

The field as a landscape of desire: sex and sexuality in geographical fieldwork

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This article calls for greater attention to be paid to the way that sex and sexuality impact on geographical fieldwork. By concentrating in particular on cross-cultural fieldwork, the article focuses on the ways in which attention to these questions has the potential to bring about greater self-reflexivity and to expose the contingency of the researcher's sexuality.

Key words: *Nicaragua, sexuality, fieldwork, reflexivity, femininity, motherhood*

Sexuality and fieldwork

Sexuality has recently become a legitimate focus of geographical research, particularly with the publication of two edited volumes exploring the relationships which exist between sexuality and space (Bell and Valentine 1995a; Duncan 1996). Despite this growing interest in geographies of sexualities and considerable geographical attention to questions of reflexivity in fieldwork, remarkably little attention has been paid to the intersection of these two areas. Geographers have largely overlooked the significant ways in which both the sexuality and the erotic subjectivity of the researcher impact on the research process. With the exception of a chapter by Sparke (1996), who examines the way in which masculinity shaped his research experience, attention to sexuality by geographers has focused largely on non-fieldwork settings. A small number of anthropological studies have attempted to redress this absence, principally an article by Newton (1993), a number of chapters in Bell *et al.* (1993) and an edited volume by Kulick and Wilson (1995). Kulick and Wilson's work criticizes the way in which ethnographers, even more reflexive ones, have obscured what is a crucial aspect of doing fieldwork which impacts in a number of ways on the research process and outcome. According to Killick, despite the increasing attention to the research process and the conditions in which research is produced, the

sexuality of the researcher 'remains a subtext that is systematically erased' (1995, 76).

If sexuality both produces space and permeates social life, then the fieldwork experience is no different. A more reflexive approach to the fieldwork experience and process would necessarily include a consideration of the erotic dimension and of the impact of the researcher's sexuality. This article calls for a greater consideration of sexuality and erotic subjectivity in geographical research, in particular with reference to fieldwork in cross-cultural settings.

There are many reasons why geographers and others might not wish to talk about the sexualized aspects of their fieldwork. A focus on the erotic is limited by academic conventions on what is and what is not a legitimate area of enquiry (Altork 1995; Kulick 1995; Wilson 1995). Researchers might therefore feel that their academic credibility would be called into question if such areas are acknowledged or explored. For example, Wade (1993) reflects on the significance of sexual relationships with two black Colombian women while conducting fieldwork on black identities in Colombia, but he does so many years after the fieldwork was completed and the research findings written up. To some extent, this demonstrates the ongoing power of the myth of the researcher as detached and objective (Altork 1995). In anthropological circles, the idea of 'sex with the natives' is seen as unethical (Whitehead 1986). In addition, there are certainly issues of privacy and

confidentiality that could be breached if researchers were more open or honest about these issues.

There are, however, a number of crucial reasons which suggest that we should address these dilemmas for the benefit of our research. First, it is impossible to escape our sexuality in the field and therefore it should be acknowledged. As Morton (1995) says, in the field we are sexualized subjects, we might be viewed as wives, mothers, desirable foreign women, potential sexual partners and these views impinge on the research process in ways that cannot always be predicted. Second, the field itself can have a seductive quality. Fieldwork can lead to the constitution of a sexualized relationship between the theoretical ethnographer and the 'field' (Wilson 1995). Altork (1995) believes that allowing oneself to be seduced by the field, and this can mean acknowledging the erotic component of the research, can provide more powerful insights. Third, even if we disregard the impact of our sexualities on our research, and even if we do not engage in sexual relations while in the field, we will still be sexually positioned by members of the host community. Caplan (1993a) has pointed out how sexuality will be constructed for us, even if we attempt to put our sexuality aside in the interests of maintaining some form of detachment or objectivity. We do not only position ourselves in the field, we are also positioned by those whom we research.

When we go into the field, we often go as members of a group of people of which our researched community already has a preconceived image. We are others to our hosts, as they are others to us (Wade 1993). Our research is affected by stereotypical understandings of who we are and these often include the existence of stereotypical sexualities. Female researchers have referred to the importance of existence of stereotypes in fieldsites of foreign women as desirable and loose (Krieger 1986; Dubisch 1995; Gearing 1995; Morton 1995). Killick (1995) describes how in Korea, foreign men can likewise be seen as desirable sexual partners by women. Even if we do not have sex when we are in the field, these preconceived notions will determine how we are received by our hosts and how we receive information. An important part of positionality is not just how we feel, but how others see us.

Reflexivity in research accounts is often 'limited to a solitary consideration of oneself' (Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002, p. 109) or to a brief autobiographical statement at the start of a paper (Butler 2001). Sex and sexuality are, however, to a large

extent about interaction with others. Being constructed as an object of desire or being sexually attracted to members of a researched community make us aware of how identity is constructed for us and that there are multifaceted meanings to gender. Exploring our shifting sexual and erotic subjectives during fieldwork can be a useful way of not reducing our positionality in the field to essentializing attributes of class, age, ethnicity and gender. As Caplan (1993a) has stated, gender is not a thing in itself and what is more crucial in the field is the complex dialogical relationships in which we engage with the members of a researched community.

Our positionings therefore are not based solely on stereotypical notions of who we are but also depend on the form of interaction which takes place. Moreover, they are not static but can shift, in response to how our subjectivities shift during the course of fieldwork. Attention to sexuality is important in all fieldwork settings but takes on added dimensions in cross-cultural fieldwork. Our sexual subjectivities are more likely to shift when we are away from 'home' and away from our more long-term and familiar sexual and social relationships.

Feminist geographers have been striving to conduct research which acknowledges the power relations implicated in its production and to seek ways to make the research process more egalitarian, participatory and interactive. To some extent, as Blackwood (1995) has argued, the subjective experience of sexuality in the field can challenge the distance between us and them. It can therefore be a way of getting round the inadequacies of the insider/outsider debate which a number of authors have rejected (Karim 1993; Nast 1994; Gilbert 1994; Wolf 1996; Herod 1999; Mullings 1999) or of the equally problematic native/non-native debate (Narayan 1993). Its potential lies in its ability to enable us to focus more clearly on hybrid or in-between spaces which emerge during the process of knowledge production. Betweenness has been advocated by a number of geographers as a valuable strategy for dealing with difference (England 1994; Katz 1994; Nast 1994; Bondi 1997; Rose 1997; Tooke 2000). Attention to sexuality is therefore a way of understanding the multiple repositionings of self that take place during the course of fieldwork and a way of acknowledging our positionality as embodied researchers.

Moss (2001) has talked of the value of using herself as a source of information by using her own experiences as she has used those of her research

participants, as a means of linking empirical material with theoretical concepts. As Moss and Matwychuk (2000) argue, if we are to integrate critical reflexivity into feminist activism and research, it is important not only to identify particular positionings but to use them critically. Our sexualities, like other aspects of our positionalities, become a source of knowledge and a resource to be utilized or explored, and the participant observation work we engage in can be invaluable in developing theoretical abstractions on sexuality. Cross-cultural fieldwork is a complex experience in which our role as researchers is not to erase or conceal these complexities for the sake of producing a coherent argument but to make sense of them and learn from them.

I believe, however, that its value lies in much more than its potential for greater self-reflexivity, although this in itself is important. The consideration of sexuality in fieldwork could prove to be a valuable tool in terms of destabilizing what Bell and Valentine (1995b) refer to as the 'heterosexing of space'. I believe this is particularly the case with cross-cultural ethnographic research. Our repositioning in a cross-cultural setting, when we are away from home, our friends and families and our more familiar haunts and workplaces, has great potential to expose the contingency of the sexuality of the ethnographer. Much of the attention to sexuality in geography to date has focused on lesbian and gay geographies (Bell and Valentine 1995b). Chouinard and Grant (1996) believe that it is the lack of critical analysis of the social construction of heterosexuality which allows it to retain its hegemony. The fieldwork period provides a unique setting in which heterosexual researchers can examine heterosexuality, an exercise which could potentially lead to its destabilization. Just as lesbians and gays have to manage their identities in heterosexual space (Johnston and Valentine 1995), ethnographers in the field are engaged in a process of 'impression management' (Linneken 1998) which could also include how they represent or indeed conceal their sexual identities. Awareness of the need for cultural sensitivity and a concern not to offend members of a researched community mean that as ethnographers we might behave in ways that either conceal or augment aspects of our sexuality. We might be either more or less prepared than we are at home to resist normative understandings of sexuality as expressed in our own culture. We might be more prepared to risk offending members of our own culture than we would members of a community in which we are

doing research. Alternatively, acts which might not appear to be acts of resistance in our own culture, such as dressing in a certain way or indulging in a one-night stand, could be interpreted very differently in another culture. (See, for example, Abramson's (1993) experience on the meanings of such a sexual relationship during fieldwork in Fiji.) We might also feel sexually attracted to research participants or they might feel sexually attracted to us in ways which complicate or enrich the research process. Bell and Valentine (1995b) discuss a number of sexualized spaces which they term landscapes of desire. This article attempts to discuss the field as such a landscape. Through an exploration of how my own subjective experiences have informed and shaped my research in Nicaragua, I wish to demonstrate the potential of examining the field as a landscape of desire, as a means to both achieve greater self-reflexivity and to reveal the incoherence of heterosexual desire.

Racism and transcendence of self and other

The exploration of both the expressions of sexuality and actual sexual relations in the field can be seen as a valuable way to transcend the self-other dichotomy (Caplan 1993a) and achieve more egalitarian relationships with our research participants. However, in cross-cultural settings, the question of sex and sexuality is more complex and presents the same dilemmas of othering that it might attempt to overcome. First world researchers working in the third world constantly run the risk of unknowingly reproducing the inequalities that the research was intended to undermine through their internalized racisms (Madge 1993). Sexual relations and the expression of sexual desire in fieldwork particularly carry this risk. Said (1978) identified the central role played by sexuality in the West's construction of the other and in the intellectual domination by the West of the third world. As Woods (1995) has noted, Said's notion of the Orient and the space it occupies in the Western sexual imagination is not confined to the East. The myth of third world sexual liberalism is far more widespread and leads to understandings of the other as both racialized and sexualized. These understandings can lead to racist fantasies and desires to possess the other. Morton (1995) has indicated how the desire to sexually possess the other is an important part of anthropology's colonialist heritage. Likewise, in geography it is also difficult

to escape the colonial origins of our discipline, particularly when we do fieldwork. Geographical fieldwork has been linked with conquering frontiers and expeditions (Katz 1996) or with the masculinist penetration of feminized space (Rose 1993). Westwood and Radcliffe (1993) refer to how western media tend to reproduce the 'imaginings by the West of the exotica of Latin America' (p. 3) by focusing on the links between nation and cultural heritage and this exoticization is one element in the racism which continues to reproduce Latin Americans from within Eurocentric discourses.

Sex and sexuality are important sites in which other peoples and places tend to be exoticized. While sexual relationships in fieldwork can be seen as bridging social or cultural distance, it is just as likely that they occur because of this distance. Focusing on these issues within our own research and research practices, helps us to avoid such exoticization or at least be clear when it is taking place.

Robinson (1994) urges us to explore the space between self and other, in the interests of giving greater voice to our research participants in a way which does not reproduce the colonizing positionings of much research. I would suggest it is also valuable to examine whether this space is a sexually charged one and how experiences, constructions and understandings of sex and sexuality are working to constitute that space. Does reflexivity, as Karim (1993) sees it, constitute a partial defence against Said's critique? How do we know whether our sexual desire for the other constitutes a transcendence of self and other or is a result of racist fantasies, of wanting to possess the other? I examine these contradictions and dilemmas in the light of my own fieldwork experiences in Nicaragua.

My love affair with Nicaragua

I began conducting fieldwork for my PhD on single motherhood in Nicaragua in 1999. I spent six months in the northern town of Matagalpa conducting in-depth interviews with a group of single mothers in order to explore the links which exist between motherhood, politics and work. Originally from the UK, my interest in Nicaragua began in the mid-1980s when I became involved in the solidarity movement in support of the Sandinista revolution, which had overthrown the Somoza dictatorship in 1979. I had already visited Nicaragua several times before in the early 1990s. When I embarked on my fieldwork, therefore, I did so as someone who

already had a number of friends, contacts, experiences, perceptions, prejudices and a history of sympathizing with the Sandinista revolution.

Shortly after starting my fieldwork, I began to experience a heightened state of awareness and stimulation. As researchers we sometimes become attached to our fieldsites and enjoy the familiarity of difference. My state of awareness was reinforced by the pleasure I gained from the way this familiarity played on my senses; the salsa or bolero track blaring out of the bus, the smell of fresh tortillas, the historical traces of revolution on the landscape. Existing in another language is also energizing in this respect; it allows us to adopt another personality. When I function in Spanish, I can do things that I would never do in English, from making small talk to taxi drivers to shouting for service in a busy bar.

Once I was back in Nicaragua, I simultaneously began to experience not only intellectual stimulation but also sexual desire and renewed feelings of myself as a sexual being, which I almost interpreted as a sensation that the two were somehow connected. A commitment to a political cause can take on a passionate quality and, as stated, my initial interest in Nicaragua was sparked by sympathy and support for the Sandinista revolution. The fact that thousands of non-Nicaraguans across the world dedicated themselves, particularly in the 1980s, to an external political cause indicates the appeal of the revolutionary mystique. This appeal can take on quasi-religious or even sexualized dimensions, in addition to a sense of political justice. For me, my sense of commitment to and involvement in the Sandinista revolution was both cause and consequence of a short but intensely passionate sexual relationship I had in 1990 with a Sandinista militant. I found myself at that time confirming my political commitment to the revolution through a passionate and romantic attachment. Both my political and my sensual–sexual commitment to Nicaragua preceded my academic commitment. Both Bolton (1995) and Morton (1995) describe their attraction to their fieldsites through previous romantic involvements.

When I began my fieldwork in 1999, however, my relationship to the Sandinista revolution was very different from that of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The geopolitical situation had changed dramatically, the revolution had been in opposition for nine years with the FSLN losing both the 1990 and the 1996 elections, the leadership of the party was widely seen within Nicaragua to have betrayed many

of its basic revolutionary principles and international solidarity towards Nicaragua had also declined significantly.

While I began to experience myself as a subject of sexual desire, I was simultaneously and unexpectedly positioned by others as an object of desire. It could perhaps be anticipated that the presence of my children and the temporary presence of my partner would have emitted clear signals about my potential sexual availability. At least, if I had thought about it properly, I would have assumed that my sexuality would be differently constructed from how it was in 1990 when I visited Nicaragua both single and childless. Nevertheless, I was still a *chela*,¹ and so gendered and possibly racist assumptions were made about my sexual availability, assumptions which nonetheless impacted on the research process in significant ways. While my motherhood status in Nicaragua positioned me in certain ways and did to some extent facilitate rapport with participants, it did not position me as sexually unavailable. This in itself is interesting in terms of what it tells me about alternative discourses of motherhood and family in Nicaragua, but is nonetheless complicated by my foreignness. My positioning as a *chela* could have created sexual attraction to me based on attributes that I would feel uneasy about promoting. This could possibly include the way in which fair skin is seen as a sign of beauty and the notion that European women are more sexually liberated than Latin American women are.

I realized that offers of help from male Nicaraguans with my research project could not be seen as 'innocent', given that they were often sexually motivated. At times, men feigned interest in my research project in an attempt to spend time with me. I did, however, sometimes take advantage of such interest and used them to further my research and make connections with places and people. One man I met suggested to me that I should interview his mother as, after three failed marriages in her early 20s, she had set up her own business and managed to bring up a large family alone. I did interview her and the interview yielded many interesting data. The son however often visited me on the pretext of offering clarifications and elaborations on his mother's life story from his perspective. On my final night in Matagalpa, he turned up again protesting that I had talked very little to him about my work and we should go out and drink some whisky so I could tell him all about it. I was able to gain access to the Nicaraguan government through a man I met in

Matagalpa, who had a friend who worked for the PR department of the Presidency and was therefore in constant contact with the ministers. This introduction involved my travelling to Managua with him on a Sunday to meet her, so I took along both my children and my domestic as 'protection'.

Apart from having to negotiate my femininity in this way as a foreign woman and a researcher, I did also find myself enjoying male attention and interest that I was receiving from numerous people I met through the course of my work, attention which was undoubtedly fuelling my intensified sense of self as a sexual being and was also connecting with previous sexual attraction to men with a revolutionary past. Wade (1993) acknowledges how his research in Colombia was inevitably influenced by the tendency by the non-black world to objectify the black world as possessing an exotic physical and sexual otherness. Although he saw his relationships with two Colombian black women as a 'desire to transcend the separateness that I perceived as distancing me from the constructed otherness of black culture' (p. 203), and as much as he attempted through his work to distance himself from such constructions, these relationships could not be separated from them. The sexual attraction I have felt and feel towards revolutionary men is likewise undoubtedly influenced by stereotypical notions of Latin American men as macho sexual predators, but also as competent lovers.

Over the course of my fieldwork, my sexual and gendered subjectivities shifted and I found myself renegotiating my femininity and performing it more self-consciously. Gender is performative (Butler 1990) and these shifts and renegotiations are particularly valuable in highlighting the performative nature of gender, which can have a destabilizing impact on normative heterosexuality. The researcher, according to Rose (1997), is situated 'not by what she knows, but what she uncertainly performs' (p. 316). My experience made me realize how the fieldwork process highlights how gender is performed differently in different contexts and how it can also be highly contradictory in terms of both subjectivity and the construction of self. Sometimes female field researchers try to make themselves appear genderless to defy stereotypes or ward off unwanted attention or harassment from men. (See, for example, Conaway 1986; Caplan 1993b; Vera-Sanso 1993.) Sometimes I painted my nails with a couple of Nicaraguan women. I did this not because I particularly wanted to paint my nails, but because it

provided a time and space to talk about other issues. However, I did also find myself regretting not having brought many of the 'tools' that I had at home to perform my gender. As I began to experience my own sexuality more actively, I wished I had brought my perfume, more make-up, a pair of shoes with heels, items that had seemed inappropriate and unnecessary to my fieldwork while I was packing to leave for Nicaragua back in New Zealand.

To some extent, there is a cultural pressure among Latin American women to display outward symbols of conventional femininities, and not to do so could seem arrogant. I partly wanted to comply with cultural norms in order to fit in, even when my feminist consciousness told me it was not necessary, but at the same time and in a somewhat contradictory fashion, I was enjoying being complimented and the flirtatious interaction with men that does not happen in New Zealand.

Knopp (2001) has expressed concern about the heteronormative understandings generated by feminist geographers because of their tendency to conceive of gender relations as male–female relations even though we know that constructions of masculinity and femininity also regulate relationships between men and between women. I realize that (my) displays of (hetero)sexuality in the field also impact on (my) relationships with women. Rivalry rather than solidarity, driven by dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity, is a common feature of relationships between women in Nicaragua (Cupples 2002). As a researcher in this site, I am also subject to these understandings and their contradictory outcomes. At the times when I painted my nails or dressed up for a night on the town with other Nicaraguan women we shared our sexual subjectivities. At other times, these subjectivities diverged when I implicitly positioned myself as a potential sexual rival by taking advantage of being constructed as a foreign object of desire.

In retrospect, I feel that this subjective experience is something which cannot and should not be separated from the focus of my research. If, as Rose (1997) has stated, our sense of self depends on an otherness that we can never really know, I have wondered what the implications are of my experiencing or expressing desire for individuals who are not research participants but who are nonetheless members of the researched community. If that desire is constituted by internalized neo-colonial desires of wanting to possess the other, what possible consequences could it have for research participants? It is

a deeply complex issue. While it can be considered racist *not* to consider people from outside your own culture as potential sexual partners (Gearing 1995; Kulick 1995), I recognize that I am in equally in danger not only of replicating stereotypes about 'Latin' men and foreign women (*chelas*), but also of benefiting from the manifestations of romantic heterosexuality which I am aiming to deconstruct because of the visible harm it does to the lives of women. This is potentially the case whether sexual desire is consummated or not, for example, even when it involves flirtatious interaction because it is enjoyable or when it involves taking advantage of being fashioned as an object of desire in order to further my research project. This demonstrates the contradictions inherent in my own positioning, that I can criticize expressions of Nicaraguan masculinities from a feminist perspective, but am simultaneously attracted to the revolutionary male or exotic other, an experience labelled by Altork (1995) as cognitive dissonance.

My experience also helped me to understand the connections Nicaraguan men and women make between sexuality, femininity and motherhood and how they differ from the cultural contexts at home. In Nicaragua, I was positioned as a sexually available working mother. This suggests that discourses which constrain are also liberating, in the sense that Nicaraguan women do not have to put their sexuality on hold when they become mothers. It also suggests that Nicaraguans are more accepting or enabling of more complex multiple subjectivities than is the case in New Zealand. Nast (1998) describes how the sexualized comments she received while doing fieldwork in Nigeria 'helped me to recognize myself in terms other than my own' (p. 109), which is a valuable point if we are to get beyond the notion of positionality as being solely about oneself.

Following Nast's (1998) work in Nigeria, Falconer Al-Hindi and Kawabata (2002) refer to situations 'where our bodies are inscribed, prohibited, or disciplined according to others' worldviews and interpretations of our bodies' (p. 113). I would add that others' worldviews and interpretations of our bodies do not only prohibit and discipline but might also liberate. Engaging reflexively with my own sexuality enabled me to acknowledge that in Nicaragua mothers are constructed as sexual beings and that women, even if they are wives and mothers, are not expected to reserve their sexuality for just one man.

Conclusions

Gilmartin (2002), in an attempt to create anti-colonial geographics, has argued that if colonial geography is about conquest, anti-colonial geographies are about exposing the ongoing effects of that conquest. One of the ongoing effects of colonialism is the way in which the other is simultaneously sexualized and exoticized. Engaging with our shifting sexualities in cross-cultural fieldwork can expose our complicity with colonial discourses and practices and enable us to accept the paradoxes of our own positionings. My assumed racialized heterosexuality as a 'liberated' *chela* created both constraints and opportunities in terms of the research process.

If we engage more fully with our positionalities (and this means including dimensions which tend to be ignored), we are better placed to understand the knowledges which are produced and which get written up as research findings. While I accept Rose's (1997) assertion that feminist geographers can never fully understand their positionality and that what we know is always incomplete (Moss and Matwychuk 2000), engaging with our positionalities in more detailed ways can help us to be aware of moments and spaces when oppressive power relations are unwittingly being reproduced and enable us to work with paradox and contradiction more fruitfully. Our performances of sexuality have an important bearing on how our identities are read and paying close attention to these can help determine to what extent these reproduce or challenge dominant gendered and racialized discourses about power, north-south relations and masculinity and femininity.

Acknowledging the impact of sex and sexuality on fieldwork is fraught with complexities. However, ignoring our sexuality will not make it go away, but will simply impede our understandings of how it shapes our positionality in a number of contradictory ways. It also enables us to overcome static understandings of our subjectivities, given that the fieldwork experience causes them to shift, often in unexpected ways, as we act as sexual subjects or are turned into objects of desire by members of our researched community. Exploring our sexuality in the field is crucial to geographers wishing to address the question of power relations between the researcher and the researched, as it forces us to examine whether we are reproducing Western and orientalist notions of the other, transcending the self-other

dichotomy or creating a space in which hybrid understandings and identities can emerge.

Note

- 1 In Nicaragua, men and women of European descent are referred to as *cheles* and *chelas*. These terms are also used for fair-skinned Nicaraguans.

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