexual dropouts" (Kendall 2002, pp. 90-94). I analyze heterosexuality as contradictory within patriarchal society, causing tension for men who must view women both as denigrated and desirable. Where does my own desire for these often openly sexist men position me within these contradictions? Not surprisingly, my crushes were on some of the least sexy men on BlueSky, men who sometimes supported my feminist analyses of BlueSky in online discussions. This tells us more than just my own particular tastes in men. It also points to some of the contradictions for *women* within heterosexuality, something I did not previously analyze.

Most of the women BlueSky participants I interviewed were married to, or later married, other BlueSky participants. Taking my own sexual feelings for BlueSky participants more seriously as data might have led me to consider this fact a bit further. I analyze the women on BlueSky as having to fit into a male-dominated social context, and depict them as being "one of the guys." Their marriages show that, like many

heterosexual women in mostly male groups, the BlueSky women managed a complicated presentation of self as "like the guys" and simultaneously "not guys."

Had I been more conscious of these aspects, and in particular, had I taken more seriously my own feelings and concerns, there are several different directions I might have taken my study. Most particularly, I probably would have asked different questions of the women I interviewed. While they downplayed sexual aspects of their interactions online, they clearly encountered sexual talk and also had sexual feelings for at least some other participants. This would have been worth pursuing more than I did.

Sexuality and Research Ethics

Issues of power, gender, and sexuality are also important to researchers in regard to the ethics of social research. Ethical standards for social research stress the degree of care a researcher must take not to abuse the power they have over research participants. Some of the researcher's power may come from their status in society, as someone well-educated (and usually economically privileged). Power also accrues from the researcher's activities as the person controlling information about the people they study.

The depiction of the researcher as having power over the researched is sometimes at odds with how qualitative research *feels* while in process. For instance, Goode (1999) writes that:

> To me, in interactions with my marijuana informants in 1967, the relationship
> seemed completely nonhierarchical. In my interviews, it was I who was invading
> the users' turf, begging them for their time and words. If anything, I reasoned, I
> was the subordinate party in this transaction, not the other way around. (p. 316)

194

Goode indicates that he gave no thought to ethical issues during his research project and would not, at the time, have considered his sexual activities with informants unethical. His 1999 reflections seem to indicate he still does not consider those actions unethical but understands that others might.

Like Goode, I did not feel more powerful than my informants, whose social location in many cases gave them more social status than me. But feelings of powerlessness are not the same as actually being powerless. Such feelings ought instead to signal a particular need for caution. <u>We are most likely to abuse our power when we least feel we have it</u>. This is especially crucial during the writing phase of qualitative research. It is when writing up the research that the ethnographer particularly exercises their power: the power of representation. As Fine (1993) says: "A spurned ethnographer can be a dangerous foe. ... Those of us with access to 'the media' have power that others cannot match" (pp. 273-74). I believe I did take care to describe the BlueSky participants carefully and honestly, and to protect their identities from exposure. Yet it is interesting that although I to some extent describe *their* sex lives (or at least their talk about their sex lives), I don't at all discuss my own, even as it intersected the field site. As Markham (2004) points out, the researcher has the privilege of choosing whether or not their own embodiment is an issue in the research, even while critically observing the embodiment of participants (p. 809).

Does this mean that researchers who look at sexual behavior online necessarily need expose their own? The vulnerability of the researcher in doing so might somewhat balance power issues. On the other hand, that can be a tricky balance to maintain. As Fine (1993) points out:

> Sexual contact stigmatizes the writer, particularly female writers. ... Participant observation is a methodology in which the personal equation is crucial, and yet too many variables remain hidden. The question is whether we can preserve our privacy while we reveal the impact and relevance of our behavior, both private and public. Where is the balance? (p. 285)

My own sexual feelings are doubly stigmatizing because of my identities as a woman and as a professional ethnographer. Acknowledging sexual feelings in the field is antithetical to traditional notions of professionalism. Professionalism is associated with masculinity, and academic research is a male-dominated field. Sexuality, as connected to the body, is also associated with femininity. By talking about sexuality, I emphasize my stigmatized female identity in a context in which power accrues to conformity to masculinity. Writing about such feelings also exposes me more than similar statements expose my informants. I have at least taken pains to protect the identities of my informants. The reports of my own sexual feelings have no such protection.

Beyond the issue of my own exposure, the ethics of balancing the exposure of informants' feelings and behaviors by reporting on our own are by no means clear. Famous anthropologists who revealed sexual feelings (and/or actions) regarding informants in other cultures – as in Malinowski's (1967) private diaries, and Rabinow's (1977) discussion of a sexual experience in the field – could rest assured that most of their subjects would not read these tales. Modern field researchers, especially those who study people online, have no such assurance. Since my respondents might find my revelations as uncomfortable as I do, the ethical choice might be silence.

Conclusion

Unless you count online jokes and sexual innuendo, I never engaged in any sexual contact with BlueSky participants. Had I done so, I'm not sure I could have written this chapter. I tip my hat to several of the authors I've cited herein for their bravery in discussing transgressions I only fantasized about. Even so, this is one of the hardest pieces I've ever written, illustrating the depth of the taboo I'm breaking. Despite increasing openness about sexuality in general in Western culture, and despite decades of self-reflexivity in qualitative research, talking about sex in fieldwork still crosses a line.

Researchers are generally quicker to acknowledge the importance of gender to qualitative (and other) research. Yet sexuality too needs to be recognized as an important part of our experience. Both gender and sexuality affect and are affected by our sense of self and our experience of fieldwork. These aspects of identity also interact and jointly affect people's relationships with each other, including relationships between researchers and the people they study.

Sexuality may seem irrelevant to research projects that focus on people's use of information technologies, especially when that research is conducted online. Yet it forms an important part of our identity, and enters into day-to-day interactions far more than we usually credit. Further, as Markham (2004) points out, "perception always involves embodiment, and this cannot be set aside in the context of studying life online" (p. 809). In the context of ethnographic research, we make of our bodies measurement instruments, and should be careful before considering some perceptions (such as erotic feelings) merely noise or error, while privileging other perceptions (sight, sound) as more relevant.

In most in-depth ethnographic studies, attention to the erotic dimension in both analysis

and ethnographic reports can yield important insights.

Recommended Reading:

Fine, Gary Alan. 1993. "Ten lies of ethnography: Moral dilemmas of field research," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 22, no. 3, 267-294.

Fine, a sociologist who has published many oft-cited ethnographies, outlines the virtues expected of ethnographers and the problems that arise when moral expectations meet the realities of fieldwork. His article illuminates ethical and methodological dilemmas, many of which defy simple solutions but instead require continual struggle and consideration. This essay is particularly useful for considering issues of power between researchers and participants.

Goode, Erich. 1999. "Sex with informants as deviant behavior." *Deviant Behavior*, v. 20, pp. 301-324.

This at times troubling essay goes against the dominant position among researchers that sex with informants should be avoided. Goode argues that this may be true in some cases but not in all. The journal issue also includes two commentaries on Goode's article by Clifton Bryant and Columbus Hopper.

Kleinman, Sherryl and Martha A. Copp. 1993. *Emotions and Fieldwork*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Both authors are well-known experts in the sociology of emotions, and this book is an invaluable guide to an important aspect of fieldwork. Kleinman's earlier article "Field-workers' feelings: What we feel, who we are, how we analyze," in *Experiencing fieldwork: An inside view of qualitative research* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991, pp. 184-195), provides a briefer exploration of many of the same issues.

Kulick, Don and Margaret Willson, Eds. 1995. *Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork*, London: Routledge.

This excellent volume includes many thoughtful essays regarding sex and eroticism in fieldwork. These anthropological tales mostly depict U.S. scholars in encounters with other cultures.

Newton, Esther. 1993. "My Best Informant's Dress." *Cultural Anthropology,* v.8 (February 1993): 1-23. Also available in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay*, Esther Newton, 2000, Durham: Duke University Press.

Newton's essay provides a good introduction to the issues discussed in this chapter, including an overview of some of the earlier anthropological writing on the subject of sex in the field.

Response to Lori Kendall

Jenny Sundén

Double Life on the Screen

In the spirit of confessional ethnographic reflexivity, I too have a story to tell. In parallel with my two-year online ethnography in a text-based virtual world called WaterMOO (Sundén, 2003), I did, occasionally, visit another online world – a parallel universe if you like – to explore the potentials and promises of cybersex.

My researcher character in WaterMOO carried the highly inventive name 'Jenny', sporting sensible boots and a rather lose fitting woolen sweater, tapping away consistently in her virtual office or hanging out with WaterMOOers to better understand their notions of online embodiment, gender, and sexuality. As opposed to Lori Kendall's study of BlueSky, my ethnography never took me offline to face-to-face encounters and interview sessions. The reason for this was primarily that most WaterMOOers didn't meet offline either, and I wanted to understand this particular online culture 'on its own terms.' This is not to say that people, myself included, are not curious about who the person is behind a certain character. But I insisted on the realness of imagined worlds for those involved, and I wanted to bring into the picture a fundamental online condition: the state of not knowing who you're meeting. The inhabitants of WaterMOO sometimes struggled with this uncertainty, particularly in terms of what they experienced as troubling gender incoherence, and I wanted to perform my ethnographic work in the midst of the very same insecurity.

If Jenny was the 'serious' researcher, her doppelganger was very different. Sometimes, after having put Jenny to sleep in her office (which is what happens when you log out from the system), I would redress as one of the fairly anonymous guest characters at a different site, seeking out a late night adventure. Sometimes in a very femme dress, sometimes butching it up with a tie and slacks, and sometimes, pretty straightforwardly, putting a single word in the description field: "Naked." Oh dear. I don't think of these textual escapades as having sex in the field, since they neither involved my field site, nor the inhabitants of WaterMOO. Some would probably add that it wasn't even sex, since no physical bodies were involved in any 'immediate' sense. Here, I would have to disagree. But no matter which way these steamy, sensuous, online encounters are labeled, they did have important consequences for my understanding of online embodiment and sexuality. These were experiences that I certainly brought with me to the field, and that were helpful to advance my understanding of the connections between sex, text, and the virtual body, to paraphrase Shannon McRae (1996).

As opposed to the kind of fieldwork where being, living, and staying in the field is the only option, online ethnography brings with it the possibility of "cycling through" (Turkle 1995, pp. 12-14) different layers of windows and locations, to the point where the borders between them may start to blur. What consequences does this cycling through have for the kind of knowledge we can form in online field sites? Is it relevant to make visible experiences that border to the field, but that are not *of* the field? Or, as Kendall puts it in her chapter, "How do we know what we know? What do we tell people about how we learned what we learned in the field?" (currently p. 90).

Kendall's chapter is an act of bravery. I sympathize deeply with her ambition of "doing fieldwork with the whole body, and not cutting off certain types of experience as irrelevant or inappropriate," and I find the ways in which she revisits her fieldwork with heightened attention to their erotic aspects as potentially important sources of knowledge both productive and daring. In particular, I am intrigued by her discussion of gender, sexuality, and power. She brings in the question raised by Markham (2005) of the researcher's privilege to chose "whether or not their own embodiment is an issue in the research, even while critically observing the embodiment of participants" (p. 809), but simultaneously argues that putting oneself out there – in particular as a female researcher – is risky business. We risk our credibility as researchers, no matter if we ourselves regard the ideal of neutral detachment in social science as neither obtainable, nor desirable. Kendall pushes her case even further and argues: "Despite increasing openness about sexuality in general in Western culture, and despite decades of self-reflexivity in qualitative research, talking about sex in fieldwork still crosses a line." I could not agree more.

However, Kendall and I might differ in our understandings of what characterizes online embodiment and sexuality. In her chapter, I sense certain ambivalence in relation to the role of 'the body' in online interactions in general, and in online fieldwork in particular. She makes a fairly clear distinction between the offline world as the world of bodies, sensuous experiences, crushes, and physical attraction, and an online world in relation to which embodiment and sexuality is, if not irrelevant, then not quite present. Bodily experiences in her writing enter online fieldwork primarily through aching backs, stiff shoulders and sore eyes from spending too much quality time with your computer.

Although there is certain amount of physical attraction that plays into the online sessions, making long sittings at the keyboard more interesting and tolerable, most of Kendall's crushes on her informants "began after meeting people in person. In short, they were physical attractions."

My take on embodiment and sexuality online is different. Leaning on the experiences, stories, and secrets that WaterMOOers shared with me about the many intimate connections between textuality and desire – as well as my own experiences in a parallel, text-based universe – I would rather make the case that online attractions, indeed, can be highly physical affairs. On a methodological note, this gives a different meaning to the notion of "doing fieldwork with the whole body". If the virtual can be erotically charged, this points at the fragility of the limit between body and text in online encounters. It renders unstable the borders of online ethnography, raising an issue discussed elsewhere in this volume about whether the notions of 'online' and 'offline' are as self-evident as they might be portrayed in the writing of internet methodology. To say that the boundaries between bodies and texts are fuzzy in online ethnographies (of the WaterMOO variety) is more than a rhetorical trick. It demands a reformulation of what it means to do fieldwork with the whole body in a field that relies on intense mediations of bodies.

Then again, even if the border between physical and virtual locations is continuously crossed in online experiences – including online ethnographies – there is also a separating distance between the two. By actively having to type oneself into being, a certain gap in this construction is at the same time created. This distance between 'the typist' (the person typing) and the textual character can help form some breathing space – a reflexive

understanding of research procedures and of the ways in which oneself as a researcher is always intertwined with these processes. The possible distance between fingers typing, and on-screen performances coming to life at your fingertips, can be used to create room for reflection on how I, as a researcher, am not only a producer of texts (such as this one), but also always a co-producer of the reality that is being written.

Kendall never moves her discussion of sexuality online into the domain of cybersex, but if she did, her argument might have engaged more clearly with the sensuous, erotic potentials of online textuality itself. In a text-based virtual world, cybersex takes on the character of rhythmically co-typed narrative of seduction where typists engage their characters in sexual acts and enactments (see, for example, Branwyn, 1994; Döring, 2000; Hamman, 1996; Marshall, 2003; Waskul, 2003). In fact, the passionate textual acts of cybersex might be the ultimate case study of embodiment online, since in few other moments is the line between the textual and the corporeal so obviously fragile. I agree with Sadie Plant (1998, p. 30) in stating that cybersex is "a merging which throws the one-time individual into a pulsing network of switches which is neither climactic, clean, nor secure."

In the WaterMOO-study, I attempted to turn this sense of not being safe into a methodological strategy. Donna Haraway (1997, p. 190) uses the term ethnography in an extended sense, which "is not so much a specific procedure in anthropology as it is a method of *being at risk* in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires." Following Haraway, I used the concept of ethnographyto allude to a particular mind-set in relation to which her notion of being "at risk" seems crucial: "The WaterMOO project was never primarily about 'taking sides.' It was rather about

exposing others, as well as myself, to critical inquiry – to engage in the making of online texts in ways that braved initial beliefs and passions" (Sundén 2003, p. 19). This is a path well worth exploring. The question I need to ask myself at this point is how much I really exposed myself. Looking back, it does not seem like I was at risk quite as much as this quote implies, at least not in the sense of self-exposure.

I did align my project with the reflexive ethnographic tradition of sharing reflections on the research process (such as how I handled the early phase of entering the field, building trust etc.), as well as of making visible the dynamics around my own presence in the field, as a researcher. For example, WaterMOOers tended, initially, to quite self-consciously 'put on a show' when I entered a room, well aware of my recording devices and special interest in them. With time, they became more relaxed. I also did bring into the picture the creation and impact of my own online embodiment, from the initial act of creating an online persona, to the embodied motions within and between rooms and locations together with other WaterMOOers. But the WaterMOOers put themselves at risk in a different way by sharing with me the most intimate thoughts and texts. Compared to them, I was playing it safe. We were close, but never intimate. It was a closeness that cannot quite be described as happening on equal terms.

The possibility of getting sexually intimate in the field – as a way of exploring online embodiment and sexuality differently – barely crossed my mind. It must have appeared incompatible with the kind of research ethics that asks questions of the researcher's (mis)use of power over the people s/he studies. The question then is rather: Are there ways of developing ethically responsible risk-taking?

If the conclusion is that making visible our own embodied experiences would be

valuable for analyses of (online) embodiment, such efforts might backfire in an academic

context of departmental hierarchies and traditional gender politics. At the time for the

WaterMOO study, I was a relatively young doctoral student in a department with

primarily middle-aged, male professors. It became clear to me that bringing sexually

explicit material to the table (in general, without explicitly including myself) certainly got

their attention, but not always in productive ways. "I haven't had time to read it all, but I

have, indeed, read *certain* parts of your text," one of them told me with a smile and a

wink. Such episodes should not stop us from examining the critical role that sexuality and

desire might play in ethnographic work. We need to keep taking risks – in order to

continue the expansion of the field of possible and legitimate knowledge production.

Recommended readings

For discussion and research on cybersex, see, for example, Branwyn (1994), Döring (2000), Hamman (1996), Marshall (2003), McRae (1996), Plant (1998) and Waskul (2003).

For discussions of gender and feminist ethnography, see, for example, Balsamo (1990), Callaway (1992), Enslin (1994), Lengel (1998), Skeggs (2001, 1994), and Warren and Kay Hackney (2000). In addition to Lori Kendall's references on intimate methods, sexuality in the field, and research ethics, see Irwin (2006).

To better understand the kind of 'ethnographic attitude' of being 'at risk' that Donna Haraway argues for, see Haraway (1997a, 1997b, 2000). See also Lather (2001). For this type of ethnographic approach in cybercultural studies, see Escobar (1994).

Response to Lori Kendall

John Edward Campbell

Online Research: Let's (Not) Talk About Sex: Considerations of Sexuality

 In 1994, Pat Califia wrote that there is "something unsatisfying and dishonest about the way sex is talked about (or hidden) in daily life" (p. 11). I would extend Califia's observation by suggesting that there remains something unsatisfying about the way sexuality is talked about (or ignored) in much academic scholarship. This proves both curious and troubling when one considers the inescapability of sexuality – along with race, gender, class, age, and even body type – in the constitution of our social identities. Indeed, Foucault (1978) argues that sexuality is the primary means by which the body is discursively subjugated; the mechanism by which social hierarchies are extended over physical sensations and life processes.

     The absence of candid discussions of sexuality in online qualitative research is particularly problematic in light of the abundance of sexual representation in cyberspace. Whether examining chat rooms on IRC or AOL, profiles on social-networking sites such as MySpace.com or AmIHotOrNot.com, videos uploaded to YouTube.com, or video chat on ICUII, we find individuals expressing their sexual fantasies, fetishes, and pleasurable practices with great alacrity. The very fecundity of this online erotic universe begs the question of how qualitative researchers could *avoid* discussing expressions of sexuality in cyberspace. With such a question in mind, I build on Lori Kendall's discussion of gender and sexuality in online fieldwork by focusing on some of the theoretical and

methodological considerations confronting the researcher when studying sexual communities in cyberspace. Guiding this discussion is the understanding that the erotic is present in every social situation regardless of the site studied or the sexual identities of either the subject or the fieldworker.

Kendall rightly observes that sexual desire is at once a methodological and an epistemological issue. I would further Kendall's observation by noting that sexuality, as an integral dimension of our subjectivity, is an ontological issue of which the fieldworker needs to give careful consideration. Bette Kauffman (1992) insightfully points out that "the particularities of the ethnographer shape the very selection of what constitutes a 'problem' worthy of study, whose reality or social knowledge will be construed as 'answer,' and what techniques will be privileged for the selection of 'facts' from the flow of things" (p. 192). In practical terms, the fieldworker needs to remain aware that he or she will be sensitive to certain expressions of eroticism while oblivious to or even dismayed by others.

For instance, my sexual identity (which situates me as a gay man) and my particular sexual desires (which draws me to the gay male "bear" subculture) infuses every decision I make (and may not be fully aware of) as to what communities I will study and how I will approach those social aggregations. This restricted view of the sexual universe is a challenge confronting every qualitative researcher both online and off. However, the limitations of a singular perspective are compounded by a hegemonic model of sexuality that denies or censures sexual practices societally deemed "non-normative." Such epistemological myopia is apparent in the general absence of sexual-minority communities from the existing literature on social relations in cyberspace

210

despite the substantial number of sexuality-minority members who have been early adopters of computer-mediated communication technologies. This omission of sexual-minority experiences from the cyberculture literature has the danger of enacting what Gross (1991) identifies as the "symbolic annihilation" of people who do not conform to the dominant sexual paradigm.

I wrote my monograph – *Getting It On Online: Cyberspace and Gay Male Sexuality* (2004) – to address some of these troubling oversights. At the time I started the study, most of the generalizations made about social interaction in cyberspace were based on observations of online straight (and predominantly white) communities, resulting in an incomplete understanding of online social relations. I set out to investigate the always already presence of sexual tension when conducting fieldwork in a sexually charged space, even if that space was virtual. Problematizing conventional understandings of sexuality, I interviewed men (some identifying as gay, some identifying otherwise) whose erotic desires and sexual practices utterly diverged. Of particular fascination was how often these men would speak of their own sexual practices as perfectly "normal" or "healthy" – whether those practices involved gaining, muscle worship, bondage, water sports, or vanilla top-and-bottom anal sex – while discounting the erotic practices of others. To avoid privileging or naturalizing my own sexual desires, I continuously reminded myself of the idiosyncrasy of my own sense of the erotic.

Although, as Weston points out, recent "work in cultural anthropology has stressed the importance of recognizing the researcher as a positioned subject" (1991, p. 13), studying sexual communities necessitates pushing self-reflexivity beyond conventional levels of comfort. Such research involves confronting invasive questions

211

regarding one's own sexual identity and sexual desires. In addition to acknowledging that the researcher's particular "turn-ons" are as culturally constructed as those of subjects, such study also requires an awareness that sexual identity involves more than a binary claim to being "straight" or "gay." Sexual identity equally encompasses the researcher's particular sexual desires, how these desires intersected with other axes of identity, and, most importantly, how these desires inform our very sense of self. As such, sexual identity is thoroughly enmeshed with issues of hierarchy and power.

Bell and Valentine (1995) discuss the power dynamics inherent in the researcher-researched relationship in regard to the study of sexuality. Specifically, they warn of collapsing a shared marginalized sexual identity with a shared power position in conducting research, noting that "our research relationships and the way we report them cannot (indeed must not) be kept impersonal and clinical;" instead we must "be reflexive about how we feel about our respondents – owning up if we feel sexually attracted to them rather than struggling to maintain a false front of objectivity" (p. 26). Bell and Valentine attempt to open a space for more critical and positioned ethnographic work in which the researcher reflexively interrogates his or her own role as researcher *and* as positioned subject, acknowledging that although reflexivity makes the potential audience more aware of power inequities, it *does not* erase them. Thus it is vital for the researcher to acknowledge if there is a sexual interest on either the researcher's or the subject's part even when the researcher makes a concerted effort to *bracket* his or her desires in the field.

By "bracketing," I refer the methodical monitoring of the researcher's own online discourse, communicating clearly to participants whether he or she is speaking to them as

a researcher or as a community member. In my own research, when conducting formal

interviews, I avoided initiating any discussions I suspected would be construed as

libidinous, or even as inappropriately personal. If I wanted to engage in a personal

(sexual) discussion with an individual, it would have to wait until another occasion when

we were not interacting under the auspice of research. This is not to suggest that my

personal experiences and desires do not shade my interpretations. Indeed, it would be

dishonest to suggest that one can "bracket out" all of one's expectations and sentiments

regarding a group with which one has significant personal investment. Rather, my

methodological strategy in approaching these sexually charged relations between myself

as researcher and my subjects is simply to be honest with the reader – to include these

very social dynamics as objects of analysis and critique. As Hammersley and Atkinson

(1995) remind us, the researcher's interpretations "need to be made explicit and full

advantage should be taken of any opportunities to test their limits and to assess

alternatives" (p. 19).

Of course, there are analytical dangers to studying any subject to which one has

such a close identification. In her work on gay kinship, Weston (1991) discusses the

unique challenge of conducting research within a community with which one has "a

common frame of reference and shared identity," noting that the greatest difficulty

confronting such a researcher is in the "process of making the familiar strange" (p. 14).

In this regard, my strategy in online interviewing has been to keep conversations open-

ended, asking participants to explain to me the significance of online social practices to

which I was already accustomed. In this process of making the implicit explicit, I hoped

to be surprised by the connotations of things I thought I already understood. In the

213

written account, I allow as much as possible the "voices" of those participating in this study to "speak" directly to the reader, endeavoring to have members of these online communities explain their practices in their own words while never losing sight of the constructedness of any written account. [1]

It is vital then for the researcher as "the research instrument *par excellence*" (Hammersley and Atkinson, p. 19) to open him or herself up for inspection, allowing the seams of the research to show. One means towards this goal is incorporating what Grindstaff (2002) and earlier, Van Maanen (1988) identify as the "confessional tale" into the written account. Reflecting the influences of both feminist researchers and post-structuralist thinkers, the "entry of confessional tales into the fieldwork canon is part of a larger culture moment in which disciplinary canons of all sorts are being challenged and in which truth and knowledge are taken as historically situated, partial, and incomplete" (Grindstaff, p. 276). This "confessional tale" should not be mistaken by the research as some self-indulgent narcissistic practice, but rather as a way of maintaining an open channel of communication with the reader. Put into practice, this includes keeping a detailed journal of events in the field as well as incorporating the researcher's own online discourse into the written account so the reader can see how the researcher actually

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[1] Methodological considerations do not end with the collection of data in the field. Historically, careful decisions had to be made about the best approach to transcribing the discourse of subjects. Concerning the transcription of oral narratives, Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) indicates that transforming "spoken language into a written text" is a serious endeavor, involving theoretical and interpretive decisions "because thoughtful investigators no longer assume the transparency of language" (p. 12). Riessman continues: "Different transcription conventions lead to and support different interpretations and ideological positions, and they ultimately create different worlds" (p. 13). However, research in cyberspace presents different considerations as the very technologies underlying computer-mediated communication can also provide the researcher with analyzable data of online interaction. The fundamental difference, however, is that this transcribed text is static, whereas with synchronistic modes of online interaction, the text appears fleeting.

interacted with subjects.[2] The final account should include the oversights and limitations

of the fieldwork in the understanding that all research enterprises are inherently

incomplete.

With this in mind, researchers need to assiduously contemplate what ethical

responsibilities they have in constructing representations of sexual communities in

cyberspace. I held a deep sense of privilege and responsibility that those participating in

my study were willing to talk candidly about their online experiences even when

recounting events which had proven emotionally painful. As those participating in the

study were so forthright about their online experiences – including their online erotic

experiences – I was intellectually and ethically obliged to be open about my own online

(erotic) experiences with the reader despite the fact that such candidness often left me

feeling vulnerable and exposed. This openness involves discussing how my desires and

those of my subjects were negotiate in the field, admitting that at times any distinction

between my role as researcher and my role as friend or even sexual interest blurred.

In confronting these ethical considerations, the safest strategy for the online

researcher is simply to be honest with the reader. One does not need view an

ethnographic monograph as a confession *per se* (which Foucault suggests functions as a

disciplinary means of surveilling and containing sexual behavior) in order to have a

forthright discussion of erotic tension in the field. However, acknowledging the sexual

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[2] In analyzing the discourse of subjects, a useful approach originates in social psychology: developed by Potter and Wetherell (1987), "interpretive repertoire analysis" involves identifying "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" (p. 149). Hermes uses this approach in her study of women's magazine consumption, noting that repertoire analysis, "though grounded in post-structuralist theory, differs from other forms of discourse analysis in that the social subject is theorized not just as an intersection of discursive structurings but as an active and creative language user" (1995, p. 26). This approach is helpful in discerning what interpretive strategies participants employ in making sense of community practices and the researcher-subject relationship.

identity of the researcher in relation to those studied enables the reader to more critically

assess which social dynamics may have been neglected and which privileged in the field.

Kendall notes that gender seems a safer topic for academic discussion than that of

sexuality even though Foucault (1978) and Butler (1990) see the social construction of

the gendered body as inextricably intertwined with the social construction and

deployment of sexuality. Still, gender is often discussed in terms that avoid the sexual

for the sexual remains forbidden territory. As Kendall points out, "despite decades of

self-reflexivity in qualitative research, talking about sex in fieldwork still crosses a line"

(p. 24). I invite the online qualitative researcher to hold that line up to interrogation.

Who draws the line and who is positioned on the other side? Such interrogation will

reveal much about the hierarchies our culture has constructed around sex and sexuality.

Recommended Readings:

For some of the earliest cyberculture work to look at the online expressions of sexuality,
including the experiences of sexual minorities in cyberspace, see articles and book
chapters by Correll (1995), Hamman (1996), Shaw (1997), Woodland (2000); and two
essays by Nina Wakeford (1996, 2000). For a book length treatment, see Stone's (1996)
book, *The war of desire and technology at the close of the mechanical age*. (MIT Press).

For insightful discussions of sexuality and space, see Bell and Valentine's (1995) edited
collection, *Mapping desire: Geographies of sexualities* (Routledge) and Ingram,
Bouthillette, and Retter's (1997) collection, *Queers in space: Communities, public
places, sites of resistance* (Bay Press).

For theoretical discussions of the social construction of sexuality and gender, read
Foucault's (1978), *The history of sexuality: An introduction, volume I* (Random House),
and Butler's noted works, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*
(1990, Routledge) and *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* (1993,
Routledge).

For theoretical discussions of the role of the body in cyberspace and online embodiment, see LeBesco and Braziel's (2001) collection, *Bodies out of bounds: Fatness and transgression* (University of California Press), McRae's (1997) Flesh made word: Sex, text and the virtual body in Potter's collection, *Internet culture* (Routledge), and O'Brien's insightful article (1999), Writing in the body: Gender (re)production in online interaction, in Smith and Kollock's collection, *Communities in cyberspace* (Routledge).

For readings on the gay male "bear" subculture, see Mosher's (2001) chapter, Setting free the bears: Refiguring fat men on television, in LeBesco and Braziel's collection, *Bodies out of bounds: Fatness and transgression* (University of California Press), and Wright's (1997) collection, *The bear book: Readings in the history and evolution of a gay male subculture* (Harrington Park Press).

For an experimental approach to the online ethnographic study of gender, see Schaap's (2002), *The words that took us there: Ethnography in a virtual reality* (Aksant Academic Publishers).

For particularly insightful discussions of sexuality and reflexivity in ethnographic fieldwork, see Weston's (1991), *Families we choose: Lesbians, gays, kinship* (Columbia University Press) and *Long slow burn: Sexuality and social science* (1998, Routledge).

For a method of discourse analysis incorporating the thought of poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, see interpretive repertoire analysis introduced in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology* (Sage) and employed with great success in Hermes' (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines* (Polity Press).