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Review

Moments of collusion? Close readings of affective, hidden moments within feminist research

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses affective 'moments of collusion' present in feminist research relationships, and contextualises these seemingly personal encounters within a wider systematic framework of the early career researcher and the increasingly neoliberal climate of academia. Focusing on the temporal transition from doctoral research to postdoctorate research positions immediately post-PhD, this paper questions the concept of collusion within (immersive) fieldwork, and examines the delicate and complex question of who is colluding with whom, and for what purpose at different times within the early career academic journey. Specifically, this paper focuses on how the increasing pressures of the neoliberal university play out on our emotions and bodies during fieldwork, an area which still requires attention within the growing critiques of the affects of neo-liberalism in Higher Education. Using personal case studies as springboard for a far wider and important discussion, this paper situates such methodological dilemmas within a broader temporal framework of the increasingly precarious nature of early career academics, where 'moments of collusion' may be the only way to keep your head above water.

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Introduction

This paper addresses affective 'moments of collusion' present in feminist research relationships, and contextualises these seemingly personal encounters within a wider systematic framework of the early career researcher and the increasingly neoliberal climate of academia. Focusing on the temporal transition from doctoral research to post-doctorate research positions immediately post-PhD, this paper questions the concept of collusion within (immersive) fieldwork, and examines the

delicate and complex question of who is colluding with whom, and for what purpose at different times within the early career academic journey.

Multiple combinations of embodied affects, emotions and past histories can culminate in such moments in any space and time; during fieldwork is no exception. Building on feminist methodologies and theories of affect, this paper draws on two specific case studies to provide a close reading of emotional, embodied and affective moments during qualitative fieldwork. Both case studies will be personal, reflective anecdotes from the author/researcher at different times in my early career; the first being immersed in doctoral fieldwork; the second being a temporary, fixed-term RA (Research Associate) in my first post-doctoral post. The two case studies are an important comparison of how these

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emotional, embodied and affective 'moments' are significantly shaped by wider structures of the temporal academic journey. The first explores issues of friendship, guilt and coercion during my PhD research into women travellers (2009–2010) and how a brief, emotional 'moment' between researcher and participant has the potential to significantly influence the direction of the research.

Developing this further, the second case study expands on my blog post [ANONYMISED], which discusses the private moments of research which are often omitted from our methodologies. Here I reflect on my own experiences of receiving emotional and practical care from research participants on a post-doctoral project, and how these moments of care impacted on the data and findings of the research. This paper explores the power of those moments that challenge the drive to appear 'professional', and how this affects knowledge relations with the participant. In addition to these 'real' emotions problematising existing literature into the 'fake' performance of the researcher establishing friendships and rapports, this paper discusses the extent to which allowing moments of care, kindness and support to go un-critiqued can lead to complex systems of collusion and coercion within the research process. Specifically, this second section of the paper focuses on how the increasing pressures of the neo-liberal university play out on our emotions and bodies during fieldwork, an area which still requires attention within the growing critiques of the affects of neo-liberalism in Higher Education. Using these personal case studies as springboard for a far wider and important discussion, this paper situates such methodological dilemmas within a broader temporal framework of the increasingly precarious nature of early career academics, where 'moments of collusion' may be the only way to keep your head above water.

Part one: immersive participant observation: ethical boundaries during doctoral fieldwork

The first section of this paper focuses on my PhD thesis which explored the embodied and emotional experiences of independent women tourists from a feminist geography approach. This opening section, which follows a very particular time in my academic journey - namely a period of intense, individual and immersive fieldwork for my own PhD project - is a useful starting point in order to set the foundations for the later discussion of post-doctoral research contracts, where becoming fully immersed in the design, delivery and analysis of a complete research project is no longer possible. In both cases, I colluded with the expectations of gathering 'the best' data possible, within the allocated timeframe, to prepare myself for the competitive arena of the early career academic (details of which shall be more fully discussed throughout). Moments of discomfort and ethical boundaries between researcher and participants were still very present, but played out in both comparable and contrasting ways.

Feminist research: positionality, methodological challenges and ethical dilemmas

For my PhD research into the embodied and emotional experiences of independent women tourists (for which I employed the term 'travellers'), I carried out a qualitative mixed methods framework: qualitative interviews, in-depth participant observation in the field, focus groups and 'sensory diary' written exercises. It has been argued that even the more sophisticated versions of mixed methods triangulation tend to predicate unproblematic views of methods themselves (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). As feminist research is integral to my research process, it is therefore necessary for me to evaluate the practice of the methods used in my research as part of a reflective process, in relation to concerns raised by feminist methodological perspectives. Defining which methods explicitly adhere to the category of feminist is highly problematic, as there are no resolved rules in which to carry out 'correct' feminist research. However what appears to be loosely agreed within the

feminist research community is that both the aims of the research and the process of social inquiry should be consistent with the goals of emancipation and social change (Madge, 1997). Feminist methodology influenced the way in which I conducted this research, and interpreted the narratives of women's lived experiences. The evaluative framework I used, and continue to use, for reflection therefore asks to what extent my methodological practices comply with feminist goals, and to what extent this contradicts the necessary research objectives necessary to complete a piece of research. Situating 'moments of collusion' with the academic research process within the principles of feminist research is crucial, as it exposes the tensions between carrying out feminist research and adhering to institutional expectations (Gill, 2012).

Friendship in the field: feelings of collusion and unease

Adopting a feminist methodological framework in qualitative interviewing involves examining the power relations between researcher and participant. In the attempt to avoid perpetuating the exploitation of women as research subjects, feminist researchers such as Oakley assert the need to break down the traditional hierarchical relationship between researcher and participant so as not to 'objectify your sister' (1981: 41). Oakley calls for a more intimate, reciprocal research setting where the participant can identify with the researcher. Such identification, she argues, enhances both the validity of the data and the researcher's interpretive abilities.

Establishing a relationship with participants is perceived as a vital structuring factor for qualitative research (Hoggart, Lees, & Davies, 2002). As Bloom explains, participants can often feel uncomfortable and self-conscious when their narratives move from a mutual dialogue to an 'unnatural monologue', where the researcher's responses seem like 'silences' in contrast to their longer, in depth story telling (1998: 19). Sharing the experience of an extensive backpacking journey myself, I therefore disclosed myself as a former backpacker to the participants in my research. For the most part, the interviews followed the more traditional semi-structured approach of researcher prompting and facilitating relevant information from the participants. However, there were many instances where the interview slipped into a conversational dialogue where we identified with each other's views and experiences, and even compared stories.

Sharing experiences with the participants produced narratives rich with candor and critical engagement. Reading through the transcripts, I become aware of the amount of laughter and recognition present in the interview, and how this strengthened our connection and, subsequently, allowed the participants to become more forthcoming in their narratives. Humour present in interviews (and even more so in focus groups) was integral to narrative performance of the travel story, which became a crucial empirical finding. Whilst it is important to remember these encounters were set under the classification of an interview, where our conversations can arguably never be 'natural', the reciprocal nature of the exchange, in addition to my conscious partiality, not only validated the way we both felt towards particular situations, but further opened up the participants to engage deeper in the discussion.

This interactive style of interviewing does, however, require careful ethical consideration as it can negate a process referred to by Hollway and Jefferson (2000: 6) as the 'defended subject', where research subjects 'are invested in particular positions in discourses to protect vulnerable aspects of self, ... and are motivated, largely unconsciously, to disguise the meaning of at least some of their feelings and actions'. In mediating this response, it is possible that the interactive style of interviewing may encourage participants to reveal aspects of their experience that they would not otherwise reveal. Undertaking feminist research whilst immersed in the field, particularly involving participant observation, raises more complex ethical issues that require reflection. Here I outline two areas where my interactions felt both genuine, and also moments of collusion with a system which required me to gather

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