

# The researcher's erotic subjectivities: epistemological and ethical challenges\*

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## Abstract

This paper aims to deepen the conversation about the potential relevance and importance of including reflection on the desire and sexuality of the researcher in research outputs. We critically scrutinise the exceptionalisation of sexual(ised) interactions in research: why is sexual(ised) contact between researchers and participants considered unethical or problematic, and what are the consequences of the avoidance of—and/or the (self-)censorship with regard to discussing—intimacy in the field? This discussion leads us to argue for an alternative ethical approach than that prescribed by institutional ethical protocols. The ethical approach that we envision is based on the premise that knowledge production never occurs apart from our bodies and that a research relationship is not fundamentally different from any other human relationship. What we propose is a relational research ethics that creates space for discussing openly and in dialogue with others the (potential) consequences of our actions as researchers/human beings within relationships of shifting power asymmetry.

**Keywords:** geographies of sexualities; reflexivity; research ethics; researcher; sexual subjectivity

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**Resum.** *Les subjectivitats eròtiques de l'investigador/a: reptes epistemològics i ètics*

Aquest article pretén aprofundir en la qüestió de la rellevància potencial i la importància d'incloure reflexions sobre el desig i la sexualitat de la persona que investiga en els resultats de la seva recerca. Analitzem críticament l'excepcionalització de les interaccions sexual(itzade)s en la recerca: quines són les raons per les quals el contacte sexual(itzat) entre la persona que investiga i les persones participants es considera no ètic o problemàtic, i quines són les conseqüències del fet d'evitar la intimitat —o l'(auto)censura en relació amb el debat— en el treball de camp? Aquest debat ens porta a defensar una aproximació ètica alternativa a la prescrita pels protocols ètics institucionals. L'aproximació ètica que plantejem es basa en la premissa que la producció de coneixement mai no es dona fora dels nostres cossos i que la relació de recerca no és fonamentalment diferent de cap altre tipus de relació. El que proposem és una ètica relacional de la recerca que creï espais per al debat obert i en diàleg amb altres persones sobre les conseqüències (potencials) de les nostres accions com a investigadors/es/éssers humans en unes relacions d'asimetria de poder canviants.

**Paraules clau:** geografies de les sexualitats; reflexivitat; ètica de la recerca; investigador/a; subjectivitat sexual

**Resumen.** *Las subjetividades eróticas del investigador/a: retos epistemológicos y éticos*

Este artículo pretende profundizar en la cuestión de la relevancia potencial y la importancia de incluir reflexiones sobre el deseo y la sexualidad de la persona que investiga en los resultados de su investigación. Analizamos críticamente la excepcionalización de las interacciones sexual(izada)s en la investigación: ¿cuáles son las razones por las que el contacto sexual(izado) entre la persona que investiga y las personas participantes se considera no ético o problemático, y cuáles son las consecuencias del hecho de evitar la intimidad —o la (auto)censura en relación con la discusión— en el trabajo de campo? Este debate nos lleva a defender una aproximación ética alternativa a la prescrita por los protocolos éticos institucionales. La aproximación ética que planteamos se basa en la premisa de que la producción de conocimiento nunca se da fuera de nuestros cuerpos y que la relación de investigación no es fundamentalmente diferente a ningún otro tipo de relación. Lo que proponemos es una ética relacional de la investigación que cree espacios para el debate abierto y en diálogo con otras personas sobre las consecuencias (potenciales) de nuestras acciones como investigadores/as/seres humanos en unas relaciones de asimetría de poder cambiantes.

**Palabras clave:** geografías de las sexualidades; reflexividad; ética de la investigación; investigador/a; subjetividad sexual

**Résumé.** *Les subjectivités érotiques du chercheur/leuse : défis épistémologiques et éthiques*

Cet article vise à approfondir la discussion sur la pertinence potentielle et l'importance d'inclure une réflexion sur le désir et la sexualité du chercheur dans les résultats de la recherche. Nous examinons de manière critique l'exceptionnalisation des interactions sexuelles(isées) dans le domaine de la recherche : quelles sont les raisons pour lesquelles le contact sexuel(isé) entre chercheurs et participants est considéré comme contraire à l'éthique ou problématique, et quelles sont les conséquences de l'évitement de - et / ou - de la censure en matière de discussion - intimité sur le terrain ? Cette discussion nous conduit à plaider pour une approche éthique alternative à celle préconisée par les protocoles éthiques institutionnels. L'approche éthique que nous envisageons est basée sur le principe que la production de connaissances ne se produit jamais en dehors de notre corps et qu'une relation de recherche n'est pas fondamentalement différente de toute autre relation humaine.

Ce que nous proposons est une éthique de recherche relationnelle qui crée un espace pour discuter ouvertement et en dialogue avec les autres des conséquences (potentielles) de nos actions en tant que chercheurs / êtres humains dans le cadre de relations à asymétrie de pouvoir changeante.

**Mots-clés:** géographies des sexualités; réflexivité; éthique de la recherche; chercheur/euse; subjectivité sexuelle

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### Summary

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## 1. Introduction

This article follows from a panel that we organised at the *IV European Geographies of Sexualities Conference* held in Barcelona September 2017 on the methodological and ethical challenges that arise in research in relation to the researcher's erotic subjectivities. The impetus for this panel was our concern that although this topic has been around for some time, the ways in which sex and the sexuality of the researcher play a role in the research process is often still swept under the carpet. Significant challenges remain, in spite of the growing body of work done by qualitative researchers from a variety of disciplines. This corpus of work includes the work of cultural and social geographers (e.g. D. J. Bell, 1995; Cupples, 2002; De Craene, 2017; Nash and Bain, 2007). They have called attention to both the causes of this academic fear of sex, and to how sex (or the abstinence of sex) and the sexual subjectivity of the researcher can become relevant in everyday research practice. That the issue is not 'solved' yet, and is still a 'hot potato' for many geographers and researchers in a variety of other disciplines, was evidenced by the success of the call for papers for our panel and the animated and at times uncomfortable discussions the panel generated. The sensitivity of the topic was also made tangible by our decision to move from the big plenary room that was initially allocated to our panel to a smaller and more intimate room that yet was not big enough to accommodate the entire audience comfortably. Some of the presenters' feelings of inhibition and uneasiness caused by the spatial setting of the big room prompted this decision. The distance between the public and the speakers—the latter lined up on a platform and somehow hidden behind the big desk—did not seem to provide the right level of intimacy and confidentiality to make the speakers feel secure enough to disclose information they were not entirely comfortable with sharing. Several of the speakers told us

how they had felt a bit nervous about their talk. They attributed their insecurity to the content of their presentation that was more personal than they were used to. They felt uncertain about whether the acts and feelings they wanted to talk about were appropriate and relevant in an academic context, even though it was exactly the purpose of the panel to address these issues. Despite (or maybe because of) the speakers' feelings of discomfort, most talks were characterised by considerable reticence about issues of the researcher's sexual desires and thoughts. The majority of the contributors refrained from talking about their own sexual and emotional involvement, but instead discussed moments of having been the *object* of sexual attention by research participants and/or having decided to resist their sexual advances.<sup>1</sup> They used these instances to reflect upon power dynamics as well as upon their own and participants' ideas of how a 'good' researcher should act. Most speakers testified of the tension they felt between their belief in the importance of recognising how instances of sexualisation have the potential to constitute moments of embodied learning and their willingness to openly discuss the genealogy of the knowledge gained through sexualised experiences. While it had clearly been our intention to provoke an open debate on the participation of the researcher in sexualised interaction and sex, not only as a passive 'target' of the sexual desire of research participants, but also as an active, feeling, desiring, fantasizing, 'real' person, with a body, thoughts and emotions,<sup>2</sup> the paper presentations only partially fulfilled our expectations. Only a few speakers spoke out about their acts, thoughts or behaviour that potentially could be designated as doubtful, if not unethical, when measured against institutional protocols and traditional views on academic professionalism. Moreover, the few talks that did more openly address the researcher's own sexual(ised) feelings and interactions in the field were judged quite differently by the audience. The testimony of a white, male scholar in his sixties of having had sex with a female interviewee many years ago, for instance, was met with much animosity and even anger, while the talk of a young queer Latino male researcher about a particular situation in which he had sex with a male research participant, was received by many as courageous. This different reception was definitely based on the researchers' presumed positionalities within power relations within the research context and beyond, but seemed also be connected to the speakers' various willingness to profoundly and reflexively analyse the power dynamics of the sexual encounter and to make clear the relevance of (discussing) it for their understanding of the subject researched.

The representations and absences in the papers and the dynamics of the panel discussions confirmed our belief that there is still a huge need for deeper

1. This observation is in line with the findings of De Craene (2017) in her review of how the researcher's sexual subjectivity is generally dealt with in sexuality studies, in which she points to a variety of strategies and mechanisms that create a remarkable dichotomy between the desiring informant and the allegedly non-desiring researcher.
2. See the call for papers: <<https://egsc2017.wordpress.com/sessions/>>, session "The researcher's erotic subjectivities: methodological and ethical challenges".

ning conversations about the potential relevance and importance of including reflection on the desire and sexuality of the researcher in research outputs. This paper aims to contribute to this much needed debate by highlighting what we think are important issues that need to be addressed in order to be able to develop a radically reflexive stance that is bound up with responsibility and accountability and aims to fully acknowledge the researcher's role in shaping knowledge, also when this includes sexual/sexualised interaction. In what follows we argue that there is a need for a deeper analysis of the relationship between a radical reflexivity and the politics of science. It is important to critically scrutinise the exceptionalisation of sexual(ised) interactions in research, the reasons why sexual(ised) contact between researchers and participants is considered unethical or problematic (in general or in particular cases), and the consequences of the avoidance of—and/or the (self)-censorship with regard to discussing—intimacy in the field. We argue that we need to radically abandon objectivist epistemology and accept that a research relationship is not fundamentally different from any other human relationship, and that knowledge production never occurs apart from our bodies. Starting from this premise, we argue for the need of an alternative ethical approach than that prescribed by institutional ethical protocols.

## 2. Embodiment and the politics of science

In his article in the journal *Deviant Behavior*, Goode denounced the fact that:

of the thousands of ethnographers who have spent uncountable hours in close proximity with the people whose lives they shared and behaviour they observed, engaging in almost every imaginable activity with them, only a few dozen have had the courage to step forward and tell the world about their more intimate moments. (Goode, 1999: 311)

He observed, together with Kulick and Willson (1995/2003) that of these brave scholars, almost none were heterosexual men.<sup>3</sup> His decision to defy this taboo by writing an account of his intimate experiences with female participants in three of his research projects from the 1960s till the 1990s—and in which sex was a centrally relevant topic—was met with a firestorm of commentaries (e.g. S. E. Bell, 2002; Saguy, 2002; Williams, 2002). Part of the outcry was undoubtedly due to the rather blunt style in which Goode discusses how he had sex with many of his female interviewees—including with women who could definitely be designated as vulnerable—and admits that at the time he gave little or no thought to the potential disparities of power and to the ethical and ideological implications of what he was doing. Moreover, while his article points to a considerable problem (the silence about the researcher's

3. However, this observation might not be entirely correct, see the works of Rabinow (1977), Whitehead (1986), Abramson (1993), Wade (1993), Killick (1995/2003), Salamone (1999), Winkelman (1999) and Climo (1999).

sexuality), he yet fails to carefully and critically analyse the effects of his acts and attitudes and the blind spots on the knowledge he had produced (we come back to this issue in the next section). What is more, his testimony seems to be an example of what Vanderbeck (2005) identifies as texts in which reflexive fieldwork narratives afford male researchers the opportunity to publicly affirm their masculine prowess.

Goode, as well as the older male researcher in our panel (see introduction), show a research mentality (in the past) in which researchers did not feel the need to reflect upon their own power positions and blind spots. They both talked about the 1960s and 1970s as a period that, at least from their position as white, male intellectuals in the liberal, Western urban milieus they were living in, was a time of sexual freedom and permissiveness, and a time (and position) in which they did not even think about the potential differences in agency between themselves and their sexual partners. Research ethics in many fields and disciplines have changed since then, demonstrated by the widespread introduction of official ethical committees and protocols in universities and research institutions. In comparison to the sixties and seventies, there is a greater acknowledgement of the potential harmful effects of research practices on the people researched and of the role of power dynamics in the quality of consent in the interaction that occurs in the context of research. In the last decades, there is also growing public debate on and condemnation of the pervasiveness of unacceptable sexual behaviour in male-dominated culture, including sexual behaviour perpetrated by men in relatively powerful positions (for example through the 'Me Too' campaign). Moreover, the romantic view on the sixties and seventies as a period of sexual liberation has been challenged by growing recognition that this revolution was not necessarily or straightforwardly empowering for women (hooks, 2004). This change in mentality has certainly altered the way in which sexuality in research is generally evaluated, and tend to have reinforced the idea that sexual(ised) interaction with informants is unethical anyway. As Kulick and Willson noted:

There seems to be a kind of unwritten, unspoken, and, for the most part, unquestioned rule about the ethics of sex in the field that all anthropology students somehow absorb during their graduate education. That rule can be summarized in one word: *Don't*. (1995/2003: 10)

It seems that more than twenty years after *Taboo* (1995/2003) was published, the researcher's erotic subjectivity has very much remained a taboo, not only within anthropology.

When it comes to the realm of sexuality and intimacy, the appropriateness of full physically and emotionally engaged participation and the relevance of reporting on it are still often problematized and tend to stir discomfort, even in sexuality research. This is rather surprising, in light of the substantial body of feminist and postcolonial work that, since the 1980s in particular, has discredited the myth of the impersonal, independent, objective scientist (e.g. Bourdieu, 2004; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1991; Mohanty, 1991), and

opened the door for research methodologies that require the full participation of the researcher and immersion in the field. In ethnographic methodology in particular, prolonged and intensive participant observation in all kinds of everyday activities is widely lauded as an effective method for gaining deep understanding of the culture under study. Moreover, scholars from a variety of disciplines have started to point to the role of researchers' interpersonal and structural positions and the relevance of acknowledging and reporting on personal experiences to substantiate the reflexive accounts of how the researcher's knowledge and understanding is shaped. Evolving primarily from feminist and postcolonial research, reflexivity has become a priority on the research agenda (Bourdieu, 2004; Haraway, 1988; Hervik, 1994; Rose, 1997). Based on an understanding of knowledge production as implicated in power and the result of a dynamic interpersonal experience between the researcher and the researched (Hastrup, 1995), the positivist view on scientific knowledge production as the value-free work of the scientist's mind has increasingly been exposed as a fiction (Haraway, 1988; Krieger, 1991; Rose, 1997), and growing attention has been given to processes of embodied learning (Okely, 2001).

Nevertheless, contemporary academia is still characterised by a fear of embodied research (Longhurst, 1995, 2004; Longhurst and Johnston, 2014), especially when it pertains to learning through sexual and intimate interaction. This fear has reinforced a discourse that dismisses every participation by researchers in sexual(ised) activities and intimate relationships 'in the field' on the ground that as research relationships are always infused with power, sex with participants is per definition unethical and exploitative. Some of the commentators on Goode's paper, for instance, argued that there are 'no instances in which sex between researchers and subjects can be justified' (S. E. Bell, 2002: 538). This 'better safe than sorry approach', see Kulick and Willson's "Don't" (1995/2003), chimes with the general academic desire to establish clear-cut ethical guidelines, practical checklists of do's and don'ts that are supposed to keep researchers from doing harm. However, what at first sight seems common sense raises a couple of important issues.

First, ruling out sex between researcher and subjects implies that research and private life can and should be completely separate spheres of life. In spite of a fairly long tradition of insider research, there still seems to be a fear of overthrowing the (sometimes) artificial boundaries between research and private life. Auto-ethnography and reflexivity, for instance, although on the one hand recognised as viable methods in qualitative research, are on the other hand vulnerable to being pejoratively labelled self-indulgent or narcissistic (Okely, 2001; Sparkes, 2002). Participant observers and auto-ethnographers have often encountered accusations of 'going native', which is used as shorthand for losing research integrity and the presumed necessary distance. A tension exists between, on the one hand, adopting a feminist epistemological framework that points to the sheer impossibility of detached and disembodied research and, on the other hand, remnants of a positivist ideology of science that make many researchers and commentators reach back to traditional val-

ues, such as distance, neutrality and impartiality. This reflex appears especially when interactions become more intimate and potentially emotionally overwhelming for the researcher or the people s/he engages with. In insider research, however, and insider research in relationship and sexuality studies in particular, the line between who is a research participant and who is a friend, a lover or a (sexual) partner is often impossible to draw (see, e.g., Newton, 1993). Ruling out intimate and sexual relationships between researcher and people 'in the field' is impossible in a context in which research can become real life or real life can become research (Blidon, 2012; Cupples, 2002; Newton, 1993). Yet also in other research contexts, research relationships can turn into personal relationships (and that is not necessarily problematic). As our sexuality and sexual emotions can never be escaped, they require our critical attention (Cupples, 2002; De Craene, 2017).

Second, singling out sex as a special category of interaction that has no place in research is not a neutral decision, but is closely connected to a politics of science that privileges disembodied forms of knowing. Moreover, although it is certainly true that the researcher occupies a privileged power position, the power relations between researcher and participants are complex and multi-layered, and depend upon various aspects of the researcher's and the participants' positionality along axes of social stratification. The very different reactions in our conference panel that the two stories of sexual involvement received from the audience—one told by a white older man about his sexual interaction with a female interviewee, the other told by a young queer Latino man about his sexual interaction with a male research participant—demonstrates that power balances in the field can be very different, and produce differential moral evaluations. It is clear that researchers should be aware of the potential effect of power imbalances on *any* research interaction. We concur with Wekker (2006: 4) when she warns that the acknowledgement of the sexual subjectivity of the researcher should 'not be misread as a license for an unbridled, honorless exploitation of the Other on a more intimate level than has thus far generally been acknowledged'. However, there is, as Wekker (2006: 5) argues, 'no good reason to exclude sexual locations from our work, either as an a priori or a posteriori excision'. On the contrary, fully embracing the embodied presence of the researcher also includes the acknowledgement of the *sexual* body of the researcher.

With 'The Politics of Passion', Wekker provides a compelling example of how (reflection on) the researcher's sexuality can become an important instrument in knowledge production. The ethnography's analysis of the sexual practices among Afro-Surinamese working-class women richly traces the ethnographer's own multifaceted position within shifting power structures and disentangles how this position fed into her process of learning and understanding. Her description includes her intimate relationship with an older woman, and subtly unravels the power dynamics that unfolded between herself and the woman, but also the wider functioning of power in the community and in relation to the national and global arenas. By unfolding the complex



discourses and power relationships in which the research and the production of knowledge was inevitably entangled, Wekker succeeds in generating a persuasive analysis of how the Afro-Surinamese women's sexual culture is embedded in the wider and changing political economies. She also offers a model for a deeply embodied methodology and embodied research ethics that is in sync with a reflexive epistemology. However, the way research ethics are currently being deployed and implemented in institutions does not allow for this kind of reflexively embodied research, as we show in the next section.

### 3. Risks of Disembodied (Institutional) Research Ethics

Institutional research ethics tend to start from the illusion that doing research without affecting or being affected by the (people in the) field is necessary *and* possible, and/or that harm can be avoided by adhering to a simple set of universal guidelines. These rules, and the ticking boxes-mentality they often generate, however, do not allow for the messiness that comes with a research vision that acknowledges that the researcher has a body, has desires, is desired by others, has sex, loves, gets emotionally aroused. They typically fail to take into account the complexities that arise in research, and in (auto)ethnographic research in particular, in relation to unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched and in relation to research/private life boundaries.

Many authors (Blidon, 2012; Cupples, 2002; De Craene, 2017) have documented the researchers' fear of losing scientific credibility and/or public respectability when discussing their erotic and emotional subjectivity. It is clear that reporting on the researcher's sexual(ised) interaction and bodily feelings in research contexts might jeopardise the respectability of the researcher in light of persistent ideas that see emotional detachment as a crucial component of rigorous academic work (Lerum, 2001) and in light of moral geographies of sexual conduct that govern which sexual behaviour is acceptable for whom—moral geographies structured by sexist, classist, racist and ageist dimensions (Haritaworn, Lin, and Klesse, 2006; Klesse, 2014; Robinson, 1997). The angry reactions caused by the testimony of the older male researcher in our panel—in a panel that aimed to provide a platform for discussing researchers' moral dilemmas caused by sexual experiences in the field—exemplify the risks involved,<sup>4</sup> and how these risks are complexly intertwined with issues of positionality as well as accountability. It shows that this risk is not only restricted to academics who write from precarious positions, both in terms of job security and in terms of marginalised sexual identities (see, e.g., De Craene, 2017), but that talking about sexual interactions can also be particularly challenging for those academics speaking from privileged (and tenured) white, male posi-

4. The male researcher of the panel first started his presentation using the third person. After he misspoke and used 'I' instead of 'he', he admitted that he was talking about his personal experiences. He also mentioned it was a colleague who had suggested he not speak about himself directly because of the potential consequences.

tions (see also: Goode, 1999; Kulick and Willson, 1995/2003). The older male researcher's confession of a series of interactions that after all those years had still remained unarticulated could certainly be read as an act of trying to come to terms with actions that had left him puzzled. However, his position as a white, male researcher discussing a situation in which he had sex with a younger, female interviewee—who afterwards had told him she was an incest survivor—short circuited further conversation rather than opening space to jointly discuss the incident. The testimony could have provided an important opportunity to talk about the ir/relevance of the incident for the knowledge the researcher produced, the cause and meaning of his silence and what critical self-reflection could have provoked (then, and now). As chairs of the panel, we were confronted with this dilemma quite promptly, as we had to decide to intervene and therefore stop the heated discussion, or rather continue the discussion while realising how the white, male scholar might have felt vulnerable and exposed, even though his positionality was not read as such. As long as researchers are not able to openly voice their moral doubts, feelings, failures, blind spots and missteps, their silences and lack of (openly) critical self-assessment risk reproducing the myth of the detached, infallible academic.

As the testimonies of Goode and the scholar in our panel indicate, it was precisely the illusion of the detached, disembodied scientist that in the 1960s and 1970s discharged white male researchers in particular from paying attention to the politics of their own bodies in the field, even though they used ethnographic methods that required their full participation. They both admit that, at the time, and when they decided to have sex with participants, they just did not think about their own (and the participants') positionality nor about the ethical consequences of their interactions. What their testimonies also show is that the then prevalent framework enabled them to consider their own bodies as irrelevant and to separate the role of their interactions with others from their understandings and the knowledge they produced. As Kulick and Willson (1995/2003) argue, the silence about desire in the field has been a way for social science researchers to avoid confronting the issues of positionality, hierarchy, exploitation and racism. The myth of the asexual and disembodied scientist enables bracketing off what counts as relevant knowledge and leaving out of the picture all other things the researcher does, feels, says, hears, learns and brings into the research situation. Silence about the erotic subjectivity of fieldworkers has served 'to keep concealed the deeply racist and colonialist conditions that make possible our continuing unidirectional discourse about the sexuality of the people we study' (Kulick and Willson, 1995/2003: 4).

It is partly due to the feminist and postcolonial critiques of science that since then many of the illusions white men were able to uphold about themselves have been deconstructed, including the illusion of the irrelevance of their own bodies and emotions. Haraway (1988) explains how it is the somatophobia of traditional science and the over-prioritisation of sight as a means of knowledge that has had the perverse effect of instrumentalising and objec-

tifying the researched. The illusion of the eye as a neutral instrument that allows for distanced, objective and harmless observation (the eye as the observation instrument of the researcher's bodiless brain so to speak), in contrast to the researcher's interfering body that is inevitably subjective, has created the conditions for a science practice in which researchers did not have to take responsibility for their own situated perspective—as long as their observation occurred through vision (and hearing) only or could be imagined as such. Haraway insists 'on the embodied nature of all vision' and aims to 'reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988: 188). She points to the exploitative, inherently oppressive character of this disembodied account of science, of that illusion of neutral objective distance, and points to the violence of the purportedly non-interfering eye-gaze as it 'makes the un-marked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation' (Haraway, 1988: 188).

Haraway and other feminist scholars have proposed new ways of imagining scientific rigour, centralising concepts such as 'strong objectivity' (Harding, 1992) and 'situated knowledge' (Haraway, 1988), concepts that share a desire to unpack the political effects of scientific truth claims and to politicise scientific knowledge production in a way that allows for accountability (Willey, 2016). Harding believes that a 'strong objectivity' cannot be assimilated into the dominant philosophies of science, but require us to reject 'objectivism', as

Objectivism impoverishes its attempts at maximizing objectivity when it turns away from the task of critically identifying all of those broad, historical social desires, interests, and values that have shaped the agendas, contents, and results of the sciences much as they shape the rest of human affairs. (Harding, 1992: 70)

If we are to take a fully reflexive research paradigm seriously, we need to radically reject the objectivist ideal. We need, conversely, to fully embrace the inevitable presence of the researcher (as a living, embodied individual) in the observations and knowledge production and accept the unavoidably blurry lines between research and 'real' life interaction. Once we radically reject objectivism and start seeing a research relationship not as fundamentally different from any other human relationship, we can envision (research) interactions as requiring researchers to accept accountability to self and others for the consequences of the actions taken or not taken—as should be the case in any other relationship.

#### 4. A Relational Ethics

In this final section we open the debate on how an alternative ethical approach to the approach that is prescribed by institutional ethical protocols could be developed. Instead of a set of clear-cut rules, which create the illusion that

achieving ethically sound research is possible through the ticking boxes of universal, standardised guidelines, we need an ethical approach that is (self)-critical and 'relational' (Ellis, 2007), and is embedded in a research culture and ethical climate that enables critical scrutiny of our embodied presence in the field.

Wekker (2006: 54) opens the way to radically rethinking research ethics towards a comprehensive account of moral accountability by radically demolishing the boundaries between doing research and living 'one of the happiest periods in [her] life and being funded to live it', and by transparently discussing the shifting positions of privilege and disadvantage in the field. Research as implying real life relationships points to the need to 'become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection and of immunization from potential harm by others' (Braidotti, 2008: 22). An ethics of 'intersubjective vulnerability' (Gilson, 2013) can be a useful starting point for a re-examining of research ethics (see: De Graeve, under review). An ethics that 'calls us to be responsive to our own vulnerability and to the vulnerability of others' (Gilson, 2013: 178) can open ways to unmask and leave behind the ideology of emotional detachment, an ideology that mainly serves to protect power and privileges, including the power of academic privilege (Lerum, 2001). Similar points have been made by Braidotti (2006) in her plea for an 'affirmative ethics' with an emphasis on the transformative power of vulnerability. Ethical work, according to her, 'works by transforming negative into positive passions through the power of an understanding that is no longer indexed upon a phallogocentric set of standards, but is rather unhinged and therefore affective' (Braidotti, 2006: 12). A relational, affective ethics crucially needs a critical disposition both theoretically and in terms of everyday (research) practice, centralising embodied accountability and/or fully acknowledging the consequences of actions within relationships of shifting and varying power asymmetry.

We therefore envision a relational ethics as an ongoing process which centrally locates a reflexive power analysis in all stages of the research process. A first prerequisite is the ability to be reflexive of one's own positionality in relation to the wider context in which the research takes place. However, this is only a first (yet necessary) step. A relational ethics also implies a different way of communicating. An ongoing dialogue with our research participants has the potential to reveal the different and always shifting power relations inherent in any research context, no matter how blurry and messy. However, we argue that a relational ethics should not be the sole responsibility of an individual researcher, but rather call for a(n academic) working culture in which scholars are encouraged to reflect upon the embodied positionality of their work with their colleagues. Indeed, we not only need to talk about good practices, but we also need to provide spaces in which to reflect upon past and present failures. We need a context in which researchers dare to reflect upon their embodied presence in the field, including upon actions and occurrences that might have brought them in (what are considered) ethically murky zones. We concur with Susan Bell (2002: 538) when she pleads for researchers to engage in a dialogue before, during and after the fieldwork 'about the thorny problems of desire,

sexuality, intimacy, knowledge and power'. We need both more formal and more informal spaces for doing so, whether at a specific conference session, in themed sections of academic journals, books or other research outputs, but also during informal talks, such as during lunch or coffee breaks. We need to go beyond the mere condemnation on the basis of decontextualised analyses and fixed understandings of intersectional identities, but allow for researchers to openly voice their moral doubts, feelings, failures, blind spots and missteps. The critical disposition that we propose helps us move towards a dynamic and complexly relational view on the shifting positions of privilege and disempowerment of the researcher beyond stereotypical and fixed understandings of certain intersectional identities as locations that inevitably engender or prevent abuse, stereotypical understandings that tend to strangle open dialogue while unwittingly perpetuating the myth of disembodied science. Only when changing the image of the disembodied and infallible scientist, and the image of research as a higher order activity that occurs outside 'real life', can we enable a dialogue in line with a relational ethics.

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