

Snapshots of friendship as expanding spaces in research and activism

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While much feminist scholarship has acknowledged the dangers in research of the creation of a “false intimacy”¹, a “friendly façade”² and deceptive “egalitarian relationships”³, this chapter takes the heed from Niharika Banerjea et al⁴ to rethink friendship in the field, drawing on my experiences from queer feminist ethnographic research to explore further the blurred boundary between closeness and distance in queer feminist ethnographic research. In what follows, I take seriously the possibilities for rethinking politics of knowledge production brought about by being immersed in queer cultures.

As queer feminist research involves ambitions for developing close and trustful relationships between researcher and researched, to open up more dimensions of the social world and move beyond the seeming neutral and distant objectivist researcher position, scholars have identified a risk for opening up for misunderstandings or disappointments. In addition, Acker, Barry and Esseveld argue, closeness may not only be harmful for research participants or the relationship between researcher and research

participant, but also jeopardize the quality of the research itself, creating a kind of “blindness in the researcher”.⁵ Furthermore, they write, the ambition to recognize research participants as “subjects in their own right” may risk to make the research relationship exploitative, not only because of the more powerful knower, for defining the goals and methods of the study, but also because the goal of the research is to gather information, and within these tensions, a danger appears of the risk of manipulating friendships.⁶ Therefore, it is relevant, scholars agree, to minimize the risk of transforming participants of research into objects of manipulation and to create conditions where research participants can enter into the process as an active – and interactive – subject. However, in their ambition to complicate the role of the research participant, researchers also illuminate that research participants should not necessarily be described as powerless or weak, but they actually have a far-reaching possibility to enable or obstruct the research process, by revealing or concealing information during, for example, interviews.⁷

In this reflection, I want to critically engage with these points of departure to further understand the possibilities of active and interactive exchanges between researcher and research participants: How can and do queer cultures and struggles for expanding spaces of livability influence politics of knowledge production? What happens when a researcher let go of the role of controlling the gathering of information and become immersed in an intellectual partnership? Can alternative modes of friendship appear in the shared exchange of ideas and search for information?

Kitchen table talks

The snapshots of friendship included in this chapter are selected from two different research projects across a period of eight years, both focusing on exploring feminist and LGBTI+ activism, first in feminist and queer grassroots engagements in a Swedish context, and later in transnational exchanges with feminist and queer activists in various national contexts.

The snapshots I bring to life here highlight various facets of friendship encountered in research and activism, opening up for reflections around the ways in which queer cultures can reconfigure practices of knowledge production, illuminating intellectual friendship as a shared pursuit of knowledge and a mutual exploration of common problems, building collective forms of response. The snapshots work as illustrations of situations where support, confidence and strength were shared, where feelings of mutuality across differences were exchanged, enabling spaces of livability and trust.

In defining my approach to the moments of friendship included in this article, I have found the idea of kitchen table talks useful, presented by queer and feminist critical race scholars, as it encapsulates the critical and reflexive engagement in the research process with a multiplicity of positionalities through informal conversation.⁸

The kitchen is a space that establishes and sustains a complex set of relations, recognized as a “complicated, racialized, and gendered space”.⁹ It is a space of labor in which food is produced and consumed. The kitchen can reproduce patriarchal structures,¹⁰ but can also be spaces of transformative power and emancipation. The kitchen can be a space of control, but it can also create communities of care and be used as a space to communicate.¹¹ The kitchen and the activities within it do not transcend racial and/or gendered hierarchies and histories. While one of the conversations I include in this chapter literally took place in my kitchen, kitchen table talks do not have to take place in a kitchen, but can take place in a café, a park, a bus stop, or any other public or private setting. Also, not all conversations taking place in kitchens are constructive but can be, as mentioned above, violent, controlling, reproducing hierarchies. Nonetheless, the term kitchen table talks seek to capture the everyday and informal character of the conversations taking place. The examples brought up in this article illuminates how embodied positionalities impact on the research process. Using the notion of everyday talk as a methodological tool to collect data, and as an analytical tool to reflect on the role of positionality in the research process, I approach the informal communication between me and my research participants not only as a way to share information but also to “build

relationships and challenge beliefs”.¹² Often starting out as informal dialogues, many of the conversations I refer to in this chapter were not recorded and did not follow a prepared plan or scheme, but emerged as a type of accidental ethnography, resulting in the development of a reflexive relationship to myself, to the evolving conversations and the unfolding relationship.

Dialogue as analytical strategy

I have been inspired by the idea of dialogue as analytical strategy in transnational feminist queer praxis.¹³ Situated in this tradition of thought I envision dialogue not just as an object of scholarly analysis but as “analysis and knowledge creation in itself”¹⁴ and as a way to overcome a strict comparative methodology that can reproduce hierarchies between geographical contexts or social locations. By contrast, dialogue can highlight linkages, parallels, tensions, and contradictions between contexts and locations.¹⁵ Further, rather than following the fixity of the notion social position, I am influenced by Floya Anthias’ approach to social location as recognizing the multifaceted embeddedness of subjects in space, seeing that subjects are located “across multiple but also fractured and inter-related social spaces of different types”.¹⁶ The concept allows me to capture how diversely situated subjects are embedded in complex relations of hierarchy, directing my attention to the broader contexts of power which produces social divisions.

Contexts of the research

The material for the discussions in this chapter are drawn from two research projects. The first research project examined grassroots feminist, anti-racist and queer activism in Sweden (2012–2015). Together with Marta Cuesta.¹⁷ We conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and participant observation, with feminist, anti-racist and queer

activist groups and individuals in Sweden. We visited meetings and events, and collected documents and images for understanding of tactics and visions in the struggle. The second research project focused on examining transnational exchanges in struggles for women's and LGBTI+ people's rights in Russia, Turkey and the Scandinavian countries (2016–2021), together with Selin Cagatay, Olga Sasunkevich and Hülya Arik.¹⁸ We developed a multi-scalar methodology for examining resistance in the grey zone between spectacular, large-scale events, and smaller, even hidden, forms of struggle for expanding spaces of livability on various scales in the contexts involved in the project.

The snapshots I present below, are examples of moments where the relationship between researcher and research participant shifted from a more structured relationship with fixed roles, within the frames of the uncertainty that characterize all research projects, to open up for social bonds of a mutual kind, as we were building a kind of intellectual friendship. As highlighted below, on a general level, these moments gave me deeper insights on the conditions and possibilities for queer lives and liveabilities. Throughout my projects, there have been other moments of similar kind, there have also been many times at which I have not experienced such shifts, but the examples below are selected in the ambition to shine a light on the possibilities of active and interactive exchanges between researcher and research participants.

As based in Sweden and as a researcher involved in feminist and LGBTI+ struggles in this context, I was situated in relation to my research and research participants in a positionality where I was looking “both from the outside in and from the inside out”¹⁹, focusing my attention on the center as well as on the margins in the Swedish-Scandinavian contexts of the projects. My social location informed my positionality in the field, as I was situated in critical race and queer knowledges and engaged in conversation with the LGBTI+ community about the tensions that shaped the limits and possibilities for cross-border engagements in struggles for feminist, people of color, trans* and queer lives and liveabilities in Sweden, Norway and Denmark.²⁰

The space between us: Queer cultures and politics of knowledge production

Within the frames of my research on transnational feminist and queer struggles, I contacted the organization Queer World, a Norwegian nationwide organization working for LGBTI+ people of minority background. In a first meeting with Rick, one of the leaders of Queer world, we talked about the work of the organization and I shared my understanding of the challenges and possibilities encircling LGBTI+ lives and livabilities in the Scandinavian countries. As I was interested in political and social community-based activities in the area of gender and sexuality, I asked if I could join some of the activities of the organization, to which I was warmly invited. However, Rick underlined, I was not welcome as a distant or passive observer, but as an active participant. This suited me fine. Some weeks later, Queer world organized a three-day workshop on sexuality and love, which I registered for. The course gathered 15 other course participants of diverse backgrounds and gender identities (three female-identified, one non-binary, three preferred to be addressed by their name only, and the rest of the group male-identified) and sexual orientations (approximately two thirds of the group identified as non-heterosexual, one identified as asexual and three found it too private to talk about) in the ages from 16 to 35 years. Most course participants were migrants from countries such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, United Arab Emirates, Hungary, Uganda, Kenya and Egypt. The conversations were kept in Norwegian and English with a simultaneous translation to Pashto, conducted by one volunteer, a member of Queer world. The workshop focused on questions of identity, relationships, health and lifestyle and gave an introduction to Norwegian legislation in the areas of anti-discrimination and sexual health. A set of collaborative exercises shaped a sense of trust and openness among workshop participants, who were invited to share their reflections, experiences and knowledges. During breaks, other members active in Queer world showed up to have a lunch or coffee together with workshop participants, which shaped a sense of the space as allowing for a broader community to emerge. By mid-day on the

second day of the workshop, Marwan, a newly arriving participant arrived. He was living in the upmost northern part of Norway and had missed his connecting flight due to delays but had followed the same workshop before, and he easily joined the conversations and exercises in the group. Since the start of the workshop, I had been open about my participation as both personal and professional. I had given a short presentation of the topic of my research and invited all who were interested to chat with me more during breaks and after the workshop. Some of those who chatted with me in breaks and during lunch time were explicitly interested in the research I conducted, and asked about my approach to the research and shared their insights into the topics, others didn't care so much about the research but our conversations focused on everyday experiences, worries and joys. In the afternoon of the second day, Marwan and I took a coffee in the break. Marwan, who was in his early twenties, had arrived to Norway from Syria about one year before. He was interested in applying for the university and learn languages. We decided to keep contact after the workshop. In the spring some months after the workshop, I received a text message from Marwan who made plans to come to Gothenburg, where I was living at the time, and closer to the summer, I was planning to visit Oslo during Pride. By this time, Marwan had moved to Oslo and taken up a job in a bar. Meeting up in Oslo, we took a cup of tea and decided to go and check out Oslo Pride, which was held over these days. It was a beautiful summer day, and we shared a great time when we strolled around in the Pride area, and stopped to chat with friends and acquaintances of Marwan and myself. In a similar way as some of my other exchanges with members of Queer World, with one of the leaders, Lyne, and with Dino, another course participant, these exchanges established a relationship that stretched beyond my task as ethnographer or researcher. The conditions structuring our exchange made our relationship asymmetrical, for example in relation to Marwan, who was still located in a vulnerable situation as a relatively newly arrived migrant in the need of expanding his friendship circles and developing more stable plans for his education and working life, although the move to Oslo had meant that he now lived in the same city as the people that were his closest friends, who he had met through activities in Queer world, and that he had gotten a

job. In addition, my position as a researcher and as an outsider in the organization and in the broader queer political scene in Oslo and Norway gave me a position of privilege that made it possible for me to chat with people of diverse backgrounds. As we were going for a walk together, bought vegetables in the market, were having a coffee or sharing a meal, my outsider position seems to have allowed my research participants to share feelings of frustration with me, conflicts and tensions in- and outside of the organization.

When thinking back on these moments of exchange, it was not the case that they challenged my possibility to conduct 'good' research, risking to exploit my research participants, more than a distant or detached researcher mode, as feminist scholars have suggested as one of the dangers of developing personal relationships with one's research participants.²¹ Exploitation, I would suggest, is not an issue that can be avoided through the use of certain methods for data collection, but rather through attention to questions of subjective agency, individual integrity, shared accountability and trust throughout the research process. Also, the closeness of our relationship did not help me to grasp some hidden knowledge that I would otherwise not have captured. While my position as researcher in the relationship challenged the idea of reciprocal exchanges, our exchanges still demanded openness and responsibility, but rather than reinscribing the position of my research participants as native informants, our exchanges brought my own desires and prejudices to the surface.²² For example, after hanging out with Lyne, Dino and Marwan, I had to confront my own beliefs of what expanding queer spaces of liveability was about, that some queer people have no interest in politics and simply want to go on and live their lives, and that friendship sometimes is just friendship: someone to share a moment of joy, sadness or frustration with, nothing more, nothing less. When conducting my ethnography, these moments, highlighted here as snapshots of friendship, took place off the record, when I was taking a break in my ethnography, shut off the tape recorder, and opened up for more relaxed conversations, allowing me to become closer to the lives of my research participants. Since I didn't consider these moments as parts of my ethnography, these shifts in our exchange, helped me to navigate a potential ethical difficulty of

using the data or discarding it, at the same time as these exchanges off the record provided me with a deeper and broader understanding of the complexities of the dynamics at hand. As I didn't live in Oslo, but travelled there for the ethnography, there was no expectation that our relationship would develop into a long-lasting friendship.

Some years before, another example of similar dynamics emerged, in another project where I was working with queer politics and communities. While this example highlights a different dilemma than the above in relation to the question of friendship in research, both are examples of instances which have pushed me to rethink the politics of knowledge production in academia through queer cultures. I find in them some similarity since both examples direct my attention to the significance of broader linkages of subjective, affective and political relationships, allowing me to capture the knowledge that appear in the space between us.

The research project I was working with during the time aimed to explore tactics and visions of grassroots feminist and queer activism in a Swedish context. One of the groups I approached to gather my material for this project was Göteborgs Queerinstitut [Gothenburg Queer Institute]. I joined meetings, events and activities of the organization. I also interviewed interested members of the organization. One of these were Jon, who had a strong interest in archiving practices. One day, Jon and I sat down in my kitchen. He had brought a bag full of excerpts, clips, leaflets and photos of events since the early days of the organization from the start of the 2000s and onwards. There were news clips from heated debates, illustrated and hand written flyers from events, and minutes from annual meetings of the organization. Jon was presenting the materials one by one and as we sat in my kitchen, the darkness fell outside of the window. One of my children came home from school and joined some of our conversation as she made a cup of tea. Finally, Jon and I had documented all materials. Since my project wasn't about the history of the organization or even of queer history, I had already informed Jon that I wouldn't be able to document this narrative in the project. Still, by sharing the events and activities across the years, a new kind of methodology emerged that allowed me to grasp the tactics and visions of the

organization that was going beyond regular participant observation and interviewing. The rich material that was spreading out over my kitchen table, enabled me to identify relationships and connections in and outside of the organization over time, and helped me to go beyond personal or individual actions, to capture the collective dreams and hopes of queer politics in the group and in the city, the conflicts and the frustrations. In that moment of story-telling as the archive was coming to life, an interdependence emerged in our joint interest of the historical narrative, and a deeper sense of involvement, intimacy and trust appeared, sustained by our shared devotion to queer lives and politics.

When I now recall this exchange, I find that my memories of the exchange resonate with queer feminist approaches to story-telling that has moved beyond the “realm of personal or individual” friendship to identify the political potential of friendship.²³ By approaching friendship as a methodological tool in feminist archival research, Varsha Chitnis recognizes how relationships of respect, support, love and mutual admiration goes beyond conventional notions of friendship, to expand the scope of the meaning of friendship as a tool for doing archival research.²⁴

While this chapter started out by asking what friendship can contribute to research, these dynamics of intellectual exchange and shared devotion brings attention to the ways in which research relationships can contribute to rethink notions of friendship. These reflections can bring some critical light to the ways in which friendship often is framed within an abstract ideal of friendship as a relation without any self-interest, despite the fact that many friendship relations actually are shaped in situations where people are in the need of particular skills, support, help or solidarity. Talking about friendship as transformative social justice, bell hooks and Cornel West understand friendship through an ethic of responsibility toward the other (including its failure) which involves sharing of critique and nurturing love as a social bond of exchange: “we must think of not just romantic love”, hooks hold, “but of love in general as being about people mutually meeting each other’s needs and giving and receiving critical feedback”.²⁵

When being situated in such shifting and messy relationships, questions of agency, integrity, accountability and trust appear as central. In order to

come to terms to the dilemmas that may appear as a result of blurred boundaries in the asymmetric relationship between researcher and research participant, Thomas Newkirk proposes three principles of action that can be adjusted to specific needs and circumstances in specific contexts of research, which I find fruitful when reconsidering the relationship between researcher and research participant from an understanding of interactivity and shared engagement: 1) that all involved in the research, both researchers and research participants, should be willing to receive critical feedback, to enable reciprocal learning; 2) that research participants have a right to the co-interpretation of events, even if researchers and participants don't agree; 3) that researchers bear a responsibility of intervention, and should be willing to address any problematic issue they might observe while conducting research.²⁶

Concluding discussion

While feminist scholars have warned against the dangers of understanding of the relationship between the researcher and research participants as a form of friendship, in this chapter, I set out to explore the terrain of researcher-research participant relationship and the reflections provided in this chapter opens up for a rethinking of both research and friendship relations.

While the idea that the researcher's goal is always to gather information has been taken for granted among researchers in the field across many years, in this chapter, I took a closer look at moments where boundaries between the roles of researcher and friend are blurred. The reflections shared in this chapter suggests that it is possible for a researcher to move in and out of the role of gathering information when being in the field. While drawing such lines of on- and off-duty may give protection for individual research participants from risks of being exploited or manipulated, it may still provide the researcher with a potential to reach a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of the landscape that the questions in focus for the research are located within.

In addition, in contrast to researchers who emphasize the need for demarcating a line between being a researcher and being a friend, the reflections in this chapter also suggests the need to rethink friendship as an altruistic relationship, free of self-interest. I have suggested the fruitfulness of expanding the scope of friendship to also recognize relationships of giving and receiving critical feedback in a shared pursuit of knowledge and exchange of ideas. In this spirit, I have attended to how the relationship between researcher and research participant can be transformed through the research, based in experiences of intellectual partnership and mutual devotion to queer cultures, lives and liveabilities.

Endnotes

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- ¹⁷ For a book length publication from the project, see Liinason and Cuesta, *Hoppets politik*.

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- ¹⁸ Selin Cagatay (postdoctoral fellow, CEU Vienna), Olga Sasunkevich (Senior Lecturer University of Gothenburg) and Hülya Arik (Senior Lecturer University of Toronto). For a book length publication from the project, see *Feminist and LGBTI+ activism across Russia, Scandinavia and Turkey, Transnationalizing Spaces of Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan and Springer ebooks, 2022).
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The names of individual activists included are kept confidential, by the use of a pseudonym instead of the real names. The included organization appears by its real name. This has been decided in agreement with the participants involved.
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