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Concealing researcher identity during fieldwork: Sexuality and silencing research participants

Abstract
Researchers often conceal or reveal parts of their identity to ensure the success of fieldwork. Yet, in a socially mediated world, connection between researchers and research participants can be maintained via social networking sites. This raises new questions about the ethics and practicalities of negotiating identity during and after fieldwork. The article draws on a narrative ethnography of concealing sexuality during and after ethnographic research in Bolivia. First, I demonstrate that in a socially mediated world, the "curation" of researcher identity is no longer temporally and geographically bound to the periods and locales of fieldwork. Second, I argue that a researcher's decision to conceal elements of their identity may be informed by essentialist assumptions about research participants. Third, researchers may effectively colonise and silence research participants because they speak for them and remove any opportunity for participants to respond to the element of the researcher's identity being hidden, such as, sexuality, class, or religion.

1. INTRODUCTION

It has been more than 25 years since England (1994) questioned fieldwork in geography, advocating for greater reflexivity. This article speaks to this, by critically discussing how ethnographers self-consciously conceal or reveal parts of their identity during fieldwork (Lewin and Leap 1996, Godbole 2018). The paper then goes further to discuss the ethical and practical implications of this decision, for researcher-participant relationships that are maintained via social networking sites, once fieldwork has ended. This is a particularly salient question, as connection between researchers and research participants can now be easily maintained via social networking sites, such as, facebook, twitter or instagram (Hall 2009).

This journal has included several key debates on this topic (Cupples 2002, Diprose et al 2013, Hall 2009, Maguire et al 2019, Sharma 2019, Widdowfield 2000) and I contribute to this discussion by extending scholarship on the way researchers manoeuvre their identity within and beyond fieldwork, by bringing social media into the conversation. Ethnographers have long grappled with self-reflexivity in how identity is presented 'in the field' (England 1994). Yet, with a handful of exceptions (Hall 2009, Maguire et al 2016), there is limited scholarship that reflects on how we present ourselves to research participants on social media, once we exit case sites. By drawing on my ethnographic narrative as a lesbian researcher, this article also contributes to literature on negotiating LGBTQ+ identities during fieldwork (e.g. Browne

and Nash 2016, Lewin et al 1996), but which, as of yet, has not tackled the implications of queer researchers staying connected with research participants on social media.

Whyte (1993) argues that one's private life and identities can be kept separate when fieldwork is carried out during a certain time and in a physically bounded place. However, this article demonstrates how maintaining relationships with research participants via social networking sites suggests that the "curation" or concealment of researcher identity is no longer temporally and geographically bound to the locales and periods of fieldwork. I also suggest that identity curation is not simply to ensure good relationships and successful fieldwork (Ballamingie and Johnson 2011), but may also be symptomatic of the subjective biases that researchers bring to fieldwork. More specifically, researchers may inadvertently essentialise research participants when they actively "protect" them from knowing about elements of their identity. I argue this strips people in field sites of their agency because the researcher colonises their voice, which reifies and reproduces the asymmetrical relationship, which ethnographers seek to avoid. As such, this article supports feminist and postcolonial critiques that researchers do not enter field sites with objective, impartial, and value-free knowledge (England 1994, Madge 1993, Rose 1997).

Methodologically, I draw on my "ethnographic memoir and narrative ethnography" (Tedlock 1991: 81) as a lesbian conducting ethnographic research in an evangelical Christian community in Bolivia (see Sou 2015, 2017). Fieldwork took place over an initial nine-month period in 2012 as recorded in fieldnotes and a personal diary, plus two visits in 2015 and 2017, as well as reflections on my continued relationship with research participants via Facebook. I do not want this article to be an example of academic navel gazing about my personally difficult time. Challenging experiences are to be expected when one carries out research in societies that are very different to what one is used to/familiar with. My intention is to use my lived experiences because discussions of the way researchers construct their identities during fieldwork requires intimate understanding (Crapanzano 2010).

The first section reviews current scholarship on the manoeuvring of identity during research, paying particular attention to work by researchers who self-identify as LGBTQ+. The second part draws on my experience conducting ethnographic research in Bolivia, discussing how and why I concealed my sexuality during fieldwork and afterwards on social media. The conclusion considers implications for wider scholarship on positionality and the negotiation of researcher identities.

2. CONSTRUCTING RESEARCHER IDENTITY
Researchers must often negotiate their identity during ethnographic work, which, in turn, affects their research (see Jones and Ficklin 2012; Smith 2016). That is, the fieldwork self is

always, to some extent, shaped by the cultural context and social relations found in/of the field (Coffey 1999). As Bondi (2005) stresses, data collection of any kind draws the researcher into relationships, and it is these relationships that shape the context in which aspects of identity are expressed or repressed. When your data consists of interviews, those relationships involve other people, and this raises issues of positionality and maneuvering one's identity during data collection (Chong, 2008; Widdowfield, 2000).

Every researcher has a range of personal and social identities which comprise who they are, ranging from gender, age, nationality, class, qualifications, and religion. During fieldwork, certain aspects of a researcher's identity are more significant while others are less important, influenced by a combination of factors including the research topic, location, methodology, and relationship with respondents (Dam and Lunn 2014). Some have divided researcher identities into two types variously labelled in the literature. For example, 'prescribed' and 'ascribed' (Herod 1999) or 'real' and 'perceived' (Chacko 2004). The former are aspects of identity that are visible or less easily disguised such as skin color, nationality and gender, although they are interpreted differently in different contexts. The latter are aspects of identity that can be more easily disguised, but which people assume based on appearance or behavior, such as clothing or jewellery. For example, class, religion or education.

Thus, there are some aspects of identity that are easier to construct than others. As Valentine (2002 p 120-121 cited in Ng 2011) notes when discussing interview methods,

> "identifications and disidentifications we make are complex, with many different notions of sameness and differences operating at the same time. Both researchers and interviewees directly or indirectly claim points of sameness or difference during interviews based not only on knowledge which is exchanged during these conversations but also on what is read off from each others' performances. In other words, as the interview develops, we are constantly reproducing "ourselves" so that both researcher and interviewee may be multiply positioned during the course of an interview."

From this, various studies have discussed the ethics of strategically revealing, concealing, emphasizing, or down-playing elements of identity that are within our control, for the benefit of the research, including to develop rapport with people, to gain access to communities, and to gather data (Godbole 2018). Many of these discussions have been made by LGBTQ+ researchers who consider the negotiation of their queer identities during fieldwork (e.g. Browne et al 2009, Browne and Nash 2016, Goodman 1996, Maguire et al 2018, Rooke 2010, Lewin et al 1996). However, much of this research is empirically bias to Global North contexts (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2016), and, as of yet, has not tackled the implications of queer researchers who conceal their sexuality during fieldwork, yet connect with participants on social media after fieldwork.

Some ethnographic research is covert and depends on deception (and tends to be subject to very stringent ethical procedures). For instance, Maguire et al (2018) commented how they occupied a "closet" space when carrying out covert research with anti-LGBTQ+ groups. Yet, most researchers are not acting under cover and often researchers will engage with groups whose interests, values and beliefs do not align with their own (Chong, 2008). In such instances, matters of identity negotiation can be experienced more acutely as researchers conceal part of their identity, which can come at the emotional costs of self-repression, along with the struggle to conform to conflicting values (Jansson, 2010). For instance, Drake and Harvey (2014) discuss how, when working in the "extreme" environment of prison, researchers engage in impression management and "role strain" as they performed particular identities as prison researchers.

Uncertainty also surrounds whether deliberately manipulating your identity constitutes deceit. Ethical guidelines call for transparency in our dealings with research participants (ESRC 2019). One aspect of this is informed consent, which includes a full explanation of the purpose of our research, being clear about people's involvement, and assurances of confidentiality. This raises questions about whether transparency also means being honest about your identity. Dam and Lunn (2018) suggest that deliberate manipulation of identity can be acceptable if you are fully aware of it and if it does not cause harm to you or your participants. Yet, concealing parts of identity reproduces and reifies an asymmetrical power dynamic, where the researcher is the informed "knower", who only reveals their background to research participants ("the known") if and when she/he decides to (Stacey 1988).

Despite methodological debates about researchers maneuvering their identities, discussions prodominantly focus on the fieldwork period. That is, there is minimal discussion of how researchers negotiate their fieldwork identities once they leave "the field". Ending fieldwork is a distinctive part of the process of ethnography. In traditional ethnographic research, ethnographers usually ended up going 'home' at some point, which suggests that the end of fieldwork provides a temporal and physical boundary between the field and the self, and involves ending relationships or altering the intensity of them (Coffey 1999). However, an abrupt end to fieldwork is not always the case, particularly where researchers revisit the same fieldsite over a lifetime of research. This is further complicated when "ethnographic friendships" are formed with research participants (Powdermaker 1966). To complicate things further, social networking sites such as twitter, instagram, and facebook, can instantly connect researchers to the "researched" (Hall 2009).

Social networking websites mean that remaining separate from, and exiting the field, may no longer be so easily achieved. It presents a new (technological) challenge for ethnographers in the face of an 'old' problem of developing friendships with participants, sharing personal

information and emersion from the field (Powdermaker 1966). Maguire et al (2018) touch on this when discussing how their gay, lesbian and LGBTQ+ ally identities may be googled and discovered by the anti-LGBTQ+ groups that they covertly researched. Hall (2009) discusses the ethics of connecting with her research participants via Facebook, and raises concern about privacy, suggesting that social networking sites make available information about researchers' personal lives that they may not intend to give to participants.

Yet, missing from this is an explicit discussion about how researchers negotiate their fieldwork identity, after fieldwork, when relationships are maintained via social networking sites. These platforms allow all people to create 'doctored' realities and identities (Gündüz 2017, Lee 2018). Though, for ethnographers who decide to "deceive" participants in the field, the question goes further. They must decide whether to continue (re)constructing their particular fieldwork identities. This may require careful editing of their social media self to suit the perceptions of their research participants in particular. Should "deception" continue? How? Why? And what does this tell us about the reasons why researchers conceal parts of their identity during fieldwork in the first place? These are the questions this papers examines.

Against this background, the following sections draw on my experience of conducting fieldwork in Bolivia to discuss the ethical and practical implications of constructing a "fieldwork identity", when maintaining connections with research participants via social networking sites.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION BEYOND THE FIELD

3.1 Constructing a heterosexual self

My research project set out to explore the risk perceptions of low-income populations, living in environmentally hazardous neighbourhoods, in global south cities. After arriving in Cochabamba, and researching the area, I identified 'Lourdes' as a suitable case site. Located in the lower income southern region of the city, Lourdes was prone to landslides, and populated by low-income households of indigenous ethnicity. There were many christian churches in the area, and conversations revealed that many people identified with different denominations of christianity. Although religion was not something I was particularly interested in exploring for my project, it came to influence my fieldwork experience and identity construction.

As someone who had been out as a lesbian to family, friends, and teachers for many years, and living in Manchester – the "gay capital" of the UK - I had not given serious thought to concealing my sexual orientation for a long time. However, when I began fieldwork, I decided it would be better to invisibilise my lesbian identity (Goodman 1996). I assumed the Christians that I was to live amongst would have conservative expectations of appropriate behavior for a

young woman and presenting myself as an out lesbian probably would undermine my chances of completing my PhD research. Yet, the assumption of heterosexuality in most everyday contexts (Valentine, 1993) is so strong that people in Lourdes took it for granted that I was heterosexual. However, to those who asked about life "back home", I identified myself as unmarried, straight, and in a relationship with a man, despite being in a relationship with a woman. I was not simply concealing my sexuality, but actively constructing an alternative heterosexual self. I maintained this story throughout fieldwork. It was a feeble disguise, since I had no pictures of my boyfriend.

Maguire et al (2018) identify this as a "closet" space that is produced when researchers suppress their sexualities. However, that I can construct a "closet" for myself, also demonstrates my privilege and power as a queer researcher who can shift positionality and hide parts of my identity (Williams et al 2009). Adopting this disguise implied that people should not, or did not need to know such things about me as a researcher, reflecting the knowledge hierarchy between the researcher as the informed "knower", and research participants as the "known" (Stacey 1988).

I gained access to Lourdes via an Evangelical Christian church because my Bolivian contact knew people within this particular church, and churches were the only community-based organisations present in Lourdes. From the beginning I was honest about my atheism. I helped out with cleaning, preparing food and acting as a teaching assistant during Sunday classes and attended multi-day church trips into the countryside. Through conversations it became clear that church leaders viewed homosexuality as "a sin". Memorably, during my first church trip to the countryside I attended a class where the teacher drew a "stick person" on a whiteboard and listed "lujuria" (lust), "avaricia" (greed) and "pereza" (sloth) to the side. Written above the stick person was "homosexuales y prostitutas" (homosexuals and prostitutes). This experience consolidated my decision to continue the façade of my boyfriend back home.

I lived with a Christian Bolivian family who were kind and generous. We ate together most evenings, and at meal times I came to know about their opinions on homosexuality. *"Homosexuality is a mental disorder"* and *"Homosexuals are a mistake by God; a defect in the population*". These comments neither surprised nor upset me. A fundamental part of fieldwork is often living among populations that have antagonistic views to your own, and which may oppose aspects of your identity (Maguire et al 2018). We politely disagreed with each other. During one evening, Mauge, the Mother commented, *"You can catch homosexuality by being in close contact"*[1]. I had not anticipated the belief that homosexuality could be "contracted"

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[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

6

between people – epidemiologically speaking. This made me particularly uncomfortable because Mauge and her husband had two small children and I did not want them to worry they may have "caught" homosexuality. The Research Ethics Framework (ESRC 2019) states "Harm to research participants must be avoided", and so I took the position that it would be unethical to potentially cause distress in this regard.

Despite the fact they articulated unpleasant homophobic views I found myself sharing a sense of connection and warmth with people in Lourdes, and established "ethnographic friendships", which resonates with Valentine's (2002) experience of simultaneously liking and disliking interviewees. As Luff (1999) points out, people are far more complex than labels such as "moral right" or " homophobic," no interaction with research participants is entirely negative, there is always some moment of connection or rapport. I started to feel uncomfortable that I was deliberately hiding my identity. Blackwood (1999) found that playing the deceptive role of the heterosexual woman to be a significant emotional strain when conducting an 18-month ethnography in Sumatra. Tired of the deceit and pretense of having a 'boyfriend' she told her Sumatran "Mother" that she was a lesbian. Her "confession" was met with acceptance, but Blackwood was warned that she should not engage in homosexual practises whilst in Sumatra. In Bolivia, I decided to stick with the niggling feeling and not go with the honest approach. I didn't want to potentially spoil the impression and relationships I had built. This was also pragmatic because I was under time and funding pressures to complete my PhD (see also Ballamingie and Johnson 2011).

I returned to Bolivia two more times to share research findings. I stayed with the same family and visited with 'ethnographic friends'. I set up a Facebook profile and received 'friend requests' from people I had established friendships with during fieldwork. It may be viewed as unethical to accept their requests because we would be able to view private information about each other, and other people would be able to view that they were on my 'friends' list. However, I accepted all requests because ignoring or rejecting an invitation may be considered unethical, and may signal that our friendship was only bound to the research, almost a pretence (Hall 2009). Interaction is now minimal with congratulations and good wishes exchanged during birthdays and at Christmas**.**

Social networking sites allow researchers to easily maintain relationships with people in field sites. Yet, your identity remains on display. My sexuality could easily be identified through photos with my partner or the LGBTQ+ events that I posted about or was "tagged" in. I was faced with the decision to "come out" or continue deceiving my "ethnographic friends" in Lourdes. After deliberation I decided to continue the façade of heterosexuality, and hid photos of me with my partner and any posts I made about LGBTQ+ events, politics or otherwise.

Curating researcher identity is nothing novel. However, connecting with research participants on social media raises new questions for researchers once they end fieldwork. In the next section I argue that my decision to continue (re)producing my heterosexual fieldwork identity on social media exposes my researcher subjectivities, and reproduces a colonial hierarchy within the researcher-researched relations.

3.2 Staying "closeted" on social media and essentialising ethnographic friends

My construction of a heterosexual self reflects how researchers can, with intentionality, engage strategically in acts that essentialise certain elements of their subjectivities (Danaher 2001). As Spivak emphasised, the term 'strategy' is something that 'suits a situation' and implies 'matching the trick to the situation' (Spivak and Rooney, 1997, p. 358). That is, strategic essentialism does not involve forsaking critique of essentialism, but rather a situated calculation not to engage explicitly in such critique in a particular circumstance. To ground this idea in the current case - I essentialised my supposed (hetero)sexuality to suit my situation in an evangelical Christian context in Cochabamba.

I was of course concerned about successfully completing my PhD (Ballamingie and Johnson 2011) and that people may think less of me, or that our friendship was a "sham" because I had actively deceived them (Blackwood 1995). I was also concerned that some people may worry that they or their loved ones had "contracted" homosexuality[2]. This latter point resonates with Dam and Lunn's (2018) argument that deliberate manoeuvring of identity can be acceptable if you are fully aware of it and if it avoids harming your participants. However, through personal reflection on how I negotiated my identity on social media after fieldwork, I realise that my decision to conceal my sexuality was also informed by the preconceptions of Christian Bolivians that I brought with me to Bolivia and which were solidified by some experiences in Lourdes. Assumptions that people would be angry, upset, disappointed, disgusted or otherwise by homosexuality, which speaks to feminist and postcolonial critiques of the 'impartial' researcher (England 1994, Madge 1993, Rose 1997).

Before beginning data collection, I had already homogenised the population in Lourdes because I was laden with my subjective biases and assumptions about Christian Bolivians. Therefore, when living in Cochabamba, I had already essentialised my "ethnographic friends" as intolerant of homosexuality and assumed they would be unwilling to interact with people with identities that they oppose – homosexuals in the current case. I recognise that I viewed my ethnographic friends through an orientalist gaze, in which people have fixed identities that are anchored in the past. This is in opposition to people who may be "enlightened", "modern" and open to change. This is an artificial binary based on ideal types that are not "real"

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[2] After great consideration I concluded that the probability of people living in Lourdes accessing this paper and discovering my sexuality is extremely low.

(Germond-Durect 2016). Homi Bhabha's work on cultural hybridity demonstrates that societies are composed of a mixing of modernity with traditional customs. Individuals can only be described through the ambivalence of their identities, and erasure of their hybridity will result in the oppressive essentialisation of peoples (2012).

One could argue that my decision to continue presenting as a heterosexual is paternalistic. I have tried to "protect" people from something that they disagree with, dislike or may feel uncomfortable knowing. I have taken actions to maintain an essentialised idea of a "fragile" and "traditional" culture and belief system. This reductively suggests that people living in Lourdes are entirely separate and unexposed to the constant unpredictable circulation of "modern" ideas and images – global cultural flows - that may challenge their worldviews (Appaduari 1996). Yet, homosexuality was legalised in Bolivia in 2009, and although same-sex marriage remains illegal and homophobia is widely reported (Lamotagne et al 2019), the LGBTQ+ rights movement is growing nationally and more broadly across Latin America (Corrales 2020). Images of LGBTQ+ marches and events are increasingly common in Cochabamba and studies have revealed the lively, albeit hidden, queer "scene" in Bolivia (Montes 2019, Wright 2006). Through social media, I was also fortunate to discover a small lesbian scene outside of Lourdes, comprised of two inconspicuous 'gay bars', populated by middle class and mestizo queer Bolivians, who were predominantly from the more affluent north of the city. In sum, my "ethnographic friends" and indeed others living in Lourdes were exposed to homosexuality in Bolivia.

It is also likely there were people with a diversity of opinions towards queers and/or were queer people (closeted or "out") living in Lourdes (Anderson et al 2011). Yet, by constructing a heterosexual identity I may have silenced queers or queer allies living in Lourdes, who might otherwise have spoken to me. Interactions with queers living in Lourdes might have potentially de-centred the biases that I came and left the field with, despite my exposure to queers in the more affluent part of the city. As uncomfortable as it is to admit, my assumption that all people in Lourdes were heterosexual, is naïve at best, and colonial at worst. I homogenised people in Lourdes and viewed them through a western/Anglo-American queer perspective, which erases queer experiences and visibility in the global south (Kulpa and Mizielinska 2016).

By entering the "closet" I also took away "ethnographic friends" agency to respond, and in ways that may challenge my assumptions. For instance: 1) to maintain a cross-group friendship in spite of their views on homosexuality, 2) to express their understanding about why I hid my sexuality, 3) to reduce their prejudices, or even 4) to "come out" to me. This act of essentialising and ultimately colonizing people's voices reproduces and entrenches the

colonial relations that post-structuralists have long critiqued and researchers try to subvert when conducting research in the Global South (Smith 2013).

In the concluding section I reflect on the implications of my narrative ethnography for literature on fieldwork and positionality.

4. CONCLUSION

Strategic curation of researcher identity is one of the 'tools' that ethnographers draw upon when 'in the field as interactive members of a group on a temporary basis' (Bornstein 2007, 485). Revealing and concealing of identity is a privilege that researchers 'enjoy' to complete fieldwork. Yet, connecting with research participants via social networking sites, means that the practical and ethical implications of "deceiving" people in "the field" endure far beyond the temporal and physical boundaries of fieldwork. Researchers must decide if and how they will (re)produce their fieldwork identity to research participants, once fieldwork ends. This raises new dilemmas for researchers wanting to navigate "the field" in the most ethical manner. When and if field training for ethnographers is provided, the average researcher is still preconceived as white, European, male and heterosexual (Caretta and Jokinen 2017). Yet, there is much more diversity among researchers now (Sharp and Dowler 2011). Hence, it is important to improve fieldwork preparation practices by acknowledging that researchers embody diverse positionalities that may need to be negotiated when 'leaving the field' in a global context where social media is ubiquitous.

This narrative ethnography suggests that (re)production of fieldwork identities after exiting the field, may reveal the subjective biases that researchers arrive and leave field sites with (England 1994, Madge 1993, Rose 1997). In particular, decisions to conceal aspects of researcher's identities on social media after fieldwork, may be informed by essentialist ideas of global south people that reify and reproduce colonial relationships. When researchers conceal elements of their identity, they may inadvertently colonise the voice of research participants, because they remove the opportunity for research participants to perceive and respond to the particular element of the researcher's identity in question, i.e. sexuality, class, religion. As such, I argue for heightened disciplinary debate and awareness surrounding the reasons researchers construct their identities during and after fieldwork. This question is increasingly important in a socially mediated world and I call for greater discussion of the biases that possibly underlie the construction of fieldwork identities.

This discussion also contributes to literature on negotiating LGBTQ+ identities during fieldwork (e.g. Browne et al 2009, Browne and Nash 2016, Goodman 1996, Maguire et al 2018, Rooke 2010, Lewin et al 1996), and which, apart from Maguire et al (2019), has

10

minimally tackled the implications of queer researchers connecting with research participants on social media.

Traditionally, the relationship between researchers and "researched" suggests that the former is the "knower" who maintains control over what she or he reveals about their background to the "known" (Stacey 1998). Yet, understandably and unsurprisingly, people living in field sites may well be curious to learn more about the person that is researching them (Powdermaker 1966), and this information is increasingly accessible online. In light of this an interesting line of inquiry is whether social media, and the Internet more broadly, are challenging the long-established knower-known research dichotomy?

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