# The unspoken experiences of ethnography: overcoming boundaries of (un)accepted behaviours

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Abstract

Qualitative methods generally, and ethnography in particular, have emerged as the most immersive research methodology within the everyday life of research participants. However, the relationships established in the field may impinge on levels of intimacy that are perceived to be inappropriate by the ethnographer. Based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted as a Doctoral researcher with older Italians in Newcastle upon Tyne, this paper foregrounds the position of the ethnographer when interactions with participants involve experiencing of sexual harassment. Within a discussion of the safety of the researcher, this work firstly deliberates on issues that oscillate between the ‘field’ and the ‘self’. Secondly, this article discusses issues of access, positionality and challenges of conducting research through ethnographic fieldwork. Finally, it elaborates on the emotional, psychological and social dimensions of the harassment, bringing the ‘body’ and its varying perceptions to the fore. This work constitutes an original contribution to the discussion on the precarity of working in a community setting in close contact with research participants, and how that shapes the idea of research fieldwork. The author highlights the varying nature of the ethnographic field and suggests the growing need to reflect on the ‘unspoken risks’ of fieldwork.

Key words: ethnography; fieldwork; gender; sexual harassment; Italians.

## *Introduction*

Ethnographic research is idealised as an adventurous experience. Training, mentorship and fieldwork narratives construct the trope of ethnography as entailing travel to different cultural contexts to gain an understanding of a specific group of people or society from the inside (Malinowski, [1922] 2002). Scholarly norms and expectations shape the myth of the ethnographer as a ‘brave and solitary adventurer’ (Cohen, 2000), which persists in academic environments, especially amongst PhD students who are embarking for the first time on their long-awaited fieldwork journey. However, as the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork are rarely mentioned, early career researchers are more prone to putting their work before their own safety (Pritchard, 2019).

Expectations about fieldwork, as part of the research process, that only a few are able to master (Hovland, 2009) reflect a belief that to be a good ethnographer, one must be ‘doing whatever it takes to get good data’ (Hanson & Richards, 2019, p.14). This can often result in the researchers’ behaviour becoming influenced, and potentially exposing them to risks. Hence, while conducting fieldwork, researchers might encounter situations they are unprepared for, or that are hard to walk away from. One recent example of this is the case of Giulio Regeni, an Italian Cambridge University PhD student, who in February 2016, was abducted and tortured to death while conducting his fieldwork in Egypt, and the call for truth and justice has yet to be answered (Roselli, 2017).

Although acknowledging the increasing diversity within ethnographic methodologies and the multiplicity of ways in which fieldwork is carried out, there are assumptions about researchers immersing themselves, as deeply as possible, into the social and cultural field in which the research takes place, while participating in the local life of the people explored. However, as the body is the most important scientific tool for mediating and acquiring knowledge in ethnographic research (Crang, 2003; Longhurst, et al., 2008), long-term fieldwork might expose the researchers to risks and vulnerabilities. There are challenges that shape the research process, recruiting, gaining access and building relationships with people, generating data and ultimately analysis that are obscured and silenced in ethnographic narratives.

Methodological literature has identified ‘dangerous’ environments, unsafe areas and ‘dangerous’ subjects to work with (Lee 1995; Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009; Tshabangu, 2009). Consequently, pre-fieldwork risk and safety assessment procedures are generally focused on researching external factors that define certain fields as ‘dangerous’ such as zones of conflict, or where civil freedoms are denied. However, it has been argued that dangers pertain also to the interpersonal relationships established with people in the field, and the expectations that structure these exchanges, particularly for female researchers (Gurney, 1985; Green at al., 1993; Arendell, 1997; Campbell, 2003; Collins and Farrell, 2024).

Women’s lived experiences and their methodological difficulties have been well-documented (Campbell, 2003; Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Yassour-Borochowitz, 2012) shedding light on gender dynamics during data collection with qualitative methods. Despite the growing acknowledgement of the dangers for female fieldworkers (Collins and Farrell, 2024), it is still unclear how to circumvent the difficulties of gender issues and how to best reassert legitimacy as researchers, in environments that are potentially hostile to equity for women (Pini, 2005; Presser, 2005; Collins and Farrell, 2024). There are challenges that have not been sufficiently addressed in the methodological literature, such as risks of sexual harassment, sexualisation and violence more broadly occurring in the field.

This paper aims to highlight the often ‘unspoken experiences of ethnography’, by illustrating a case of sexual harassment that occurred during the ethnographic fieldwork I conducted for my PhD project. Sexual harassment, a term coined in the 1970s by feminist movements (Langelan, 1993), refers to verbal or nonverbal unwanted actions that violate local concepts and prevailing sexual norms (Mott & Condor, 1997). I adopt Kloß’s (2017) definition of sexual harassment, as ‘coercive behaviours, which may include gestures, actions, and other modes of verbal and nonverbal communication, with sexual connotations, which intimidate, humiliate and exercise power over another person’ (p. 399). Its impact on researchers has been acknowledged by numerous scholars (Easterday et al.,1977; Gurney, 1985; Williams et al. 1992; Green et al. 1993; Huff, 1997; Kenyon and Hawker, 1999; Sharp & Kremer, 2006; Grauerholtz et al., 2013; Pritchard, 2019; Collins and Farrell, 2024), however, these experiences have been marginalised within theoretical and methodological discussions of ethnographic fieldwork (Pollard, 2009; Congdon, 2015; Johansson, 2015; Kloß, 2017; Mügge, 2013; Sharabi, 2020). The silence surrounding experiences of sexual harassment might be due to uncertainty around what is ‘permissible’ to tell about these in academic writing (Yassour-Borochowitz, 2012) linked, in part, to the institutional patriarchal power relations that dominate higher education more broadly (Berry et al., 2017; Collins and Farrell, 2024).

This work has its roots in a series of conversations I had with some colleagues with whom I shared an episode of sexual misconduct. In particular, Elena M., at the time a PhD student in Anthropology, contributed enormously to my thought process. Although she did not experience sexual harassment during her fieldwork, our conversations generated the arguments discussed at a Postgraduate Research event that we organised. The one-day workshop aimed at highlighting the role of emotions in ethnographic fieldwork. At the time, I was driven by the need to verbalise and share my challenges within a community of peers. Insights from attendees were energising, providing what Lisiak et al. (2018) refer to as a ‘space of care’. After the fruitful discussion and perceptive reflections, we concluded that sexual harassment in the field should be a topic that as reflective researchers, we must continue to include in our ethnographic writing. While the thinking process that led to this work is informed by colleagues, this work draws solely on my own experience of sexual harassment. Adopting a confessional tales style (Van Maanen, 1988), this paper offers practical implications for how preparing for fieldwork and managing some of the inevitably ambiguous relationships that researchers develop with participants.

## *Ethnographic intimacy and challenges*

Qualitative methods, in general, and ethnography, in particular, have emerged as the most immersive research methodology within the everyday life of research participants (Green et al., 1993; Appadurai, 1997). However, the double-edged sword of intimacy has often been underestimated (Hanson & Richard, 2017; 2019). In fact, ‘fieldwork takes place at the intersection of the public and the private, opening up the possibility for violation of boundaries between the professional and the personal’ (Hanson & Richards, 2019 p.14).

In ethnography, data are generated through the encounter *between* the researcher and the participants, as situated in the social and cultural context in which the ethnographic encounter took place (Tedlock, 1991; Hastrup, 1992). Therefore, the ‘self' and the 'other' are inextricably involved in a dialectical process (Fabian, 1990). The expression 'to grasp the native’s point of view' (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25) is considered a fundamental purpose of fieldwork for most ethnographers; it entails effort to establish intimate connections with people living in that context, and seeking to become part of their everyday life. Epistemological foundations of ethnography that inform the interactions between the researchers and the participants imply building a series of trust relationships over time (Hammersley, 2006). As such, the levels of intimacy and disclosures of narratives depend upon the developing rapport between researcher and participants (Atkinson and Pugsley, 2005). Therefore, relationship building is considered to be an integral and important part of the fieldwork process, and should be taken into consideration for further analysis.

With this reflective turn, the traditional gaze on the ‘native’ has become a controversial topic of discussion among anthropologists (Clifford, 1988; Geertz, 2008), who argue for reducing the ethnographic authority, as it no longer fits within the model for the study of a culture (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). Since the researcher and participants are recognised as being equally involved in the production of knowledge (Geertz, 2008), the experience of social interaction should be treated with reflexive attention. Reflexivity, such as the ‘reciprocal interplay of one’s relationship with oneself and others’ (Jackson, 2010, p.36) should embed the role of the fieldworker’s emotions in ethnographic description and interpretations. Hence, as James (2010) argues, ‘immersion in the field is essential to the generation of our disciplinary knowledge, we must enquire how far the human consequences of such immersion affect these very processes of production’ (p.79).

Feminist approaches advocate for the erasure of power hierarchies between the researchers and researched, have also stated the importance of closeness to achieving a deep understanding of the reality studied (Stacey, 1988). In particular, Burns (2003) endorses critical reflexivity, considering interviews as embodied interactions between the researcher and participants, which have implications at the physical level. Within this context, ethnography recognises the embodied nature of the fieldwork (Davis and Breede, 2015), according to which situated bodies shape the research process, access, and outcomes, and, as such the production of ethnographic knowledge.

The focus on ‘embodiment’ or ‘embodied ethnographies’ (Turner, 2000; Monaghan, 2006; Patarin-Jossec, 2024) considers the researcher’s body as a source of data. Ethnographers, in fact, use the body as an instrument for research (Crang, 2003). This expression refers to the use of the self – feelings, moods, bodily reactions and gestures – to gain insights into the research (Longhurst et al. 2008). This also includes various aspects of the body, such as spatial relations -deciding where to stand- or clothing -deciding what to wear (Bain and Nash, 2006). However, exactly because ethnographers’ bodies are implicated in the research process, they can be exposed to risks.

In particular, the ethnographer’s goal of becoming as intimate as possible with the social world explored risks breaking down formal barriers between the researcher and participants (Gailey and Prohaska, 2006; Orrico, 2015). In this respect, Hanson and Richards (2017; 2019) develop the concept of ‘fixations’ referring to ideological forms that shape how ethnographers – especially women - evaluate their own experience or think this will be evaluated by others. These fixations are standards of solitude, danger and intimacy that shape ethnographic knowledge produced. Being intimate with participants, the two scholars argue, might be subjectively interpreted and understood differently between researcher and participants. Thus, the researchers’ body might be vulnerably exposed to unwanted contacts, and gendered and sexualised dynamics that are inherent in the research field.

Literature that expresses concerns for safety of the researchers suggests thinking sharply on gendered hierarchies and multiple inequities such as race, class, gender, sexuality, raising awareness of the challenges of ethnography from the perspective of nonmale, non-white, nonhetero, and non cisgender bodies (Conboy et al., 1997; Berry et al., 2017; Patarin-Jossec, 2024). For example, Berry and colleagues (2017) via ethnographic vignettes, reflect on the embodied experiences of black women to discuss how researcher assaults were most likely racially motivated. Similarly, Elliott (2021) reflects on a violent encounter that happened during her postdoctoral fieldwork as a white Canadian in Kenya. Patarin-Jossec’s (2024) ethnography of commercial divers discusses experiences of sexism, rape threats, harassment and physical assault, during underwater fieldwork, from the perspective of a woman, queer, but whose sexuality was thought to be straight from her crewmates.

It has been widely discussed how to manage moments of ‘disjuncture’ in the interviewing relations during data collection (Campbell, 2003). In particular, in her study on in-depth interviews with authoritative senior male police officers, Campbell (2003) outlines how she developed an interviewing style for building an ‘interpretative rapport’, based on an emphatic understanding while maintaining distance through a critical dialogue. However, she argues, this is emotionally draining (Campbell, 2003). Similarly, in discussing barriers that gender poses in feminist research, Collins and Farrell (2024) stress the emotional labour and techniques employed by female researchers in mitigating potential harm to their person in male-dominated and sexualized spaces. However, authors argue that in the lack of university training concerning gender dynamics and personal safety on sexual violence, researchers are left to develop their own methods of dealing with such incidents (Collins and Farrell, 2024).

And this is where this paper is situated, aiming at addressing the following questions. Are gender dynamics reproduced during fieldwork interaction? How to mitigate the potential harm to the threat of sexual harassment? How to prevent or to anticipate experiences of sexual harassment during ethnographic fieldwork? What are appropriate responses to experiences of sexual harassment?

This work discusses an unwanted sexual contact in the fieldwork, showing how the physical proximity adopted by the researcher might have been understood differently from the participants’ perspective. I use my own embodied experience through reflective writing to critique the production of gendered identities and expected attitudes, to illustrate how gender intersects with other systems of domination. To elucidate my argument, I will firstly present the research setting where participant observation was conducted, highlighting my positionality in the fieldwork (gender, nationality, age, etc.), and, secondly, describe the harassment I encountered.

## *The fieldwork context*

My ethnographic experience comes from conducting research amongst older Italians in the North East of England, exploring a sense of attachment to places. Participants, both female and male, were aged between 60 and 94 years old. This research was grounded in ethnographic fieldwork, which drew on in-depth interviews and extensive participant observation, over a period of 12 months, starting in June 2015 (see anonymised; 2019; 2022; 2024a).

In this study, participant observation implied a direct engagement with the social and cultural reality, in order to build relationships of trust with informants over time. The main site for participant observation was a recreational centre for Italians, which hosted an average of 30 to 40 guests. This site is located in the city centre, and I attended it on a weekly basis, during the daytime, from 12 to 3, engaging in conversation, while enjoying a cup of tea (anonymised 2024b). Therefore, my field site was relatively safe, as it was not classified as a high-risk environment and the subjects were not considered dangerous, according to the risk assessment procedures, prominent in the methodological and ethnographic literature. I gradually built trust with participants and patiently negotiated access into the community setting.

Rosaldo (1980) illustrated how ethnographers are ‘positioned subjects’. This position, he asserted, is defined by different aspects, such as gender, age, personal biography, personal values and beliefs that play a key role in the research experience during fieldwork, thus ‘enables or inhibits particular kinds of insight’ (p.193). Treating the ethnographic experience with reflexive attention, I detail my positionality, by illustrating the role of some of these aspects that shaped the relationship I built with participants, and the data generated through conversations.

As this research has been conducted amongst older Italians, my Italian origin played a crucial role, as such I was considered an ‘insider’ (Ganga and Scott, 2006) sharing similar cultural, linguistic, and national heritage. At the time, I was 30 years old, however, as I learned later on, I appeared much younger. The length of my residence in the North East -being a newcomer to the town- shaped the nature of the relationship I built with some of the participants. On several occasions, they passed onto me their knowledge about the city where I had just begun to live. Over time, I was designated the role of the adopted granddaughter. Aware of this dynamic of infantilisation, I felt I could only benefit from their attitude to ‘educate the young newcomer’ as it helped to build rapport.

In line with the critiques of the ‘old’ orthodoxy, claiming against the authorial status of the ethnographer in the field (Geertz and Marcus, 1986) I sought to avoid the process of distancing the ‘other’. Therefore, I adopted a friendly and approachable attitude. Moreover, the intergenerational relationship established was further shaped by introducing myself as an unmarried, childless student. This was considered unusual for a person of my age – and rather subversive – according to the gender norms of the people I aimed to work with. This was expressed in comments about the fact that I should not only think about studying and working, but that I should also seek to find a husband and ‘settle down’. While during fieldwork, I did not perceive these comments to be oppressive, I do now retrospectively, considering these as expressions of patriarchal belief, as I elaborate later.

### *Gendered divisions in space*

Gender, as produced through everyday performance in interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987) had a significant influence on my data collection in determining access to the fieldwork. When I approached this community, I did not have gender on my mind, but it was brought up in the interactions, as a socially constructed category that grounded my participants’ ‘identities’; the meanings they attached to it in everyday interactions; their expectations that I needed to conform.

The community setting was a highly gendered context, with rigid gender structures, accomplished and performed through social interaction and social arrangements. After standing and socialising, people took their seats at tables; although seemingly spontaneous, they were used to sitting more or less in the same place each meeting. This unwritten rule, observed by regular members for years, I learned afterwards, served to maintain an informal segregation by gender and conversation topics. In one corner of the room, 6-8 men used to sit, their talk revolving around social, economic, and political concerns. In their area, the women’s talk was predominately about personal matters: grandchildren, domestic activities, such as baking, cleaning, etc. Both women and men talked about health and news they had heard the previous days on Italian television.

The participant who introduced me to the centre was a woman, and at the beginning of my fieldwork I used to sit next to her, and so first became familiar with the women around her. Thus, I acted in line with established behavioural norms, which I had witnessed during initial occasions. However, after a few weeks, I felt the need to establish contact with as many people as possible, and to interact more with all the members. Therefore, I approached the ‘man corner’ to take a seat. On some occasions, women would call my attention, invite me to sit with them and suggest that I ‘leave them alone, they are men’; I realised afterwards that it was considered *inappropriate* for a woman to be involved in the *men's area*.

Therefore, my gender played a role in determining the use of space in the setting for participant observation, and this intersected with my personal affective response to the gender role I needed to conform to, or reject. Female participants supposed I should be interested exclusively in baking, cooking, cleaning; and male participants used to ignored my point of view when debating politics, or issues that they would define as ‘men’s issues’- from which women were often excluded. In both cases, I was motivated by an ambivalent desire: a desire for closeness and distance. Sometimes, I wished to conform to their gender expectations, enacting conservative femininity, remaining in the female corner, and asking about their knowledge of these themes. I enjoyed performing this role, especially when they used to say ‘you like to cook; you are like one of us’, distancing themselves from those other women who ‘are not into cooking food’. However, sometimes, I did not fit in with this role at all. Particularly, when it implied limitations.

As illustrated by Butler (1997), gender does not exist outside of performance, discourse, and symbolic logics, as it is ‘a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actor themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief’ (p.402). However, gender performances can also be contested and reinterpreted (West & Zimmerland, 1987), and researchers may engage in performances that challenge these roles. I did not want to adhere to hegemonic femininity; I wanted to challenge the norms and expectations that structured that social world I was studying.

For the purpose of this article, it is paramount to highlight that I, as researcher, transgressed the boundaries of the gendered division within the setting. To gain insights into the research, I used my body, such as its movement in space, as an instrument for knowledge (Crang, 2003). From performing gender in expected ways for the local context, I decided to present myself in a non-hegemonic femininity, wanting to ‘mix with men’s business’. Unaware of the consequences that this might provoke, I challenged and violated the unwritten rules of gendered interactions within the social world of the community. This retrospective interpretation might suffice to explain -not to justify- the harassment experienced.

## *Sexual Harassment*

Community members used to gather spontaneously outside the building’s entrance, sharing small talk, before entering the centre. It was a common practice to kiss each other on the cheeks, as Italian people generally do, which implied physical proximity. That morning, as usual, I spent some time at the entrance, talking with one female member, when one of the male members and his wife came along.

*‘They joined us and I didn't even have the time to ask how are you doing. Suddenly, I found myself having a pinch on the bum. I felt unprepared to handle such a situation’*

*(Extracted from fieldwork diary, September 2015)*

Bum pinching has to be contextualised in the rhetoric of relationship building that occurred on the previous occasions I was engaged with the community. A few weeks prior to that morning, I learned something that was a significant feature of the group of people I was working with. Described as embedded in practices of socialisation, bum pinching referred to an experience several members of this community could relate to, as I learned from them: bum pinching used to be a way to show appreciation of a lady’s aesthetics, among members of the Italian community during the ‘70s in Italy, as well as in the UK. The Italian men I spoke with, who had migrated to the North East in the ‘70s, used to navigate Neweldon Street[[1]](#footnote-1) and, as the sidewalk roadway was restricted, people had to walk quite closely together. Italian men of my community reminisced about former days when they - or other men they knew - would have fun by ‘accidentally’ groping the bottom of ladies they found sexually attractive. As such, bum pinching was an example of the history they represented. These conversations, which took place in the man’s corner, also involved some women, who confirmed that this had happened to them, and added funny anecdotes. Only one third-generation Italian had a contrasted version of the history. She said:

*“When I say my grandparents are Italians and I spend the summers in Italy, people of that generation, who could remember bum pinching, ask me: ‘Does it still happen in Italy?’ I answer: ‘It has never happened to me’, but I don’t know if I should take it as a compliment. Maybe my butt isn’t attractive enough”.*

*(Extracted from fieldwork diary, August 2015)*

Understanding the self-humour of her statement, I smiled. However, upon reflection, in line with Kloß (2017), sexual harassment has often been misunderstood as based on sexual attraction, but instead ‘it is largely an expression, exertion, and recreation of (male) power to control the recipient’s behaviour’ (p.399). Kloß (2017) asserts that that by continuing to label sexual harassment as a form of courtship, it risks masking the abuse of power involved. The participant above might have not interpreted bum pinching as sexual abuse; she seemed concerned that her body met male standards of beauty.

At the time, I thought I should consider myself fortunate to have formed close relationships with my participants, disclosing to me their memories of themselves in their younger days, offering insights about their common history. So, I continued to smile when listening to these stories, and attributed meanings, as rich informed data for my place-based research. However, I started to ‘learn from the inside’ and gained experiential understanding of the life of the community only a few weeks later.

That morning, instead of the usual good humour, the interaction between some of the community members and myself was characterised by an escalation of negative emotions, when at the entrance of the building I found myself being pinched on the bum.

*This came as a surprise to me and I looked at [the gentleman] very annoyed. I said: “Excuse me! This is not acceptable!”*

*Withdrawing his hand, he said: “Well, you are here to know our past, aren’t you? In the ‘70s Italian women enjoyed you pawing at them, English women too”*

*With incredulity, I answered: “I’m not sure who enjoyed this in the past, but, this is not acceptable any longer nowadays” I looked at his wife, hoping she was going to intervene in my defence, I said: “Have you seen what happened? Can you, please, tell him that I’m not happy with that?”*

*She was evidently embarrassed, but she didn’t say anything. Not a word. She just looked somewhere else.*

*The gentleman continued: “What, are you sore for a little slap? You were the one approaching our corner, sitting amongst men, and now? Don’t be such a fusspot! You know, when you play with fire you might be burned. Well, you don’t like it? Then, go away, don’t enter this Club. You are not one of us, then”*

*His wife didn’t express her opinion, assuming a stoic stance. I hesitated to respond or take any action. The other lady who witnessed the episode came closer to me and led me to the interior of the building. That morning, I barely wanted to cross the entrance threshold.*

*(Extracted from fieldwork diary, September 2015)*

This experience had an enormous impact upon the way I regarded my fieldwork context. To adopt James’ (2010) expression, it was ‘as if with such severance the beautiful veil that once draped the imperfect reality [was] suddenly torn off’ (p.87). The harasser made me think that being physically ‘closer’ to some of the community members came with emotional and psychological costs, and, as a woman, I should have envisioned the risk of proximity. So, it was my fault because I had established an intimate relationship with the men of the Club. This brought to view asymmetries of relational power to the surface. Hence, the core of this behaviour reinforced patriarchal beliefs and attitudes, regarding the role of the female ethnographer within the field. It sounded as if I wanted to obtain information from them, I had to accept and conform to their rules.

Johansson (2015) discusses how one of her participants would grant her access to information by asking for ‘something’ in return – referring to sexual favours (p.57). In my case, the asymmetries of power within the fieldwork were communicated by the expression: ‘being one of us’. On the one hand, as I mentioned above, cultivating the desire to be accepted in the field, I was pleased to hear this inclusive expression, by those who emphasised affiliations, such as the women of the community did. On the other hand, in this situation, I felt blackmailed, as I was asked to accept the compromise to be considered part of the community. Otherwise, I should decide ‘not to enter the Club’ reminding me that, as ethnographer, I was an ‘uninvited guest’ (Crapanzano, 2010). I did not want to be an outsider in the community, but still I was not happy to let my body be violated. I found this humiliating.

This resonates with the feeling of being uncomfortable due to sexualized comments discussed by Collins and Farrell (2024). The authors questioned whether this feeling stemmed by the researcher becoming aware of her body being sexualized or as the participant commented on her lack of legitimacy in the space (Collins and Farrell, 2024).

The sexual harassment that I experienced, later elaborated through ethnographic reflection was a source of insight, worth reflexive attention to understand how this was perceived by the women involved, as I articulate next.

### *Silence and power relations*

As I climbed the stairs to enter the community centre, I walked alongside the woman who had witnessed the incident. She tried to calm me down by saying that the gentleman commonly joked in that way; I did not know him very well. I shared with her my annoyance, and also my surprise at the lack of any reaction by his wife, and she said:

*“Come on, we are good Italian women, sometimes we prefer to remain in silence, to avoid trouble, don’t we? Be omertosa (be silent) as we all are''.*

*(Extracted from fieldwork diary, September 2015)*

I was advised to align with the gendered code of behaviour in that social context, as an ‘omertosa’ lady. I was asked to accept and act according to the prevailing local norms and silencing the account of that experience in order to be considered a ‘good Italian woman’. I wondered how the internalization of such norms about gender might have contributed to the enforced conspicuous silence surrounding experiences of sexual harassment – and violence in general- from the perspective of the people I worked with.

This episode and the way the female participant handled it, by dismissing him as a joker, confirm the pervasiveness of patriarchy within the community. The self-imposed silence demonstrates the degree to which women marginalise their own experiences, and internalise that sexual harassment should not be taken seriously, as the witness informed me, ‘he was joking’. In fact, the prevalence of hegemonic masculinity historically worked to the advantage of those who were in power, contributing to the silence surrounding these issues. The same silence that reproduces values, standards and norms that delegitimised women’s own experiences. Hence, in line with Crapanzano (2010) ‘the unsaid, the silenced (…) can be more forceful than the said’ (p.68). Why the harasser’s wife remained silent and pretended not to have witnessed her husband’s sexual assault on my body is still a question that remains unanswered.

However, in light of the events that occurred, I was not able to acquiesce to sexual harassment both according to the understanding of what ‘counts’ neither as a ‘good Italian lady’ nor as a ‘good researcher’. As Green and colleagues (1993) explained, to complete successfully the fieldwork it is imperative to maintain an acceptable social identity in order to ‘fit in’ with local cultural expectations. Similarly, Hendry (2008) suggests that researchers need to accept and replicate the rules of the participants we are observing:

 ‘if the people they are concern with get up early, they get up early; if they stay up all night, the anthropologist should do the same. […] the idea is to experience what it is like to be a member of the world under study, for otherwise one could not begin to understand how it looks and feels’ (p.324).

So, to adhere to the notion of what counts as a ‘good ethnographer’ and to adopt the same behavioural norms of the other women, I tried for a while to be the ‘*omertosa’* Italian lady, who had experienced sexual harassment and chose to remain silent about that experience.

That day, I continued to be agitated, trying to repress my troubling emotions. Worries formed in my mind about what I was supposed to do, as an early career researcher. On the one hand, I was wondering: shall I accept the harassment as ‘a joke’ and remain in silence without reacting? Shall I ignore it for the sake of the research? On the other hand, what implications might my acceptance have in the future, in terms of risks? What if my silence encouraged him or other male community members to repeat the groping? As such, would it be best to confront the perpetrator?

I felt this confusion on both personal and professional levels, and this allowed me to reflect on the blurred border that oscillates between the personal self and the researcher. As stated by Gurney (1985) ‘unfortunately, there are no ready prescriptions for female researchers’ coping with such situations. Obviously, a modicum of tolerance is necessary with respect to any behaviours respondents may exhibit; otherwise very little field research would ever be accomplished. However, the question of where to draw the line is a difficult one’ (p.45).

In their work on four women in Glasgow, Green and colleagues (2003) reveal to have been subjected to inappropriate body language, including the ‘paternal squeeze’, however, they light-heartedly dismissed these incidents, to maintain the research relationship.

Nevertheless, similar to Kloß (2017), ‘I felt obliged to consider the potential backlash that any impulsive behaviour might have on my research and relations to informants” (p.401). I feared that responding to the harassment could be detrimental to my access to the community. However, in the aftermath, I felt a sense of repudiation for the context I aimed to research. Therefore, even if it meant putting my fieldwork relationships at risk, I could not continue to smile and carry on after this experience. So, I decided to act as I would out of the field, and to confront the harasser.

### *Confronting the harasser*

There is no agreement in the literature on how to handle sexual harassment in the field given the diversity of specific local contexts (Kloß, 2017). Nonetheless, a few scholars have tried to expand on this, especially, regarding whether or not to directly raise the issue of such incidents with the harasser. Some suggest confronting the harasser (Congdon, 2015), however others chose otherwise, out of fear that this would impact the professional relationship in the field (Pollard, 2009; Mügge, 2013; Johansson, 2015). Arendell (1997) in her study on divorced fathers did not confront these men when these were touching her or expressing sexist and misogynist attentions. Presser (2005), in her work with men who committed violent crimes, was subject to mild coercion and threats, but did not challenge her participants on their sexual remarks, concerned that they would terminate their contract. Similarly, both Kloß (2017) and Pritchard (2019) did not directly confront their harassers; instead, they made changes to their research plan, in terms of locations, or participants’ gender- by only recruiting women. On the other hand, confrontation might not be easier either, as it includes the risk of an escalation (Kloß, 2017).

Not confronting the perpetrator might have had long-lasting effects on me. I might have considered abandoning the project, modifying it, or suffering through it. As stated by Langelan (1993) ‘women who have ignored harassment in the field might deal with the emotional repercussions of victimization: fear, humiliation, feelings of powerlessness’ (p. 98).

I chose to confront the gentlemen, asking if we could have a private chat, in the same venue where all the other members were. So, I was visible to the others, in case of an escalation, but far enough away to allow privacy. I expressed my disappointment and re-stated my research intentions, by saying:

*“I’m here to work, and I want to be seen as a researcher. Imagine I was your daughter, beginning a new work experience and being treated like you did with me by an older man? Would you be happy about it?”*

*(Extracted from fieldwork diary, September 2015)*

I wanted to be assertive, to incite his empathy by adopting a father-daughter relationship, to be treated with respect. I provided some space for dialogue, and most importantly, built professional barriers for my physical and psychological safety. I do not know if I had hurt him, but he looked embarrassed, apologised and respected me, from that moment onwards.

## *Discussion*

The narrative that constructs fieldwork as adventurous journeys shapes how ethnographers produce knowledge and seek to align their tales within certain standards, avoiding discussing incidents that might sound ‘transgressive’, to avoid being labelled ‘overly emotional and by extension, irrational and incompetent’ (Hanson & Richards, 2019, p.11). For a few years, I conceived the sexual misconduct illustrated above as ‘awkward surplus’ (Fujimura, 2006), to be excluded from the main research writing. However, with some distance from the fieldwork, I became aware that narratives which indicate that not everything went as expected, and the emotional impact of those, are equally important. By adopting a ‘confessional tales’ writing style (Van Maanen, 1988), the experience of sexual harassment discussed, not only focuses on how the fieldwork was accomplished, but also informed on the culture of the other participants involved. This paper, broaching the interplay of method and emotions, is the result of a reflection as ethnographer and it demonstrates how these incidents can also be used to generate understanding for ethnographic writing. Thus, reflecting upon the emotional effects of intersubjectivity challenged the view that emotions are secondary to ethnographic insights.

Firstly, this article discussed issues of identity, access, and challenges of conducting research through ethnographic fieldwork. Hence, the article provided an understanding of positionality as a researcher, reflecting on the way my personal characteristics and attitudes facilitated or created challenges for managing fieldwork relations. This paper gave methodological consideration to conducting community-based fieldwork when I realised that trying to conform to the gender role expected of me limited my ethnographic fieldwork. This revealed how meanings attributed to gender by myself and the participants were different. Hence, I interpreted the patterned social arrangement within the social context and its dichotomous structure, as a way to reproduce and reinforce inequalities. I deliberately wished to introduce ruptures to hegemonic narratives related to gender roles. Therefore, I chose to approach the ‘men's corner’, expressing my voice even in ‘men’s type of conversations’ –and being treated with both deference and respect by females and males alike.

However, the incident of sexual harassment revealed that the use of my body in the setting was interpreted as ‘out of place’. As a researcher, I received signals (implicitly or explicitly) that some considered my physical proximity to the ‘men corner’ as an act of transgression. According to Hanson and Richards (2019) sexual harassment incidents ‘were usually explained as having been caused by the allegedly immodest and promiscuous behaviour of the victimized woman’ (p.402). My intention to get physically closer to the ‘man corner’ for a research purpose was misunderstood. Physically approaching the men’s corner might have caused a shift from being infantilised, as the granddaughter; instead, I became sexualised in the field. Initially after the assault, I thought that I should have expected it, and engaged in self-blaming for having crossed the gendered boundaries, and self-doubting about my role in trying to disrupt dominant narratives, and not interiorising the code of behaviour of the reality I wanted to study. Having been told by the harasser that I should have considered the risks of getting closer to the men, I immediately believed that I had actively provoked the harassment, and this generated a feeling of inadequacy on a professional level. Only at a further stage, I realised that I was doing exactly what I was supposed to be doing, as an ethnographer!

Secondly, I discussed how from the ethnographer's perspective, the boundaries between what is acceptable or not, might be often blurred, raising issues that oscillate between the ‘field’ and the ‘self’. There might be situations that undermine the researchers’ personal sense of security, that they may not know how to handle ‘in an ethical and anthropologically correct way’ (Kloß, 2017, p.402). However, in line with Crapanzano (2010) ‘to be good fieldworkers – and none of us are always good fieldworkers - [we should not] lose our own identity, our point of view, the confidence of our position’ (p.58). Paying attention to what happens to our bodies in the field can inform how we understand situations, the people we interact with and how to write about our field sites. Hence, my experience of sexual harassment, and the confrontation that followed immediately afterwards, became a way to access knowledge and an important part of relationships build with the harasser and the community members.

In this sense, this paper constitutes what Pini (2005) would define as a call for reflexivity that focused on the dynamic relations of power within the research context and in a community setting. Hence, as Pini (2005) has argued, the focus of such analyses should be shifted from the gender of the interviewer and interviewee to more sophisticated inquiry of the intersection of the mediating influences. As such, the interactions discussed in this paper can shed lights on the role of the ethnographer as an outsider within, as one of the differences between the people I was working with and myself pertains with the acceptance of the sexual harassment. I considered not challenging men’s actions as a way to reproduce gender inequalities. Instead, the female subjects present at the scene reworked and reaffirmed their conception of gender expectations. This was justified by the apparently ‘Italian nature’ of women that consider *omertá*, such as the silence, as a virtue. However, the uncritical acceptance of women’s subordinate status based on patriarchal assumptions is a value with which I do not identify, as belonging to a different generation (and I would like to believe no-one of my generation would identify with that value, any longer).

As defined by Kitzinger and Thomas (1995), sexual harassment is ‘something which women need not passively endure, but can actively protest against, and resist’ (p.32). Confronting the harasser, in my case, proved to be useful in increasing the understanding of the participants and study group. Kloß (2017) explains ‘harassers may count on their status to silence the women they victimize and may (threaten to) use their authority to try to discredit any woman who dares to speak up. As they often do not expect women to confront or reject their behaviour, the element of surprise forms the effective aspect of confrontation and assertiveness.’ (p.403). In my view, in that determined historical context, in that specific place, with those particular social dynamics, the way I handled the incident might be interpreted as a way to show its subjects how they could overcome the conditions of their own oppression.

The insights generated through the emotional domain enable me to critically reflect on how being a woman in the field comes with drawbacks and potential weakness, especially, when expectations about gender roles are inextricably linked with the culture of people the female ethnographer works with. In fact, as the case discussed above has revealed, asking why women silenced themselves, according to the values shared by a group of people, might put women in academia in danger, due to the need to conform to these expectations, by not talking openly about the vulnerabilities they experienced, or not confronting the harassers, trumping the need for safety awareness. In a methodological sense, as ethnographers, we should question whether embracing the values of the people we wish to study might mean maintaining gender hierarchies and replicate relations of oppression. Although the previous literature has established that there are no safe places for research (Prichard, 2019), as well as those risks are embedded in the relationship established with participants (Johansson 2015), the expectations assigned to each gender within the cultural setting might expose researcher’s vulnerability, and place them at risk.

Thirdly, this article discussed the emotional, psychological and social dimensions of the harassment experienced by the researcher to provide methodological implications on how to handle similar circumstances in the field.

Stressing my role as a researcher helped in building a respectful relationship with the perpetrator from the moment that I confronted him, and I did not ever encounter further problems. I am aware that trying to establish professional boundaries is sometimes very difficult. Nonetheless, I believe this is an important aim to pursue. Since that moment, inevitably with scepticism, I assumed a different code of behaviour in the field: for example, I made clearer my research intentions in verbal interaction; I wore my University student lanyard, to indicate that I was working; I invited my ‘boyfriend’ to participate in evening social events.

Intergenerational differences were highlighted in confronting the harasser by explicitly raising awareness about the age gap between the between the younger female researcher and the older male participant. By encouraging an emphatic understanding of the different standpoints, I infused a critical dialogue between the two of us. This might be seen as a methodological practical example of what Campbell (2003) defined as ‘building an interpretative rapport’, such as a technique to manufacturing distance.

Thinking about safety measures that might unfold in fieldwork situation, probably, confronting the harasser belonging to a community setting might have been a way to preventing the risk of sexual harassment from other members of the Club. In this sense, the reflexive analysis in this paper aimed at providing methodological insights on how to minimise the threat of sexual harassment when conducting fieldwork with communities. This might benefit greater awareness of safety concerns to future generations of ethnographers. In fact, as stated by several scholars (Gurney, 1985; Arendell, 1997) it is important to acknowledge the risk of complications that could develop before entering the field, and put in place safety measures for both men and women involved in research (Green et al., 2003).

Finally, this is the first time I am able to articulate this experience in academic writing, as I needed distance from the research setting. Similar to Yassour-Borochowitz (2012), I am wondering why it has taken me this long to be able to write about this as part of my reflection. In her work collecting life histories of male who battered their wives, Yassour-Borochowitz (2012) admitted she felt shame for thinking of having managed the situation unprofessionally and never spoke with her PhD supervisor about it. Although my supervisors were aware of the incident, I was not able to write about it, as my ‘performance’, as a doctoral student, was under examination at the time. Having successfully completed my PhD, I feel confident, now, to reflect upon the sexual harassment experienced. Nevertheless, in line with Green and colleagues (1993) I believe it is vital not to think about sexual harassment as ‘an individual’s problem’or interpreted in such a way that as the fieldworker blamed for the ability to conduct a good research. Instead, it is essential to reflect on how power relations manifest, considering the interactions within fieldwork and the interesectionality of other factors, such as race, ethnicity, class.

Yet, support should be in place amongst academic institutions for these kinds of challenges within the research field. Especially, early career researchers should be provided with opportunities of encounters, where to share challenges experienced amongst peers and co-construct ‘space of care’ (Lisiak et al., 2018). As such, raising awareness of the risks of ethnography is particularly important among early-career fieldworkers, generally new to the socio-cultural context in which fieldwork is conducted and who might lack a personal support network, leading to additional stress (Congdon, 2015). To be safer in our professional spaces, as academics we should demand that risk of sexual harassment towards the researcher to be form of the procedural ethics and risk assessment. Thus, ‘practical safety advice should be routinely offered to all fieldworkers, safety issues should be discussed during training, and self-defence classes and rape alarms should be available to those who would like them’ (Green, 2003, p.636). In other words, to prepare new ethnographers to better experience their upcoming data collection, pre-fieldwork training must also include the risk of sexual harassment.

In this sense, this paper aims at encouraging more open conversation about how sexuality can shape research experience. In line with Grauerholz and colleagues (2013) silence surrounding these topics shape research methods, publications and future training. As evidenced by Collins and Farrell (2024) there is a lack of specific training on how to deal with experience of sexual harassment in university- taught methods. In regard to research methods training, the authors suggest including positionality of the researcher and how this might shape the interactions in the field, alongside the knowledge generated within the research encounters (Collins and Farrell, 2024). Such research training, they warn, should not be just a response to vulnerabilities, but aim at normalizing the uncertainties related to field dynamics, both for female and male (Collins and Farrell, 2024). Hence, the initiative of the workshop, illustrated in the introduction, proved to be a good practice in this respect to overcome the lack of support in academia around sexual violence.

*Conclusion*

The ‘unspoken experiences’ of ethnography that have not been sufficiently addressed in the methodological literature refer to risks of sexual harassment, sexualisation and violence more broadly occurring in the field. This paper has highlighted the necessity of prioritising the safety of the ethnographer on fieldwork, by illustrating the porous boundaries between secure and insecure spaces and providing evidence of the challenges of working with a community setting at close contact with research participants. Although I consider ethnography as a highly valuable research method, it is important to raise awareness of how contact with research participants might expose the researcher to unwanted attention. This article aims to avoid the researcher being unprepared, to acknowledge and to address sexual harassment when it occurs in the field. Thus, unexpected obstacles or uncomfortable topics should be reported within the academic communities, shared amongst peers, and written up rather than written down via reflective confessionals, to reduce dangers in research.

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1. this is pseudonym for one of the main streets of the City Centre, currently a pedestrian area, but accessible to cars at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)