



WORKSHOP ABSTRACT

Back in the closet? Doing ethnographic fieldwork as a queer person

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Abstract: This workshop aims to delve into the multifaceted experiences and challenges encountered by queer ethnographers engaged in fieldwork, particularly within contexts permeated by queerphobia. By examining the intricate interplay of sexuality, gender, race, class, and ethnicity, the workshop seeks to unravel the complex dynamics shaping data collection, reflection, and interpretation in research settings. Building upon the notion of participant observation as an embodied activity (Coffey 1999; Okely 2007), we explore how queer researchers navigate their identities within the field, often facing initial categorization based on gender and sexuality. Despite extensive literature on the female experience in fieldwork, the perspectives of queer ethnographers remain relatively overlooked.

Central to our discussion is the exploration of what it means to conduct ethnography as a queer person, especially when immersed in environments hostile to queer identities. We interrogate how gender and sexuality influence the researcher's positionality. Drawing upon La Pastina's (2006) notion of returning to the closet during fieldwork, we delve into the complexities of negotiating visibility and safety while maintaining academic integrity.

The workshop invites contributions that critically engage with questions of ethics, rapport-building, and research strategies employed by queer ethnographers to navigate their fieldwork. Emphasizing intersectional perspectives, we aim to foster a dialogue that recognizes the entanglement of sexuality and gender with other axes of identity and power.

To cultivate a safe space for discussion, all participants will remain anonymous in public communication, including the names of conveners. The workshop welcomes diverse theoretical and methodological contributions from both younger and experienced scholars, including papers, field experiences, performances, and other creative forms of expression.

SESSION SCHEDULE

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 3 | Room 3

Anonymous: Being a Mehmaan: Navigating trans-ness during ethnographic fieldwork in South Asia

Anonymous: Abstract not published

Anonymous: Abstract not published

Wednesday, September 25, 2024 | Slot 4 | Room 3

Anonymous: Navigating Hostility: The Experiences of a Queer Ethnographer Amidst TERFs and Trans Allies in Scotland

Anonymous: Chameleon Ethnography: Fugitive Research under Surveillance

Anonymous: White Lies or Illegal Truth? A Self-Presentation and Group Integration Workshop

SESSION PAPERS

Being a Mehmaan: Navigating trans-ness during ethnographic fieldwork in South Asia

I am a transmasculine nonbinary PhD student, researching energy access programs for displaced people in India. Doing ethnographic fieldwork in my native country for a year would mean not being able to access gender affirming care. Post colonial cis-heteronormative society in India performs gender in binary ways that isolates genderqueer people. To be taken seriously, and to reduce chances of harm, I would have to adhere to some semblance of binary-ness, hinging towards the sex assigned to me at birth. Trying to adhere to gender norms eventually resulted in an emotional breakdown quite early in my fieldwork, when I came back from a bureaucratic office one day, feeling humiliated at presenting my gender in a cis-normative way and being referred to as “madam” (out of well-meaning courtesy) way too many times. When such tight bounds of cis-binary social norms offer little leeway for being open about one’s gender identity, conversational gender-neutral languages can provide affordances of respite. This is the respite I got when I stayed with displaced people of Tengaguri village, who spoke a dialect of the Bengali language, and lovingly called me “Mehmaan”, a gender-neutral term, meaning “guest”.

Doing fieldwork as a Mehmaan, provided me with affordances of performing gender in fluid ways – whether of dipping out of single-sex spaces or attending social events while maintaining my internal boundaries of gender presentation. Understanding this at the intersection of religion and class location provides further nuance. In this paper, I discuss what it means to be a guest in a cis-het world through the lens of language, use of physical spaces, gender presentation and performance. I further ask the question of what a sense of belonging can mean while doing fieldwork, when an ethnographer is compelled to sever ties with interlocutors as they medically transition post-fieldwork.

Navigating Hostility: The Experiences of a Queer Ethnographer Amidst TERFs and Trans Allies in Scotland

This paper delves into the complex experiences of conducting ethnographic research as a queer ethnographer within the polarised context of TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) and trans allies in Scotland. My fieldwork was divided between these two groups, revealing stark contrasts in queerphobia and attitudes towards transgender inclusivity. One group I conducted fieldwork with underwent a noticeable radicalisation

into TERF ideology. Early in my research with them, one of their member's transphobic comments escalated, culminating in the group attending a so-called 'women's rights conference', which was, in reality, a TERF conference.

As a queer anthropologist (she/they, bisexual), attending this conference was one of the most harrowing experiences of my fieldwork. I encountered blatant hostility from attendees who assumed I was cis, straight, and in alignment with their views, making me feel profoundly unsafe. I also encountered there a globally famous transphobic author, intensifying the need to stay firmly in the closet for my safety. Throughout fieldwork, I faced ongoing categorisation based on my gender and perceived sexuality, influencing my interactions and data collection. My Armenian ethnic identity added another layer of complexity to these interactions and fieldwork experiences.

In contrast, many other research participants were outspoken LGBTQAI+ allies or queer themselves, providing a supportive environment. This dichotomy highlights the multifaceted challenges that queer ethnographers face in hostile settings.

This paper critically engages with questions of ethics, rapport-building, and the strategies employed by queer ethnographers to navigate fieldwork. It explores how I managed personal safety and academic integrity while conducting research in such polarised environments. By examining these experiences, I discuss the broader implications of ethnographic practice and emphasise the importance of acknowledging the researcher's positionality. This paper contributes to the discourse on queer ethnography, highlighting the need for methodological reflexivity and support systems for queer researchers in hostile environments

Chameleon Ethnography: Fugitive Research under Surveillance

In recent years, Kurdish lubunyas ("queer/trans" in LGBTI lingo) have been under an increasingly intensive, extensive and sophisticated regime of surveillance for their involvement in Kurdish and LGBTI movements, cruising in public spaces, and sex work, all in a context of state-sponsored stoking of fears of national disintegration (read: Kurdish separatism) and moral degeneration (read: threats to the family and 'laxity' regarding sexual 'depravity'). Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic study with Kurdish lubunyas in various key sites and locations in Istanbul and Amed, Turkey, in this paper, I explore challenges, dilemmas, and possibilities queer scholars may experience in securitized sociopolitical contexts.

Employing key concepts used by Kurdish lubunyas in their intimate encounters and everyday lives, such as "chameleonhood" – quickly adapting to situations by "posing" in another's identity – and "bedel" (debt), the powerful feelings that connect (lubunya) Kurds to their national struggle, I scrutinize cis-heteronormative anthropological assumptions and concerns surrounding queer ethnographic methods that embrace and employ adaptability, intimacy, care, and "going stealth" in response to shifting contexts of security and ethics in the field. Specifically, I explore: 1) Fugitive and affective ethnographic methods necessary to navigate and protect the researcher and informants from unprecedented contexts of security (state-sponsored securitization, everyday homophobia and transphobia, precarity, and the Covid-19 pandemic). 2) Shifting

contexts of ethics (responsibility, anonymity, reflexivity, accountability, and what we owe to our informants and their struggles) in conducting queer ethnographic research. The concept of "bedel" underscores the deep emotional and ethical connections formed during fieldwork.

Grounded in queer of color critique, decolonial scholarship, and critical anthropology, this paper argues for a radically adaptive methodology that is attuned to, and reflexive about, the implications of the heteronormative and objectivist distance and boundaries established between the researcher and the researched, particularly in high-risk and marginalized sociopolitical contexts.

White Lies or Illegal Truth? A Self-Presentation and Group Integration Workshop

As an independent young researcher, I aim to study how artisan-owned platform cooperatives in Morocco drive social and economic transformation and reduce inequalities. Specifically, I will explore how social relationships and practices within digital cooperatives promote gender equality and sustainability. The goal is to examine the gendered and technological epistemologies of entrepreneurship in "other economies" (Hobbis, 2021). I will achieve this by integrating feminist participatory methods (Maguire, 1996) and action-oriented qualitative methods into cooperative business research (Greenwood et al., 1992).

The significance of my study lies in a robust collaborative approach, which, in feminist terms, means developing authentic relationships, creating a more equitable distribution of power, and demystifying research to make it accessible to underrepresented communities (Guy & Arthur, 2021). To do this, I must build trust and respect with the participants and community members. However, as a queer scholar privately involved in a same-sex relationship, I face challenges in Morocco, where same-sex "activities" are illegal and punishable by law—article 489 of the Moroccan Penal Code.

Given this context, I am questioning: How can I dismantle the power imbalance between researcher and research while protecting my safety? What does it mean to build authentic relationships with others while being honest about my sexual and gender identity?

Following the Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, I propose a self-presentation and group integration workshop. The goal is to test ideas and practices on disclosing identities and discussing (possibly) clashing perspectives that might affect the researcher's entry into the field. As Frisby et al. (2009) noted, action research enhances feminist theory-building by including individuals typically excluded from traditional theory production methods. Incorporating the researcher's sexual identity into discussions about equality could open up new opportunities for knowledge production.