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SEEKING CONNECTION: THE INTERVIEW AS NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

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Abstract

Acts of counter-subjectification in qualitative research are always present but are often submerged in accounts that seek to locate the power of subjectification entirely with the researcher. This is particularly so when talking to people about sensitive issues. Based on an interview-based study of infertility and reproductive disruption among British Pakistanis in Northeast England, we explore how we, as researchers, sought and were drawn into various kinds of connections with the study participants; connections that were actively and performatively constructed through time. The three of us that conducted interviews are all female academics with PhDs in anthropology, but thereafter our backgrounds, life stories and experiences diverge in ways that intersected with those of our informants in complex and shifting ways. We describe how these processes shaped the production of narrative accounts and consider some of the associated analytical and ethical implications.

Introduction

Researching involuntary childlessness is a delicate business, often bringing to mind painful and, perhaps, still unresolved memories of trying to become a parent. In drawing out narratives, chronologies, reflections and opinions from informants, researchers themselves become engaged in ways that are subtle and might be easily missed in the accomplishment of the semi-structured research interview. Capturing this exchange ion order to examine methodological complexities and their analytical and ethical consequences is the central aim of this article.

We pay close attention to what Tedlock (1991:70) and others have described as *narrative ethnography*, an approach that renders explicit the relationships formed between ethnographer and informant who engage in 'ethnographic dialogue to create a world of shared intersubjectivity'. This approach rejects a sharp analytical distinction between 'Self' and 'Other', and is critical of an historical tendency among anthropologists to 'abstract the meaningful data from the objects of study and to remove all traces of the observer' (Ibid:72). Tedlock's version of narrative ethnography encourages us to engage actively with the 'ongoing dialectical political-personal relationship between Self [researcher] and Other [informant]' (Ibid:81), resulting in 'the coproduction of ethnographic knowledge, created and represented (...) within an interactive dialogue' (Ibid:82; see also Goodhall, 2000). This entails a sensibility that extends beyond the internalities of people's stories and accounts and emphasises the way that conditions of communication and encounter create the possibility for certain kinds of narration to occur: what Gubrium and Holstein (2008) describe as 'narrative environments'. For Gubrium and Holstein, the narrative ethnography approach focuses on 'the everyday narrative activity that unfolds within circumstantially situated social interaction, with an acute awareness of the myriad layers of social context that condition

4

narrative production' (Ibid:251; see also Hockey, 2002; Phoenix, 2008). Although the versions of narrative ethnography presented by Tedlock and Gubrium and Holstein differ in the degree of focus placed on researchers' representational practices in relation to research subjects, both have at their heart the idea that narrative context, which includes the narrator's connection with the 'audience' (be it a researcher or anyone else) profoundly affects what is told and how (Phoenix, 2008; Hockey, 2002; see also Goffman, 1969).

In what follows, we examine and interrogate the ways that we, as researchers, sought and were drawn into different kinds of connections with informants through and beyond the interview process. While the classic construction of anthropological fieldwork is one boundary crossing, it is increasingly recognised that the 'field' is not merely spatial but is fashioned out of ongoing and continually-ramifying interactions between ethnographer and interlocutors (Coleman and Collins, 2006:5). These connections are actively and performatively constructed through time; furthermore, they are ones through which informants position and progressively refine their readings of the strangers in their midst.

In unravelling and laying bare the kinds of connections formed during our fieldwork, and their implications for the production and representation of 'knowledge', we examine the ways that we were drawn in and configured by research participants, as well as vice versa (see, for example, Collins 1998; 2002; Dyck 2000; Ribbens and Edwards 1998; Ribbens, 1989; Simpson 2006; Valentine 2002). The project interviewers were all women, but we differed in terms of social class, ethnicity, age and reproductive/family situation (among other things). The specific configurations and intersection of identity and experience, in relation to our research participants, meant that we all spanned an insider/outsider spectrum in complex and shifting ways, as we describe below (see also Mullings, 1999; Brah and Phoenix, 2004;

Gressgård, 2008), shaping the emergence of narratives and interpretations (Sixsmith et al, 2003; Thomas, Blacksmith and Reno, 2000).

The Study

Our study, on infertility and reproductive disruption among Pakistani Muslims in Teesside (an industrial connurbation in Northeast England) sits within an emerging body of literature describing '*IVF cultures*'; in this instance, the way in which an established UK South-Asian population, with a strong sense of their history, community and links to 'home' engage with the growing repertoire of techniques available to address involuntary childlessness (cf. Edwards et al 1999, Franklin 1997, Inhorn and Birenbaum-Carmelli 2008). Our more ambitious intent was to understand this 'culture' ethnographically as part of what Spencer (2007:163) has called the 'everyday work of ethnicity'. How, in a plural society, do these techniques begin to feature in the way people do kinship, practise religion, preserve their identity and tradition, assimilate new influences and aspire to well-being? We do not elaborate on our findings here, which have been published separately (REFERENCES REMOVED).

In developing such ethnography, the way we enter this ongoing 'flow' of practice is crucial; it involves understanding the processes of counter-subjectification whereby we, as researchers, are figured as subjects in other people's worlds. Of particular interest are the different kinds of relationships that become fore-grounded within the interview context and how these play into the co-construction of narrative. Unusually, some interviews involved two researchers jointly interviewing, thus complicating the process of counter-subjectification in interesting and, we hope, illuminating ways.

Fieldwork, conducted in 2007-2010, entailed interviews with 108 women and men identifying as 'Pakistani', living in Teesside. Ethical consent was obtained from Durham University School for Health and local NHS Ethics Committee. The Asian Infertilities study [http://www.dur.ac.uk/asian.infertilities/] comprised two research phases. Phase one was designed to elucidate the range of 'normal' reproductive experiences in this population, against which 'abnormal' reproduction is measured (Jenkins & Inhorn, 2003), and the diversity of infertility experiences. Interviews were conducted with 65 women and 26 men (aged 17-70y), recruited from community centres and other public venues frequented by Pakistanis, and by snowball sampling from this group. All were first- or second-generation migrants from Mirpur (Azad Kashmir) or the Punjab, and all were practising Muslims. We endeavoured to interview individuals of different ages and social classes, but we did not deliberately target those with reproductive difficulties. Interviews took the form of guided conversations (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), to allow each participant's experiences and interpretations to drive the interview. We used a life-history approach, encouraging participants to talk through their marital and reproductive lives in chronological sequence, although there were often deviations from this.

In phase two, we interviewed individuals and couples undergoing biomedical treatment for infertility. Six couples and three individual women were recruited from the reproductive medicine clinic of the main public hospital in Teesside; two other women were contacted and interviewed via internet discussion boards on infertility. These interviews covered similar ground to Phase One except that, because of the recruitment context, they usually began with participants' stories of seeking treatment for infertility.

Interviews were conducted in English, Urdu or Punjabi, according to participants' preferences, by three of the authors (K, M, N), with M and N (research associates) doing the majority. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed; Punjabi/Urdu Interviews were translated into English, but key terms with no direct English equivalent were left in the original language. Analysis was thematic and inductive, based on the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). All authors engaged in close reading of the interview transcripts, noting key emerging themes, patterns and variation (Rapley, 2011). Subsequently, one author (M) developed a series of inductive codes, and coded each transcript in Nvivo. Below, we have used pseudonyms for research participants and our initials [*we will use our full names for published version; this is for purposes of anonymous review*].

Most interviews were one-to-one. However, at the start of fieldwork, K (as co-PI) and N conducted several interviews together. This was primarily for training and supervision purposes (particularly important for less structured forms of interviewing, where the interview format/schedule cannot be fully determined in advance), and to enable K to 'get a feel' for the ethnographic context. Doing the first few interviews together also helped us develop and refine our research approach and interview guides; at project meetings, we were both able to offer our own 'take' on those joint interviews.

While co-interviewing, we had no pre-established plan about who was to ask which questions and when; instead we 'played it by ear', ensuring that, between us, we covered all requisite topics. In the event, this flexibility and juxtapositioning of different perspectives proved very illuminating, to the extent that we continued to pursue this strategy beyond when it was needed for training and supervision. N and K interviewed jointly those participants who preferred to speak English (13 interviews), while the Punjabi/Urdu-language interviews

(9) were conducted by N (who speaks those languages fluently) alone. Unfortunately, after several months, N become seriously ill and had to stop working. We appointed a new research associate, M, who conducted the remainder of the interviews. The first five interviews she did together with K; thereafter, M worked alone or with a Punjabi/Urdu-speaking interpreter. It was thus through serendipity, rather than by design, that we ended up with different combinations of interviewers working together and separately. However, this turned out to be illuminating for exploring how interviewers' positioning, in interaction with interviewees, can shape the processes through which knowledge and understandings are arrived at and shared.

The researchers

The interviewers, N, M, and K are all female academics with PhDs in anthropology, but thereafter our backgrounds, life stories and experiences diverge. N (research associate) is a British Pakistani Muslim in her late-twenties. She lives in Teesside with her parents and extended family; she is unmarried and has no children. N is physically disabled and walks with the aid of crutches, a status that makes marriage difficult. N was born in Teesside and, although identifying as Pakistani, she has never visited Pakistan. She is trilingual in Urdu, Punjabi and English (which she speaks with a Teesside accent). K (co-PI) is a white-British woman in her early forties. She lives in Durham (about 25 miles from Teesside) with her husband and three young daughters. Around the beginning of the fieldwork, she became pregnant with her third child. K is not originally from the region, which is clear from her southern English accent. She does not speak any Pakistani languages and has never been to Pakistan. She does not follow any religious faith. M (research associate) is in her early thirties. She is married but has no children and lives with her husband near Durham. M grew up in the US and has American nationality, but she identifies strongly with her West African

and Lebanese family origins. A Black American, from her appearance, she could easily be mistaken for Pakistani; an issue we return to below. M speaks English with an American accent; she also speaks limited Punjabi, learned from previous fieldwork in the UK and a visit to Pakistan. M is from a Christian background but is a practising Buddhist.

From the outset, it was clear that the researchers' appearances and experiences were influential in shaping the interview process. N is unusual among British Pakistani women of her age in not being married and in having a university degree. Although not (as far as she knows) biologically infertile, her disability, which has made marriage a difficult prospect, confers on her a form of social infertility. M is married but childless through choice, having elected to postpone starting a family until completing her studies and establishing her career. While postponement of childbearing for career or 'lifestyle' reasons is now commonplace in the UK, it is far less so among British Pakistanis and Bangladeshis although some of our study participants were challenging this (REFERENCES REMOVED). As we discuss below, N's involuntary childlessness and M's voluntary postponement often became the subject of interrogation by research participants. By contrast, K's fertility became increasingly visible (literally) as the fieldwork unfolded.

Below, we draw on the three interviewers' experiences to highlight the ways that the management of communication led to different points of connection and alliance being established (cf Briggs 1996). These points often became the point of entry into confidence, affirmation and a foundation for sharing sensitive and personal information, while difference and 'outsiderhood' enabled the broaching of topics that lay outside the etiquette of intra-community communication.

Positionalities and seeking connection

As any textbook on qualitative methods will affirm, in-depth interviewing (indeed any qualitative social research) depends on rapport-building and a sense of common purpose between interviewer and interviewee (e.g. Bryman, 2012); this was evident in many of our interview transcripts. Depending on the interviewer, interviewee and context, particular elements of identity and experience were emphasised or played down, for example: living in Teesside, being Muslim/Pakistani, being married/unmarried, having children or not, and deviating from social/reproductive norms. As researchers, we often sought to foreground such connections, to create a facilitating interview context. In the following example, N shares that she has never visited Pakistan, thereby allowing the interviewee not to feel embarrassed about her lack of geographical knowledge:

N: Where are you from in Pakistan?

Shenaz: I'm not that familiar. I think it's Jhelum.

N: Don't worry; I'm not familiar either. I've never been.

Shenaz: Yes, it's hard when you've never been.'

In another exchange, below, the shared experience is that of being the object of local gossip. Parveen, the interviewee, described how her 'failure' to become pregnant again after having two children has made her the object of social scrutiny. By sharing her experience of being 'talked about', N provided the discursive space for her to elaborate further:

Parveen: People would ask me if I wanted any more [children]. [...] The women would say to me, 'Parveen, aren't you having any more?' I would say, 'Allah isn't giving me any more.' Inside it would hurt me and I would think about it a lot.'

N: It's difficult when others talk, isn't it? [...] People always talk about me.

Parveen: Yes, you understand don't you? [expands]

Foreshadowed here are some important discussions in several interviews about the use of gossip as a form of social exclusion and 'othering' experienced by childless people [REFERENCES REMOVED].

The other interviewers established different points of connection including, in one interview, the shared experience (with K) of long-haul flights with young children and anxieties about the prospect of parenting teenage daughters. This opened up a deeper and franker dialogue, allowing K to probe a potentially sensitive area: the (in)compatibility of the informant's belief that timing of childbearing is 'up to God' with her use of contraception. The ensuing dialogue revealed some important insights about the 'practical ethics' adopted by several study participants when framing engagement with New Reproductive Technologies within their Islamic faith.

While the importance of the interviewer 'establishing rapport' is a common methodological mantra, less often is this recognised as a two-way process. On many occasions, interviewees actively sought connection with us. With N, this often centred on shared geographical origins, with interviewees enquiring where in Pakistan her family came from; other interviewees emphasised their shared status of childlessness or, as in the excerpt below, coming to terms with disability:

When [son] was born, the doctors said that he had a condition called Down Syndrome and that he would have learning and physical disabilities. Your parents will know because of your condition, but you feel devastated when you are told.

M's position as non-white, non-British, but also non-Pakistani, intrigued several interviewees. Many assumed at first she was Pakistani and, on finding she wasn't, asked in some detail about her background. One interviewee, for example, suddenly interrupted M's line of questioning thus:

Halima: How many years have you been in the UK?

M: Seven years.

Halima: Why did you come? Is your husband here?

M: I got married over here because my husband is here.

Halima: You have kids?

M: No. No kids. I have just finished my...

Halima: [Interrupts] Are you from Pakistan?

M: No, my family is African and Lebanese mixed.

Halima: OK, mixed.

M then started asking Halima more about her infertility treatment, but FI quickly turned the questioning back on M, asking first about her husband's occupation and then about M's family networks and migration, before enquiring further about her reproductive situation:

Halima: Do you face any problems with not having kids?

M: Not too much in my family (...) they think I have lots of time.

Halima: What about in-laws?

M: Well, my mother-in-law has passed away, and my father-in-law has not said too much. [...] but my mother I think is upset.

Halima: Do you have any treatment? [for infertility]

M: No.

Halima: Because you are just starting.

M: Yes, because I've not been ready.

This was by no means an isolated occurrence: to give another example, after discussing her fertility treatment, this interviewee turned the discussion to Mwenza's reproductive story:

Zeinab: How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?

M: I'm thirty-one.

Zeinab: You're not too old; you're all right!

M: Yeah, I did my degree then worked for a year and...

Zeinab: It's just your life, isn't it? How it goes. Some want to have kids and get married and, you know, they don't want to do anything, but you wanted a career for yourself.

Sometime later, Zeinab's husband, Faissal, joined the interview, and quickly sought to locate M's background, to position her as a 'cultural' insider or outsider:

Faissal: [discussing family building] ... I don't know where you are from?

M: My family is mixed between Arab and African.

Faissal: All right, in your background. You know (...) in India or Pakistan, if a little

girl is born, they say, 'My wife is no good'. I don't know in your culture...

The conversation returned to the couple's infertility treatment before Faissal again solicited

reciprocal information from M:

Faissal: We will see for six months [whether fertility treatment is successful] and then

we will see what happens. How many kids do you have?

M: I don't have any kids yet, because I have been studying all this time.

Faissal: Are you married?

M: Yes…

While the rest of us also sometimes became subjects of this 'reverse interviewing', it was M's

situation, perhaps because of its similarity to that of many interviewees (married but

childless), that attracted the most interest.

Insiders and outsiders: shifts and juxtapositions

Establishing connections and becoming positioned as an 'insider' can enable the

researcher to penetrate more deeply into informants' life-worlds. Interviewees often made

specific reference, with N, to their shared cultural understandings, drawing her into worlds

that were difficult for the rest of us to enter fully. In this extract, for example, Aziza assumes

that N will understand the social implications of marital breakdown within the local Pakistani

community:

N: When did you get married?

Aziza: This is my second marriage. I first got married when I was 18. Then, when I was nearly 21 I got married again. (...) You can probably imagine, it was much worse for my family than for me.

Aziza proceeds to describe the circumstances of her first marriage and divorce, again drawing N in as a 'cultural insider':

N: So [after the separation] did they [in-laws] try and get you [back]?

Aziza: They knew they were in the wrong, but they denied everything. They never [tried to take me back] because they knew they were in the wrong. […] We got the local *maulvis* [religious scholars] involved as well. Divorce is a very big thing in our culture, isn't it?

Other interviewees made similar assumptions and attempts to draw N into shared life-worlds. For example, after reflecting in her aunt's childlessness, one young woman commented, 'You know how hard it is for infertile women in our culture.'

In such exchanges, K was clearly an outsider, a position which enabled her to ask more 'naïve' questions. In the following extract (K and N co-interviewing), K offered a comment about arranged marriage, which would have been impossible for N, eliciting discussion of the meanings of love:

Zubaida: We had the marriage on the night, so we were legally married, but I did not see him or get to talk to him until the day they gave me away. I was still legally married, but we didn't talk.

K: I just can't imagine how that must be.

Zubaida: You have to grow to love a person.

K: Yes?

Zubaida: I couldn't love him straightaway. I couldn't say, 'I'm head over heels; I love you.' It just doesn't work like that (...)

Being non-Muslim also enabled K to probe into aspects of Islamic beliefs and practices in relation topics like contraception, assisted reproductive technologies and adoption that might have seemed threatening coming from N, especially when it came to interviewing men.

M often occupied an in-between position, being not Pakistani but not white, and not Muslim, but with Arabic ancestry. Here, the interviewee assumes that M's Arabic background means she will share a common understanding of cultural norms regarding marriage:

Nadia: [Discussing her marriage to someone outside the family] I went outside of the family, you see, we're not related, because normally you marry families. What culture are you, by the way?

M: Me? Oh, my background's Arab: Lebanese, and West African.

Nadia: Oh, right, so they're probably similar, yours.

At several points in this interview, Nadia drew M in as a cultural insider. Their common position of being non-white women living in the UK allowed Nadia to share confidences about the behaviour of *gorian* (white women) that would almost certainly not have happened had K been conducting the interview:

Nadia: [Talking about her ex-husband's relationship with his white girlfriend] He's always getting kicked out by his so-called girlfriend [*laughs*], she kicks him out but when the money runs out, when it's near Christmas, she'll probably take him back again [...] when she wants money, you know what all the *gorian* are like. English women are, like, they like the money, they go for the money basically.

The joint interviews provided some particularly illuminating illustrations of insider/outsider positioning, as interviewers (sometimes unwittingly) switched roles as the discussion progressed. To give one example, when K and N interviewed Mustafa (a father of two young children), it emerged early on that Mustafa's wife came from the same part of Pakistan as N's family; N was drawn in as the insider, while K stayed on the periphery of the interview. However, when Mustafa began to discuss the difficulties of balancing work and family life, K (evidently a 'working mum') became the insider. Mustafa then talked about the impact of fatherhood on his participation in the local cricket team, and we both became temporary 'insiders', as our shared experiences of watching/playing cricket became fore-grounded. The conversation revolved around cricket for some time, increasing the sense of connection, before reverting to family building. After discussing the possibility of having a third child, a topic on which he and his wife do not fully agree, Mustafa asked the same questions of (visibly pregnant) K:

Mustafa: It's a possibility [having a third child], yeah, like I say, it's up to God, but in my opinion, she [wife] wants another baby now. She said, like, 'We should have another baby,' but like I said I think two is enough. [...] I think it's a headache having more children. How many do you have?

K: I have two now and this will be three.

Mustafa: Oh, right, so is your husband happy with that?

A clear connection having been established, K felt able to ask a potentially very sensitive question about use of contraception:

Mustafa: [Laughs] Well, you know, in our religion, you can't... I think it's forbidden, and if we do something to stop it and eats some tablet thing, like, that's a sin.

K: So you are not using any contraception?

Mustafa: No.

To probe further was risky, possibly construed as insinuating 'sinful' behaviour. However, the juxtaposition of insiderness (shared parenting experiences) with an outsider's curious naïveté about Islamic doctrine and practice opened a space for K to pursue this line of questioning. As an unmarried Pakistani woman, N was not even supposed to *know* about contraception, let alone discuss it with a man. Mustafa's answer was directed exclusively at K; although N was still physically present, she became all but invisible at this point.

K: So, from what you've been saying [pause] you've decided not to have any more children for now, but you're not using contraception...?

Mustafa: No, we use sometimes, sometimes, yeah, but we know that you can't stop God's will.

K: Mmmm.

Mustafa: [More softly] Sometimes we use, yeah.

Finally, Mustafa enquired further about K's pregnancy and, specifically, about the baby's sex (K said she didn't know), again opening up some useful reflections:

'That's the other problem in our culture, you know, you have to have a boy rather than a girl (...) But I love girls more than boys, you know. (...)I've got five sisters and, to be very honest, they loved us like I can't explain. That's why I never want, we never want... Because our first was a girl and I was really happy; very, very happy. Some people say, you know, that you should have a boy, but why?'

Temporalities, connection and inter-weaving biographies

As the research progressed, our lives (and those of the study participants) unfolded in more or less predictable ways. K's pregnancy became increasingly apparent, and she took an extended period of maternity leave. At the same time, N became seriously ill and our formal fieldwork was suspended for a year. However, several interviewees kept in touch, especially with N, who lived nearby. Two, Tahira and Bina, visited her in hospital and they became particularly close, as N commented:

Bina's sister's had a very rough time with [similar illness]. She was very empathetic because her family had gone through it. When she visited me in hospital, she said, 'You're my sister as well.' They gave lots of support to me.' [N in conversation with K]

As their relationship moved from researcher-informant towards one of friendship and mutual support, Tahira and Bina continued to share their own ongoing reproductive stories with N. Tahira was preparing to go to Pakistan for infertility treatment and was very anxious

about the pressures on her husband to remarry. Although the sources of their anxieties differed, N and Tahira were able to identify closely as a result of their experience of social marginalisation.

These developments in K's and N's lives happened independently of the project (albeit shaping our relationships with informants). However, for M in particular, the research and her own life project became increasingly intertwined. Until starting the project, M had been voluntarily childless, as is common for young professional women in the UK. She assumed she would have children at some point, but giving the matter relatively little active consideration. However, the process of interviewing people (particularly women of a similar age to herself) who were struggling with infertility, cast into relief M's own reproduction position. And, as interviewees turned the questioning on M, the matter began to assume increasing salience for her, as she makes explicit in this exchange, towards the end of a long interview:

Laila: Have you got kids?

MB: No. I have just finished my last qualification, and we are just starting to talk about trying now, and doing all this makes me think, if I can't do it...

Laila: It's not as easy as people make out. Some people pick someone up on a Saturday night, drunk, go home, do the business and a couple of weeks later, they are pregnant [...] and you think, you know, people make it look so easy and it's not.

M: And I don't think I will ever think about it the same way again, having met people and thought about all this.

Laila: Even after, though my sister has three, she's still constantly worrying... it's strange.

M: It's funny, because I remember I was talking to my mum and she was saying that she somehow got it into her head as well because she knew I was doing this stuff and it just somehow puts it in your mind that I am studying fertility problems, and she was saying, 'There's nothing wrong with you, is there? And 'have you been checked?''

Several interviewees sought to reassure M about her childlessness. For example, in a follow-up interview, Zeinab updated M on developments in her own reproductive quest, before asking M for a similar update:

Zeinab: Are you trying [for a baby], because last time you said you might, so no luck yet?
M: No, and it's not been that...
Zeinab: [Interrupting] No, it's not been that long since I last saw you. They do say it takes about two years, so that's OK.

N also sometimes became the subject of interviewees' counsel. One informant, having compared her own situation (defying her parents' marital intentions for her) to N's (whose parents had not sought a marriage for her because of her disability), offered this advice:

'You have to be strong and think about yourself, N. Your parents are never going to be with you all your life and, it might sound a bit selfish, but do what's right for you.'

Discussion

Gubrium and Holstein (2008) have proposed narrative ethnography as an 'emergent method'; here we have explored the place of researchers in creating the context in which

certain kinds of narratives regarding infertility and family formation can emerge. Our rather serendipitous juxtaposition of different interviewer combinations throws light on some crucial contingencies which extend beyond the internalities of the interview.

Despite all being female anthropologists, our backgrounds, life stories and identities diverged significantly, by ethnicity, nationality, social class, family/reproductive status, and disability (among other things). It was the *intersectionality* of these dimensions (characterised by Brah and Phoenix, 2004:76, as 'the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts'), that proved critical in shaping the ways that we related to interviewees and vice versa. For example, N's and M's childlessness were seen very differently (although neither was known to be biologically infertile), because of the particular intersections of ethnic/religious identities, social (and marital) position and disability. Such differences played out in the relationships and connections formed with study participants, shaping the ways that meanings were shared and understood.

But such connections were not fixed; they shifted over time, even over the course of a single interview as the discussion moved from areas where particular facets of life experience or identity were fore-grounded to ones where others gained prominence (Mullings, 1999). The three-way interaction in joint interviews added extra layers of complexity to the shifting and intersecting interviewer-interviewee positions. In purely practical terms, the (unplanned and undirected) process of 'switching' over the course of an interview often provided a facilitating, non-evaluative space for informants to develop their accounts, allowing topics such as arranged marriage, contraception, and use of assisted reproductive technologies to be

broached and explored in ways that would have been nigh-on impossible for a single interviewer. However, there are clearly important analytical and ethical ramifications of these processes.

Presentation and Representation

The interview extracts presented in this paper all entailed some degree of researcher self-disclosure. However, this was not always the case: some respondents simply answered our questions without seeking to enter into a more dialogical relationship. We tried to follow participants' lead, sharing biographical information where this seemed sought or expected, either in response to a direct question or non-verbal cues; with other respondents, who did not actively seek our engagement in this way, we stuck to a more standard question-response interview format. Each interviewee was different, with his/her own reasons for agreeing to participate. For some, it was just to help us; others saw it as a much-needed chance to share their feelings and experiences, and indeed perhaps to normalise their predicament through the co-construction of narrative (cf Hockey, 2002; Simpson, 1998).

Some writers (e.g. Hennink et al, 2012) have argued that 'rapport-building' should specifically *not* entail the researcher divulging personal information, since this would risk 'biasing' the responses obtained. While we do not deny this risk, we would argue that, merely by being present, we are disclosing something about ourselves, from the way we look, the way we talk, the way we move, as we embody our life experiences (Goffman, 1969). Moreover, while 'objectivity' might be the aim of more structured forms of 'data collection', we argue that treating the interview as an ethnographic object means acknowledging and foregrounding the social relations and context in which narration occurs, not just the narrative content (Gubrien and Holstein, 2008).

More pressing, then, than *whether* self-disclosure is appropriate for researchers, is the question of *what* information is disclosed and *how* and *how much*. We were careful only to *reflect* perspectives and experiences that interviewees had shared with us, rather than introducing new ones. Thus, for example, K volunteered her experiences of long-haul flights with young children, and N said that she had never visited Pakistan, only when these were raised first by the interviewee. We argue that employing such reflective self-disclosure can help to establish a non-judgemental atmosphere in which interviewees can feel more at ease to share their own stories.

A second issue around connection and representation concerns the prominence that some accounts may gain over others in analysis, when the degree of exchange and connection inevitably varies between interviewees/interviews. Already, the gendered nature of our recruitment networks led to an over-representation of women in the overall sample. In addition, interviews with women (particularly younger women) with whom it was easier for N and M to connect, yielded the longest and richest interviews. To what extent do these then become fore-grounded in the analysis over briefer exchanges, when it comes to selection of quotes, etc.? And how can researchers, who may remember more vividly the stories of interviewees with whom they formed closer relationships, avoid giving these particular stories undue analytical prominence?

These are, indeed, risks. However, they are risks present in all social research that goes beyond the most structured approaches, in which the 'data-collector' remains anonymous and invisible. The accomplishment of an ethnographic interview, particularly where sensitive and intimate matters are involved, is always going to be relational and

therefore, to some degree, unruly, unpredictable and subject to 'bias'. Rather than seek to eliminate this, through rendering impersonal and sterile our interactions with informants, the challenge is to reflect accurately and honestly on the process. Unfortunately, journal word limits often make this a difficult task; however, in our view, it is through paying critical attention to these issues, rather than attempting to eliminate them, that qualitative researchers demonstrate the 'validity' of their work.

Ethical considerations

Relationships formed during fieldwork, which can play out in unpredictable ways for both researcher and researched, also beg important ethical questions. How is confidentiality managed when researcher/friend boundaries become blurred? What are the researcher's responsibilities in 'anticipating and preventing harms' to informants (ASA Ethical Guidelines), when relationships may extend significantly beyond the planned interview? And what costs and risks might accrue to researchers themselves from entering such relationships? None of these questions can easily be anticipated and neatly addressed in advance in ethical review.

In any social research that entails a level of engagement beyond the very superficial, relationships may arise that are unplanned and unanticipated, and researchers must make careful decisions about how to respond. One possibility is to strive to avoid forming relationships with informants that might compromise 'objectivity' and raise ethical concerns about boundary crossing. However, there is a fine line between the 'rapport-building' deemed necessary for qualitative research and developing friendships with informants that entail certain kinds of social expectations, such as reciprocity in disclosure, or an ongoing interest in their lives. And the consequences are not always easy to manage. The account of Gay-y-

Blasco (anthropologist) and de la Cruz ('informant') (2012) about their friendship that started during Gay-y-Blasco's field research and continued over the following ten years is perhaps one of the most vivid examples of crossing the friendship/informant boundary and the very profound personal consequences that ensued for both of them. But friendships that transgress the ethnographer/informant boundary are not a new phenomenon (see, for example, Grindal, 2011; Mintz, 1989; Pink, 2000) and, in the emerging 'critical collaborative ethnography', the idea of researcher disconnection and detachment is seen as both methodologically and ethically problematic (e.g. Bhattacharya, 2008).

A second ethical concern is around honesty and self-presentation. As Goffman (1969:243) eloquently put it, '[a]s [social] performers, we are merchants of morality'. It is usual in social encounters, particularly between strangers, to seek 'common ground' as a basis for social engagement. We therefore tend to present aspects of ourselves that facilitate this sense of connection, and avoid others that may be more contentious or at odds with our interlocutors' experiences/opinions. Thus, for example, K and N both talked readily of their appreciation of cricket when Mustafa said he played in the local team. This was not untruthful; however, cricket did not play a major part in either of our lives. To what extent could our enthusiastic discussion of recent matches and players be seen as a disingenuous attempt to present ourselves in a particular light just to get a better interview? Is this kind of purposeful self-representation inherently 'dishonest', as Mullings (1999) has pondered? And what do we *not* disclose? In interviews where informants discussed their Islamic faith, N often volunteered her own Muslim identity. K, on the other hand, never declared her lack of religious faith, instead letting the interviewees believe perhaps that she was a Christian and therefore an adherent 'of the Book'. When does selective representation become dishonesty? On the other hand, it is now widely accepted that the self is 'dynamic, multiplex […]

dialogic, negotiated in and through social interaction, and therefore dialectically related to society' (Collins, 2002:91; see also Goffman, 1969): is any form of self-representation ever the 'real' or 'honest' one?

Finally, we should consider the consequences of seeking connection for ourselves as researchers. Self-disclosure is not without risk and, as Almack (2008: 5.6) comments, researchers do not enjoy the same protection as research participants; here, we have changed our informants' names but not our own. N and M, in particular, had to think very carefully about how much of their personal stories to disclose in this article. As Lahman (2009) asks, in relation to a very personal auto-ethnographic account, 'At what point are we saying too much?' Moreover, entering into relationships with informants that extend beyond the interview necessarily renders porous the boundaries between research and the rest of life. This was particularly so for N, who lives in Teesside and whose life intersects with some of the research participants. Although this inter-weaving enabled N to build close relationships and gain deep understandings of participants' lives and worlds, like Dyck (2002:50), she found that 'transforming friends and family into informants and, potentially, informants into friends and family' necessitated very careful management.

Concluding remarks

We do not offer easy answers to these questions. As others have indicated, ethnographic research is perhaps an inherently 'messy' business (Amit, 2000:7, citing Marcus and Fisher, 1986:22; see also Grindal, 2011:98), in which personal and research relationships become blurred as lives unfold in unpredictable ways. Whether in the name of methodological rigour or ethical review, qualitative researchers are coming under increasing pressures to formalise their methods and specify in advance the interview content and

procedures, thereby demonstrating their ethical credentials through informed consent and the anticipation of the social science equivalent of adverse drug reactions. Yet, how could one anticipate the real impacts of N's illness, K's pregnancy or M's reproductive quandaries and what these came to mean for the formation of relationships and the acts of exchange and solicitude that led these to evolve over time.

One option is simply to disregard these aspects of methodological unruliness in an attempt to aspire to a particular version of objectivity. There may be other reasons to avoid engaging with this: as Tedlock (1991:71) has noted, 'the public revelation of participatory details of the fieldwork experience is still considered embarrassingly unprofessional by some ethnographers.' However, we take the opposite view and advocate a fuller engagement with narrative ethnography. Indeed, we would argue that rigour in these techniques lies not in attempts to attenuate them but rather in a fuller account of the circumstances of their accomplishment. In our project, the richness of the material and our subsequent analysis derives in part from the ways that we managed ourselves and were in turn managed in the research encounter, as points of connection and disconnection came and went over time. As occasional participants in one another's biographies, we may have eschewed claims to certain kinds of objectivity, but, in so doing, we believe we can develop insights and understandings of a kind that would not otherwise have been possible.

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