

Negotiating the field: rethinking ethnographic authority, experience and the frontiers of research

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Begonya Enguix

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain

Abstract

This article derives from my own fieldwork experience as a female anthropologist working in the field of gender and male sexual dissidence. Taking my early fieldwork in the 1990s as a departure point, and drawing on my recent fieldwork with Spanish Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual and Bisexual activists, I reflect on the researcher's position, both in the field and in the construction of the field, through a discussion on ethnographic authority and management of the roles of insider/outsider. In adopting a critical perspective, I propose that the position of the researcher and of other actors in these social situations be continually and thoroughly negotiated, thus revealing the flexibility of the frontiers of/in research. This negotiation of positions is related to the complex process by which anthropological 'difference' is constructed, and to the dynamic configurations of ethnographic 'objects' and 'subjects' in fieldwork. Positions, alterations, intersections and negotiations are seen to be permeated by the rational and the emotional construction of 'otherness'.

Keywords

authority, experience, fieldwork, frontiers, negotiation

A reflexive anthropologist: setting the field

There is a fairly widespread consensus that the existence of a generalized crisis in the social sciences in the 1980s (particularly in ethnography) resulted in the adoption of reflexive perspectives on the role of the researcher. Reflexivity implied an in-depth analysis of issues such as the negotiation of gender (anticipated by feminist ethnography), complicity, neutrality, ethnographic authority, emotion and more flexible definitions for the roles of outsider/insider, among others (see Clifford, 1988; Clifford and Marcus,

Corresponding author:

Begonya Enguix, Department of Arts and Humanities, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Av. Tibidabo 39-43, 08035 Barcelona, Spain.

Email: benguix@uoc.edu

1991; Lassiter and Campbell, 2010; Marcus, 1997; Sherif, 2001; Spencer, 2009). Such questions have been discussed with some frequency since then, and the resultant texts show that the way in which these issues are experienced and dealt with, alongside the different practices they enact, vary depending on the researcher and on the contexts in which they have conducted their research.

Goffman, recorded in an informal and casual conversation that was published in 1989, said of participant observation:

It's one (technique) of getting data, it seems to me, by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation or whatever. (p. 125)

The sum of one's self, one's body, one's personality and one's social situation, in addition to a set of contingencies, paints a detailed picture of what immersion in the field means. They are, thus, the elements with which I illustrate my steps as a researcher in the field of Gender and Sexuality.

My first contacts with gay sexualities and masculinities came at the very end of the 1980s, and, as often happens, these initial encounters were relatively haphazard. I had homosexual friends (now, 'gays') and I was curious about their way of life. This personal interest converged with a particular academic and scientific context that made it possible to conduct this kind of interrogatory research for the first time. The context of the late 1980s and early 1990s is distinct from that of current policies of knowledge (see Lancaster and Di Leonardo, 1997: 5). The then-emerging anthropology of (homo) sexuality was associated with medical and deviant perspectives, and there were only a few anthropologists working in this field in Spain (Nieto, Cardin, Guasch and the author).¹ In 1989, I began participating in the meetings of Col·lectiu Lambda in Valencia, a Lesbian, Gay, Transsexual and Bisexual (LGTB) association that still exists. I introduced myself to the eight or nine people – mostly men – who attended these meetings as an anthropology student who was interested in male homosexuality. The role of a student is a particularly neutral and unthreatening one, and I felt warmly welcomed. However, how seriously I cannot say, the possibility that I might be a 'spy' was an issue raised every now and then. Once in a while, I led conferences relating my 'discoveries'. As I considered activism a relevant category, five members of the group became my informants. Some of them also became my friends.

The fact that I was (and still am) a woman observing a male universe never seemed particularly relevant to me: it could (and still can) be labelled as an 'irregularity' in a field of studies that, in the European context at least, tends to be highly influenced by the gender and sexuality of the researcher. This 'irregularity' is related to the process of construction of the field, and to the construction of frontiers between object and subject (researcher and informant), a point that I will develop further below.

I was, however, a 'particular' kind of woman, familiar with gay men. This derived from the composition of my social networks, which provided me with godfathers, intermediaries and guardians who facilitated and secured my presence in the field (see Hammersley and

Atkinson, 2001). My position in the field was one both close to and distant from the other actors. While we shared logics of thought, context, representations and values, we were worlds apart with regards to gender, sexuality and sociability. This dual position facilitated my 'strangeness', allowing me to distinguish between brokers, custodians, informants and collaborators (Gil, 2010) on the one hand, and friends on the other.

I am currently working on the LGTB Pride celebrations in Spain, with a special emphasis placed on the Madrid Pride celebrations. In the different places in which I am conducting my studies, the organization of these events is assumed by three social actors (institutions; city councils, councils and the like, LGTB associations and LGTB entrepreneurship). The equilibrium between these acting groups is unstable, and their importance varies according to the context. This fieldwork has led me to conduct interviews across the board of LGTB activism, with businessmen and with representatives of institutions. I believe that without my previous 'experience', access to this powerful network of relations would have been limited and/or different.

The black box of a stranded anthropologist

Being 'stranged' implies being both interested and surprised by the way in which others interpret or act within their sociocultural world. The key to 'strangeness' is the ability to perceive diversity and difference, even in apparently familiar contexts. Strangeness is part of the 'black box' of the research process (Velasco and Díaz de Rada, 1997) and prevents anthropologists from assuming 'common-sense' misconceptions about the use of ethnography (Forsythe, 1999: 130). Male homosexuality undoubtedly fulfilled that requirement for me: it was at once my immediate context, yet I also saw it as being alien to me. I've never felt the need to change my appearance or my habits in an attempt to dilute my differences from my study group, as my difference is ostensible and evident. However, I am sure that the way in which I have presented myself has been an important factor in my being accepted in the field (Goffman, 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2001). However, the sum of the intangible and tangible features that constitute me as a particular kind of woman is very important. Yet, neither in the 1990s nor now have I faced major problems in accessing the field or in communicating with potential informants, two situations that are fundamental in defining the field (Mazzei and O'Brien, 2009: 358).

In this second phase of research, my 'godfather' in COGAM (*Colectivo de Lesbianas, Gays, Transexuales y Bisexuales de Madrid*)² suggests who I should speak to and facilitates contacts statewide. The people I interview, in turn, provide me with other contacts. Frequently, this takes place at the beginning of the interview without them knowing exactly what the interview will entail and their generosity in this respect is flattering. The network/snowball system has proved to be the most effective means by which I could identify potential informants, both in the 90s and nowadays. It appears that I have not had to face more difficulties than those naturally arising from requesting an interview with extremely busy people.

My fieldwork is now multi-local with broad goals that Lassiter and Campbell (2010: 760) listed as including dialogue, reflexivity, cultural criticism and scientific knowledge. It is also based on continuous negotiations at various levels.

Negotiating authority and experience in the field

Ethnographic authority has been strongly undermined by post-modern positions that cast doubt on any discourse having a privileged place (Sherif, 2001: 173). Nowadays, the collaborative and dialogical relationships derived from Bakhtin's ideas of polyphony and dialogism, as an alternative to monological authority (Marcus, 1997: 91–92), are privileged ones. In his canonical text on ethnographic authority, Clifford (1983) considered that precisely because it is difficult to systematize, 'experience' serves as an effective guarantee of ethnographic authority. This is certainly true in my case.

Speaking for myself, experience has proven relevant as a category for negotiating positions in the field, as it is considered by my informants as a 'guarantee' of (my) 'neutrality' (their words). Before interviewing leaders or politicians, for example, I am usually asked to explain who I am. I also start all my interviews with a detailed account of my experience (and relevant publications) in the field. Without a doubt, this 'exposition' can be considered a strategy to legitimate my role as researcher and also generate empathy with my interviewee. As long as I believe that there is a substantial amount of information that anthropologists cannot control – particularly between certain 'elites' (such as the presidents of LGTB associations) that function as a network of exchange of information that includes information about researchers – it is important to manage one's presentation, to use the Goffmanian expression. Experience and empathy are strategic for securing further interviews.

Authorities are not stable but negotiable, and negotiated: the position of the actors is different depending on the time, the situation, the circumstances of the interaction and the discourses that are rendered relevant. My dependence on my 'informants' and my need for their collaboration often places me in a non-authoritative or even a disadvantageous position. Whereas in interviews I hold ethnographic authority – my informants often consider my career, my analytical intentions and, most particularly, my access to different voices as a guarantee – in other social situations, my 'authority' is reduced (especially in situations of observation during Pride celebrations, in which the LGTB leaders I interviewed occupy social positions of privilege and power).

In my experience, authority can be managed in diverse ways. When I interview a top activist or a politician, I do not feel that I 'posses' authority. However, if previous to the interview, they ask for some of my publications, my previous 'experience' acts as a means of legitimizing me, turning my voice into an 'expert' voice and thus conferring it some kind of authority. Furthermore, quite often I am not only invested with authority but required authority too. Some of my collaborators, informants and friends believe that 'I have more context', 'more data' and thus 'more perspective' than they have (their words), and often ask me for answers. The construction of authority through expertise is a collaborative project, in which natives participate to a greater extent than the researcher does.

'Authority' does not imply superiority in the field: the equation between authority and superiority is a false equation, as such positions are relative and negotiable. I also believe that holding authority does not automatically construct a hierarchical system of relations, and neither do my informants. 'Authorities' are negotiable and negotiated sources of

power and, additionally, are a source of productive and valuable exchange. In some ways, 'authority' can be considered to be a commodity because of its value of exchange for social actors.

Negotiating data, neutrality and empathy

As Cohen (2000: 317) explains, anthropologists are left out of certain events, are not told the 'truth' and sometimes have access to confidential information that others are not privy to. The connections between intersubjectivities and neutrality are complex ones since they are influenced by the social roles and the personal biographies of those involved in the research (Cohen, 2000: 319–320). Using the aforementioned snowball sampling, while not knowing (nor controlling) the kind of and/or the amount of information that is in circulation about me, can pose a challenge to my research. As all LGTB leaders know each other, introducing someone 'on behalf of' can make an excellent introduction but only as long as I manage my data carefully. The negotiation of the data – particularly those gleaned from previous interviews with other leaders – is a delicate matter: one must manage the complicity of revealing previously obtained data as well as taking into account the confidentiality implied in fieldwork. In negotiating data, complicity and confidentiality are intertwined with telling and silencing some details of the previous interviews. Complicity and confidentiality are necessary skills in my context of research, so I always ask for permission to quote the interviews.

I have never been interrogated about what I would use the data for, nor have I ever been asked to produce a specific type of information. This is probably because, as I have previously stated, my 'neutral' status is taken for granted. Complicity, confidentiality, neutrality and empathy are all related to emotion (Kirschner, 1987; Holland, 2007), and to the commodification of emotion within sociological research (Duncombe and Jessop, 2002; cited in Watts, 2008: 8). They illustrate the intertwining of reason and emotion in fieldwork.

Even though many scholars – Rabinow and Sullivan, among others – have denied the importance of empathy in obtaining data (cited in Kirschner, 1987: 213), in my opinion and in my experience, the empathy granted to me by my research history, my presentation and my social network favours a particular position in the field that in turn facilitates the obtaining of data.

The boundaries between empathy, friendship and procurement/production of data and their ethical implications, make neutrality problematic.³ Over the years, I have consciously or unconsciously used strategies to keep the members of my personal networks as far from my research as they have desired to be. Friendship goes well beyond empathy in its suggestion of commitment, knowledge, trust and such emotional and intellectual implications. In my experience, however, empathy and friendship are sometimes very closely related. Both are relevant in managing professional matters and personal relationships, and for negotiating the limits of fieldwork, it is important to mark a boundary between them. Let me give you an example. A short while ago, I had dinner with some friends. After dinner, we met some other friends of theirs at a bar, most of them gay men. They did not know me personally but had heard about me. One of them asked me, 'did you come to study us?'. I was holding a drink and answered, 'I just came to have a drink.

I am not at work 24 hours a day, and if I were, I would certainly have warned you about it first’.

In this particular context, the negotiation of the limits of research must consider professional ethics and the preservation of friendship. Only one of my friends became (voluntarily) an informant with a role as such. However, I enjoy direct and/or indirect access to much information. The exchange of professional information between friends flows naturally in any context, and in this particular case, I see no exception. In my research on pride events, for example, unspecific comments that my friends may make should be systematized for use. And in the case of my friends, I do not carry on the exercise of systematization and certainly would not do so without their prior consent.

Negotiating gender and sexuality: the roles of insiders and outsiders

Thousands of pages, many of them from a feminist perspective, have been written on the importance of the researchers’ personal characteristics and the influence they have on their research (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Gregorio, 2006; Skeggs, 2009; Stacey, 1988).⁴ The social and intellectual characteristics of the researcher are considered crucial to the investigation, but we must ask, as Brandes (2008) did, if we can consider that gender automatically confers advantages or constraints to the production of data (p. 145). Most publications these days consider that the influence of gender must be contextualized, that is, related directly to the kind of societies that are being studied (Brandes, 2008). Gender matters, but knowledge also matters. Mazzei and O’Brien (2009), who have performed a detailed analysis of this issue, believe that

the field setting determines which of a researcher’s ‘key attributes’ are most important and that socially constructed meanings, ‘scripts’, are attached to these and other attributes – be they gender, race, national origin, or other group cleavages. These scripts contain messages about what individuals in particular groups – female, Latina, white, black-female, American, male, gay white male, etcetera – are ‘typically like’, and therefore what is expected of them (Ansell, 2001: 105–106). (p. 360)

Gender is not a stable category and is intersected by many other categories; gender is situated and when intersected with ethnicity is often less relevant than ethnicity (Stanley and Slattery, 2003). As Li (2008) points out, gender is important, culture is important and age is significant. As a result of this intersectional and complex approach, the idea that gender on its own determines the researchers’ position in the field and procures his or her ‘belonging’ to the social group must be problematized, as sharing a trait with the social group does not automatically enact all the mechanisms of ‘identity’ with that group. In the case of women, the idea that to understand women one needs to be a woman relies on the implicit existence of some kind of feminine empathy or ‘universal womanhood’ (Strathern, 1981), a reminiscence of an essentialist, naturalized and reified old-fashioned idea that, on occasions, is still associated inherently with gender categories (see Gregorio, 2006: 26). Tinker and Armstrong (2008) point out these views:

A key problem with ideas of insiders and outsiders is that they essentialise categories, overlooking the significant differences within as well as between groups, and failing to take account of the flexible and multifaceted nature of identity. Researchers can differ from, or be similar to, the people they are researching in a variety of ways: age, caste, ethnicity, religious belief, physical ability, personality, sexuality, and class to name but a few. A similarity in one of these spheres does not necessarily make an insider, just as a difference in one area does not necessarily make an outsider. Researchers are always both insiders and outsiders in every research setting, and are likely to oscillate between these positions as they move in and out of similarity and difference, both within and between interviews. (pp. 53–54)

Weber, Simmel and Merton would also comply with the aphorism that ‘one need not be Caesar to understand Caesar’ (cited in Ergun and Erdemir, 2010: 17). As Ergun and Erdemir (2010) state, ‘the insider-outsider relationship can be conceived as a dialectical one that is continuously informed by the differentiating perceptions that researchers and informants have of themselves and others’ (p. 16). Forsythe (1999) adds that being an insider does not guarantee accurate observation (p. 130).

For many years, it was believed that women enjoyed a privileged position in research because they could access both the masculine and the feminine spheres as they were transformed, somehow, during the fieldwork into ‘social hermaphrodites’ (Brandes, 2008: 145–146). Ergun and Erdemir (2010) claim that female researchers tend to be overprotected and not taken seriously (p. 30). Yet, in the case of Laura L Adams’ (1999) fieldwork among elites in Uzbekistan, she felt like a ‘pet’ researcher adopted by the more powerful group as a result of her consideration as a foreigner, rather than her consideration as a woman.

In masculine contexts, it can be difficult for women to be treated as equals, although their consideration as ‘harmless’ can actually favour fieldwork. In gay settings, women can also be ‘a-sexualized’ and ‘de-eroticized’, thus freeing fieldwork from all kinds of sexual tensions. This in turn stresses other elements of identification with the ‘others’, such as empathy or experience. In fact, women are being increasingly recognized as an important element in the socio-historic fight for LGTB rights.⁵

In gay imaginaries, there are certain women who are symbolically positioned as being close to gays: the term ‘fag hag’ was invented to refer to women who associate mostly, or exclusively, with gay and bisexual men, and/or who have gay and bisexual men as their close friends. Whereas ‘safety’ and the benefits of non-overtly sexualized relationships are given as reasons by so-called fag hags to explain their status, we have little information about why gay men may themselves relate to particular women. A respondent once told me that these women were usually beautiful ones that empowered gay men through their company and enjoyed ‘safe’ contexts of interaction.

I guess I can be labelled as a ‘fag hag’, and the interstitial position this status grants me has enabled me to avoid feeling like a ‘pet researcher’. However, I have had to face misogynistic discourses regarding the need to belong to the group that I have managed to overcome resituating gender, sex and sexuality as attributes that have nothing to do with intellectual potentials and capacities. Gender by itself does not exhaust (nor define) the researcher and neither do other personal attributes in isolation: ‘it remains important to stress the value of *analytic* ethnography, and that the goals of analysis and theorizing are too often lost to sight in contemporary fashions

for subjective and evocative ethnographic work' (Atkinson, 2006: 400). I agree that 'the personal is political, but the personal does not exhaust or subsume all aspects of the political' (Atkinson, 2006: 403). The personal includes gender and sexuality. Both can be determining, influential and even shocking, but they neither limit nor prevent knowledge or understanding because knowledge and understanding are based on analytical training and intentions.

Gender and sexuality are situated, flexible and contextual categories that can be either determinant or invisible. For my particular position in the field,⁶ they are important. In the early years of my research, gender was central in the definition of myself in research contexts (most people actually showed surprise at encountering a woman studying male homosexuality). Nowadays, I am sometimes questioned about my own sexuality. Whether this shift obeys to less misogyny in the field, to greater visibility or to the empowerment of lesbians, I will not go into it now, as it would stray from the objectives of this article. My status as a woman is obvious, whereas my sexuality is a 'hidden' attribute that only intrigues some respondents and, in fact, questions about my sexuality rarely arise in research contexts.

As I said before (Enguix, 1996: 16), and as Atkinson (2006) also makes clear, intellectual capacities are not dependent upon gender and sexuality but upon the distribution of power between genders and sexualities, and that is a cultural construction. While I am conducting fieldwork, my professional skills and status, along with my personality, become the cornerstones of my 'being there', and other categories are apparently considered irrelevant. But, admittedly, in my awareness of the discourses on insider/outsider positions, my gender and sexual difference do sometimes generate a sense of personal discomfort. However, this is probably connected to the possibility of being disqualified or challenged due to my failure to 'belong' to the 'community' in this peculiar field of research.

As I mentioned earlier, much has been said about the researcher necessarily belonging to the social group that he or she is investigating in order to genuinely understand its members' experiences. This is particularly applied to communities that are disadvantaged or disempowered: women, religious and ethnic minorities and disabled people have all criticized research undertaken by 'outsiders' who fail to comprehend or accurately represent their experiences. Most social researchers in gender and sexuality studies (LGTB or queer studies included) are 'insiders' and thus part of the 'community'. This 'insider' status is productive: the field produces research, while the researchers produce the field. It has been this way for some years now. This is a peculiarity of this field that is not shared by other fields such as political or economic anthropology, kinship studies, migration studies and so on, so it is worth commenting on. In my opinion, the argument that LGTB researchers have 'experienced' stigma becomes irrelevant when considered on its own, as other disadvantaged groups like migrants or ethnic minorities have also been stigmatized in Europe and the studies about them are not monopolized by 'native' scientific production. We should also consider that as a result of historic fights for equal rights, gender and sexuality dissidents have attained a higher social status than that of migrants and, subsequently, a greater sense of empowerment, and access to knowledge and knowledge production. Alongside, and probably connected to empowerment, there exists an over-signification of gender and sexuality that has pervaded

policies of knowledge. The reasons for this over-signification are more complex than a mere history of subordination and the annihilation of women and sexual dissidents. Yet again, further discussion would go beyond the objectives of this article.

Sexual dissidence is a hidden attribute that cannot be observed by the naked eye. In sexuality, unlike ethnicity, 'difference' is generally invisible (this, despite a stereotype claiming the existence of 'recognizable' types of homosexuals). Difference is constructed through body and textual discourse and through practice, action and/or desire. It is through discourse and activism that dissident researchers make their status explicit. This causes a double-bind in relation to the production of knowledge: social scientists who study gays and lesbians are, generally, gays and lesbians and so anybody who studies gays and lesbians is labelled as an insider. This process is developed both from the 'inside' of research and from the 'outside' of research on this field, thus configuring and limiting the field. The transition from 'is' (belonging to the group) to 'must or should be' (one must belong to the group) is problematic and should be urgently problematized because it is part of a process of stigmatization and delegitimation of some objects of study (and some subjects). It constructs frontiers between legitimate fields of research on the one hand and legitimizes some kinds of researchers on the other. The transition is also perverse because it derives moral imperatives and normative propositions from factual propositions, with important theoretical and methodological implications. There are no special attributes in these fields that prevent access, knowledge or understanding by any social scientist: the close association between the insider status and the production of knowledge (both among the natives and in the scholar contexts) can end up creating vicious spirals that can lead to the conclusion, for example, that gender is exclusively a women's issue and therefore is a women's problem, thus configuring hierarchical knowledge and research statuses.⁷

The perceived need for 'quasi-identification' between object and subject in these particular fields is based on deep-rooted essentialist and universalizing assumptions that consider that all sexual dissidents share a particular identity and common views due to the fact that they happen to be dissidents. Being part of the 'community' seems to grant 'automatic' access to the 'truth' about that community. The distance between these assumptions and other reified identities, such as the medicalized identities shaped in the 19th century, is a small one. Reductionism, simplification and reification condense the 'self' in an essential, self-fulfilling trait – sexual dissidence – that is thought of as determining. So, whereas on the inner processes the turn from 'is' to 'must be' can shape endogamic networks of authorized (authoritarian?) voices, disqualifying voices on the basis of 'not belonging', in wider contexts, some strains of scholarship consider that only dissidents can be interested in dissidence. Both processes share stigmatizing and marginalizing traits that undermine empowerment and knowledge. In the case of women, the truth of the matter is, as Grosz (1995) argues, that

women's experiences are as varied as men's. And on the other hand, to claim that women write only on the basis of their experience, and to claim that these experiences are only the result of women's patriarchal subordination (no others count), is to impose a present limit on women's writing: it must always remain reactive, a writing tied to oppression, based on resentment. (p. 15)

Much has been said about the 'advantages' of 'belonging', but it is not usual (with only a few exceptions) to discuss the positive effect of the status of 'outsider' (Tinker and Armstrong, 2008: 53): for me, being a woman working in the field of male homosexuality has had the same 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' as any other position. While it has awarded me a greater access to information on some issues, it has prevented my access to information in others: for example, it prevents me from entering certain bars and nightclubs and darkrooms, but it allows me to learn that women are not let in. From this prohibition, and the arguments that have accompanied it, I have always obtained valuable information on the construction of the borders and boundaries between the 'community' and the 'others'.

The category 'woman' (from which I cannot 'escape') and my sexuality could be seen as moments of 'exclusion' that have not prevented me from doing research: exclusions and inclusions, identifications and differences are negotiated, and many compensatory mechanisms function as validation of my presence in the field. Among these mechanisms, I would specially mention expertise, conducting ethnography (which is not perceived as a 'dangerous' activity), being (precisely) a woman in a masculine context and 'sharing' a past of oppression. After all these years, I've learnt that frontiers are always flexible, are re-thinkable and can be negotiated depending on the context of action.

In my particular case, I am sexually and 'genderly' speaking as an outsider, but my social network and my research turn me into a quasi-insider: my initial explanations before interviews are probably aimed to disclosing this 'intermediate' status.

I consider myself as a 'partial insider' (Sherif, 2001), and this status has granted me more occasions for research than exclusions, more 'advantages' than 'disadvantages', if these are the appropriate terms (p. 437). Working in masculine contexts (the 'strangest' from me in the anthropological sense) have freed my contacts with informants of sexual tension.⁸ My dual status prevents informants from feeling that 'they are being judged' (their words), help me 'get more detailed information' (so they believe) and favours a 'more critical perspective in analysis' (their words). Respondents seem to be delighted to collaborate with someone who does not belong yet who shares an 'open' mind: they do not need to distort information and they do not need to control attraction, they 'trust' me, both because I am different and because 'I know', after working on this field for a long time.

The process of research is infinitely layered and interwoven. Its borders are easily put into question as shifting and ambiguous identities challenge assumptions of oppositional subjectivities rooted in Western, binary thinking: 'Indigenous ethnographers and "partial insiders" raise questions about the boundaries of understanding and interpretation' (Sherif, 2001: 438). In consequence, I consider that the construction of the status of insider/outsider involves a process of negotiation based on shifting and unstable identities and identifications. Belonging to the community should no longer be considered a critical determinant of access to the field nor of qualified (authorized? legitimate?) research. All participants in the research process are active agents in negotiating the terms of belonging. Consequently, the researchers' abilities to position themselves appropriately in order to negotiate knowledge is a key feature in research.

Negotiating commitment and complicity

The anthropologist

is always on the verge of activism, of negotiating some kind of involvement beyond the distanced role of ethnographer, according to personal commitments that may or may not predate the project ... These are the questions that define the much more complicated ethical compass of contemporary fieldwork for which the past understanding of ethnography (in the throes of more abstract world historical forces) can no longer serve as an adequate frame of assessment. (Marcus, 1997: 100)

Ewing (cited in Winchatz, 2010: 353) reminds us that any encounter potentially engages multiple identities that manifest themselves in an array of competing discourses, each of which may constitute the speaking subject in a different matrix of power, meaning and practice. The individual seeks to both reveal and conceal at each stage of the conversation.

As it is shown by Geertz and his wife's presence in a cockfight during a police raid, complicity with social actors is an essential element for the exchange of information and for the acceptance of the researcher.⁹ In the case of research on activism, complicity can easily be converted into collaboration and/or commitment. In this sense, the position of the researcher in the field of activism is vulnerable as it leads the researchers to think about which should be their participation in the vindications that are under analysis and, thus, rewarding the information obtained. Commitment and/or collaboration adds another element to the configuration of the insider/outsider status.¹⁰

The personal implication in the universe under analysis is not a precondition for scientific or valid work, nor is it an imperative: Shanafelt (2002) does not share anything with the Amish people that he studies, and his position is often at odds to theirs. So too, Holmes has nothing in common with the Italian fascists (cited in Marcus, 1997). My quasi-insider status allows me sufficient proximity and distance from the universe I am studying; that 'distance', that I sometimes consider as an ambiguous or ambivalent position, is additionally stressed through my acquired status as a 'neutral' researcher. That 'neutrality' is often required of me (just as 'authority' is often required of me), differentiating me from other researchers who 'belong' to the community and have – or are perceived to have – stronger positions within this universe. In my case, my status is perceived of as a guarantee of 'unprejudiced analysis and opinion' (their words), and therefore, my interviews are generally welcomed without further commitment being asked for.

As in the case of authority, gender, sexuality and other key issues, the relationship between neutrality, commitment and 'belonging' – and, therefore, the construction and negotiation of borders – is also problematic. These tensions are complicated by the Spanish context.

There exist now in Spain critical voices that denounce the commercialization of the celebrations of LGTB Pride (Enguix, 2009): In the Madrid State demonstration, defined by activists in terms of 'strength' and 'power' (their words), more than a million people take to the streets. Yet, it is strongly criticized by some activists, who denounce that 'rights are not business'. Fragmentation in activism has a long history and is related to

the tensions between assimilationism and revolutionary stances in identity politics.¹¹ This complicates the questions about the meaning of being ‘committed to’ and/or becoming an ‘insider’ in activist terms and again problematizes the construction of categories; who is an insider and to whom? From which point of view? Which are the conditions for the construction of the category?

As the act of labelling someone as an insider requires active identification from previously labelled insiders, to be considered an insider implies ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ categories of identification, as well as an active definition of the characteristics of the group or action to which one must adapt. The difficulty in establishing stable and unitary categories of belonging is clear in the LGTB activist setting where belonging is not only simply being sexually similar but also remaining close to certain ideological positions that strongly oppose others.

Furthermore, the polarization of pride events around three social actors in their organization (activists, entrepreneurs and institutions) and to whom the researcher cannot be an insider (at least not to the three of them simultaneously), creates another difficulty. The researcher’s ability to negotiate his or her position among the actors and to manage the information received is definitely more fundamental than his or her definition of gender, sexuality or ideology in order to grant access to all sources of information, even the most reluctant.¹² The complex panorama stresses the tensions of the subtle game between the revelation and concealment of information by all actors, as noted by Ewing (cited in Winchatz, 2010: 353) and experienced in my interviews.

Pride events bring together money, activists, businessmen, entrepreneurs, activist–entrepreneurs, politicians, activist–politicians and other ‘embodied objectivities’ (Haraway, 1991), including the researcher’s. All these actors negotiate their insider/outsider status with fluidity. They negotiate their complex identities and their complex roles intersectionally. In consequence, the research process becomes a ‘situated’ process between positions and roles that are not stable but changing which makes it impossible to be a ‘full-time’ ‘insider’. To return to Goffman and his considerations on fieldwork, in research settings we encounter subjects, bodies, personalities and social positions in constant fluctuation and negotiation. All of them are embedded in dynamic categories subsumed in flexible boundaries.

Epilogue: between reason and emotion (the boundaries of difference)

The process of research implies a space of vulnerability, and no generalized nor transversal recipes can overcome this fact. Experience achieved through the ethnographic present, through ‘being there’, now entails more than having been part of, or having first-hand knowledge of, the realities that we study. Anthropologists have collaborated in the visibilization of previously invisible (or invisibilized) realities, and they also negotiate, through this positioning, with the defined policies of the appropriate, the intelligible and the thinkable, in particular socio-historical contexts. These policies define, question and reproduce the policies of the production of knowledge and of the relevant or irrelevant fields of knowledge. Through our work, we negotiate the limits of social interest,

social relevance and the possibility of understanding, and in my experience, this role we play is highly valued by the people we study.

Ethnography has proved to be a useful instrument for trespassing across the frontiers between different social groups. In my experience this is possible thanks to the *productive exchange* that occurs in fieldwork situations where collaboration and negotiation of meanings are constant.

The limits of 'ethnographic difference' (as enacted in the field) and the construction of the wider category of 'otherness' are inherently related to the construction of the categories of insider/outsider. I share with gays a past of discrimination and subordination in the face of hegemonic masculinities. We shared, and share, only a part of our world. In my view, complete identity or identification with a subject of study is impossible, and it is not – and should not be – a prerequisite of knowledge or of understanding. I do not know to what degree I am different (an outsider) or similar (an insider) and I am not sure of the advantages or disadvantages this implies. However, I believe that the construction of difference and the status of insider and outsider are shaped in the process of research through punctual interactions and negotiations among the actors, and are not aprioristic statuses.

Objectivity and emotion are not at odds (Lerum, 2001). In my opinion, **reason and emotion both shape the experience of fieldwork and the experience of belonging. Reason and emotion construct our idea of 'otherness'**. The numerous discussions in academic literature on empathy and commitment which are closer to emotion confirm their relevance. But neither empathy nor commitment are preconditions for the production of fieldwork and knowledge. It is necessary to deal with the tensions between emotions and strangeness. Strangeness is both a precondition for ethnography and a trait highly valued by informants. Being 'stranged' confers authority and shapes a particular kind of experience in the field and 'about the field' (their words).

The complex processes of identification that occur during fieldwork and the volatile processes of construction of borders, make explicit the perversion intrinsically linked to mechanistic views. Fields and moments of research condition key characteristics of the researcher involved in particular interactions with particular subjects. Insider/outsider roles can be based on gender, nationality, ethnicity or other social classifications and are overtly overcome by experience, authority or empathy. The confrontation of subjectivities that negotiate their territories and their frontiers is productive, and it is the productivity of negotiation, in knowledge terms, that we must rely on.

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Notes

1. See Pichardo, 2007.
2. COGAM is the LGTB association in Madrid.
3. See Mitchell and Irvine (2008) and Vanderstaay's (2005) works for ethical reflexions on fieldwork. Mitchell and Irvine study the negotiation of consent in interviews and Vanderstaay centers on the ethical dilemmas faced by researchers and their responsibility with their collaborators.
4. It is interesting to note that the incidence of masculinity – of male researchers – in the field has been little explored, as if being a woman was the only issue to be questioned (see Ortiz, 2005 and McKeganey and Bloor, 1991).
5. Pedro Zerolo, Spanish LGTB activist, counsellor in Madrid City Council and until February 2012 member of the board of the Socialist Party, told the author that an 'H' should be added to the acronym LGTB in order to recognize the role played by heterosexuals, and particularly heterosexual women in the fight for rights. In particular, he thought that heterosexual women 'helped us gain the situation we enjoy today' (interview October 2011).
6. McKeganey and Bloor (1991) suggest that gender and sexuality should be considered separately in fieldwork contexts. Based on my experience, I think that the distinction is relevant when the research is carried on gender and/or sexualities but can be rendered irrelevant in other cases.
7. I do not pretend here to question the legitimate – and necessary – right of feminist anthropologists and sexual dissidents to widen the scope of research in order to visibilize discrimination and subordination of gender and sexual dissidents but rather to question the occasional exclusion of 'outsiders' as non-authorized voices.
8. The relationship between the researcher's sexuality and the field has been analysed in a few occasions. See, for example, Kulick and Willson (1996), La Pastina (2006) and Newton (1993).
9. Their presence at a cockfight during a raid earned them their acceptance by the community (Geertz, 1987; Marcus, 1997).
10. See, for example, Arditi and Hequembourg (1999).
11. A good example is Kobayashi's work where she combines the political and the academic, self-defining herself as a scholar and an activist (1994).
12. For example, being an 'outsider' has granted me a 'neutral' access to some people who are prejudiced against activist researchers.

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Author biography

Begonya Enguix, is an Associate Professor at the Arts and Humanities department, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain. She also holds a university diploma in Communication (Advertising). Her publications include, among others, the book *Poder y deseo: La homosexualidad masculina en Valencia* (1996) and later works such as 'Gendered sites' (2008), 'Identities, Sexualities and Commemorations: Pride Parades, Public Space and Sexual Dissidence' (2009) and 'XXY: Representing Intersex' (2011). She belongs to the European Association of Social Anthropologists and is a member of the Research Team in Anthropology of the body (Catalan Institute of Anthropology). She is also a member of the Research Team in Social Anthropology (Universitat Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain). Her current research is focused on bodies, genders, sexualities and identities, and their intersections with urban and media anthropology.