Ethnographic Intimacy: Thinking Through the Ethics of Social Research in Sex Worlds

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Abstract

Ethnographic researchers entering sensitive fields of research become entangled in ethical dilemmas when they encounter 'sticky' questions, situations and issues. In undertaking research within two distinct sex worlds: female sex work and male sexual negotiation/risk and HIV, we struggled to manage the contingent links between our relationships with the people who inhabit these worlds, the ethical requirements of our institutional ethics committees, and our hybrid selves. In the context of 'doing' intimate ethnography, we were required to craft ourselves into the field and establish a number of intimate and prolonged relationships. While the participants in our studies were active in giving their consent, this did not obviate the risk that they would become objectified within the field relationship and the texts the research generated. These issues are central to our discussion as we consider the lack of fit between ethical guidelines and the practical reality of fieldwork.

Keywords: Ethnography; Informed Consent; Ethics Committees; Reflexivity; Sex Work; Risk and HIV

Introduction

1.1 Ethnography enables researchers to spend extended periods of time in one or more settings, develop close relationships with participants, and look for links between the diverse pieces of that world and between that world and other social worlds (Agar, 1996; Calestani, 2009; Mattingly, 2005; Strathern, 1999). The value of ethnographic methodology is that we can enter the world of the people that interest us (Pérez-y-Pérez and Stanley, 2005), or 'climb inside it and spend time with its inhabitants' (Agar, 2006a, p. 18). The principles of ethnography are central to following and describing the actions, activities and relationships of the worlds we wish to understand or *peer into* (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004; Mol, 2002). The objective is to record the 'situated rationality of action' (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Key to building such intimate knowledge, participant observation is a data collection method (informal conversations, casual observations and other unobtrusive interactions) that establishes rapport and forges personal relationships, thus weaving the researcher into the diverse worlds that constitute the research field (Bolton, 1995, 1996; Pérez-y-Pérez and Stanley, 2005 ; Rambo Ronai, 1998; Weseley, 2006).

1.2 Ethnographic methodology brings into question what participant observation entails and means. For some researchers, 'going native', in sex worlds, for example, may jeopardise their professional status (Hart, 1998). For others, complete participation becomes the key to insider status. Bolton (1995, 1996) immersed himself in a gay community to address the processes of adaptation and change towards issues such as AIDS, albeit using unorthodox methods (see Wengle, 1988). Other researchers of sex worlds have also chosen participatory roles with less contentious pathways (McKeganey and Barnard, 1996; O'Connell Davidson, 1998; Sanders, 2005). As Hodgson contends, 'What makes ethnographically based cultural critique so much richer – that is, our engagement with peoples as well as "texts" – is what from another perspective makes it so problematic, in terms of the potential repercussions of our work for those we study' (Hodgson, 1999, p. 202). Personal and disciplinary ethics make us accountable in unique ways to the people we study for the possible consequences of our work and writing, however intended or unintended. Research subjects consent to an intimate relationship within which they are going to be used as objects. The research process is one of objectification and appropriation, it does not become an ethical activity simply because researchers have followed agreed rules and guidelines (O'Connell Davidson, 2008).

1.3 Using our experiences of ethnographic research, we consider some of the ethical challenges we encountered and introduce some of the strategies we assembled as researchers involved in *intimate* research. The sticky ethical issues we faced from the outset and over the duration of our studies were largely unanticipated, and required us to make ongoing quick but sound ethical decisions. Our participant observer positions, Pérez-y-Pérez as a receptionist/shift manager in a massage parlour, and Stanley as a social worker in a non-profit organisation providing HIV prevention services, allowed us entry into intimate aspects of the lives of the people who inhabit these worlds. We use examples from our own studies to discuss how we entered and positioned ourselves within these worlds; reflect on the level of intimacy developed by researcher and researched and how we managed these relationships; and reflect on our 'hybridity' and the *sticky* issues as they presented themselves: informed consent, confidentiality and criminal activities. We discuss these issues further within the context of ethics committee policies, processes and guidelines and the lack of *fit* between these and ethnographic research.

Choosing ethnography

2.1 We chose ethnography as a methodology to avoid the standard 'question and answer' approach. We wanted to enter our fields of research to better understand the meanings and experiences of the people we talked to. In 'entering' their worlds and 'following' their lives (Latour, 1999), the discovery of connections (Agar, 2006b) and the stories people shared became crucial to the meanings and the findings we were able to describe (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Stanley, 1999, 2000). By entering the sex world, Pérez-y-Pérez was able to explore the complex social organisation of prostitution (O'Neill, 1997), and consider the configuration of networked actors (social and technical) that produces sex markets (Pérez-y-Pérez and Stanley, 2005), at a time when legislative changes were seeking to decriminalise prostitution (Prostitution Reform Act, 2003). As a social worker and active within the local gay community, Stanley was able to enter spaces where sex was negotiated. This was crucial to sparking talk and stories in the context of risk and HIV, when police activity and media coverage added further complexity to the ethical considerations of ethnographic research.

'Doing' ethical research: Issues *for* ethnographers

3.1 Ethics committee guidelines shape the performance of research and the relationship between researcher and researched. Professional codes of conduct establish principles of justice, safety, truthfulness, confidentiality and respect that the researcher is expected to follow (O'Brien, 2001). Ethical codes and guidelines are generally informed by legislation (Dawson et al., 2003), which also stipulates sanctions that follow failure to meet ethical requirements. In practice, researchers often develop a set of protocols and procedures to suit their research setting or context based on ethical guidelines. Rather than set their own agendas, researchers are required to undertake active and careful discussion and negotiation with ethics committees, and cautious consideration when attending to potentially difficult ethical decisions once fieldwork is underway (O'Brien, 2001).

3.2 In considering applications for research approval, ethics committees may raise methodological concerns where, rather than traditional approaches, qualitative data collection relies on observation and participation, and informal, conversational-style interviews (Mattingly, 2005; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Sanders, 2006). The validity of such methods, the amount and accuracy of information to be collected, how analysis will be undertaken and the subsequent quality of the data and findings may be questioned (Harper and Corsín Jiménez, 2005; Strathern, 2000). In addition, methods such as covert data collection, in sex work research, for example (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Sanders, 2006), where not all inhabitants of the research setting can be informed that they are being observed,[1] can appear unethical and potentially dangerous for the researcher. Misunderstandings about the research setting, such as a 'red light district', massage parlour, apartment, or illegal brothel, often become the focus of concern, particularly where activities are considered illegal. Stereotypes of *marginal sexualities,* and the link with criminal behaviour, risk and disease, raise questions of researcher safety.

Informed consent

3.3 The concept of informed consent is a central tenet of research ethics policies where the transparency of a social and psychological reality is assumed that enables researchers to provide full and accurate information about the research and all 'foreseeable risks' to autonomous subjects able to make informed choices is assumed (Wilkinson, 2001). The protocol for informed consent involves giving participants an information sheet or letter with comprehensive and accurate details about the research, including the demands, risks, inconveniences, discomforts and benefits that might be involved, and the participant's right to withdraw from the study (Dawson et al., 2003; O'Brien, 2001). Researchers must ensure participation is voluntary (no coercion or inducement beyond reasonable compensation), participants are adequately informed of all aspects of the research process, informed consent is gained (departures from this must be fully justified) and confidentiality and anonymity is assured (where possible).

3.4 Ethnographers, however, may encounter a lack of *fit* between ethnographic practice and ethics committee requirements (Hodgson, 1999; Mattingly, 2005; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). In the practical reality of an ethnographic study, relationships within the field can be unpredictable and precarious, subject to individual whims, organisational necessity, and so forth; these may restrict access to sensitive aspects of the setting (Aagaard-Hansen and Vang Johansen, 2008; Meskell and Pels, 2005; Strathern, 2000). Equally, new opportunities may arise or be sought as the study progresses. Access to settings, interactions and activities are rarely guaranteed, can be blocked as quickly as given, and depend upon a researcher's capacity for sustaining the goodwill and cooperation of the participants (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Punch, 1986). If access is withdrawn, the researcher must renegotiate and re-establish goodwill and trust, and seek new ways of *getting back in*. The initial informed consent can be both tentative and limited. Over time, as trust is established between researcher and researched, access may be granted to

previously restricted areas or interactions. Consent should, therefore, be viewed as a relational, sequential and continual process, rather than a contractual agreement per se (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007).

Risk: Relationships, law, and personal boundaries

In ethnographic research, issues of accountability and consequences are more personalised and, therefore, precarious than in other research methodologies (Castañeda, 2006; Hodgson, 1999; Mattingly, 2005; Pels, 1999). Indeed, the risks can be highly indeterminate, subjective, and not easily specified or communicated in advance to participants (O'Connell Davidson, 2008; Roberts and Sanders, 2005). Persuading potential participants to engage in discussions of hypothetical risks, may compromise entrance to a research group (O'Connell Davidson, 2008). The intimate relationships conscientiously built, often over extended periods of time, may make participants vulnerable to hurt or even harm (Stacey, 1988). Many potential risks, however, mirror those encountered in everyday life, for which formal consent is unnecessary (Sanders, 2006). A practical solution, therefore, is to base consent on the trust between researcher and researched to exercise ongoing judgement (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). This is particularly pertinent when a researcher is firmly embedded as a *participant* and becomes inextricably socially and emotionally tied with the inhabitants of the field (see Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Allison, 1994; Flowers, 1998a; Weseley, 2006).

3.5 In addition to the issue of informed consent, ethnographic researchers may need to consider matters of illegal or criminal behaviour, as well as personal and institutional moral boundaries (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; O'Connell Davidson, 1998, 2008; Punch, 1993; Sanders, 2005; Van Maanen, 1992). When Pérez-y-Pérez undertook her study, sex work was still regarded as a criminal activity. As a receptionist/shift manager, she negotiated the sale of sexual services performed by women who operated from the massage parlour. She also took part in a number of prostitution-related activities (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2009). Similarly, Stanley found himself in an ethical 'minefield' as participants discussed sexual negotiation while police executed a search warrant as part of an unfolding criminal investigation into the activities of HIV positive men knowingly transmitting HIV. Ethical considerations, therefore, were negotiated in spaces where research practice was taking place.

3.6 Associations between HIV/AIDS and disease, drug-injecting sex workers, potential violence within research and sex settings, sexual deviance, and criminal underworlds all surface in institutional ethics discourses relating to ethnographic research involving sex worlds, fuelled by assumptions about the type of people who organise and inhabit these worlds. A central concern for ethics committees can be the danger that the researcher is exposed to (and, possibly, the reputation of the institution responsible for the researcher) (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Indeed, the routines the researcher engages in may entail long hours, in fairly unknown or secluded locations, often late at night, and sometimes alone, mirroring the lives of participants (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Rambo Ronai, 1998; Weseley, 2006).

3.7 Ethnographers confront a number of sticky questions when negotiating the 'fit' between ethics committee expectations and the challenges of research methodology: What constitutes consent? What becomes coercive? How does one handle the complex and often conflicting requests for confidentiality, on one hand, and authorship and ownership, on the other? How much of one's interpretations should be shared with informants? (Adams, 1981; Fluehr-Lobban, 2003; Jorgensen, 1971; Mattingly, 2005; Silverman, 2003).

Intimacy and ethnography

4.1 The nature of ethnography requires researchers to minimise their impact on the research setting, reduce any disturbance or inconvenience to participants and avoid disrupting the setting, thereby rendering the findings unrepresentative. Thus, researchers become integrated into the setting, form relationships with participants and participate as a member of their social worlds. When working with *marginalised* groups of people, building relationships is a necessary part of gaining trust and access (Agustín, 2008; Boynton, 2002; Wahab, 2003). Over time, participants may come to overlook the research purpose and the researcher's identity. As the line between researcher, friend, confidante or colleague becomes blurred, participants may disclose information that they do not consider relevant but which the researcher considers is relevant to the research (O'Connell Davidson, 2008). The dilemma then is in reconciling effective participation with truly informed consent. Bourjois questions the expectation that the researcher will 'build rapport' without distorting the 'host' setting as a means of encouraging people to forget that they are being observed and recorded. He argues, 'To maintain truly informed consent we should interrupt controversial conversations and activities to re-announce our presence and to make sure everyone is aware of the implications of what they are saying or doing' (Bourjois, 1990, p. 52).

4.2 Reflexivity is needed for researchers to consider how to manage the intimacies that develop within the field, how these come into being, and to what extent they are considered data. For example, whether the participants' prior consent justifies the use of disclosures, activities and personal settings as data (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; O'Connell Davidson, 2008; Roberts and Sanders, 2005); or whether people who consent to the research intimacies implied by an ethnographic study, consent to a relationship that is time-limited and ultimately leads to their objectification (O'Connell Davidson, 2008). What then does it mean to consent to such an arrangement? How do we, at the onset of the research, explain the process and anticipate what will occur in the field? How 'native' will we go to build such relationships? What risks are we prepared to take in terms of our own safety and that of our participants in building intimate relationships?

4.3 The ethical or moral base of the relationship between researcher and researched cannot be adequately captured by the language of contractual consent or of care. In other contexts, when we contract or ask someone for help or assistance, we think in terms of gratitude and obligation rather than informed consent. Roberts and Sanders (2005) see the willingness of participants to be researched as a *gift,* one of immense value for the studies and subsequent careers of researchers; there may be little direct or immediate benefit

for the subjects nor financial or material gain (see Agustín, 2005; O'Connell Davidson, 2008; Roberts and Sanders, 2005; Van Maanen, 1983). O' Connell Davidson (2008) suggests that such *gift-giving* can lead us into a symbolic domain that is non-contractual, a terrain where people come together in a 'complex web of mutual dependency and obligation', and are usually careful about whom to approach for help. To conduct social research it is often necessary to ask for help indiscriminately, or to ask for help from those whom we would not usually accept gifts – perhaps because we perceive them to be too vulnerable – but sometimes because we find them morally, politically or personally objectionable and would wish to avoid any on-going obligation to them (O'Connell Davidson, 2008, p. 21).

4.4 The relationship between researcher and researched in ethnography can resemble but also differ from normal social relations, such as mutual friendships, therapist and client, employer and employee, service provider and consumer. A research relationship, however, is, inevitably, a social and emotional relationship. This complicates our understanding of 'informed consent': not all outcomes of a social relationship can be predicted at the outset; nor can the relationship's development be controlled. In our research, we also inhabited the worlds of our participants, crafting bodies and language that allowed us to be enrolled as members of these worlds. This meant that we were frequently at odds with our hybrid selves.

4.5 In sex world research, issues of strong stereotypes and potential dangers must be confronted before the project begins. Although research designs are, therefore, perhaps over scrutinised and charged with queries that expect more insight from the novice researcher, this also encourages reflexivity, even at this initial stage. Thinking ahead to foreseeable problems, having a set of plan 'B's' if the initial methods fail, and taking time out of the fieldwork to reassess 'good practice' in an intense and volatile environment are crucial and highlight the importance of collegial relationships in the field. We argue that these considerations go beyond those of ethics committee and institutional guidelines.

4.6 The following sections discuss these ethical concerns of intimacy and ethnographic research. Examples from our own ethnographies illustrate how we managed some of the foreseeable matters and how we grappled with some unplanned encounters. First, Pérez-y-Pérez examines the ethical issues that emerged in her sex work research. Stanley then outlines the ethical dilemmas he experienced in his research on sexual negotiations/risk and HIV.

Researching sex work: Fitting *in* and staying *in*

5.1 I entered the sex work industry and embarked upon my fieldwork armed with information sheets, consent forms and the good intentions of professional ethics informed by my institutional guidelines and accounts of ethnographic fieldwork (see Gilbert, 1993; Oakley, 1981; Punch, 1986; Stanley and Wise, 1991; Wolcott, 1995). However, at my massage parlour *job interview* (for the receptionist/shift manager position) the senior manager made it clear that my 'research presence' was insignificant compared to my 'paid employee presence'. As I began to explain how I would assure safety, confidentiality and anonymity, I was silenced by a wave of the hand. The manager listed the responsibilities of a shift manager, then reiterated that my research should not interfere with my employee role. Roberts and Sanders (2005) see this as an example of how the researcher needs to pre-empt how an audience will construct the researcher in relation to their own lives.

5.2 Despite the lack of interest in my research, gaining informed consent from potential participants (formal interviews) and inhabitants of the research field (participant observation) remained vital to me as I was bound by my institutional ethics committee guidelines. However, I also entered the field as a participant, and realised that the issue of consent was not a linear or transparent process. To devise an ethical research strategy, therefore, I needed to be guided by the practices of my research world. Sex work networks are organised around verbal agreements and unspoken understandings. Sex work practice is learned through oral storytelling and by the piecing together of shared knowledge, experiences and ideas of good and bad sex work practice that serve as a vehicle of community memory (Orr, 1990) or a knowledge base for workers (Pérez-y-Pérez, forthcoming; George, 2008; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). The implications of a signed consent form in this context soon became clear. The illegality, stigma, and 'hidden' nature of sex work are such that the disclosure of real identities is problematic for workers. For many, sex work is a means of supplementing income, such as unemployment and child benefits. Any documents that require real names and signatures may be perceived as a potential risk to this income (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Phoenix, 1999; Sanders et al., 2009). Documentation of personal details has also been associated with the surveillance of prostitution and the assignation of the prostitute label (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Palmer and Reed, 2001; Prostitution Law Review Committee, 2005).

5.3 Following the traditional route and ethics guidelines, I drafted information sheets for the women within the massage parlour. These explained the proposed study, and contained sex work topics that were regularly discussed around the *staff table* in the massage parlour during 'down time'. In the printed document, however, these topics no longer seemed familiar, disrupting accepted conventions of sex work, and rendering the building of relationships between myself and the women problematic. The initial four participants commented at the end of their interviews that they felt uneasy about documenting their participation in the study. They did not want a copy of their consent form or information sheet, quickly reading before handing them back to me. Two of the women refused to sign the consent form in spite of my assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, commenting that this 'paper work' made it seem 'too formal' or 'official-like'.

5.4 A reasonable and practical solution, therefore, was to convey information and receive consent verbally. Thus, I followed Agar's recommendation: 'To begin your work honestly by presenting yourself and your task in some way that will make sense to the group members' (Agar, 1996, p. 111). I needed to explain, at regular intervals, to the women, management and workers, that my role as shift manager would be a form of data collection. Moreover, rather than information sheets, the gossip grapevine within the massage parlour was extremely effective. By the time I began my first shift, most of the women were aware that I

was a researcher and student studying the sex industry. I did not, therefore, have the awkward situation of going in 'cold' to explain who I was and what I was doing.

5.5 What to say and who to tell in ethnographic studies is often a tricky issue. Norris (1993) suggests that explanations constructed for the research are conditional upon the audience being addressed. Flowers (1998a), in her study of phone sex operators, saw no need to disclose her graduate *student* status. This information was not well received by her co-workers, who felt uncomfortable and distanced themselves, when initially there had been camaraderie. To increase their comfort level, Flowers responded with her own stories of harassment and agony and thus gained entry to the setting and relative acceptance (Flowers, 1998b).

5.6 My participation in the massage parlour world required me to learn the role of shift manager in order to understand the organisation of sex work. Rather than the 'passive observed', the women I worked with were 'experts' in relation to me. Like Flowers, I intended my presence to be perceived as non-threatening, and to become the student in order to understand, observe and participate (Agar, 1996). This 'recasting of the self' in the role of 'apprentice' as part of the democratising process can be critical in terms of group acceptance and the establishment of trust (Agar, 1996; Punch, 1993). The peculiarity of my 'apprenticeship' was that I entered the massage parlour as a member of management.

5.7 Like other ethnographers (Hastrup, 1995; Kondo, 1990), I observed and learned the cultural competencies of how to act and behave and the nuances of interaction and engagement in the field. The culture of my research subjects was 'written over me' as I became just another 'damn shift manager' or 'one of the girls'. How I presented my(self) body was critical and required an element of authenticity (see Hochschild, 1983); seemingly a contradiction when prostitution is predicated on pseudonyms, pseudo-bodies, pseudo-personalities and identities. I responded to the norms of the massage parlour, where bodies are displayed, sexualised, disciplined, desired, shaped, touched and talked about, 'crafting my body as part of the crafting of the field' (Coffey, 1999, p. 68). Fieldwork is an embodied experience; how our body looks, and is used can impact upon access, field roles and relationships (Coffey, 1999). This I intuitively understood as necessary for the successful accomplishment of fieldwork (see Allison, 1994; Hobbs, 1988; Punch, 1993).

5.8 Part of this 'field self' is the ability to learn physical actions and articulations that fit the context (Hochschild, 1983). I did this through watching and being guided by the women I worked with, piecing together my own body management, just as other workers do (Pérez-y-Pérez, forthcoming). I also used my real name, despite the use of pseudonyms to meet the need for confidentiality. This decision was an attempt to present myself as 'honestly' as possible in order to gain the trust of workers and management, and non-threatening in terms of competition. However, using my real name could also be read as an attempt to separate myself from sex work *per se*.

5.9 The shifts I worked were long, often beginning at 6.30pm and finishing at 6.00am. During the night there would be blocks of 'down time' (Pérez-y-Pérez, forthcoming), filled by talking, sharing stories, or partaking in 'bonding activities'. Sharing intimate personal life experiences around the *gossip table*, in an area not accessed by clients, or in small, intimate groups, became the key way in which workers could make decisions concerning me, not as a sociologist or researcher, but as another woman. At first, I was the subject of research, regularly interrogated and asked key questions: 'What do you think so far?' 'What does your partner think of you working in a massage parlour?' I also established friendships with women who shared similar interests and life experiences, and accepted invitations to join women who worked together regularly on the same shift when they socialised outside work. Through these informal meetings, I learned a great deal about the research questions I was interested in, such as their personal lives and their work. I was also introduced to and socialised with their families and friends; most had no idea that these women worked in the sex work industry, and I took care to use their real rather than fictional working names.

5.10 The nature of ethnography means that not all field inhabitants are aware of their participation. Late into the night on busy shifts, I often found myself 'entertaining' one or two clients at the bar; some divulged personal details and history to me without prompting. To inform everyone who walked through the door of my research would have altered the dynamics of the setting, and, potentially, risked the loss of business clientele (see Agar, 1996; Fountain, 1993; Hobbs, 1993; and Norris, 1993). By default and design, clients often believed, or were led to believe, that I was simply a massage parlour receptionist or shift manager. Under such pretences, I organised their sexual encounters with sex workers. Thus, the practice of participant observation can be seen as interactionally deceitful (Bulmer, 1982; Norris, 1993). However, I was also actively participating in the field as a paid employee, and recording my experience of work, of which clients were a small part.

5.11 My hybrid status as a worker/researcher provided me with understandings of the business of sex work that had not been detailed by other researchers. As shift manager, my job was to coordinate the work of a parlour and present it to clients and the police in such a way that it ran as a 'normal' business. This provided me with a perspective on the sex work world that differed from that of the sex workers but, at the same time, placed me in proximity to them.

Researcher intimacy with HIV positive 'subjects'

6.1 As a social worker employed within a non-profit organisation providing HIV prevention services, my research interest stemmed from the relative silence within social work research around sexual practices connected with HIV/AIDS (Stanley, 2000). In particular, I wanted to explore issues of sexual risk and pleasure and the contexts within which sexual behaviour is embedded (Stanley, 1999). With the introduction of protease inhibitor drug treatments in the late 1990s, new sets of social issues required increased social work assistance. I wanted to answer questions about how sexual negotiation is organised

when one lives with HIV or AIDS. From a legal perspective, the case law relating to HIV positive sex practices was unfolding while I was in the field. More importantly, the research literature did not cover all the ethical dilemmas I faced as a researcher (Bolton, 1996). Like Pérez-y-Pérez, I negotiated a range of ethical boundaries and transgressions to enter the spaces where talk of sexual negotiation happened.

6.2 With my knowledge of Foucauldian notions of power and understanding (Foucault, 1972), I established an ethnographic project and immersed myself in the field. As a qualified social worker, sociologist, queer man and knowing the sexual spaces of interest, I applied to two institutional bodies, health and academic, for ethics approval. In preparing my applications, I considered a number of questions: How much do we comfortably reveal in these processes? How much does the ethics committee need to know? And, paradoxically, is keeping back 'the gay sexual self' an easier means of gaining ethics approval? From a professional perspective, I was faced with the work of HIV positive sexual negotiation on a day-to-day basis. From the perspective of a researcher, I was guided by professional codes of ethics. These became the dominant models that guided my fieldwork. Ethics committee guidelines also seek to keep researchers and institutions free from risk. As other ethnographers have discovered, the ethical risks are complex, complicated and ever present: What would we do if a subject advised us of knowingly infecting another man? Do we ask participants to stop just before they disclose crimes? And if we do, in what way do we complicate the co-construction of the 'research subject' for the purposes of institutional categorisation and, therefore, audit and risk management?

6.3 To gain an understanding of the complex issues around how HIV positive men negotiated, organised and managed sex with men, I entered spaces where HIV was visible and hidden, and changed how people responded to each other with regard to sexual negotiation. I went 'inside' the bathhouses, backrooms, parks, and bedrooms inhabited by people living with HIV. At the time I was 'loitering with intent', however, there was extensive local media coverage of the arrests of a small number of sexually active, HIV positive men. My concern was that participants in my study would be hesitant to talk about their sexual practices because of this. But quite the opposite happened. The media coverage provided a focus for the ten men who readily shared their thoughts, feelings, views, ideas and sexual experiences.

6.4 In the context of increased public attention and blame, talking to participants in their homes and spaces where they enjoyed sex was an important strategy in generating rich stories about having and managing sex while living with HIV/AIDS. At the beginning of each interview, a process of negotiated trust opened between the participant and me in my professionally visible self (social worker) and visible private self (gay man in the club scene). Participants were interested in discussing how I would ensure their confidentiality, where data would be stored, and who would have access to it. In one way, the media and police activity encouraged the participants to exercise their research subjectivity. The men renegotiated how they would set up the ethical protections they felt necessary. Some requested further levels of anonymity: where arrangements had been made for work to be posted, meetings were set up to verbally discuss the analysis of the data, thus removing paper-based notes from production. As police attention increased, the management of confidentiality and anonymity become vital. A number of participants also asked for clarification about the legal repercussions of police action.

6.5 From an ethical perspective, the events at that time could not have been foreseen. This highlighted the precarious position of the researcher within the network of required ethics approval. Maintaining fluidity around the use of names and identifiers to ensure audit trails meet ethics requirements, concomitantly offers potential criminal investigation audit trails. In the final stages of the fieldwork, and quite unrelated to it, the police, as part of their investigation into the sexual actions of two HIV positive clients, who were subsequently arrested, executed a search warrant on the office of the organisation where I worked. Acting under a court order, the police seized a small number of my client files and client notes belonging to another counsellor.[2] The police obtained names and addresses of sexual partners of one of the arrested men, via these files, and the police investigation widened. As a social worker *and* researcher, this raised a number of as yet non-traversed ethical issues. At that time, I was still entering the homes of HIV positive men to enquire about social and sexual practices. This led to questions such as: Where does the social worker and researcher begin and end? Do they? Should they?

6.6 When client files were seized by the police, I collected interview transcripts and identifying information about participants, and after consultation with my academic supervisors, shredded everything. Protecting the identities of participants is ethical research practice. Building knowledge with clients about their experiences is ethical social work practice, from which research and publications can facilitate wider access to information about this sensitive, complex and 'hard to reach' group (Stanley, 1999, 2000). Following the police activities, the organisation I worked for published recommendations for HIV positive people. Increased awareness of disclosure issues and the new definition of non-safe sexual activity as a criminal offence also introduced a further perspective to my study and brought results that might not be found in other studies. The experiences of the men who took part, therefore, cannot be generalised for all people with HIV.

Being an ethical and *intimate* researcher

7.1 Our experience of ethnographic research suggests that ethics policies and processes provide guidance but not definitive solutions to questions about ethical research and moral behaviour. Trying to craft research with emerging ways of 'knowing', or 'doing research' to fit ethics practices, particularly where these are rigid and dogmatic, creates a number of dilemmas. Anticipatory regulatory regimes based on models of clinical or biomedical research, where risk is more readily assessed, are highly problematic (Aagaard-Hansen and Vang Johansen, 2008; Meskell and Pels, 2005; Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Strathern, 2000). The dialogue between researchers and ethics committees becomes constrained when there is a lack of *fit* between traditional research models and those of the researcher. In such a climate, researchers may find themselves committed to processes that are conceptually flawed or impossible to implement. On the other hand, the ethics process may foster deception and cultures of counterfeit practice

(Gordon, 2003). Furthermore, researchers may be requested to assess all risks, and perhaps to anticipate hypothetical worst-case scenarios, Pérez-y-Pérez , for example, was asked to consider the possibility of arrest for not disclosing the *real* identities of her co-workers. This may create disincentives to undertake research.

7.2 In the intimacy of ethnographic research, the application of the principle of informed consent is more complex than intimated by institutional ethics guidelines and practice. Establishing *close relationships* in the field is not a risk-free endeavour for participants or researchers (Pérez-y-Pérez, 2003; Punch, 1994). Such relationships could lead participants to share information they find distressing. Such disclosures may appear therapeutic; others, in retrospect, may be embarrassing or regrettable, possibly reawakening memories of trauma, and result in participants becoming upset, worried or offended. How the principle of informed consent could protect against such harm, particularly as participants may choose to share troubles in ways they did not anticipate when they gave their consent, is unclear. The ethical challenge lies in ensuring that participants are treated with decency, discretion and respect, and have access to whatever support they may need. Given the difficulty of gaining fully informed consent, researchers suggest returning to participants at the end of the study to reaffirm that the findings can be used (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). This approach, however, risks undermining the credibility and impartiality of the findings. To grant the right to veto may invite participants to suppress findings they find unpalatable. A further alternative is to apply caution when explaining the research process, rather than making assurances that we, as researchers, are unlikely to sustain.

7.3 The ethnographic approach provides the opportunity to make choices and decisions within a reflexive standpoint that allows the researcher to contemplate wider structural processes driving and influencing data collection. Becker contends: 'No matter how carefully one plans in advance the research is designed in the course of its execution. Indeed as we experienced it, final research findings are the result of hundreds of decisions, large and small, whilst the research is underway' (Becker, 1965, p. 602). While the literature offers novice ethnographers/researchers information about the importance of following ethical guidelines, this did not prepare us for the intimate and challenging questions that participants presented, or the extent to which we needed to engage in self-disclosure in order to develop effective relationships on which to build trust. Given the personal investment in maintaining relationships, self-disclosure and emotional involvement, ethnography could be described as being 'situated between autobiography and anthropology' (Hastrup, 1992, p. 117).

Conclusion

8.1 Our management of intimate ethnographic research was guided and restricted by the ethics policies of the academic institutions where we were located. The purpose of such policies is to summon into being ethical research and researchers (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007; Wilkinson, 2001), yet new research methodologies and strategies for generating knowledge can lead to conflict with the social, organisational and cultural practices of ethics processes. When prescribed ethical protocols fail to engage with the complex lives and work of participants and researchers, the policies and practices of research ethics function to construct both researchers and participants as contrary to, different from, and *other* to its aims. This can also result in ethics committees and researchers being positioned as binary opposites: with or without power; rigid versus flexible; or methodologically conservative or methodologically explorative. In underestimating the extent to which we knowingly or unknowingly position ourselves within these spaces, we become complicit in preserving the very things that our work seeks to erode. Ultimately, in the process of ethnographic research, ethical conduct depends on the personal integrity and ethical education of the researcher.

8.2 The process of informed consent also has implications for reifying the research subject. This raises questions about what is and what is not ethical. We conclude, however, by reflecting on Roberts and Sanders' (2005) notion of the relationship of researched to researcher as a form of 'gifting'. The willingness of participants to be part of our studies we considered a gift to us, of immense value to our careers as researchers and academics. We took their willingness to engage with us as we wove ourselves into their worlds and private spaces as their consent to be objectified; in return we gave them our respect and acknowledged the contribution, as inhabitants of the worlds that interested us, they made to our world.

Notes

[1]This may occur for the sake of access to the research location and at the request of sex workers and managers to avoid disruption of business activities.

[2]There is no legal privilege in New Zealand to protect the social worker/counsellor–client relationship.

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