CLOSE ENCOUNTERS: RESEARCHING INTIMATE LIVES IN EUROPE

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Close encounters: researching intimate lives in Europe

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Abstract

This research note aims extend the discussion on the methodological implications of doing research on intimacy and personal life. Drawing on a comparative study concerned with the intimate lives of those who live outside the conventional, modern western nuclear family, it reflects on the processes of gaining access to often hard-to-reach populations which informed and influenced the empirical work that we carried out in four European countries.

Keywords: gatekeepers, negotiating access, intimacy and personal life, unconventionality

The study of intimacy and personal lives has been growing considerably in the last two decades, particularly in sociologically informed research. Despite this steady expansion, however, scholarship addressing methodological issues concerning the exploration of this subject area continues to lag behind, with the majority of contributions focussing on research practices and problematics pertaining to the investigation of changing family ties (Gilgun et al 1992; Duncombe and Marsden 1996; Edwards and Gillies 1999; Deacon 2000; Daly 2007; Gabb 2008; Jamieson et al 2011), rather than the study of personal life outside the conventional family (see, for example, Ryan-Flood and Gill 2009). This research note aims to contribute to this body of work by extending the discussion on the methodological implications of doing research on intimacy and personal life. Drawing on a comparative study concerned with the intimate lives of those who live outside the conventional, modern western nuclear family, it first provides an overview of the research project we worked on, and then reflects on the processes of gaining access to often hard-to-reach populations which informed and influenced the empirical work that we carried out in four European countries.

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The FEMCIT intimate citizenship project's socio-biographic study: an overview

The research on which this note is based was conducted as part of the intimate citizenship work package of the European-Commission funded FEMCIT project[2] between 2007 and 2011. Our overall objective was to understand the role of women's movements, and other movements for gender and sexuality equality, in transforming intimate citizenship, particularly in laws and policies and in everyday life experiences (Roseneil 2012; Roseneil et al 2012). In order to research the latter, we carried out a qualitative study of 'intimate lives at the cutting edge of change' in contemporary Bulgaria, Norway, Portugal and the UK, using the biographical-narrative interpretative method (Roseneil 2012). We focussed specifically upon those whose lives might be expected to have been most affected by the cultural shifts set in train by the women's movement: people who are living outside the conventional modern western nuclear family. Our sample therefore included men and women, all of whom were one or more of the following: un-partnered; in a non-cohabiting relationship ('living apart relationships'); lesbian, gay, bisexual or in a same-sex relationship; living in shared/communal housing. The sample included members of the national majority ethnic population in each country, and members of two minoritized/ racialized groups from each country: Bulgaria – Roma and Turkish; Norway– Pakistani and Sami; Portugal – Cape Verdeans and Roma; the UK – Pakistani and Turkish. We sampled for variability of class/ socio-economic status/ educational level/ occupation, rather than focusing on a particular group, but also recognized that amongst particular groups there might be less variability of class/ socio-economic status. We initially aimed to interview people who were between the ages of 35 and 50 years old, as the age at which people are most normatively expected to be coupled and living as part of a family. However, given the challenges in the recruitment process, our final sample comprised of interviewees between the ages of 28 and 54. Interviews were carried out in the capital city of each national case study site, as these places are usually thought to be most subjected to social and cultural transformation, and to contain the largest numbers of people living non-conventional intimate lives. In light of the resources and time available, and the intensity of the chosen methodology, we interviewed 67 people (41 women and 26 men) from across the four countries; 26 from the national majority

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population and 41 from minoritized/racialised groups.[3] As far as the research team is concerned: we are all white women academics, in our 30s and 40s, some from the national majority population of the countries we conducted research in (but not all living there during the time of the project), none from the minoritized/racialised groups we researched, and some fitting with the categories of 'non-conventionality' that we focussed on in this study.

The combination of seeking to interview those living outside conventional familial relations during 'mid life', and members of specific racialized/minoritized groups meant that we were often looking for 'minorities amongst minorities'. We were all aware that this, together with our not being from any of the racialized/minoritized groups we had identified for our research, would make the task of reaching the latter in particular more difficult. For this reason, the research team discussed how to recruit interviewees at considerable length, before starting the fieldwork and at several meetings during the fieldwork process, and by email, as we encountered problems. For example, we shared and learned from each other's difficulties in finding participants, and discussed the ways in which the various recruitment strategies adopted worked differently, more or less successfully, in the four national contexts researched. We also took the decision not to interview friends or acquaintances, and to endeavour to reach beyond our own networks. It was also agreed that the aim was not to interview social movement activists and those easily contactable through NGOs, but rather to reach 'ordinary people'. This was not always possible and many interviewees were recruited with the assistance of NGOs and social movements.

Prior to setting out onto 'the field', we conducted desk-based research on all our target populations, to gain a better understanding of their history and socio-economic status in the four countries under analysis, as well as gender relations and family composition, where such data was available.

Overall, the sample was recruited in the following ways:

- 16 people through a key informant/ personal contact[4] (12 in the UK, and 4 in Portugal)
- 15 people were recruited through an NGO (6 in Bulgaria, 5 in Portugal, 3 in the UK, and 1 in Norway)
- 14 people through snowballing from (i.e. at one removed from) a key informant/ personal contact (9 in Norway, 3 in Bulgaria, and 2 in Portugal)

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[3] The sample bias towards women was deliberate, and was related to the overall focus of FEMCIT on the impact of women's movements on gendered citizenship.
[4] The term key informant/personal contact refers to informants with some knowledge of a group/ community identified by the researcher as potentially leading to interviewees, as well as personal contacts, colleagues, friends and acquaintances known prior to the research who were asked to assist in the recruitment of the sample.

- 10 people through snowballing through an interviewee (5 in Portugal, 3 in Bulgaria, and 2 in Norway)
- 4 people through virtual social networks (3 in the UK and 1 in Norway)
- 4 people through snowballing from a research assistant (all in Norway)
- 2 people through leafleting (all in Bulgaria)
- 2 people through a local school (all in Bulgaria)

Finding interviewees and negotiating access

The list above shows that only in a minority of cases were we able to reach our interviewees without the mediation of other individuals or institutions (6 altogether: 4 through virtual social networks and 2 through leafleting). Indeed, in line with Miller and Bell's (2002) claim that "much qualitative research relies upon gatekeepers as a route of initial access to participants" (2002: 55), most of our interviewees were accessed through various facilitators who acted as gatekeepers, i.e. by directing and/or introducing us to our interviewees, they provided conduit for access to them (De Laine 2000). As is well documented in the literature (see for example: Feldman et al 2003; Horwood and Moon 2003; Emmel et al 2007; Wanat 2008; Reeves 2010; Kawulich 2011) and in many contributions of this special issue, gatekeepers are not always easy to approach; they are sometimes elusive, reluctant to engage with researchers, or even refusing to grant access. We too faced these difficulties, as explained later, but the first challenge we encountered in our fieldworks was the identification of potential gatekeepers to our interviewees.

Gatekeepers are generally identified as individuals or institutions who stand at the metaphorical "gate" of a metaphorical enclosed compound, and allow, or not, the researcher to get in. Underpinning this metaphor is the assumption that there is an identifiable, 'guarded' compound inhabited by potential interviewees. These imagined compounds are formed on the basis of some shared commonality between people – whether it is working in the same institution, having the same job, sharing ethnic, racial and/or cultural backgrounds, life experiences, age, sexual identity, religion, language, and so on. The problem that we faced in our research was that the interviewees to whom we were seeking access do not necessarily form a group or community based on a shared experience of, or identity related to, living outside the conventional modern western nuclear family. This was especially the case for people who are in living apart relationships, those who live in shared/ communal housing, and those who are un-partnered. Thus, finding our interviewees from these categories was not

always an easy task, partly because we could not find a guarded compound to gain access to –
indeed, there was no such compound in the first place. On the other hand, participants who
were lesbian, gay, bisexual or in a same-sex relationship were more likely to have a sense of
shared identity and membership of a community. For example, we were able to identify more
or less organised LGBT[5] communities that we could contact, hoping they would act as
conduits to potential interviewees. Perhaps not surprisingly, the interviewees contacted via
LGBT organisations and networks were mostly people from the majority national population.
As pointed out by scholarship on lesbian and gay social movements, there is a tendency for
white, majority lesbians and gay men to be more publicly visible and/or networked via
political groups, and affiliation to LGBT organisations can reflect this demographic (Morton
1996; Engel 2001; Kuumba 2001; Cortese 2006). Where they existed, we contacted LGBT
organisations of specific ethnic and religious communities that encompassed our chosen
racialised/minoritised groups. This was the case in the UK alone, where the existence of, and
facilitation offered by, a Muslim LGBT organisation meant that we were able to access and
interview two British Pakistani gay men. Contacts established with a Turkish-based LGBT
organisation also led to the recruitment of a lesbian Turkish woman in London. These
recruitment processes shed further light on the difference that being able to identify and gain
access to the 'right' gatekeepers, when they exist, can make to gaining access to "hard to
reach" populations. More broadly, they also show the complex and intersecting identities that
foreground affiliations and alignments informing negotiations and experiences of intimate
lives in contemporary, diverse and multicultural Europe (see also Roseneil et al 2012).

In relation to the latter point, some of the reasons behind the difficulty we found in
identifying racialized/minoritized individuals who fit our categories of 'unconventionality'
were made explicit by some of our interviewees. They emphasised the necessity to hide
unconventional aspects of their life, in particular concerning their sexual orientation and
desires, to prevent being ostracised from their communities, but also to protect the latter from
being further minoritized by outsiders. In the UK, for example, a lesbian Turkish interviewee
explained that the Turkish LGBT community in London does indeed exist, but is not very
visible to either outsiders or to members of the mainstream heterosexual Turkish community
itself. The stigma that surrounds same-sex relationships and desires within Turkish culture,
this interviewee pointed out, has a profound impact on lesbians and gay men, who prefer to
remain hidden from the public eye. In Norway, a Sami informant argued that Samis are

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[5] The choice of this terminology is ours, and does not necessarily reflect the membership of all the organisations
and communities we contacted, some of which were exclusively aimed at lesbian women or at gay men.

usually very protective of their "flock", and do not like it when strangers lurk around their "territory". Samis are raised "not to put their neck out", and also for that reason would not want to be interviewed. Moreover, the risk of exposing marginalized/stigmatized unconventionalities within the Sami community was one major concern when potential interviewees were identified but turned down our request for an interview.

Overall, the ease with which we found majority population lesbians and gay men who agreed to take part in our research, and the difficulties we encountered in identifying and negotiating participation of the same 'category' from racialized/minoritized groups is reflected in our sample. In Bulgaria, four lesbian and gay majority people were interviewed, one gay Roma man, but no one from the Turkish minority. In Portugal, two lesbian and gay majority people were interviewed, one Cape Verdean gay man, but no Roma people. In Norway, three majority lesbian and gay people were interviewed, one gay man and a lesbian woman from the Sami population, but no-one from the Pakistani community. In the UK, four majority lesbian and gay people were interviewed, two Pakistani gay men and one Turkish lesbian woman.

In order to overcome the difficulties encountered in identifying interviewees from minoritized/racialized groups in all four countries, we contacted various cultural, religious and political organisations representing our minoritized/racilised groups, as well as various individuals from the latter, whom we either knew personally, or whom we had been directed to by others. It was our hope that their sharing ethnic and cultural backgrounds with our target population would allow some of them to act as conduits to individuals who matched our categories. However, we were aware that shared ethnicity, racial and cultural background would not guarantee their knowing people from the non-conventional categories that we were seeking, and indeed this was the case in many instances. For example, in order to reach Turkish interviewees in Bulgaria, various Turkish NGOs and a political party were contacted. Two of these organisations showed interest and were willing to assist by providing a list of possible interviewees who met the criteria of the study. These contacts were predominantly single people; the other categories were difficult to access. The gatekeepers were explicitly asked about lesbian and gay Turkish people but none could think of anyone. Similarly, in Portugal, gatekeepers from racialized/minoritized groups helped us find mostly Roma and Cape Verdean single people, but did not know anyone who fitted the other categories.

Perhaps we were less prepared to have our categories re-interpreted altogether by our facilitators. Indeed, the regulation of access exercised by gatekeepers is often based on the latter's interpretation of "what they are asked to do in their own social contexts" (Wanat

2008: 192). In other words, the mediation of the gatekeepers can lead to the subject of study being re-evaluated and given different meanings to accord with the gatekeeper's reality, rather than that of the researcher, thus ultimately influencing who will participate in the study (Emmel 2006; Miller and Bell 2012). Interpretations like the ones mentioned by these scholars emerged in our fieldworks when, in some instances, our gatekeepers told us that the categories of 'unconventionality' we had identified did not exist amongst their groups. In Norway, for example, key informants for the Pakistani minority were adamant that the researcher would not find any Pakistani belonging to any of the non-conventional categories, and for this reason could not assist her any further. In the UK, when we asked one of our Turkish interviewees if he knew any potential lesbian or gay participants, after some thought, he said: "I don't think there are gays from Turkey", a response that was reiterated by other informants from the Turkish speaking community. In these cases, our gatekeepers did not want to engage in our request to facilitation, because in their view, the population we were trying to identify did not exist. We did not challenge these assumptions. Sometimes this was due to the circumstances in which they had been made and which did not favour further exchange on these matters, and in other cases this was a choice on the part of the researcher who did not feel comfortable in challenging gatekeepers and participants on the feasibility of our chosen categories. Nevertheless, these comments were not just 'brushed away' as we persevered in our search for participants, but were useful for us in gaining a better understanding of social and cultural attitudes towards unconventionality in intimate life. In other instances, the interpretation of our research made by some of our gatekeepers meant that we were directed to wrong potential participants altogether. In Bulgaria, some Roma people were identified as single by the NGOs contacted because they were not officially married to their partners and had 'single' civil status. The study's meaning of 'un-partnered', rather than 'unmarried' had to be explained, after several potential interviewees were turned down. The topic of the research was also seen by some as problematic: in Bulgaria and Portugal some of the Roma gatekeepers contacted were reluctant to help the researchers because, they claimed, Roma people would not want to discuss these issues with a complete stranger. Conversely, in two instances, in Portugal and the UK, the gatekeeper showed such enthusiasm for the topic of the study and the methodology adopted that they volunteered to be interviewed.

Our successes and failures to find interviewees who met our pre-existing criteria for participation in the study need to be understood also in relation to issues of positionality and biography, whereby aspects of the researchers', researcheds' and gatekeepers' social

identities and life experiences frame social and professional relationships in the field (Sanghera and Thapar-Bjorkert 2008). For example, we were all more familiar with and networked to the majority national populations than with the minoritized/racialized groups of the countries in which we did research. This is reflected in the networks and social capital we drew from[6] in order to gain access to potential participants, and, consequently, in the ways in which we recruited our sample: 18 out of 26 majority national population interviewees were contacted through key informants, as opposed to 12 out of 41 interviewees from minoritized/racialized groups who were recruited in the same way. It should be noted that interviewees from majority national populations did not unreservedly agree to being interviewed; rather, often further explanations were given and negotiations undertaken. However, it was mainly gatekeepers and interviewees from minoritized/racialized groups who viewed us as racial and cultural others/outsiders and questioned our capacity to understand and represent their perspectives and ways of life in our research. In these instances, we felt that our roles shifted in the eyes of our interviewees and gatekeepers – as researchers who could produce public representations of them in academic work, *we* would become their gatekeepers, by giving their voices access to the 'wider world'. Negotiations over access and the modality of these potential representations were therefore careful and detailed. In Bulgaria, for example, multiple personal meetings with a gatekeeper from a Roma NGO were organised to address his dissatisfaction with the project, and his belief that we were going to make generalised claims about Roma people. In the UK a Pakistani gay man expressed his concerns about the way in which the research might represent gay Muslim people, and particularly reproduce the notion that being Muslim and gay are impossible identities to reconcile. In both instances, the researchers explained that each interviewee was not treated as representative of the majority or minoritized groups they are from, that we did take into account the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which each interviewees' life is situated, whilst acknowledging their uniqueness, and that the method adopted was particularly helpful for the researcher to acknowledge and then analyse the complexities of the experiences of the people we interviewed. Our replies reassured both, and we were able to carry out our interviews. However, our being positioned as racial and cultural others did not shift in the course of the latter. In telling the stories of their lives and personal relationships, some of our interviewees from minoritized/racialized groups went to great length to explain their customs, traditions and beliefs so that the researcher, clearly placed as

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[6] See Edwards 2004 for a comprehensive discussion of the ways in which social capital can be activated in ethnographic research.

an 'outsider', would gain a better understanding of their cultures and life choices and of the contexts in which they operate.

Conclusions

Our research on experiences and negotiations of 'unconventionality' in the organisation of intimate life revealed some of the tensions and struggles that are faced by those who do not conform with forms of intimacy that remain privileged and normative in the countries analysed (see also Roseneil et al forthcoming). By drawing on observations and reflections emerging from our fieldwork, in this note we reflected in particular on the different ways in which these tensions and negotiations in people's lives influence the practice of doing research on intimacy and personal life in contemporary, multicultural Europe. As seen, some people whom we identified as potential gatekeepers and/or interviewees did not relate to our categories of 'unconventionality', and as a result they re-interpreted the latter or denied the very existence of people living outside the conventional modern western nuclear family within their 'community' or minoritized group. In other instances, potential interviewees who claimed to fit with the study's categories of unconventionality were reluctant to participate in it, fearing that we would mis-represent their lives and/or their communities. These fieldwork experiences, the ensuing negotiations that we engaged in to recruit participants, and the data that we collected all point to the fact that the study of intimacy and personal life cannot be disjoined from considerations for and explorations of the multiple contexts, identities and affiliations that constitute and shape people's lived lives. The discussion of the challenges we encountered in the processes of gaining access to and recruiting participants for our study also further emphasises the points made by other researchers (Magolda 2000; Campbell et al 2006; Wanat 2008) about the fact that ethnographic fieldwork is rarely linear and discrete, that negotiations of access are an aspect of the research process that run throughout the collection of data, extending well into the interview, and carried out by both researcher and researched. As mentioned earlier, placing and positionality informed the ways in which our respondents decided to tell us the story of their lives, often putting emphasis on their cultural contexts to facilitate our better informed access and understanding of their life choices and experiences of intimate life. In this respect, as Roseneil (2012) has further explained elsewhere in relation to our project, the biographical narrative method was particularly appropriate in enabling interviewees to talk about their intimate life in their own way.

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