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The Intimate Insider: Negotiating the Ethics of Friendship When Doing Insider Research

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Abstract

Favoured by ethnographers with some degree of closeness to the culture they wish to examine, the cultural participant as insider researcher has become relatively commonplace across the humanities. A large body of methodological literature now exists on this, highlighting the advantages and some of the dilemmas of conducting insider research. This literature is not exhaustive, as there remain elements of insider research still underdeveloped, such as how one goes about negotiating previously established friendships and intimate relationships in this context. Indeed, what are the benefits and dilemmas engendered by such negotiations? Drawing on existing scholarly accounts of field-based friendship and the author's experiences of researching queer culture as an insider, this article addresses these questions in relation to the author's field of inquiry and to social research paradigms more broadly. Subsequently, it argues that while being intimately inside one's field does offer significant advantages, it also reshapes the researcher's role in and experiences of her own culture and those within it.

Key words

Friendship; intimacy; insider research, ethnography.

Introduction

‘Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.’ (Anaïs Nin)

For my birthday last year, a very close friend of mine who has recently begun exploring his potential as a visual artist, painted a portrait of me. I was delighted by this gift and hung it in a prominent place in my home. My immediate reaction was that his intimate knowledge of me produced a perceptive visual account of both my physicality and my personality. I could locate myself in his work, his perspective, his focus on particular features and not others; his choice of medium, colour and brushstrokes presented me in a way that was recognisable and truthful, yet it was also quite partial and fragmented. Over time, this painting provoked a chain reaction of thoughts: why had he chosen to represent me in this way and what part of knowing me resulted in this particular two-dimensional image? It became a metaphor of my own work as an insider researcher who has in the past—in not such a dissimilar way—interpreted her friend. As an ethnographer, I have written truthful, yet always partial accounts of him and his life into my work on queer identities and culture. I have abstracted him from his own idea of selfhood and taken the

bits that I had found most interesting and relevant to my objectives. I had done this not just to him, but to many other friends as well. This painting—seeing myself as the interpreted—prompted me to think more deeply about friendship in ethnographic processes: the liberties that friends take with each other; their sometimes insightful gazes; their sometimes myopic familiarity; their choices between honesty and flattery; and their levels of reciprocity among other things.

A departure from alterity—the classical dichotomies of object/subject, self/other and in this case researcher/researched—to embrace the fractured and broadening landscape of the postmodern, has had profound epistemological implications regarding how, as a researcher, one comes to know and relate to the world under investigation. Feminist ethnographic debates have inspired a considerable amount of literature highlighting the usefulness and some of the dilemmas of establishing close and empathetic relationships between the researcher and the observed, advocating personal investment in the research process and a degree of emotional attachment to the field and informants (see Coffey, 1999; Edwards and Ribbens, 1998; Krieger, 1987; Roseneil, 1993; Stacey, 1996; Zinn, 1979). In Coffey’s critique of field-based friendships she concludes that:

Relationships we create in the field raise our awareness of the ethnographic dichotomies of, for example, involvement versus detachment, stranger versus friend, distance versus intimacy ... Friendships can help to clarify the inherent tensions of the fieldwork experience and sharpen our abilities for critical reflection ... They do affect the ethnographer’s gaze and it is important that that should be so. (1999, p. 47)

In terms of feminist work that deals with the processes of managing *existing* friendships in a social research context, I have found very little. Most notably, there is Hendry’s work on “The Paradox of Friendship in the Field” (1992), which looks at the breakdown of her eighteen-year relationship with a Japanese woman who became an informant, and Browne’s (2003) work around negotiating power relations in feminist research where friends are involved. In terms of the latter, it was more the fluid boundaries of ‘fieldworking’ under examination. Therefore, I, like Labaree, would argue, ‘the possible influence of previous relationships and friendships between the insider participant observer and informants is underdeveloped’ (2002, p. 114). And, as my painting analogy illustrates, knowing someone, especially in a very close or intimate manner, has a significant effect on one’s perception of a person and the ways in which you relate to this person. Therefore, I suspect it would also have a significant effect on one’s interpretative outcomes.

This paper does not reject or warn against the idea that friends can become informants. Instead, seeking to clarify and justify my role as an ‘intimate insider’ this paper offers an account of how one can, with a degree of caution, successfully manage previously established friendships in field research. By way of beginning, this paper will offer an overview of some of the existing literature on insider research and friendships in the field, distinguishing field-based friendships and insider research from what I term ‘intimate insider’ research. Contextualised within my own work as both a member and researcher of local queer culture—in the section “inside an intimate insider’s view of local queer culture”—this paper will then provide some lucid accounts of managing the friendship-informant relationship and the benefits and possible disadvantages of the ‘intimate insider’ dynamic. To conclude, I will offer a reflexive, autoethnographic account of the reshaping of social alliances, friendships and roles consequent to my becoming an ‘intimate insider’ researcher.

Reviewing Insiderness and Friendship in the Field

Feminist social researchers have debated the benefits and dilemmas of insider research for quite some time now. For example, Krieger’s (1987) ethnography of a lesbian social group shows how self-knowledge can lead to social insight while also drawing to our attention the complexities of feeling at once connected and estranged from one’s social setting. In Stacey’s work on feminist ethnographies, she highlights the ‘emotional support and a form of loving attention’ (1996, p. 97), that can develop in a feminist ethnographic context, but also warns of the ethical quandary and

displacement that this can create when the researcher-researched relationship shifts. Zinn's (1979) work with a Mexican American community highlights the political challenges an insider sometimes faces given the expectation that as an insider they will be sympathetic in their analysis and always accountable, while DeLyser points to the difficulties of extracting shared knowledges and implied knowings when interviewing a community of which you are a member. As she goes on to argue, 'insider researchers need strategic alternatives to the traditional interview' (2001, p. 444).

Recently, in the fields of youth and subcultural studies, those researchers with a degree of proximity to the people and culture under investigation have enthusiastically taken up this method. Hodkinson's (2002) account of the meaning and style of goth, Malbon's (1999) project on dance club culture, and Weinstein's (2002) investigation into the culture and music of heavy metal are just some examples that exploit the researcher's background, 'street credentials' and 'subcultural capital' (Thornton, 1995) in the process of doing ethnography. The advantages of conducting research from this position have been well documented for quite some time (see Adler and Adler, 1987; Bennett, 2003; Brewer, 2000; Edwards, 2002; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Hodkinson, 2005; Merton, 1972; Platt, 1981; Sprague, 2005; Wolcott, 1999). Such advantages include: deeper levels of understanding afforded by prior knowledge; knowing the lingo or native speak of field participants and thus being 'empirically literate' (Roseneil, 1993); closer and more regular contact with the field; more detailed consideration of the social actors at the centre of the cultural phenomenon making access to, and selection of, research participants easier and better informed; quicker establishment of rapport and trust between researcher and participants; and more open and readily accessible lines of communication between researchers and informants due to the researcher's continuing contact with the field.

Receiving less attention however, are critical assessments of researcher positioning in relation to the quality of data collected and the problems arising from assuming an insider position. With regards to the former, Bennett notes, 'accounts concerning the effectiveness of such 'insider knowledge' remain largely circumspect and anecdotal' (2003, p. 189). While Bennett does not contest the usefulness of insider knowledge, he does raise questions regarding whether it is one's cultural proximity alone that results in the collection of more (or perhaps less) authoritative data. Insider research is not faultless, nor should one presume that as an insider, one necessarily offers an absolute or correct way of seeing and/or reading the culture under investigation. The deconstructive logics of postmodernism and poststructuralism have for decades now warned against privileging knowledge that is constructed within dichotomous rubrics such as insider/outsider. Moreover, numerous scholars have warned that as a researcher, and indeed as a cultural participant, one can never assume totality in their position as either an insider or as an outsider, given that the boundaries of such positions are always permeable (Merton, 1972; Oakley, 1981; Song and Parker, 1995). Some have cautioned against privileging this position, noting that as an insider one does not automatically escape the problem of knowledge distortion, as insider views will be always be multiple and contestable, generating their own epistemological problems due to subject/object relationality (Bennett, 2002, 2003; Hodkinson, 2005; Sprague, 2005; Wolcott, 1999). 'There is no monolithic insider view', argues Wolcott; 'every view is *a* way of seeing, not *the* way of seeing' (1999, p. 137, emphases in original). Another cause for concern that I would add to this list has to do with insider friendships and, as I noted previously, the grossly under-theorised impact that friendships may have upon the processes of perception and interpretation within and of the field under examination.

For decades, anthropologists and sociologists have demonstrated through their work and/or in their personal accounts of the field that meaningful friendships often emerge during the ethnographic process: friendships that have benefited the work at hand, resultantly shaping the identity and experiences of both the researcher and the informant beyond the parameters of the field (see Coffey, 1999; Foster, 1979; Lambevski, 1999; Liebow, 1967; Newton, 1993; Powdermaker, 1966; Rabinow, 2007 [1977]; Whyte, 1955 [1943]; Wolf, 1991). For example, in Wolf's study of an outlaw motorcycle gang he recalls how he became a 'friend of the club' who came to take part in

discussions about the club's future and expansion, and how 'maintaining relations of trust and friendship during the course of the fieldwork prevented [his] leaving the field' (1991, p. 19). In Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (2007) [1977] he recalls how friendship engendered mutual respect and tempered the differences between himself and his informant, Driss ben Mohammed, even though cultural differences meant that they remained 'profoundly Other to each other' (p. 161). In Powdermaker's *Stranger and Friend* (1966) he notes that in the majority of his fieldwork experiences there were always one or two people with whom he developed an 'exceptionally close friendship ... who provided the deepest communication' (pp. 261–262), and these people helped him make sense of the field more than any other. Similarly, advocating in favour of field-based friendships, Foster—referring to his fieldwork in Tzintzuntzan—regards 'the mark of a true anthropologist is to be able to relate to people, not simply as informants, but as friends who share much more than an immediate concern with data' (1979, p. 180). And perhaps more contentiously, the work of Newton (1993) and Lambevski (1999) offer favourable accounts of how their research was augmented through romantic and sexual relationships.

Accounts of ethnographer-informant friendships are not entirely unproblematic since much of the literature also tells us that friendships in the field can sometimes be confusing and unstable due to role confusion, conflict, feelings of betrayal, differences in social worlds, the inevitable withdrawal from a field or interpersonal dynamics (see Beoku-Betts, 1994; Browne, 2003; Coffey, 1999; Crick, 1992; El-Or, 1992; Fowler, 1994; Hendry, 1992; Spradley, 1979; Stacey, 1996). Crick (1992) remains ambivalent about the potential for establishing field-based friendships. He argues that given the disparities of power, culture and class that commonly separate researchers and informants, 'speaking of 'friendship' ... is somewhat odd' (p. 176). Recalling his work in Sri Lanka and his relationship with Ali, an informant, he goes on to admit that 'if I call Ali a "friend" or "informant", both labels would say too much and also leave something important out' (p. 177). In El-Or's (1992) work on ultraorthodox Jewish women, she too found it difficult to speak of the subject-object connection as a friendship: 'intimacy and working relationships (if not under force or fallacy) go in opposite directions'. Intimacy, El-Or suggests, 'offers a cozy environment for the ethnographic journey, but at the same time an illusive one' (p. 71). Hendry's spoiled relations with her Japanese friend turned informant similarly leads her to question the realness of friendships in an ethnographic context: she wonders if 'one can really only pretend to be a friend' (1992, p. 172) given the risks of role conflict, disagreement and offence that may potentially disrupt a friendship.

With the exception of Hendry (1992), the cases illustrated above—and indeed the majority of work that discusses friendship and addresses issues pertaining to friendship formation in ethnographic research—approach the topic from the perspective of an outsider researcher entering the field who is then faced with the task of managing friendships that arise during the process of data gathering and observation—that is, informant-'friendships'. I use inverted commas here in relation to the word 'friendship' because in the variety of ethnographic accounts that discuss friendship it is clear that the meaning and significance of such a relationship between two people, especially between a researcher and informant, is variable and contextual. As with all human relations, there are degrees of friendship determined by varying levels of familiarity, rapport, respect and emotional attachment. Moreover, notions of friendship that arise during fieldwork appear to be further problematised due to reasons of professional motivation, power imbalance, cultural differences, inequalities in purpose and potential gain.

The question still remains, what, if anything, do we understand about pre-existing friendships that benefit those researchers who undertake work in a field where the disparities between researcher and informant are lessened (although never absent) due to a shared investment in culture, mutual identification and, most importantly here, a personal history that pre-dates the research engagement. When one is already, at some level, an insider in their field, it is probable that they have pre-established friendships—often close friendships—in that field and it is also probable that such close friendships will shape the researcher's work and influence their positioning within the field. Positing a similar argument in terms of closeness to one's informants, Powdermaker notes:

The choice of close friends in the field depends on subtle and often intangible personality qualities which underlie friendships anywhere. The intimate inside view which a field worker receives from his close friends must therefore differ somewhat from what another anthropologist would get from different types of intimates in the same field. (1966, p. 290)

Unfortunately, Powdermaker does not extend his argument beyond this premise, failing to explore the differences he alludes to above. Indeed, when such a situation exists there appears to be little in the way of methodological guidance on how one goes about managing difference arising from intimacy and negotiating the ethics of friendship in a social research paradigm.

Here, I use the term ‘intimate insider’ primarily in relation to researchers whose pre-existing friendships (close, distant, casual or otherwise) evolve into informant relationships—friend-informants—as opposed to the majority of existing work that deals with informant-friendships. Moreover, the notion of ‘intimate insider research’ can be distinguished from ‘insider research’ on the basis that the researcher is working, at the deepest level, within their own ‘backyard’; that is, a contemporary cultural space with which the researcher has regular and ongoing contact; where the researcher’s personal relationships are deeply embedded in the field; where one’s quotidian interactions and performances of identity are made visible; where the researcher has been and remains a key social actor within the field and thus becomes engaged in a process of self-interpretation to some degree; and where the researcher is privy to undocumented historical knowledge of the people and cultural phenomenon being studied. When the self is so inextricably tied to one’s informants and field of inquiry, the process of intimate insider research then involves a degree of, or may even be called a type of, autoethnography (see Coffey, 2002; Ellis and Bochner 2000, 2006; Reed-Danahay, 1997). Where the researcher-self is a part of the Other’s narrative, the narrative of the researched and the researcher become entwined. The researcher, then, is forced to look both outward and inward, to be reflexive and self-conscious in terms of positioning, to be both self-aware and researcher-self-aware and to acknowledge the intertextuality that is a part of both the data gathering and writing processes. Moreover, the researcher needs also to be aware of the limitations of reflexivity (Adkins, 2002), particularly as the relationship between knower and known is never unproblematic. In the following section of this article, I offer an account of my own experiences as an intimate insider researcher.

Inside an Intimate Insider’s Experience of Researching Local Queer Culture

My engagement with queer culture has been ongoing for more than a decade. It began in a public sense when I was old enough to be admitted to nightclubs, but queer encounters, culture and style had been a private and casual affair of mine for quite some time prior. It was my curiosity and fascination with queer culture and queer gender and sexual identity theories that inspired my doctoral work—a study of queer musical aesthetics and gender and sexual performativity in and through music (Taylor, 2009). In order to understand how people use music to construct and express queer gender and sexuality, I turned to my own social world in the city of Brisbane, Australia, and began thinking critically about our music, our sexual conduct, our social spaces and especially the people who performed and danced within them. Some of these people knew me only in passing, others I was socially acquainted with, and others were my friends.

My postdoctoral work has continued in a similar vein, but now—given my increased visibility and immersion within the scene that resulted from lengthy and involved contact periods during my doctoral work and the common interests and identity I share with these people outside of my work—it has become almost impossible to avoid observing and involving close friends in my ethnographic research. As such, a number of people with whom I have established and meaningful friendships (like my artist friend) have become key informants in my postdoctoral work. Another contributing factor is the size and composition of Brisbane’s queer scene. Brisbane has a population of just under 2,000,000 and it is the third largest city in Australia, following Sydney and

Melbourne. The size of Brisbane as well as the conservative governance of the state of Queensland during the 1970s and 1980s in particular, has resulted in a particularly collaborative queer culture with fewer divisions—due to identity politics—running through it than one might find in Sydney, for example. Moreover, the alternative queer scene in Brisbane where I have sourced the majority of my respondents is largely a DIY (do-it-yourself) scene and accommodates a smaller percentage of people than the more commercial lesbian and gay scenes. Thus, getting to know people through collaboration and mutual support of scene events is not only common, but also necessary for the survival of the scene.

Shared experiences cultivate degrees of intimacy between people and the kinds of experiences that I have shared with people prior to them becoming key informants include: enjoying music and dancing together; eating together and cooking for each other; meeting and engaging with people's family members; sharing experiences under the influence of mind-altering substances; physical and/or romantic encounters; extended leisure time and holidaying with people; mutual grieving over deceased friends or relatives; mutual joy in times of great happiness; and supporting or caring for people in times of sickness or personal hardship. Knowing your informants in all or some of these very personal ways undoubtedly affects the manner in which you relate to them professionally. Comparing my own field experiences where I have interviewed, observed and written about people whom I know so intimately, with other experiences of people I did not have prior intimate knowledge of, confirms this, which I illustrate below.

The advantages of intimacy

My professional relationships with unfamiliar informants have generally been positive and in most instances I have been able to efficiently extract useful data from them. Following the interview and observation periods, we have infrequently exchanged pleasantries or informed each other of up and coming gigs or parties via email, we have acknowledged each other and may occasionally chat 'outside work' if we happen to cross paths again. Overall, our levels of contact after I have disengaged with them in a professional sense are minimal, but it would seem, mutually beneficial and pleasant enough to regard such relationships as informant-friendships.

My professional relationships with informants I know intimately is however, quite different. In such instances, periods of interviewing and data gathering are prolonged, and formal interviews are augmented by ongoing opportunities to talk with and observe these people in moments that are significant yet often random and unexpected—moments that one is only privy to as a result of intimate contact. The data I have gathered from friend-informants compared with informant-friends is significantly greater in volume and depth. Regular and intimate contact not only results in more opportunities to gather data, but it also increases one's level of perception in relation to body language and non-verbal communication; sensitive or covert topics; detecting false-truths; emotive behaviour; the degrees of affect that something may have upon someone (for example, shame or disappointment about which people may be less likely to speak openly); logics of taste and rationality; an informant's self image and their performative attempts at displaying this; and their intended meaning which may sometimes be obscured by incongruous or abstruse language, but is able to be referentially decoded through the researcher's intimate understanding of past events and/or their knowledge of the informant's personal history.

Increased perception in the aforementioned areas has been especially beneficial to my work on gender and sexual identity performance. An insufficiency of appropriately descriptive language regarding queer gender and sexual identities¹ means that many of my informants identify as either queer (in terms of sexuality) or genderqueer (in terms of gender identity). These are identificatory terms that one usually arrives at after some years of dissatisfaction with the heteronormative lexicon and with dominant lesbian and gay culture. Longstanding friendships with some of my informants meant that I was able to witness these shifts in identity: I was—in a few instances—a sounding board for my friends' renegotiations of gender and sexuality. Over a number of years I was able to

observe, first-hand, people's self-transformations as opposed to merely having this process described to me in an interview or coming to know the informant at only one stage of the transformative process. Take, as an example my friendship with Lena:² Lena and I met at a party about six years ago and have since become very close friends. When I met her she was lesbian identified; she always practiced monogamy with her partners and expected the same in return; she was extremely cautious of the BDSM³ scene and was fairly certain that this was not for her; she was largely disinterested in queer culture and politics; her dress sense and taste in music displayed no particular subcultural attachment; she spent very little time in queer social spaces; she was fairly disconnected to the queer community; overall her investment and participation in the culture/s of her sexuality was minimal. As our friendship grew over the years, Lena started to become rather interested in queer culture and politics and how this could apply to her life and we would often talk about these things together and attend queer events together. After some time, she started experimenting sexually with both women and men; she decided to 'open up' her committed relationship to include sex with other people; she began to take an interest in some parts of BDSM culture; she changed the way she self-identified from lesbian to queer; she developed a subtle interest in gender role-play and started socially engaging with parts of the queer community that accommodated her changing self-perceptions. Observing the personal and intense negotiations of one's morality and self-image in people like Lena, has, to date, been one of the greatest privileges and luxuries of being an intimate insider researcher. Moreover, it has also been a great privilege of friendship, in that my friend-informants have not objected to my writing about this.

In the context of my own research into queer culture, being intimately inside this culture and drawing upon established and trusting friendships has been significantly beneficial in relation to accessing semi-private or unpublicised cultural spaces. By way of illustrating this, I refer to my attendance of a queer event—an illegal warehouse dance party—which, if not for my friendship with the event organisers, I would not have been invited to, let alone given permission to write about. The queer scene that I am a part of and study operates on a DIY basis and works partially in opposition to the mainstream and publicly visible lesbian and gay culture occurring in the same city. While it exhibits certain nodes or points of confluence with lesbian and gay culture, the queer scene is distinct in more ways than it is similar (see Taylor, 2008), and being an insider greatly enhanced my understanding of this. Communication among scene members regarding illegally operated events occurs either via word-of-mouth, text messaging, private social networking sites or listservs. Due to some of the activities that occur in these spaces, such as unlicensed alcohol consumption, drug-taking and 'backroom' sex, there is an informal policy regarding who can attend these events and this is enforced by the event organisers and their trusted friends. As a female researcher, I had never previously been able to get into a 'backroom' or a sex-on-site premises attended by my informants, because in the city where I conduct my research, the only legal spaces of these kind are exclusively for men. Therefore, I had to rely on the accounts of my male informants and was unable to gain any female perspective on this. At this event however, a 'backroom' was set up for use by anyone of any gender and/or sexual persuasion and my being invited to this event provided me with a unique opportunity to observe this space and to later talk with people (both men and women) who (I knew) made use of it. My longstanding friendship with some of the people that I have interviewed around more sensitive topics, like public sexual conduct and drug-taking, facilitated a relaxed and trusting conversation. Contrarily, some people whom I have interviewed and who did not know me personally and understand my personal politics on such matters largely gave sketchy accounts, leaving out much of the detail, often talking in the third-person and making reference to the activities of others in the space rather than their own experiences.

To offer an example I refer to two interviews: one that I conducted with Megan in 2006 and the other with Jemima in 2009. Prior to the interview with Megan, we were not friends and she only knew me as someone who went to the same clubs as her. Jemima and I, however, were friends, and it was only after getting to know her that I asked her to participate in my research. In a conversation

about substance use among people who attend queer clubs and dance parties Megan tended to use phrases such as ‘there are a whole lot of undertones to clubbing, sometimes people go out ’cause they want to get off their faces’; ‘when people are drug-fucked they sometimes do...’. It was obvious by Megan’s body language and short replies that she was uncomfortable with the discussion. She consciously avoided implicating herself in any scenarios that she discussed and did not admit to, or deny, her personal involvement in such activities. Jemima, on the other hand, was far more unguarded. Directly implicating herself she made comments like: ‘there’s a lot of substance use, but it’s a moderate participation on my part’; ‘for me it’s about experiencing more brain expansion’; ‘I wonder how many other 40-year-olds are still taking the occasional drugs?’ The differing levels of self-implication in the responses of Megan and Jemima suggest that intimacy—prior personal knowledge of your subject—generates a different kind of response—potentially a more detailed one.

Managing the dilemmas of intimacy

So far, I have pointed to some of the gains afforded to me as a researcher with prior and intimate knowledge of her field and some of the social actors within it. However, I do not wish to suggest that this position is entirely unproblematic. Inevitably, such an uncharted leap across the personal/professional divide is bound to cause some degree of both personal and professional crises. While doing my own research, a number of questions and concerns have troubled me. These have mostly been in relation to professional and personal ethical conduct, accountability, the potential for data distortion and my lack of objectivity and possible insider blindness. As the literature on field-based friendships suggests, role displacement or confusion and the vulnerability of friendship are also significant concerns. These issues will be addressed in the following section.

As I understand and experience it, close friendship is based on mutual exchange and trust, considerate and cooperative behaviour, which often engenders a variety of qualities and responses including honesty, empathy, respect, loyalty, affection, esteem, altruism and love.⁴ Friendship (like research) has rules of engagement and being an ethical friend may mean not betraying confidence imparted. However, being an ethical friend may also at times compromise one’s research, particularly what you allow yourself to see as a researcher and what you choose to communicate with outsiders; that is, what you say and what you do not say. In Blake’s (2007) critique of research ethics review processes she argues that ‘trust arises from within relationships at a personal level, [therefore] “going native” is perhaps a better way to create an honest, trustworthy and “safe” research environment’ (p. 415). But as Humphreys’ (1970) unethical study of anonymous male homosexual encounters suggests, ‘going native’ does not always mean that personal relationships—even sexual ones—are at their core trustworthy. Therefore, to create a safe research environment, it is also necessary for a researcher to provide full disclosure of her aims and intent.

While I agree with Blake, I do further question if and how ‘going native’ as a researcher makes for safe and trustworthy friendships. Even when full disclosure exists, is it ethical to make use of intimate knowledge and trusting relationships and to capitalise on the ‘privileged eavesdropping’ (Burke, 1989) to which an intimate insider is privy? Moreover, when does it become unethical? These questions are not easily answered and, in my experience, it takes a fair amount of time and a keen intuition to work out when something seen and/or said is ‘on’ or ‘off’ the record. Looking back over my interview transcriptions, in each one I see occasions where I have inserted ‘[off the record]’. Mostly, this has not been because my informant explicitly said so, but because I understood implicitly that what they were telling me here was not as a researcher but as a friend and therefore—it felt to me—unethical to transcribe this statement for future analysis. At other times, when a conversation or observation falls into a ‘grey area’, I have found it useful as a researcher to formally seek the validation of my interpretations from those being interviewed or observed, as this can also help protect the trust between the friend-researcher and friend-informant while also affording the friend-informant a greater feeling of control over her own representation.

Researchers' connectedness to their culture, and indeed their emotional attachment to their friends, may make them resistant to an unsympathetic critique of the field, or if they brave an unsympathetic critique, they may be at risk of damaging or losing their closeness to the field and/or someone within it. Zinn's (1979) previously cited work highlights the challenges of managing accountability, as does Behar's essay, "Writing In My Father's Name" (1995). Jacobs-Huey reminds us that 'native researchers must be especially sensitive to the dangers of disclosing cultural secrets or airing what community members may consider "dirty laundry"' (2002, p. 797). As someone who both participates in and attempts academic translation of local queer culture and lives led within it, I have, at times, found it difficult to manage the delicate balancing act of academic credibility and friend/community accountability, especially in the case of friend-informant interviews. Given the levels of intimacy that friends share, friends are likely to divulge more to you, forgetting that you are recording and may potentially publish what they are saying. As a researcher, it can be awkward when you know that what is divulged—although valuable to your work—may damage the informant's public-face or the social reputation of someone else. To date, none of my subjects have responded negatively to my work; however, I feel that is has more to do with what I have omitted than with what I have said. For example, taking a hard line against or being overtly descriptive of any in-house bickering I was privy to, sexual promiscuity, and/or drug use among queer scene members would not only endanger my trusting relationship with the field, but it may cause distress in the lives of others. Omission is political; it is also tricky, yet it is often necessary. Certainly, poorly thought out omissions can impede 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) and the transparency of an account, but a degree of propriety relative to one's field is, I would argue, in part, a way of maintaining the 'natural order' of the field. The follow-on effects that the inclusion of a particular statement or observation may have upon a subject, the internal dynamic of the culture and indeed upon one's ability as a researcher to gather more data in the future, requires careful consideration. Knowing when not to overstep the line between friend and researcher is a vital skill that the intimate insider must develop.

Intimacy works both ways and as such the researcher's intimate knowledge of her subjects suggests that her subjects are likely to be intimately familiar with her, and this has often been my experience. As friends, people talk about all manner of things including work, so on occasion—with a lack of forethought regarding my friend's potential future involvement within a research project—I have questioned my past 'friendly' conduct. I have wondered if, in a casual moment, I may have given away too much regarding my argument or hypothesis and later, when wearing my professional hat to discuss this with a friend, I have questioned whether my friend has been consciously or unconsciously swayed by his/her knowledge of my own opinion and my scholarly objectives. Empathy and affection between a researcher and informant may result in an informant wanting to please his/her friend and the subtlety of such a gratifying gesture may make it hard for the researcher to detect given their reciprocal affection. For this reason, I would caution against the exclusive use of friend-informants in social research as I have found a mix of intimately familiar and unfamiliar informants to be wholly beneficial. Moreover, friends—especially those who originate from and act within the same culture—are likely to share opinions, values and logics of taste. Therefore, a mixture of informants acts as a checking mechanism in these instances, especially in relation to the interpretation of cultural phenomena, the meaning of cultural style and the value of cultural artefacts and space.

Insiderness coupled with intimate knowledge of and an emotional attachment to one's informants makes objectivity incredibly difficult and leaves very little room for analytic distance. Because an intimate insider has a strong personal investment in the field—coming to know their field in the deepest and most familiar of ways—these intensely familiar ways of knowing raise interpretative challenges, provoking the researcher to question their familiarity and the resultant potential for this to cause insider blindness to the mundane, the everyday and the unobtrusive (Burke, 1989; DeLyser, 2001; Edwards, 2002; Labaree; 2002; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1984). 'Such an "immersion" experience tends with time to render so many of one's observations banal. With this

goes the related problem of retracting and unpacking what have become almost “second nature” understandings’, argues Burke (1989, p. 222). To lessen one’s myopia, Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) proposes that the ‘native’ must find a way to create sufficient distance between themselves and their culture. Specifically, Ohnuki-Tierney makes reference to intellectual and emotional distance as well as physical distance: that is, she talks of physically removing herself from the field for a period of time before returning, giving herself time to refresh her perspective. With reference to Ohnuki-Tierney, ‘the process of personal distancing’, argues Labree (2002), is ‘required to bring clarity to the research endeavour’ (p. 108).

In my own case, the kinds of distancing referred to above have not been possible, given that my closest friendships—being my partner and my ‘family of choice’⁵—are (and remain) part of my field of inquiry. Therefore, even when I momentarily disengage from the broader field, my close personal relationships mean that I remain secondarily connected due to the company kept by those close to me and the social activities they engage in and often relay to me in general friendly conversation. However, I believe I have still managed to achieve clarity of vision in a way more closely related to Bennett’s (2003) perspective. In his review of the uses of insider knowledge, he proposes the necessary “unlearning”, or at least the objectification, of those “taken for granted” attitudes and values’, a process that he suggests will ‘play a role in effecting a distance between the researcher and the researched’ (p. 190).

Unlearning the familiar was a process that took some practice, but was not impossible. The most difficult part is identifying that which is taken for granted, and in the case of my research, one thing (among others I am sure) that I have definitely overlooked, until now, has been friendship. The structure of friendships and the various ‘family of choice’ groupings (other than my own) that exist within the local queer scene I have been studying only began to appear distinct and unique to me part way through my fieldwork. The way my friends—and it would seem other intimate friendship groupings—relate to each other was so ‘natural’ to me that it had almost become invisible, so much so that I have years’ worth of field notes and interviews (most of which I conducted as a doctoral candidate) in which friendship is never mentioned. Self-critique and reflexivity have allowed me to gain some distance from the familiar and unlearn the seemingly natural ways of my own behaviour and that of my friends. This process did not require me to put any emotional or physical distance between the field, my friends and me, but rather, it was a process of looking ‘inward’ to the self—self-objectification—that allowed me to see ‘inside’ culture more clearly. Choosing to see myself, my social actions, interactions and performances as part of the phenomena under investigation and not as someone distinct from it, grounded me in the field, which in turn magnified self-other interactions and made possible observation and critique of the seemingly mundane, thus assisting to relieve insider myopia.

The research context that I have discussed herein is inevitably shifting, and at times unpredictable, thus making it almost impossible to implement anything that resembles a systematic strategic response to the aforementioned ethical dilemmas. The most constant form of effective ethical management that I have used has been to offer my informants the opportunity to review their transcripts, allowing them to add or to revoke anything that has been said in the interview context, and to view my written work in which they are cited and interpreted prior to submission for publication. As I discuss in the following section, this does not always mean that my informants choose to engage with, and in some cases even read the work, they are sent. However, this is the only systematic strategy that I have found to be useful in terms of dealing with concerns around informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, exposure and insider blindness in the challenging and at times, rather confronting, ethical contexts of ‘intimate insider’ research.

Reshaping Relationality

My choice to become an intimate insider researcher was driven by my desire to understand the queer cultural milieu. In the beginning, as a doctoral candidate, I was naively unaware of the significant and irreversible effect this would have on my role and relationships within the local scenes I chose to study. Now, after six years of playing this part, I have become more aware of the trappings associated with my situation, trappings that ethnographers such as Zinn (1979), Stacey (1996), Behar (1995) and DeLyser (2001) have previously warned of. The gender and sexual identity politics as well as the cultural artefacts that I have scrutinised in the process of my work have, at times, caused friction between friends, putting personal distance between myself and others who were once close to me while also making some others closer. At times I have sensed resentment from someone who has felt that I have shown favouritism by formally interviewing one person and not another, while on other occasions I have sensed people's need to 'talk up' the value of their social role and cultural activities to me, as if to say, 'this is what you should write about me', or by way of suggesting that I should write about what they do, or acknowledge their opinion as authoritative. Fortunately, these situations have been minimal and easily managed with courtesy and diplomacy.

As a researcher who identifies and participates socially within queer culture, I believe that I am at an advantage, as there seems to be a level of admiration for critical thinking and scholarship among the queer scene in which I have conducted most of my research. In September 2007, March 2008 and July 2009 I delivered public lectures in Brisbane around the topic of queer culture and politics, drawing, in each case, on my research and experiences of local queer culture. With each lecture more people from the queer community attended. The discussions during question time became more animated and more people contacted me via email and through social networking sites after the events, usually with follow-up comments, self-introductions, criticisms and thanks. With each year that passed, I had become acquainted with more people and had developed closer friendships within the community. Upon reflection, it has become evident to me that the increasing level of community participation in such discussions coincides with an increase in the friendships I share with many people who are part of the queer community. Friendship, it would seem, has encouraged participation in my work outside of the formalised processes of interviewing and observation where this type of research participation has become part of the local queer cultural processes. Moreover, using the words of, and referring to the products of, local queer culture-makers in the public lecture format has notably affected feelings of ownership over my work. Given the nature of academic writing and the length of academic documents, I have found that on the occasions when I have sent copies of my written work to those who were involved in the research processes, the majority of people, including my close friends, only respond with a note of thanks rather than a comment about the document's content. By contrast, public forums have generated vibrant discussions around the themes of my work.

I have acquired a greater level of personal and professional respect for working with, writing the histories, recording and critiquing the cultural output of the people amongst whom I 'play'—my friends. In early 2009, following the completion of my Ph.D., I staged an event and around 150 people from the queer scene and beyond came to celebrate with me, some of them—particularly those to whom I am closest—offering their various skills and time to assist with the coordination and execution of the celebration. It was a great demonstration of mutual exchange and role adaptation, where I as a researcher was, for the first time, able to orchestrate an event which directly contributed to the collective experiences of scene participants, demonstrating my multiple social roles: participant, participant-observer, documenter and culture-maker. This celebration was a chance for me to facilitate the making of queer space in which queer (and non-queer) identities were performed and celebrated for the night: a chance to make space for the enactment of queer culture through music and dancing.

With regards to my closest friends, the shift from friend to researcher and back again can be challenging. At times I found it difficult to decipher that which I knew of people in time spent as friends with that which was said to me in the designated time as social researcher. Confusion over my role within and outside of my friendship group has also been implicitly remarked upon by my friends as they have passed comments to the effect of, ‘oops, I’d better be careful or that will turn up in her next paper’, or ‘given what you have written about me, I’ll never be able to go into politics’. While always said in jest, such remarks reveal a level of awareness regarding their vulnerability and the power dynamics of the friend-informant relationship.

The mixed experiences evident in the existing literature coupled with my detailed account of friendships in social research suggest only one certainty; that is, such encounters in the field will always be personal and partial, dependent on a great number of factors that cannot be prescribed, measured, calculated, estimated or anticipated prior to the engagement. As researchers, we have no handbook or manual to follow, no precise way of orchestrating such engagements to ensure a mutually beneficial outcome. To guide us in our research, we must equally value and rely upon our strength of character, goodwill, our gut instincts and emotional intelligence as we do our formal training. Accounts such as this one and those cited here may help us make informed decisions about how we negotiate friendship in the field, but inevitably, we must not only think but also feel our way empathetically in the field. As an insider researcher, but particularly as an intimate insider, ‘the field’ is not only my site of work and learning, but it is my place of personal belonging, comfort, trust, friendship and love. The fragmentations of self in this instance are multiple and the ethical negotiations are complex, but as I have demonstrated here, the benefits of conducting research from an intimate insider position can be great.

¹ Queer theory (see Butler 1990, 1993; Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003) demonstrates that the binary and mutually exclusive logics of male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual lack the necessary fluidity to account for much of human gender and sexual identity. Moreover, terms such as lesbian and gay often imply a connection to politics, style and culture and many of my informants were uncomfortable identifying in this way.

² The names of all respondents have been changed to protect their identities.

³ Bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism.

⁴ Sociology and social psychology have various theories that rationalise the formation of friendships and other relationships. Most notably these include: social exchange theory, equity theory, relational dialectics, and interpersonal attraction (see for example Cramer, 1998; Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000).

⁵ A ‘family of choice’ refers to a voluntary relationship, often among queer identified people. Where intense emotional connections exist, a group of individuals may consider themselves to be a family in the absence of legal and/or biological connection (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001).

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