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Abstract

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, fieldwork abroad involved inevitable uncertainty, tension, and dilemmas. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher – developing an explicit awareness that requires them to be introspective about their positions and power relations – is arguably even more necessary during such challenging times. This chapter provides a retrospective and reflexive account of ethical challenges and considerations as experienced during the fieldwork in Xi'an, China between 2020 and 2021 for a project on audience reception studies of a reality dating show. The fieldwork involved a group of young and highly educated women as respondents, who participated in text-in-action viewing sessions and qualitative interviews.

The research dilemmas that present difficulties in ethical, practical, and methodological dimensions are explicated. Factors affecting the level of trust between the researcher and participants are considered, given the feminist sensitivity of the topic. Referring to the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and researched, I propose ways of building on a reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship, particularly through conversations that are interactive, communicative, and dialogic. I also reflect on how different meeting places shape participants' behaviours and interpretations of reality dating shows, highlighting the importance of contextualism in media consumption for analysis.

By highlighting the notion of uncomfortable reflexivity, I navigate new ways of understanding and addressing difficulties in the research process to transfer the feelings of confusion and despair into self-reconciliation, healing, and solidarity. With a specific focus on fieldwork across borders and the field of audience reception studies, this chapter seeks to contribute to literature on research ethics and feminist research praxis and inspire further discussion about difficult conversations.

Chapter 8 Co-existing with uncomfortable reflexivity

Feminist fieldwork abroad during the pandemic

Xintong Jia

Introduction

During the global Covid-19 pandemic, fieldwork abroad involved inevitable uncertainty, tension, contradictions, and dilemmas, which made the issue of difficult conversations noteworthy. This chapter provides a retrospective and reflexive account of ethical challenges and considerations, as experienced during the fieldwork in Xi'an, China between 2020 and 2021 for a project on female-gendered subjectivity in a reality dating show. The fieldwork involved a group of young and highly educated women as research participants, who participated in texts-in-action viewing sessions¹ and qualitative interviews.

The “difficult” in difficult conversations indicates the uneasy, knotty, and troubling elements which evoke confused, vulnerable, hopeless, and despairing feelings in challenging and arduous situations. The concept of difficult conversations is innovative in the way that it invites the researcher to critically engage in considering and reflecting on dimensions that influence the quality and feeling of communication in fieldwork. What are the implications of difficult conversations for research ethics and feminist research praxis? How do we transfer moments of dilemmas and conflicts into productive and inspirational resources informing current feminist research methods and fostering future research? In order to address the questions outlined above, the chapter will consider the research dilemmas I encountered when conducting feminist fieldwork abroad during the pandemic. The chapter will also explore the factors that affected the relationship between the researcher and participants and how to make sense of and deal with the tensions and discomfort that arose in fieldwork.

The chapter starts by referring to the notion of reflexivity that has been practised throughout the whole research process. The research dilemmas that inevitably present difficulties in ethical, practical, and methodological dimensions are explicated. Factors affecting the level of trust

¹ Texts-in-action is a method developed by Helen Wood. It refers to observing and capturing the dynamic interaction between television texts and viewers' immediate reaction. Texts-in-action allows the researcher to conceive live moments of television reception.

Helen Wood, “Television Is Happening: Methodological Considerations for Capturing Digital Television Reception,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10, no. 4 (2007): 485-506.

between the researcher and participants are considered, given the political/feminist sensitivity of the topic. Referring to the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and researched, I propose ways of building on a reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship, particularly through conversations that are interactive, communicative, and dialogic. I also reflect on how different meeting places shape participants' behaviours and [page 114] interpretations of reality dating shows, highlighting the importance of contextualism in media consumption for analysis. The Covid-19 pandemic has generated unpredictable challenges for fieldwork traversing borders, which makes the discussion about uncomfortable reflexivity more significant than in pre-pandemic times. This chapter represents an account of how to practise reflexivity within constantly changing and precarious contexts and how to engage in research with a sense of self-care from the perspective of a feminist researcher. By highlighting the notion of uncomfortable reflexivity, I aim to navigate new ways of understanding and addressing difficulties in the research process in order to transfer the feelings of confusion and despair into self-reconciliation, healing, and solidarity. With a specific focus on fieldwork across borders and the field of audience reception studies, this chapter seeks to contribute to literature on research ethics, feminist research praxis, and inspire further discussion about difficult conversations.

Uncomfortable reflexivity

From the 1970s onwards, the interpretive turn raised debates about the place of objectivity in social science research.² It gave space to discussion about reflexivity, centring on critiques of classical and colonial practices of ethnographic research and calling for critically self-conscious forms of conduct. In social science research, reflexivity is used to articulate how the researcher's autobiography informs the research and the power relations involved in different scenarios. As Callaway succinctly puts it, reflexivity is "a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness."³ The notion of reflexivity is based on the awareness that researchers are informed by their positions and are inevitably entangled in social networks, which influence who they are, the way they interpret society and discuss research findings. Practising reflexivity with sensibility provides "nuanced, rich and meaningful interpretations of the social world and our place in it."⁴ Reflexivity centres on the researcher's agency and positionality, as all

² Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens and Scott Lash, *Reflective Modernisation: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

³ Helen Callaway, "Ethnography and Experience: Gender Implications in Fieldwork and Texts," in *Anthropology and Autobiography*, ed. Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (New York: Routledge, 1992): 90.

⁴ Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly, "Reflexive Practice in Live Sociology: Lessons from Researching Brexit in the Lives of British Citizens Living in the EU-27", *Qualitative Research* 22, no. 2 (2020): 3.

observations and interpretations inextricably entangle with the self-aware statements of the researcher. Instead of regarding reflexivity as “an objective, cognitive reflection on structure,” Adkins suggests that the notion of reflexivity emphasises both “reflection on the unthought and unconscious categories of thought” and “shared meanings.”⁵

It might be argued that reflexivity encompasses reflection, and the distinction between the two lies in whether involving in the existence of an “other.”⁶ Reflection demands looking back and carefully thinking about a particular subject, while reflexivity requires both self-referential awareness and an “other.” Reflexivity goes beyond reflection as it is about how researchers experience their relationships with people and contexts, such as participants and sites. The distinction between reflexivity and reflection highlights structured power relations – something inconspicuous or unspeakable – which saturate the whole research process. While research is not bias-free or value-neutral, practising reflexivity is to ensure authenticity and trustworthiness – ensuring the awareness of personal biases and [page 115] paying attention to how those biases interact with data and provide another layer of understanding of research process and findings.

Reflexivity in feminism means “doing research differently.”⁷ Reflexivity has been informed by constructionism, feminism, positionality, and intersectionality. Reflexivity is commonly used as a methodological tool to deconstruct the researcher’s authority. It demands researchers to take into account their self-locations, positions, and interests throughout the research process, so as to pursue a reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship between the researcher and research participants. More significantly, reflexivity practice involves being engaged and learning through a reflexive process. It is a dialogical and evolving approach rather than a linear one.⁸ It involves understanding the social world and social research itself on a broader scale and across a wider timeframe. The social world and social science develop and proceed through human agents’ continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of them.

Does self-reflexivity produce better research? Pillow traces and identifies the present-day uses of reflexivity in terms of “a form of self-reflexivity as confession that often yields a catharsis of self-awareness for the researcher, which provides a cure for the problem of doing

⁵ Lisa Adkins, “Reflexivity: Freedom or Habit of Gender?”, *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 6 (2003): 24-25.

⁶ Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, “Turning in upon Ourselves: Positionality, Subjectivity, and Reflexivity in Case Study and Ethnographic Research,” in *Ethics and Responsibility in Qualitative Studies of Literacy*, ed. Peter Mortensen and Gesa E. Kirsch (Urbana: NCTE, 1996): 130.

⁷ Wanda Pillow, “Confession, Catharsis, or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 no.2 (2003): 178.

⁸ Benson and O'Reilly, “Reflexive Practice in Live Sociology.”

representation.”⁹ In a broader sense, reflexivity is commonly used in a comfortable way – as comfortable reflexivity. Comfortable reflexivity refers to strategies that are reflexing toward the familiar and has been taken for granted as common practices and methodological techniques in qualitative research. In response to the inherent complexities and messiness of reality and embodied nature of research, Pillow proposes a notion of “uncomfortable reflexivity,” which requires the researcher to be reflexive to the point of discomfort.¹⁰ The uncomfortable feeling is attributed to both an attempt to know and a reflexive awareness that the knowing is tenuous. Coexisting with uncomfortable reflexivity means accepting the complexities of reality and the limitations of present-day research methods, language system, and practices. It challenges the pursuit of objective knowledge and dismisses “a comfortable and transcendent end-point.”¹¹ Practising uncomfortable reflexivity transcends the goal of producing better research whilst considering the difficulties and struggles involved in the research process. As Pillow insightfully puts it, “leaving what is unfamiliar, unfamiliar.”¹² I echo Pillow’s “uncomfortable reflexivity” by highlighting some of the epistemological, theoretical, ethical, and practical dimensions of striving for it during project fieldwork across borders and during global pandemic times. In the next section, I will analyse and critically reflect on three layers of research dilemmas that emerge on ethical, practical, and methodological levels, which have placed both solvable and insoluble difficulties in my fieldwork.

Reflections on three research dilemmas

During the global pandemic, fieldwork abroad has been expensive, time-consuming, and labour-intensive. Many research projects that would ordinarily constitute face-to-face fieldwork have been switched to online due to unpredictable difficulties such as international travel bans, inflated prices of flights, lockdown, [page 116] and quarantine restrictions. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher – developing an explicit awareness that requires them to be introspective about contexts, their positions, and power relations – is arguably even more necessary during such challenging times. Apart from the constraints derived from international travel/visa bans and continuously shifting epidemic prevention policies across frontiers, which can be partly dealt with personal resilience and strength, and a bit of luck to secure a plane ticket, this section concentrates on research dilemmas in my fieldwork that emerged on ethical, practical, and methodological levels.

⁹ Ibid. 181.

¹⁰ Ibid. 188.

¹¹ Ibid. 193.

¹² Ibid. 177.

One ethical dilemma I encountered was associated with my research being carried out in mainland China and simultaneously being assessed by a UK university. Ethics requirements and measurements in social science research are not universal in different social contexts. There was a section in the ethics form asking about whether I have identified and complied with all local requirements concerning ethical approval, research governance and data protection. However, by the time my fieldwork was conducted (i.e., between 2020 and 2021), there was no local ethics committee taking responsibility for research like mine in mainland China. In this situation, the ethics form required by my institution appeared to present an irresolvable paradox for fieldwork conducted in mainland China. If I replied “no” to the inquiry about local agencies and research ethics committees, I could not pass the ethics procedure; so, I replied “yes” as a pragmatic solution.

The practical dilemma centres on the utility of the consent form. One potential participant refused to participate when she found out the requirement to sign the consent form, which made her concern about participation. Bryman argues that obtaining participants’ signatures “may prompt rather than alleviate concerns on the part of prospective participants, so that they end up declining to be involved.”¹³ Meanwhile, participants regarded signing consent forms as a redundant and bureaucratic formality, illustrating that the ethics procedure did not fully achieve its utility in the field. Some participants asked me, “Is this your institution’s requirement? Will they check this?” while signing the consent form. Furthermore, a complaint procedure was also provided with the consent form, including the contact information of my supervisor and institution. Due to the absence of local ethics committee, the complaint procedure I provided was the only approach for participants to express dissatisfaction with their participation. However, in order to effectively resort to the complaint procedure, a participant is supposed to be proficient in English language and have the ability of send emails as prerequisites. Otherwise, it might be argued that some local participants were left open to potential harm and exploitation, since the protection of their well-being mainly depended on the researcher’s responsibility and integrity, rather than institutional checks.

Doing fieldwork in a Chinese context and writing up in English bring difficulties into language expression and the work of translation. Language is an “impediment to the transnational flow of feminist ideas.”¹⁴ The methodological challenges confronting me are the absence, limited,

¹³ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131.

¹⁴ Shan Huang and Wanning Sun, “#MeToo in China: Transnational Feminist Politics in the Chinese Context,” *Feminist Media Studies* 21, no.4 (2021): 680.

or ambiguous use of wording in feminist related terms in Chinese, from basic terms of “gender” and “feminism” to more complicated and theoretical ones such as “misogyny”, “sexism”, [page 117] and “gender relations.” These expressions are less likely to be aligned with the language adopted by the Chinese state, as well as less likely to resonate with those without a higher educational background and/or access to the metropolitan hubs of China. In other words, these feminism related expressions may be viewed as alienated or “culturally delicate” and thus unaccepted by the public.¹⁵ Reflections on the three research dilemmas suggest limitations of current design of ethical evaluation, research methods, and language system, with a particular focus on feminist fieldwork across borders. These dilemmas are associated with the complex and hard-to-change reality within which we are living. Apart from the objective constraints, in the next two sections, I will articulate elements that affect interpersonal relationship in fieldwork and reflect on the practice of uncomfortable reflexivity.

The issue of trust

A research process cannot be regarded as emancipatory or consciousness-raising to both researcher and participants unless a relationship of trust between the parties has been established and developed. From a participant’s perspective, taking part in a research project can be more of “an intrusion/imposition/irritation/responsibility than a benefit.”¹⁶ Suspicion and repulsion were not uncommon among potential participants. Issues making prospective respondents reluctant to participate include awareness of the unequal relationship between the researcher and the researched, matters of exploitation and control, disclosure of personal information, especially when respondents reveal, possibly for the first time to a person outside of their friendship circle, previous trauma that they have not yet overcome, and sensitive topics, such as politics, sexuality, and intimate relationships. This section reflects critically on fieldwork processes, exploring factors that affected the level of trust between the researcher and research participants, given the political/feminist sensitivity of the topic.

My project centres on exploring shifting dynamics of feminism in post-Socialist China – a topic experiencing growing conflict and tensions that “reflects its precariousness as a school of thought, an activist practice, and a topic of study” in politically sensitive contexts.¹⁷ Luo, a PhD

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Liz Kelly, Sheila Burton and Linda Regan, “Researching Women’s Lives or Studying Women’s Oppression? Reflections on What Constitutes Feminist Research,” in *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, ed. Mary Maynard and June Purvis (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1994), 36.

¹⁷ Sara Liao, “Feminism without Guarantees: Reflections on Teaching and Researching Feminist Activism in China,” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 26, no. 2 (2020): 259.

candidate working on Chinese women's attitudes towards online feminist activism through ethnography on social media, has experienced verbal attacks and unmerited humiliation by anti-feminist groups while recruiting participants online.¹⁸ Anti-feminist groups express anger, aggression, and hostility and spark controversy by means of tracing feminism-related hashtags. Luo's case reflects the "deeply entwined" relationship between popular feminism and popular misogyny.¹⁹ Both popular feminism and popular misogyny are expressed and circulated on media platforms – battling it out on the contemporary cultural landscape.²⁰

In Finch's research study involving interviewing clergy-men's wives in the UK, she highlights "strongly and consistently" the ease with which to get women's assurances hinge on the female identity and similar life circumstances shared by her self-revelation (i.e., in Finch's case, she obtained interviewees' trust by [page 118] claiming that she was also a clergyman's wife), rather than one's expertise as a researcher or a sound ethics process.²¹ Finch points out that woman-to-woman interviews develop "a particular kind of identification" as both parties share a "subordinate structural position by virtue of their gender."²² I echo Finch in the way that she identifies the basis of trust in interviews, where personal identity and similar experiences play an essential role in building a trusting relationship.

In order to navigate potential suspicion from prospective participants and verbal attacks from online anti-feminist groups, I used the snowball technique to target participants. Snowball sampling is particularly applicable when research depends on establishing trust and covers relatively sensitive issues.²³ Participants can "check out" the research and the researcher through interrelated social networks where the researcher is embedded.²⁴ In my fieldwork, all of the research participants either knew me in person before the research, or we had an intermediary person who had introduced us to each other. Some participants were friends, schoolmates, or even others' siblings. Every participant knew at least one participant within the

¹⁸ Taoyuan Luo, *Young Chinese Women's Attitudes towards Feminism* (PhD dissertation, University of Leeds, forthcoming).

¹⁹ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 2.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Janet Finch, "'It's Great to Have Someone to Talk to': The Ethics and Politics of Interviewing Women," in *Social Researching: Politics, Problems, Practice*, ed. Colin Bell and Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 78.

²² Ibid. 76.

²³ See Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, "Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling," *Sociological Methods and Research* 10, no. 2 (1981): 141-163.

Kath Browne, "Snowball Sampling: Using Social Networks to Research Non-heterosexual Women," *Social Research Methodology* 8, no. 1 (2005): 47-60.

²⁴ Ibid. 50.

research network circle. The recruitment method design of my research helped me to instil in participants a sense of security and sustain rapport with them. However, they were unaware of the sense of trust embedded in the ethics and ethical evaluation system that was firmly established within my institution. As Browne suggests, in practice, “word of mouth assurances” is essential when participants are concerned with the topic and are vigilant about leaking personal information.²⁵ In my fieldwork, participants’ consent to participate took effect when they replied “yes” and “okay” to my invitation, rather than when they signed the consent form. They regarded their participation as a personal affair – they wanted to do me a favour, which was based on the trust rooted within my personal social network. The trusting relationship is structured in an interviewing format. In the next section, I show how I interrogate a non-hierarchical relationship and how I managed to build a non-exploitative relationship in fieldwork.

Interviewing relationship: from a non-hierarchical to a non-exploitative relationship

Interviewing, like any other method, is not bias-free. The interviewer-interviewee relationship is seen as a form of “intrinsically socially unequal,” hierarchical, and asymmetrical relationship within which the interviewer sets the agenda and structure and remains the right and initiative to raise questions.²⁶ Conducting interviews is viewed as “a search-and-discovery mission” aiming to elicit and extract information from interviewees, and indeed, is a complex activity.²⁷ According to Oakley, a good interview depends on both a non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and the interviewer’s subjective initiative to invest their personal identity in the relationship.²⁸

Nevertheless, whether a non-hierarchical relationship exists in interviews remains a question. Feminist researchers have recognised a power differential in favour of the researcher, who also holds epistemic privilege.²⁹ Feminists encourage “a non-exploitative relationship” within

²⁵ Browne, “Snowball Sampling,” 50.

²⁶ Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein, *Handbook of Interview Research: Context & Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2022).

Sandra Harding, “Feminist Standpoints,” in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (California: Sage, 2012), 52.

²⁷ Nigal Edley and Lia Litosseliti, “Critical Perspective on Using Interviews and Focus Groups,” in *Research Methods in Linguistics*, ed. Lia Litosseliti (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, *The Active Interview* (London: Sage, 1995), 2.

²⁸ Ann Oakley, “Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms,” in *Doing Feminist Research*, ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 41.

²⁹ Joan Acker, Kate Barry and Joke Esseveld, “Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 6, no. 4 (1983): 423-435.

Bat-Ami Bar On, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993).

which interviewees are not seen [page 119] merely as data sources providing raw materials for research.³⁰ In addition, feminist researchers refuse to engage in acting as “emotionally detached and calculating” interviewers who regard participants as “passive givers of information.”³¹ In *The Active Interview*, Holstein and Gubrium suggest that both the interviewee and the interviewer are active and involved in meaning-making work.³² Interviewees are not “repositories of knowledge – treasures of information awaiting excavation – so much as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers.”³³ It was important for me to practise reflexivity that extended to research participants, rather than being entrenched in a researcher-centre perspective. I would like to highlight that the purpose of doing feminist research is not to interrogate participants for data, but to understand women’s experiences in a form of dialogue. Given the asymmetrical relationship between the researcher and the researched, my aim and overriding principle is to build a reciprocal and non-exploitative relationship, particularly through interviews that are interactive, communicative, and dialogic. In practice, a young woman in my research shared her regret about revealing personal and discomfiting experiences to a researcher which in turn made her feel insecure and anxious, worrying if the information would “fall into the wrong hands.”³⁴ From respondents’ perspectives, they tended not to allow interviewing to “penetrate beyond a certain level of generality.”³⁵ This relates to the issue of the extent to which respondents are willing to reveal private affairs and personal identity. In some cases, interviewing is the only opportunity for participants and the researcher to have a deep conversation and dive into specific topics. They meet each other for the first time in interviews. To mitigate concerns around “invasion of privacy” and alienation during interviews, I guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity for personal information.³⁶ In the formulation of interview questions, I used open-ended questions to prompt more reflective and narrative responses. I avoided applying leading, judging, and ambiguous phrasings, such as, “Do you think candidates are signed actresses/actors performing on dating shows? Are they sincere about their participation?” I also avoided terminology and jargon that could confuse or alienate respondents, such as “How do you understand female

³⁰ Mary Maynard, “Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research,” in *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, ed. Mary Maynard and June Purvis. (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1994), 16.

³¹ Mary Maynard and June Purvis, “Introduction: Doing Feminist Research,” in *Researching Women’s Lives from a Feminist Perspective*, ed. Mary Maynard and June Purvis. (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1994), 15.

³² Holstein and Gubrium, *The Active Interview*.

³³ *Ibid.* 4.

³⁴ Maynard and Purvis, “Introduction,” 5.

³⁵ Patrick Peritore, “Reflections on Dangerous Fieldwork,” *American Sociologist* 21, no. 4 (1990): 360.

³⁶ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 131.

subjectivity represented on dating shows?” I offered participants the option to choose meeting places, raise questions with me, and suggest additional topics to discuss. This approach to interviews was good for eliciting specific information, while being open to possibilities of new information. I realised participants were eager to know how other participants and I replied to the interview questions about female subjectivity, feminism in China, and social norms about relationship and marriage. They wanted to see their experience compared with other women and to get to know the general arguments of my project from a researcher’s perspective. Participants’ reactions demonstrated Oakley’s argument that when the interviewer was prepared to invest their own identity in interviews, they would be able to find out about participants through interviewing.³⁷ Examples of participants’ questions included, “What is your opinion about the match-door marriage norm?”, “Why is there already misogyny prior to misandry?”, and “Do you agree with the idea that men know about what feminism is fighting for, but they are pretending they [page 120] do not?” It created an interactive dialogue and allowed them to know me as both a social science researcher and a real person. Letting participants raise questions also helped me to conduct in-depth interviews with them candidly and honestly.

How can a less hierarchical relationship be built and the power differential between interviewee and interviewer be alleviated? In practice, I found that respondents’ perceptions of the interviewing relationship played a key role in the resulting interview quality. When respondents thought the interviewer and interviewee relationship was non-hierarchical or relatively equal, they tended to be more willing to talk and invest their personal identities in interviews. Respondents’ perception of the interviewing relationship was related to the recruitment method, their goal or motive in agreeing to participate, and circumstances within which interviews were conducted. Whilst carrying out participant recruitment procedures for my research, I appealed to my elder relatives for help. They initially identified eligible women who were their subordinates in the workplace, and then shared those women’s WeChat accounts with me to further negotiate with personally. One woman directly declined the invitation once she learnt that participation would be face-to-face and last for over one hour. Another two women agreed to participate and arranged to meet during working hours or during work break. They were relatively impatient and perfunctory during meetings. One woman was reluctant to give details or drill down to deep conversations. She described interview questions around identifying the main features of dating shows as “too broad” and “have no idea how to respond.” What made

³⁷ Oakley, “Interviewing women.”

these conversations difficult was the manner of introduction – the fact that I was associated with their line managers. Meanwhile, the two women were rather curious about the relationship between their line managers and me. For them, participating in my research was viewed as an allocated task related or not directly related to their work, which made them feel compelled to engage. The two women’s resistance on being questioned reflected their defensive attitude to the unequal meeting situation as well as the hierarchical power relation in their workplaces. Fortunately, one woman was delighted after the meeting – she told me the interview questions helped her to consider many important issues in life carefully. This woman’s changed attitude reflected the dynamics of interpersonal communication affected by the emotional labour I put in during interviews.

The meeting experience with the two participants demonstrate a hierarchical and tangled web of interpersonal relationships in the society within which people are living. Conducting interviews is labour-intensive and is mentally taxing on the interviewer to guide conversations and respond appropriately to interviewees. In particular, the involved complexity of emotions, unavoidable pressure, and instrumental rationality is significant for understanding the interviewee-and-interviewer relationship. Emotional labour expects one to manage feelings and expressions to “sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.”³⁸ Reflections on emotional labour in qualitative fieldwork are valuable data which dive into the invisible emotional interaction which can be easily overlooked during interview processes.³⁹ In my fieldwork, there were many moments where I was deeply touched and inspired by the trust, sincerity, and [page 121] encouragement from my research respondents. What intensive emotional labour gave back was irreplaceable emotional value, providing me with greater strength to confront difficult situation or have difficult conversations in fieldwork. In most cases, the meeting places also have an impact on participants’ behaviours and reaction to the research project, which will be explored in the next section.

How do meeting places make a difference?

In audience studies, the focus on audience’s interpretation not only has roots in the encoding/decoding model, but also relates to the discussion of “contextualism,” exploring questions about where, when, and how media texts are encountered and integrated into the

³⁸ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012), 7.

³⁹ Kathleen Blee, “White-Knuckle Research: Emotional Dynamics in Fieldwork with Racist Activists,” *Qualitative Sociology* 21, no. 4 (1998): 381-399.

everyday lives of audiences.⁴⁰ Contextualism offers different ways to analyse media consumption moments – television consumption in particular – in domestic and non-domestic spheres.⁴¹ In this section, drawing on the project fieldwork, I show how different contexts of the meeting place and practices of everyday life shape female viewers’ behaviour and interpretation of reality dating shows. I also analyse how different meeting places affect the quality of texts-in-action viewing sessions and interviews, further advancing discussions of contextualism in media consumption and audience studies.

How did meeting places make a difference in fieldwork? I found meetings conducted in undisturbed private spaces went better than those held in the public sphere. Participants were more comfortable and more willing to engage with my research when meetings were held in their homes, offices, and classrooms, rather than in cafes or restaurants. When conducting texts-in-action viewing sessions in cafes, participants expressed concern about how other people would look at them when noticing them watching dating shows. In the public sphere, women became more introspective and were disturbed by an imagined external gaze, fearing being judged and derided by others. Hua asked me apprehensively, “Will they assume that we are in a hurry to find a partner?” while we were watching the reality dating show and several customers took their seats next to us. Jing suggested turning down the volume several times during the viewing session. In addition, if meetings were held during rush hour, the sound quality of meeting audio records was sometimes poorer with the hustle and bustle of background noise in cafes and restaurants, which was found to be a distraction to respondents’ participation.

More importantly, participants’ reaction to reality dating show demonstrated that watching dating shows openly was often seen as uncivil, demeaning, and dumbed down, and thus discouraged by well-educated young women. This is a gendered issue, related also to the distinction between private and public. According to Kramer’s study of stereotyped characteristics of sex-related speech differences, female speech was featured in “gossip, trivial topics, self-revealing speech, and gibberish.”⁴² In my fieldwork, young women’s attitude towards reality dating shows reflected their rejection of the gendered stereotypes as “empty

⁴⁰ Matt Hills, “Audiences,” in *The Craft of Criticism: Critical Media Studies in Practice*, ed. Michael Kackman and Mary Celeste Kearney (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴¹ Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴² Cheri Kramer, “Perceptions of Female and Male Speech,” *Language and Speech* 20, no. 2 (1977): 159.

vessels” or gossip girls.⁴³ Some women expressed the view that reality dating shows focusing on family gossip and small household affairs appealed to older and retired [page 122] viewers⁴⁴ while young viewers were more interested in programmes with detective themes.

I prioritised participants’ preferences when fixing locations. Six of the women invited me to their homes or agreed to meetings arranged in my home office. Participants felt relatively relaxed about the meeting arranged in their space. Meetings in the interviewee’s own homes were more like “an intimate conversation,” and the researcher acted as both “a friendly guest” and “a sympathetic listener,” not “an official inquisitor.”⁴⁵ Likewise, Ahmed mentioned the advantages of conducting interviews when participants were at home, as it allowed them to “leave the conversation quickly and easily” which was proved to be good for their well-being.⁴⁶

In my fieldwork, I found myself switching between the roles of a guest and a researcher when doing home interviews, which raised questions about the positioning and visibility of the fieldworker self in the field.⁴⁷ Prior to the texts-in-action viewing sessions, participants tended to offer me food and drink – unlike meetings in public space where I prepared refreshments for participants. My experience in Xiao Mei’s home was quite remarkable. Xiao Mei lived with her parents, and we arranged a meeting at her home after she had returned from work.

“You become thinner and taller again! Have you ever eaten food?” Xiao Mei’s mother said to me when I was coming through the door.

“Our family don’t normally have dinner because we all need to lose weight. But since you’re here and it’s dinner time, I’m gonna cook something for you,” Xiao Mei’s mother said to me hospitably.

I was shocked that the whole family – including Xiao Mei and her parents – did not have dinner, or at least the mother told me so. I initially refused the dinner invitation by highlighting my identity as a researcher. Ethnographers have long debated issues of familiarity, strangeness, and distance in fieldwork accounts, reflecting complexities concerning the researcher self as an essential and inherent part of fieldwork.⁴⁸ They highlight the need to cultivate and maintain a sense of strangeness in the field to gain insight into how cultural settings reframe the self. Here,

⁴³ Helen Wood, *Talking with Television: Women, Talk Shows, and Modern Self-Reflexivity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 15.

⁴⁴ Several participants used the expression *jiachangliduan* to describe the feature of dating shows, which meant small household affairs.

⁴⁵ Finch, “‘It’s Great to Have Someone to Talk to’,” 74-75.

⁴⁶ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021), 12.

⁴⁷ Amanda Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self* (London: Sage, 1999).

⁴⁸ Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self*.

John Lofland, David Snow, Leon Anderson, and Lyn Lofland, *Analysing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, 4th edition (CA: Wadsworth, 2006).

the notion of strangeness was seen as “a methodological tool” and “an unambiguous and developmental position for the self.”⁴⁹ When I did the fieldwork, I managed to balance the researcher role, whose activities strictly conformed to the meeting topic guide, with the moderator role, adjusting the meeting atmosphere to be neither overly casual nor excessively alien. I also tried to create an empathetic ambience in the interaction process with my research participants and people around them. However, in this case the mother ignored my unwillingness to have dinner and insisted on preparing food.

The dinner included a vegetable, stir-fried potato chips, steamed buns and corn congee. The dinner was only made for me. During the dinner, Xiao Mei just picked at several pieces of greens to eat without touching anything else on the table. She was doing this only to keep me company. When I was conducting my fieldwork, she was preparing for her wedding. She said to me, “Wedding dress [page 123] photos don’t bother me because there’s Photoshop. But at the ceremony, guests will see me in person. I have to try really hard to lose weight – a month to go.”

Her mother was sitting with us but also not eating. She kept praising me for being slim and asked me about how to keep fit. The mother compared me with Xiao Mei and encouraged Xiao Mei to lose weight and become as slim as me.

“Slimness is the top topic forever.” I sighed with frustration.

“You are right. Slimness is the top topic forever,” the mother repeated, without recognising my implication.

It was not the first time that my research participants commented on my figure. Another interviewee Tian was asking about my height and weight in the first two minutes when we met. I assume that in women’s interpersonal social contact, this type of body-related questioning can be an ice-breaker conversation, a friendly greeting, or a mode of compliment, since slimness is regarded as the current ideal of feminine appearance in China.⁵⁰ The body, its weight, size, and shape, along with the related aesthetic work to transform the body, are all initial topics to begin a conversation with a stranger in women’s conversations. The complexity of human interaction leads to difficult situations for the researcher, who decides the discussion topics and how to respond to knotty inquiries while caring about participants’ well-being. In response to body-

⁴⁹ Coffey, *The Ethnographic Self*, 22.

⁵⁰ Freedom Leung, Sharon Lam and Sherrien Sze, “Cultural Expectations of Thinness in Chinese Women,” *Eating Disorders* 9, no. 4 (2010): 339-350.

Meng Zhang, “A Chinese Beauty Story: How College Women in China Negotiate Beauty, Body Image and Mass Media,” *Chinese Journal of Communication* 5, no. 4 (2012): 437-454.

related questions, I prepared an answer which I thought was scientific and honest. I replied to them, “I didn’t manage to be slim. Being slim is because of genes and the digestive system.” There was usually short silence after I said this. This answer did not meet their expectations, perhaps because it did not convince them that a slim body did not require consistent aesthetic labour. My response positioned me as a “marginal native” of the body-related conversations.⁵¹

The ethnographic turn in media reception studies has been valuable in positioning media use and consumption as an activity in the context of domestic sphere and daily life. Conducting audience reception studies in participants’ homes provided rich, complex, and detailed accounts of viewers’ use of time and space during media consumption, as well as of their different family and personal relationships. Furthermore, the ethnographic turn in audience reception studies relates to an ethnographic sensibility signposting a broader and richer conception of what constitutes data. Data includes the spoken, unspoken expressions from the side of participants, as well as observations and reflections that the researcher makes. All of these cues open a window onto the worlds of participants, allowing the researcher to make sense of the information gathered, including how participants interpret the research topic.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a retrospective, descriptive, and reflexive account of my fieldwork journey, ethical dilemmas of conducting qualitative research during the pandemic, how I managed to build a trusting and non-exploitative relationship [page 124] with participants, and how the meeting places shaped participants’ behaviour and interpretation of my project and further had an impact on the quality of fieldwork. The fieldwork was informed by a complicated reality – with obstacles consisting of international travel bans, the limitations of present-day research methods and language system, all of which have made conversations in fieldwork difficult and knotty. During the challenging times, Pillow’s “uncomfortable reflexivity” provides an inspirational perspective to perceive insoluble and unspeakable difficulties along with tensions and discomfort in qualitative fieldwork across borders, which has helped me to move beyond difficult conversations.

Given the paradox lying in the utility of ethics form, the situation experienced in my fieldwork reflected how the design of ethics form overlooked the specific local circumstances that varied in different countries. Namely, how can the interests of disadvantaged or less privileged groups be protected in research being carried out outside of the UK? This question perhaps cannot be

⁵¹ Morris Freilich, *Marginal Natives: Anthropologists at Work* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

solved by means of imposing training courses offered by university institutions on social science researchers. Instead, I call on more practice of “uncomfortable reflexivity” on the side of researcher so as to ensure authenticity and trustworthiness of fieldwork and illuminate future research across borders.

Furthermore, there were many dimensions from the side of participants affecting conversations in qualitative fieldwork, which included concern about “invasion of privacy,”⁵² discomfoting feelings arose when revealing certain experience or information, and unavoidable pressure entangled in hierarchical social networks, etc. In response to the issue as outlined above, my attitude was to take a step back and remain silent when my questioning was deemed as disturbing, instead of managing to dig out “the hidden truth” by probing participants deeply, which would make participants worry about the potential risks of being exploited by opening themselves to “interrogation.” In her research on women’s magazines, Gill articulates an orientation of critical respect which involves “attentive, respectful listening” and at the same time not to “abdicate the right to question or interrogate.”⁵³ While providing essential support to research participants, Gill stresses the right to engage critically, rather than act as “a mute supporter.”⁵⁴ I agree with the idea that showing respect is an ethical principle. Meanwhile, the success of fieldwork also depends on a demonstration of trustworthiness by respecting respondents’ boundaries and actively leaving some stones unturned.⁵⁵ When carrying out fieldwork, I avoided ferreting out participants’ privacy where I was not wanted. I did not force anyone to respond to anything that they did not want to share by means of interviewing techniques. I equally valued the importance of raising questions to participants and listening to them carefully.

My stance on taking a step back from confronting difficult conversations in fieldwork is also related to the constructionist stance of qualitative research. Qualitative research implies an ontological position indicating that knowing the social world relies on people’s interpretation and reflection-oriented understandings of the world, rather than through an examination of “out there” phenomena.⁵⁶ As Edley and Litosseliti put it, constructivist researchers treat conversations in fieldwork as indicative or illustrative data that offers insights about what

⁵² Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 131.

⁵³ Rosalind Gill, “Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and ‘Choice’ for Feminism,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007): 78.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile* (IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁵⁶ Bryman, *Social Research Methods*, 375.

participants [page 125] say they think or believe.⁵⁷ In this sense, it is not helpful to think of research participants as having open or heart-to-heart conversations with the researcher; it is also important to think of silence, or what is left unsaid, as an integral part of a conversation. What matters for a constructivist researcher is to consider why participants express certain opinions in certain ways within certain contexts.

⁵⁷ Edley and Litosseliti, “Critical Perspective on Using Interviews and Focus Groups.”

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