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How to cite

Lavorgna, A., Sugiura, L. (2022). Blurring Boundaries: Negotiating Researchers' Positionality and Identities in Digital Qualitative Research. [Italian Sociological Review, 12 (7S), 709-727]
Retrieved from <http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v12i7S.578>

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v12i7S.578]

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3. Article accepted for publication

Date: May 2022

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Blurring Boundaries: Negotiating Researchers' Positionality and Identities in Digital Qualitative Research

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Abstract

This contribution discusses a series of methodological, ethical, and ontological challenges encountered by the authors during a series of recent socio-criminological studies based on digital ethnography and investigating sensitive and emotive issues. Particularly, we will discuss the practical difficulties we encountered in navigating several increasingly blurred boundaries, such as those among: (1) the researchers' private and public academic/personal selves online; (2) the shifting of the traditional power imbalances between the researcher and research participants; (3) concerns over impartiality in research; and (4) elements of ethnography and autoethnography becoming obfuscated. We consider these dilemmas in the context of the pervasiveness of digital technologies within contemporary social life, such that we as researchers are always simultaneously on and offline, with our studies at risk of becoming all-consuming and encroaching on all areas of our lives. We will see how these blurred boundaries entail an inescapable continuous negotiation of researcher identity and positionality, and some of their practical consequences. We aim to encourage further discussion about these novel challenges faced whilst undertaking online research, and re-examination of the related ethical principles regarding these contexts.

Keywords: digital research, positionality, reflexivity.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, many of our life-spheres have been digitalized, with our selves being increasingly present online. The pervasiveness of cyberspace, and the hyperspatialization of our lives, has been long debated (among others, Castells, 2001; Turkle, 2017). As such, it is unsurprising that digital research is booming, both through innovative methodologies and through the adaptation of traditional ones. More and more scholars are recognizing, however, that the distinction between the online and offline realms is a blurred and fictitious one, envisaging instead a vision of our world as a sociotechnical hybrid (among many others, Brown, 2006; Halford, Pope, Weal, 2013).

The digitalization of our lives, and of our research with it, raises several opportunities but also challenges, touching not only upon methodological issues, but also ethical and ontological ones. In an earlier research note (see Lavorgna, Sugiura, 2020), we started a reflection on some of those issues, concluding that research frameworks and ethical standards traditionally used by researchers and ethics boards, at least in some countries (for instance, by not affording researchers to conceal their identities, or by asking them to fully disclose their research aim when approaching contentious research participants), can be inadequate to respond to some of the challenges and possibilities of digital research. Resulting in several vexing tensions affecting both the quality of the research and the safety and wellbeing of researchers themselves, especially considering the extensive amount of information about us as academics available by simply googling our names.

In this new contribution, by relying on three examples derived from socio-criminological studies pivoting around digital ethnography and investigating sensitive and emotive issues, we further these earlier reflections by stressing how these tensions directly stem from our positionality in research, and affect our researchers' identities. In the following sections, we first offer a brief overview of relevant studies and debates on positionality, researchers' reflexivity, and their epistemological implications. Second, we present an overview of the three socio-criminological studies recently carried out or planned by the authors. Third, we discuss the practical difficulties we encountered in navigating several increasingly blurred boundaries, and specifically those among: (1) the researchers' private and public academic/personal selves online; (2) the shifting of the traditional power imbalances between the researcher and research participants; (3) concerns over impartiality in research; and (4) elements of ethnography and autoethnography becoming obfuscated.

2. Positionality, reflexivity, and the meaning of knowing

Especially (yet not only) in qualitative research, positionality has been conceptualised as a key component of data collection, enabling us to critically think about where one (the researcher) stands in relation to 'the other' (the research participant). Over the years, issues of positionality have gained increasing attention in several disciplines, ranging from migration research (e.g., Ganga, Scott, 2006; Tewolde, 2021) and international human resource management (e.g., Collins, McNulty, 2020) to education (e.g., Greene, 2014; Tshuma, 2021).

While our positionality can shift in the course of a research project, and we cannot determine it without considering the cultural values and norms of both researchers and participants (Merriam et al., 2001; Barnes, 2021), for analytical and explanatory purposes it is useful to assess our 'position' at least by reflecting on whether we are external to the social group we are studying (after all, as the famous Max Weber's quote goes, 'one need not be Caesar in order to understand Caesar'), partial insiders (i.e., we share a sole identity with the group, but there is otherwise a certain detachment from it), or total insiders (i.e., we share multiple identities or profound experiences with that social group) (Chavez, 2008). In this process, researchers have traditionally considered the influence of factors such as ethnicity, class, age, gender, religion, employment status, or more broadly adherence to certain cultural norms (Ganga, Scott, 2006; Collins, McNulty, 2020; Tiamzon et al., 2021).

Issues of positionality are pivotal for researchers, having direct relationships and implications with epistemological, methodological, and ethical issues throughout the research process (Ganga, Scott, 2006). As such, for us researchers understanding our positionality *status* is of the utmost importance. For instance, when researchers are insiders and hence studying their own communities or organisational systems (Merton, 1972; Brannick, Coghlan, 2007; Greene, 2014), they generally find themselves in a context of 'diversity in proximity' (Ganga, Scott, 2006). This type of research tends to be rich (Greene, 2014), but it is seldomly problem-free (Collins, McNulty, 2020): on the one hand, researchers are in a privileged position to recognise both bonding ties and differences with research participants, and can be accepted by the group; on the other hand, researchers can face additional challenges having to deal with how participants perceive them. Furthermore, a high degree of social proximity can increase awareness (from both sides) of existing social divisions and power imbalances (Ganga, Scott, 2006). These problems tend to be particularly exacerbated in ethnographic studies (e.g., Kassin et al., 2020), autoethnographies (e.g., Kamlongera, 2021), or other studies with autoethnographic elements (e.g., Ali, 2015; Jain, 2017).

The typology recently offered by Collins and McNulty (2020) comes particularly handy to untangle these issues, as it considers both researchers' and research participants' perceptions of salient shared identities to determine the researchers' positionality. By using each perception to build a 2x2 matrix, the authors identify four main types of *personae* – i.e., the various (multiple) researcher's positions, which can vary before, during and after data have been collected and analysed (Collins, McNulty, 2020). The *stranger persona* makes no claim to belonging or similarity to research participants and, likewise, participants perceive the researcher to be a neutral outsider. The *guest persona* shares some degree of similarity: while the researcher might perceive differences about a salient identity, participants might treat them as an insider – which can present a set of peculiar challenges in data collection and analysis. The *intruder persona* occurs when the researcher assumes insider status, but salient differences may exist or emerge in the eyes of participants; also this case can raise significant research challenges, including for rapport building. Finally, the *fellow persona* arises when both the researcher and research participants perceive a high level of closeness and similarity about salient identities (this is the case of conducting ethnography in familiar research sites, which can bear uncomfortable complexities, see Anderson, 2021). In this case, the blurring of roles between researchers and research participants (who might be or become friends) can obviously pose some peculiar challenges (for more details on the typology, see Collins, McNulty, 2020).

Of course, a typology is a simplification, and in many cases there is not a real insider-outsider dichotomy (e.g., Merton, 1972; Mullings, 1999; Merriam et al., 2001; Breen, 2007; Chavez, 2008; Greene, 2014; Barnes, 2021); rather, the researcher's role could be conceptualised on a continuum (Breen, 2007). After all, to borrow Greene (2014: 10)'s words, 'there is much to be gained from being close to one's research, as there is much to be gained from keeping one's distance and having an outside perspective'. Nevertheless, reflecting on positionality is an essential exercise in reflexivity, a practice that should be welcomed in all types of research, but that is essential to any non-stranger (i.e., completely external) researcher to improve research quality (Haynes, 2012; Tiamzon et al., 2021). Through reflexivity, researchers actively and consciously interrogate the theories, assumptions, perception, emotions and values they bring to the research and their power-driven nature (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992; Alvesson, Sköldberg, 2009), but also acknowledge the potential impact of their work on research participants (Gabriel, 2015; Collins, McNulty, 2020). Unfortunately, these tensions and challenges are rarely explicitly discussed in research practices and reporting, with negative implications for both research ethics and fieldwork learning.

Positionality, as mentioned before, has also direct epistemological implications, as the way(s) in which we place ourselves vis-à-vis our research population filters to the research as we construct it. In a context where the popular understanding of 'scientific research' is closely linked to a conception of methodologies that are modelled on the natural sciences, the logical or empirical positivism through which most research is often judged is expected to prefer the researcher to be/act as a *stranger* (or, possibly, a *guest*) *persona*. Insiderness (as in the case of the *intruder* or the *fellow personae*), on the other hand, can be more easily aligned with constructivist and interpretivist approaches. As such, this latter type of research is generally subject to delicate interplays to establish trustworthiness in its design, while questioning the idea that a researcher should be a neutral and detached observer in order to create valuable knowledge (Rose, 1997; Collins, McNulty, 2020), consistently with the ontological assumption that our knowledges of social realities are multiple and situated (Haraway, 1988). Additionally, from an epistemological perspective, recognizing that knowledge is situated means recognizing that in social research both researchers and participants are involved in knowledge production, and attach a certain value to it (Clifford, Marcus, 1986; Ganga, Scott, 2006).

Without entering, at least for the moment being, into the intricacies of procedural ethics requirements, which can change from State to State, from institution to institution, it is necessary nonetheless to spend a few words to stress that there are also some substantive ethical concerns (or 'ethics in practice', see Guillemin, Gillam, 2004) directly related to issues of positionality. Several contributions, for instance, have reflected on several ethical issues affecting specifically insider researchers, ranging from how to treat potentially valuable data that participants confide in us when there are blurred boundaries between 'researcher' and 'friend' (Waite, 2018; Collins, McNulty, 2020), to protecting participants from being recognized when working within small communities (Tzadik-Fallik, 2014; Collins, McNulty, 2020).

Digital research, as anticipated above, has opened not only a wealth of possibilities for researchers to collect new types of data or to approach participants in new ways, but also created new challenges. Consensus regarding online methodologies and ethical standards in this arena is still developing, severely complicating research efforts (Lavorgna, Holt, 2021), while the peculiar features of digital social life create opportunities for more fluid identities, blurring the public and the private, the physical and the virtual (Jenkins, Ford, Green, 2013; Miller et al., 2016; Harrison, 2021) – with important consequences for researchers' positionality. In other words, doing qualitative digital research can be much more multifaceted and complex than generally recognised. In this context, challenges and needs that have been emphasised earlier in this section with reference to research carried out in more traditional settings to strengthen

the ethical, theoretical, and empirical outcomes of research (i.e., engaging in reflexivity; explicitly acknowledging and leveraging positionality as a key research strategy – see Collins, McNulty, 2020) become even more essential for activities carried out in and through cyberspace.

3. Our experiences

The evidence used to illuminate this contribution is drawn from three pieces of qualitative research (completed and/or *in fieri*) carried out by the authors. The three examples share some commonalities. First, all these studies have been somehow framed under the ‘social harms’ umbrella, a criminological concept that is very promising when looking at behaviours and activities occurring in grey areas that might not be illegal or socially deviant but that nonetheless can cause harms to individuals, small groups or communities, or even the society at large (Canning, Tombs, 2021; Davies, Leighton, Wyatt, 2021). ‘Harm’, in this context, can be associated with emotional or material negativity (Muncie, 2000) or to the non-fulfilment of individuals’ needs (Muncie, 2000; Pemberton, 2016). Consequently, all the studies address topics that – albeit different – are all characterised by a certain degree of sensitivity and emotionality. Second, even if in different ways, all the examples have a strong digital component: the researchers, indeed, have made/are going to make broad use of qualitative data online, and in doing so they are relying on their own digital selves for data collection. More specifically, the studies mainly rely on passive virtual ethnography (Androutsopoulos 2008; Kozinets 2010), complemented with digital interviews. Digital ethnography, similarly to traditional types of ethnography, is an immersive type of research that allows an iterative-inductive approach, which evolves and adapts in design as the study progresses, and acknowledges the researcher’s own role in this process (O’Reilly, 2005; Pink et al., 2016). Cyberspace is hence treated as an environment, with the researcher experiencing directly from it (Bricken 1991; Donath 1996) while observing participants in online conversations and analysing thematically the material available (e.g., textual and audiovisual material).

Despite these commonalities, there are also major differences. First, the harms (or potential harms) impact digital and physical selves differently (mostly online with spill overs in the physical space in the first case; partially online with severe health repercussion in the second case; the implications manifest themselves mostly offline but it is almost impossible trying to separate the digital and the physical exposure in the third case). Second, there are positionality differences, with the researchers being respectively external to the

community studied, having had previous exposure to it, or being part of it and therefore having to navigate elements of autoethnography in the process. The following paragraphs will briefly introduce these three studies, ordering them in a sort of positionality continuum ('outsider' to 'insider'), stressing elements of reflexivity.

The first example is derived from a research project run by R2 (see Sugiura, 2021a). Over the course of three years, R2 was immersed in the English-speaking incelsphere, a part of the online 'manosphere' frequented by the incel (involuntary celibate) community, in order to study incel formation and culture. These spaces are notorious for misogynistic behaviours and associated with the enactment of offline violence, thus, the research was undeniably impacted by her experiences of being a woman and having an informed appreciation of the harms arising from incels. Yet, simultaneously, R2 was also completely removed from participants (therefore, a *stranger persona*), as she was not part of their community, and held a diametrically opposed worldview. R2 thus occupied a space where she was both internal and external to the research, on the one hand as a potential recipient of the harms propagated by incels, whilst on the other she shared no commonalities with them. An ethnographic approach – netnography (Kozinets, 2019) – was employed and the study was two-fold, involving the observation of incel forums and websites, as well as semi-structured interviews with self-identified current and former incels, which were all conducted online. Although there was a virtual distance between R2 and participants as R2 never engaged with anyone offline, tensions regarding online identity meant that R2 was uncomfortably accessible, and the personal and professional boundaries felt blurred at times.

The second research project was carried out by R1 and involved a study on health-related misinformation in the context of the pandemic, part of a broader research agenda (Lavorgna, 2021). The project involved a passive online ethnography on several alternative medicine and counter-information Italian-speaking online communities, to be complemented with narrative interviews (carried out online) to provide opportunity to the research participants to narrate their own stories, experiences, and motivations to the researcher-listener. R1's interest in this research topic started, years ago, with what could be described as 'ethnographic stumbling' (Sergi, 2021), having witnessed first-hand some of the harms stemming from health-related misinformation, and the strong sense of community arising around certain practices and practitioners. As such, while R1 herself was a *stranger persona* in respect to her research participants, her previous knowledge of some of the groups studied (through personal experience and previous research), plus the possibility to carry out online searches on some of her respondents prior to the interviews (some are very active online) put her in a different, more blurred, situation. R1, for

instance, was sufficiently familiar with the jargon, ideation, and perspectives of some of the respondents to the point that she had the impression to be considered a *guest persona* by a couple of the research participants during the interviews. On the other hand, R1 herself was ‘searchable’ online by research participants, and so were her previous publications on similar topics – which is likely to have hindered the possibility to arrange several interviews, making her an *unwanted persona*. Furthermore, without lingering on details unnecessary for the scope of this contribution, it is worth stressing that many members of the groups researched in this study tend to have negative opinions towards Universities and academics, seen as institutionalized forms of knowledge and therefore ‘part of the system’ – which creates an additional positionality challenge for rapport building.

Also, the third example reflects the research experience of R1, but in this case the study is still at its outset at the time of writing, also because the difficulties in navigating ethical issues are slowing the process. The study looks at the experiences of Italian researchers working abroad and the impact on their personal lives of their professional migratory choices. At the time of writing, R1 obtained ethical approval from her Faculty to carry out in-depth narrative interviews of her target population. R1’s position (as she is an Italian researcher working in the United Kingdom) will mostly be that of a *fellow persona*, even if she expects that she might be considered as an *intruder persona* to some. Similarly to what was observed in Ganga & Scott (2006), even if sharing a sense of belonging to an ‘imagined community’ makes her feel like an insider from the one hand, from the other it might emphasise social differences between herself and the fellow Italian researchers she will be researching (for instance, R1 might have to negotiate divisions having to do with job security, age, gender). A first dilemma here emerges: as R1 has many ties, both socially and professionally, with the community observed, it might be difficult not to incorporate elements of ethnography/autoethnography into her analyses, as the knowledge acquired over years of experience obviously stays with the researcher – after all, R1’s personal experience is what gave her the research idea in the first place. Furthermore, communities thrive also online, and here there is an additional complication. R1 is actively involved (as a board member and social media moderator) in a notorious association of Italian researchers, whose main social media group (a closed Facebook page) counts more than 25K members (based both in Italy and abroad). This means that R1 enjoys a privileged position as both observer and participant. If R1 had a different role in the community, she would simply ask approval (to the Ethics committee of her University and to the group moderators) to analyse both spontaneous and possibly solicited online discourses, but she is afraid that her existing ‘moderator’s privileges’ might be perceived as an imbalance of power. Additionally, because her position

on certain issues discussed in the community is known or can be easily determined through a simple online search, honest and unbiased discussion with certain potential respondents might be problematic.

4. Blurring boundaries in online research: redefining positionality and status

As anticipated above, in a previous research note (Lavorgna, Sugiura, 2020) the authors have stressed how certain types of digital research, such as digital ethnography, can create severe tensions affecting researchers' private and public selves, power dynamics, and conflicting agendas. We now want to expand on those aspects, reflecting on our recent research experiences, to show how current scholarly debates should take in more consideration the specificities of certain types of immersive qualitative online research to discuss positionality and status in a more comprehensive and nuanced way.

4.1 Researchers' private vs public, personal vs academic selves online: where are the boundaries?

R1 and R2, similarly to many others in our contemporary societies, have an online presence: their academic selves have University webpages detailing their research interests, work addresses and other contact details, their publications are searchable online, and so are media interviews. Actually, both researchers recognise (without entering here into a discussion on whether public-facing roles are always to be welcomed for career progression) how having a public presence and being active online is increasingly becoming part of academics' roles, with public visibility being seen as a way to enhance professional reputation and increase impact. Additionally, both researchers' private selves make use of some social media and social networking sites (in personal or semi-professional ways) to connect with family, friends, and colleagues. In this context, it has to be noted that, because of ethics requirements, R1 and R2 had to disclose their real name when approaching participants (see Lavorgna, Sugiura, 2022 for a more in-depth discussion of the challenges posed by the respect of procedural ethics).

In the first two examples, both R1 and R2 took some precautions before entering the data collection stages of their research projects. For instance, they reviewed what was available about them online before attempting to recruit participants, changed the settings of their social media pages to make them more private, and so on. Nevertheless, during the research it became apparent that what is deemed personal as opposed to professional is not distinguished, certainly in the eyes of participants. For instance, we received requests to

become friends on our personal (private) social media accounts, profiles which we had believed to be obscured from public view. This implies that extra effort had been undertaken to discover us on these platforms, potentially even adding/following people in common to be able to send friend/follow requests. Even though there was no suggestion that these requests were sinister in nature, they had the effect, whether intentional or unintentional, of making us feel uncomfortable and that our personal boundaries had been invaded. Although it is acknowledged that any researcher, irrespective of whether they are conducting online research or indeed research of a sensitive nature, could or should review what is publicly available about them for professional reasons, there is an increased vulnerability when engaging in research with persons masked behind a computer screen, especially when the communities observed have been associated with violence and abuse (e.g., Ging, 2017).

The third example is different, as some potential research participants are already in the social networks of the researcher, and know some of her life details. While recognising that positionality is not static, as the researcher might intentionally shift identity to create distance or closeness, depending on the context (Lam, 2021), when conducting research that is closer to our private selves our positionality can influence the social dynamics shaping qualitative research at its core (Ganga, Scott, 2006). Additionally, because of pre-existing networks and the impossibility to differentiate the personal and academic selves online, the researcher might be subject to forms of *sousveillance* (unmediated bottom-up surveillance, in the words of Dennis, 2008) and, therefore, of internalised surveillance, becoming overly cautious with both her selves.

4.2 Shifting the traditional power imbalances between the researcher and research participants: who knows whom?

Ethical concerns around many forms of qualitative research tend to assume that the interviewer is in the stronger position, but power asymmetries do not always work in this direction (Jacobsson, Åkerström, 2012). Indeed, to borrow the words of Merriam and colleagues (2001: 409), ‘during fieldwork the researcher’s power is negotiated, not given’; and especially online, the traditional position of authority of the researcher can be challenged (Lavorgna, Sugiura, 2020). In line with the teaching of critical ethnography, where much focus is on interrogating and unpacking power dynamics in the research context (Thomas, 1993), it is therefore important to reflect on potential power imbalances in the research process without *a priori* assumptions. For instance, power imbalances can negatively impact the researcher when – as in the case of our experiences – research participants were often able to benefit from the affordance of anonymity online and keep their real identities unknown from the researchers

(who may only be privy to participants' usernames which can be based on fantasy or an alias, and their avatars), while the researchers had to disclose their true identities because of ethical requirements. In this way, participants can easily uncover other information about the researchers, details that could impact upon the research itself and/or put the researchers at risk. Scholarly attention (e.g., Greene, 2014) has recognised that (especially insider) researchers may have to work carefully at impression management (Goffman, 1959) to establish respect and avoid a power struggle with participants, but participants can also learn plenty about researchers through a simple online search.

In the first two examples, due to the amount of information readily available on the internet about R1 and R2, there was a shift in the power dynamics between the researchers and online participants. Conversations arose during the interviews or online communications that indicated some participants had obtained information about the researchers and had made assumptions about their life experiences and worldview as a result. In one example, a participant continually presented R2 with 'scientific' studies purportedly validating the incel blackpill philosophy comprising commonly held beliefs such as hypergamy (the belief that women will only mate with high-status males), the sexual racism theory (women will primarily choose white men to be their sexual or romantic partners), and the 80/20 rule of dating (80% of women desire and compete for the top 20% of men, and conversely, the bottom 80% of men are competing for the bottom 20% of women) amongst others. In another instance, one individual approached as a potential interviewee by R1, tried to groom her into entering his spiritualistic group, with social engineering techniques pivoting on his perceptions of the researcher's personal life experience. In the third example, research participants would know in advance R1's take on certain issues relevant for the study, as she discussed them openly online in places easily accessible to individuals belonging to the same, or similar, population. Here, potential problems of power imbalances might be even more direct, as in the research populations are potentially individuals in a senior position than the researcher, who might have a say in prospective job, grant or manuscript applications and submissions.

4.3 Getting personal? Maintaining epistemic credibility while taking a stance

The challenge we present here hence relates to the positionality of the researcher and concerns over impartiality in research. For instance, being a woman researching male dominated groups who are associated with misogynistic behaviours could lead to criticisms regarding bias; similar concerns could be levied against a researcher studying a population she has linked with

serious social harms in previous work, or studying the same population she belongs to and advocated for. As Hammond and Kingston (2014) observe, research is not conducted in a vacuum therefore researchers are unable to claim they occupy a neutral position. Especially, feminist epistemologies acknowledge and assert the position of the researcher as part of and influential to the research process (Ahearne, 2021), and welcome critical participation in research settings (Jain, 2017). Acknowledging this vested personal position though could evoke criticism over professionalism and lack of impartiality. When research participants are or can easily become associated with social or political engagement, the tension can be particularly strong, as the researcher might be perceived as an ally or as an enemy depending on the circumstances.

However, it can be argued that attempting to ignore one's identity would render the research and analyses artificial and, in our examples, would betray the lived-experience of the researchers (Sugiura, 2021a, 2021b). In qualitative research, reflexivity and an awareness of how one's own lived experiences can influence the research is important, and being immersed in conversations, from a privileged position, can add richness to the gathering and interpretation of data that would otherwise be lost (Hertz, 1997; Mayan, 2009; Ben-Ari, Enosh, 2011). As such, artificially divorcing our identities (as a woman, a critic of certain health practices, an advocate for the voices of researchers abroad) from our researcher identity would limit our understanding of the issues and the internal and external structural forces influencing our studies. Echoing Collins and McMulty (2020), we argue that researchers should be more open about their positionality, rather than glossing over their positioning when this is not completely external. As such, reflexive practices are necessary to evaluate the implications of our positionality – whichever it is –, hence allowing us to improve research trustworthiness (Collins, McNulty, 2020).

4.4 Obfuscating elements of ethnography and autoethnography: embracing the messiness

Undertaking the research studies exemplified in this article highlighted the blurring of ethnography and autoethnography, as we did draw on our own personal experience and engaged in self-reflection throughout. Autoethnography has roots in postmodern philosophy and is associated with growing debates about reflexivity and voice in social research (Wall, 2006). Rather than minimizing our selves and artificially denying parts of our identities, which would also have entailed not having an informed understanding of the harms perpetuated via certain social practices and the complexities of certain situations, we positioned our complete identity in our research endeavours, even if at times this meant that we – as researchers – were conflicted. For

instance, amongst the hatred, shocking and provoking behaviour within the incel community, or the science denialism and mythomania encountered within certain counterinformation groups, there is humanity, vulnerability, and pain, and as a result, we found ourselves wrestling with both pity and even sympathy for individuals in some instances. Although we thought we were prepared for some of the difficult-to-navigate themes prevalent within the communities studied, navigating the online spaces, and what emerged in the interview narratives, affected us both intellectually and emotionally. We are also aware that divulging these reflections could invoke criticisms over our objectivity in the research. However, recognising what we as researchers can bring into our studies, as well as what participants and the topic researched elicit within us, is well-versed in qualitative social research (Band-Winterstein, Doron, Naim, 2014). This experience demonstrates that online (auto)ethnography is an exercise in humility and power and exposing aspects of yourself might be uncomfortable but a necessary part of the process when the research is about the messiness of people's lives.

5. Concluding thoughts

In this contribution, we have furthered some reflections explored in a previous research note (Lavorgna, Sugiura, 2020) to show how, in digital qualitative research, several methodological, ethical and ontological issues, and a number of vexing research tensions encountered in our research, stem directly from issues of positionality. These issues, we argue, should be openly discussed by researchers, not only because they matter for research purposes, but also because they have meaningful implications for the safety and wellbeing of researchers themselves. After all, researcher positionality has often a direct relation to the topics we choose to study, the research design of choice, and how we communicate our findings (Shaw et al., 2020). Our positionality should not hinder us from carrying out research endeavours that we feel – often *because of* our positionality – are important to pursue; indeed, as recently argued by Shaw and colleagues (2020), researchers should choose the approach better aligned and consistent with their own values, provided the research participants are accounted for (and hence recognising the limitations of much procedural ethics in certain research settings).

While we recognise the heuristic and practical value of existing positionality typologies (*in primis* the one proposed by Collins and McNulty, 2020, which we referenced earlier on in our contribution), we argue that they do not take into sufficient account the tensions originating from the pervasiveness of digital technologies within contemporary social life, such that we as researchers (and,

similarly, our research participants), especially when involved in certain types of digital research, are always simultaneously on and offline, with our studies at risk of becoming all-consuming and encroaching on all areas of our lives. Hence, potential risks faced by researchers are not merely online, rather they constitute ‘onlife harms’ (for the onlife concept, see Floridi, 2015) where the virtual and embodied facets of researcher’s identities coexist, with possible negative consequences impacting both aspects. To the proposed 2x2 matrix ideated by Collins and McNulty, for instance, we would like to add a third dimension, to account for the hyperspatialization of our lives and how this creates new dynamics among researchers and research participants.

We have also stressed the importance of reflexivity in this process, which entails adopting an intersectional approach to determine our salient identities and multiple social positions, in order to recognise the complex interaction among and across them, also depending on the context within which the researcher and the participant interact (Reyes, 2020; Lam, 2021; Tiamzon et al., 2021). Reflexivity, however, is not only important for the researchers doing the research. Indeed, it can also encourage other researchers to carry out studies in areas they might otherwise avoid, and help define and improve ethical standards across relevant international communities. Despite the long tradition of qualitative research, there is still very little in terms of methodological guidance on how to negotiate and manage behaviours and expectations in research that is close to our private selves (Chavez, 2008; Taylor, 2011).

Additionally, we discussed how, although both researchers had carefully curated their online presence, their academic publications and engagement with certain public groups and posts made on publicly available (or otherwise accessible) platforms provided (or can provide) insight into their social or political sensibilities, activisms, and even ethos. We took extra precautions, beyond what has necessarily formed traditional ethical considerations, but they did not solve all issues, putting our well-being, and potentially our safety, at risk. Much academic attention has focused on grappling with the tensions about whether traditional ethical principles can or indeed should be applied to the online realm (King, 1996; Langford, 1996; Reid, 1996; Frankel, Siang, 1999; Ess, 2002; Hewson et al., 2003; Eynon, Fry, Schroeder, 2008), but the researcher has often been an afterthought in conventional research ethics, with most attention being on protecting research participants. This lack of direction has been further compounded by digital technologies with online researchers often left to fend for themselves with little or no institutional support due to a lack of understanding about the new online research challenges. The emerging body of knowledge necessitating researcher safety online, particularly when sensitive and polarizing topics are concerned (Lavorgna, Sugiura 2020; Mattheis,

Kingdon, 2021) is very recent, and we can only hope it will receive increasing consideration.

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