What's sex got to do with it? When a woman asks questions

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

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This paper examines the role of sex and sexualisation in the research process by drawing on my own personal experience of interviewing during a recent research project. It explores how women’s bodies can come to be objectified in research interviews and how the ‘success’ of research interactions is often judged on the ability to use women’s bodies to obtain ‘good’ data. The paper is driven by a concern that no attention is paid to the salience of sexualisation in research practice in methods teaching and textbooks. This is a problem compounded by the more general lack of consideration for the salience of gender to research relationships. The issue of sexualisation in research has instead only really emerged in work that focuses on dynamics produced in very particular kinds of interview settings. This includes work that examines the relation between women researchers and male interviewees who have a history of violence against women (Grenz, 2005; Presser, 2005), hold very elite positions (Lee, 1997), or are participating in research that principally sets out to examine gendered dynamics in, for example, the labour market or personal/family life (Arendell, 1997; Gurney, 1985; Pini, 2005). Within anthropology, and to a lesser extent in geography, there has also been a tradition that explores erotic subjectivities in research, but this work has primarily focused on cross-cultural contexts that are situated ‘away from home’ (see, for example, Kulick & Willson, 1995 or Cupples, 2002). Broadly speaking there is little discussion taking place on what happens in ‘regular’ research interactions, within ‘home’ socio-cultural contexts, and in research where eliciting understandings of issues relating to gender or sex is not the principle purpose of the interview. I argue that it is important to reflect on these more ‘regular’ research interviews exactly because they make visible the ordinariness and the routine-ness of these kinds of interactions. Exploring the issue through ‘regular’ research interactions can also highlight the salience of sex and sexualisation in settings where we are less likely to look for it. As such this paper offers an important contribution to what is an otherwise underdeveloped yet important topic.

It has been suggested that the absence of discussion about the role of sex and sexualisation in the research process can be partly explained by the way in which interview relationships mimic normalised gendered relationships and reflect the ‘accepted’ status of women researchers. Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001), for example, suggest that women researchers fail to pick up on sexualisation in their interviews with men as a point of note, because such interactions between women and men are so normalised. Whilst Gurney (1985) has pointed to the difficulties of talking about anything related to how we are positioned as women in the research process because there is ‘the added embarrassment of acknowledging that one’s status as a female overshadowed one’s identity as a researcher’ (p.44). We might add to that the frustration involved in ‘pointing out’ because of the entailed risk of not being taken seriously or being perceived as ‘causing trouble’ in the workplace (MacKinnon, 1979) – and here I mean in our institutions, not ‘the field’. I would argue that these overlapping concerns only make the matter more pressing to discuss. Drawing attention to the role of sexualisation in the research process carries a risk that this will be understood solely as a call for increased safeguarding, rather than recognition for how women researchers are positioned and for the broader salience to the research contexts in which we work. That is not to suggest that safety is not important but we need to drive the direction of these discussions in more challenging ways.

The paper begins by thinking through the ways in which sex and sexualisation has been dealt with in the literature. I primarily focus on the methods literature which is key to understanding how the role of women researchers has come to be understood more broadly. The discussion of the literature is framed around two key concerns. First, it raises pertinent questions about how women researchers have been interpreted in very particular ways – as empathetic passive enquirers – and discusses the broader implications this has for how women are represented and objectified inside and outside the academy. Second, it considers the need to pay more attention to the role and dynamic of sexualisation in research interactions in order to challenge the emphasis on objectivity over situated knowledge. Following on from the discussion of the literature, I begin to draw from my own experiences and introduce how processes of sexualisation have emerged in my own interviews. I use these examples to demonstrate how it is in the very practice of asking questions that opens up a space in which male respondents think it in some way appropriate to respond in a sexually provocative way – by flirting, making comments about presumed sexuality and private life, propositioning, touching, using terms of endearment and behaving with over familiarity. Then, by drawing on these same experiences, I explore the suggestion that we can understand these dynamics because the nature of asking questions plays into familiar subject positions. The interviewer/interviewee relationship certainly
can mediate reproductions of power through the imagining of naivety (if we already know stuff, why would we ask questions after all?) and perceived understandings of what it is to be a woman professional and a woman academic. However, here I propose whether it might be more useful to consider how the interview is composed of a mixture of both the familiar and unfamiliar, rather than think of the interview as resembling a ‘natural’ encounter. In doing so, I illustrate how it is in the slippage between the familiar and unfamiliar that can give us deeper understanding of the context in which our research takes place when a space in opens up to reveal what might otherwise go unsaid. This discussion is informed by paying attention to the way our interactions develop and by an understanding that knowledge is ‘the result of a particular engagement in a particular context [and] as a continuous way of “becoming”’ (Davids & Willemse, 2014: 2). This then opens into a discussion about how sexualised interactions that are produced and managed in research relationships can tell us about how gendered and sexualised dynamics work in the contexts in which our respondents operate. Finally, in the concluding discussion I suggest that we must also think about sexualisation beyond individual events and aside from imagining male interviewees merely as conduits for oppressive discourses (Presser, 2005). In doing so, I argue for a need to reach beyond the description of the performance of gendered roles within the interview and to resist giving one-size-fits-all type advice on how to manage research relationships.

1. Interviewing: an unnatural skill

Qualitative data has long been misunderstood as a feminine form of knowledge production, by virtue of its association with sensitivity and openness rather than reason and logic (Davies & Dodd, 2002). Part of the problem is that the power and knowledge of women continues to be regarded as always entwined with the body (Letherby, 2003). The skills and abilities of women are rarely recognised as such, because women are imagined as only doing what their bodies can ‘naturally’ do. The skills entailed to do qualitative research are insufficiently recognised because they are imagined as a form of feminine practice. This paper brings the body into central focus to emphasise the complexities of its negotiation in interviewing practice. However, whilst there has been a considerable amount of work on the intersection of gender, the body and sexuality, here I want to look specifically at how women’s bodies have been understood as instruments in research. I also want to reflect on how it is that the status of the interview has been interpellated with a certain kind of femininity and what this then means for how we might talk (or not) about our own experiences of sexualisation whilst at work.

Reflecting on how women’s bodies come to feature in discussions on research methods is important, because although we have seen an extensive development of literature on women and the body very little research methods is important, because although we have seen an extensive development of literature on women and the body very little research methods is important, because although we have seen an extensive development of literature on women and the body very little research methods is important, because although we have seen an extensive development of literature on women and the body very little...
to concoct a natural encounter out of an unnatural one by relying on ‘our’ intrinsic abilities. There is an element of seduction implied too. Although sexualisation never forms an explicit part of Oakley’s discussions on interview practice, it is telling that the opening sentence of her essay ‘Interviewing women’ reads as follows:

Interviewing is rather like marriage: everybody knows what it is, an awful lot of people do it, and yet behind each closed front door there is a world of secrets Oakley (1981: 31).

Here, Oakley is alluding to a deep level of intimacy with sexual undertones that she goes on to suggest is necessary to do feminist research. Indeed, to do good ‘quality’ feminist research, she says, we need to develop ‘close’ relationships with our interviewees. I am not advocating a return to a scientific model, nor do I want to suggest that convivial interview relations do not have creative and productive value. What is more, I agree that women should not have their experiential knowledge discounted in favour of ‘authorised knowledge’ in the academy (see Letherby, 2003 for a discussion of this). However, using such analogies plays into the way in which the power and knowledge of women is regarded as always entwined with the body. Women struggle enough already ‘to fully transcend their ties to their bodies and therefore to nature’ and it is this that leads some to conclude that women ‘are incapable of achieving pure rationality’ (Letherby, 2003: 28).

The idea that women are empathetic holds a specific prominence in Oakley’s work because of the emphasis placed on gender matching which allows for both interviewer and interviewee to be good at research interactions. However, I am concerned that working with, rather than against, characterisations of feminine/masculine tropes has gained quite some purchase in qualitative methods advice and training more broadly. This has allowed for the activity of interviewing to become interpellated as something ‘intrinsically female’ as Carol Smart (1984), for example, has suggested. A destructive yet inevitable consequence of this is that the ability to do a good interview risks being attributed to being a woman, rather than having acquired any kind of skill to do so. This has been implied by some, including Finch here:

I claim no special personal qualities which make it particularly easy for me to get people to talk, but women whom I have interviewed often are surprised at the ease with which they do talk in the interview situation Finch (1984: 73).

The literature in which sexualisation in the interview is explicitly discussed has, on the whole, emerged from a different kind of feminism, readily indicated by the kind of research engaged in (i.e. that which does not purport to have equal power dynamics between researcher and researched). This work offers powerful descriptions of women’s experiences of interviewing and importantly reveals dynamics that work to objectify and subordinate women interviewers. We are warned, for example, of the different ways in which over-familiarity is created through physical touching and compliments on the body and invasive personal questions about sex lives and relationships in order to assert heterosexist masculine identities (see, for example, Arendell, 1997, Easterday, 1977, Gurney, 1985, Lee, 1997, Pini, 2005, Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). Nevertheless, much of this work does also include advice to other women researchers in such a way that often treats the gendered (and, more often than not, sexualised) relationship as potentially facilitating ‘successful’ encounters for the good of the project. Gurney (1985), for example, notes how a failure to nurture research relationships through gendered and sexualised performances can have repercussions for how a woman is perceived in her role as an academic. She explains how, when women are perceived to fail in maintaining ‘rapport’, the quality of information gathered is subsequently placed in doubt. Although dissatisfied and critical of this fact, she details the various ways that she has gone along with sexist remarks, ignored sexist jokes and changed her appearance in order to maintain ‘rapport’ and persist with her research project. Writing about this, she explains how she has convinced herself that the things that made her feel uncomfortable were ‘necessary sacrifices’ to be a researcher. She claims that ‘at the time, the risks of confrontation seemed to outweigh the benefits’. More troubling perhaps is that she goes as far as to say that she felt gratitude towards her respondents in spite of the way they routinely subordinated her, because of the information she gained access to in the process (Gurney, 1985: 56). She is not alone, Presser (2005), for example, explains how she did not call out her respondents for their sexual remarks to her because she was concerned if she challenged them they would then terminate contact. Wasserfall (1993) explains how she ‘goes along’ with certain gendered put downs in order to ‘diffuse’ any potential conflict. And, drawing on their own experiences, Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) conclude it best to take a passive stance in order to get ‘useful’ information.

These accounts are difficult to read because we sense the discomfort experienced. I am sympathetic to them and, as the experiences I describe below will demonstrate, I have been equally complicit and unchallenging. I cannot say though that the success of my research was at the forefront of this silence or complicity. The above examples suggest these women researchers often make conscious decisions, in the moment, about remaining silent. I cannot claim such well-thought through actions myself. Typically, I have found from reading back my transcripts that I say nothing, or laugh nervously, failing to respond in a way that retrospectively I would like because the very action itself is intended to weaken resolve, shame, upset or belittle and it works! I want to suggest then – from an entirely sympathetic stance – that the examples given above, together with their explanations, point to a problematic link that I think is all too readily made. I want to suggest that a correlation is made too easily between the ways that we understand how we are positioned and how we expect and are expected to conduct research; a problem only amplified in contexts in which women researchers are objectified. That women researchers are made to feel obliged to respond passively for the good of the project says something about how research methods are taught. The emphasis on developing ‘good’ close relationships out of necessity implies that we should perform a particular type of gender and sexuality in order to get the job done (well) - without thinking through how else this may be achieved, or if it is always possible. Nor, does it take account of the extra emotional labour that is implicitly expected of women in order to manage sexualised encounters. Indeed, even when emotional labour in research practice is rarely considered it is often not explored through a gendered lens (see, for example, Hubbard et al., 2001). Women researchers are advised and trained to adopt a passive or ‘tolerant’ stance in interviews (Presser, 2005), Stacey (1988) and others have importantly highlighted how this kind of advice is sometimes offered under the guise that it represents a more ethical practice. They rightly argue that the advice to be close conceals the exploitative nature of all interviewer-interviewee relationships, by virtue of the fact that there is nevertheless a research agenda.

This paper calls for women researchers to be taken seriously and to have a broader range of research skills recognised. To do this necessitates recognising that different approaches to the way we do research are valid. I want to emphasise then that any methods advice on offer should be guarded against when it suggests that one-size-fits-all women. Advice of this type, as illustrated above, typically works with (rather than against) a dominant understanding and cultural practice that positions women as listeners to masculine needs (understood through both, and not necessarily independently, the positioning of women as maternal and/or sexual beings). The implication is that, by not performing in a normative way, we will disrupt the ‘natural’ flow of conversation and risk inviting conflict. This implication becomes

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1 The idea of interviewer/ee matching has been importantly criticized for failing to take account of positions of difference beyond gender and over-determining components of an individual’s identity (see, for example, Gunaratnam, 2003) and for falsely alluding to a more power balanced dynamic (Stacey, 1988).
increasingly stark when we consider interviews between women researchers and men.\textsuperscript{2} In women-to-men interview contexts, women interviewees have been described as ‘facilitators to male speech’ because they do not interrupt and instead ‘encourage and help the flow of men’s talk’ (Smart, 1984, 155). Women, we are told, are better able to get people, but especially men to ‘open up’ (see, for example, Manderson, Bennett, & Andajani-Sutjahjo, 2006; Rubin, 1976; Williams & Heikes, 1993). Working with these dominant and heteronormative constructions of women and failing to challenge them has implications for how women interviewers are positioned and misrecognised in the interview itself,\textsuperscript{3} and more broadly within the academy. They also fail to imagine the potential of the interview as a more dynamic and fluid experience. Above all, however, one-size-fits-all advice also implies that we share a uniform experience, just as the suggestion of working in a way that is intrinsic to ‘us’ does. In doing so, both platforms deny our differentiated positionings and experiences. Taken to its utmost degree this would equate to a claim that women are not the same and cannot all easily fit with the alleged ‘correct’ trope but can nevertheless do ‘good’ research.\textsuperscript{4} There is, embedded in this advice, no room for recognition that women are not the same and cannot all easily fit with the alleged ‘correct’ trope but can nevertheless do ‘good’ research. Furthermore, adopting fixed understandings of women researchers and men interviewees risks being biologically essentialist and pre-determines the research relationship, making flexible interview dynamics impossible. Finally, if we place too much emphasis on the performance of a kind of female interview practice then we risk seeing sexualisation only as individual acts and the men interviewees merely as conduits for oppressive discourses (Presser, 2005). Our attention should instead be drawn to how and where these sexualised narratives are situated and what they can tell us about the research context (Willemse, 2014).

\section*{2. Background: the study under discussion}

The following discussion draws from my own experience of interviewing men as part of a recent study that examined changes in policy, practice and activism broadly related to questions of race and ethnicity. The study had obtained ethical approval and in accordance with that, all the interviews are anonymised here. The interviews were carried out over a period of seven months in 2014 in four cities of the UK (Cardiff, Glasgow, Manchester and the London Borough of Newham). In each city it did this at three levels: the nation/regional level, including regional bodies and the devolved governments in Wales and Scotland; the city, including City Councils or Local Authorities; the neighbourhood, including community groups and individual activists.\textsuperscript{5} The material used in this paper is from interviews and fieldnotes that detail formal and informal conversations with male informants and observations made locally in the neighbourhoods and cities in which the research was located. The interviews and less formal conversations are, in the main, with civil servants, community activists, community voluntary workers and public and third sector professionals. In total, I interviewed 48 people, 22 of which were men. I also have 52 fieldnote entries that detail individual or group conversations of varying lengths that involved one or more men.

The study did not have an ‘obvious’ focus on gender in the sense that gender issues were not driving the research questions and the study was not publicised as a study of gender. The project was nevertheless interested in how gender intersects with broader social experiences, especially in this instance with race. Indeed, how gender and race inter-relate becomes a key focus in the final section of this paper. McKeganey and Bloor (1991) argue that a focus is often mistakenly placed on gender rather than on age and social class (we should also include race and sexuality) in the analysis of interview dynamics. I would agree that a singular focus on gender can be unhelpful and can cause over generalisation. Gendered dynamics are not produced in isolation but they do need emphasis because their effects are normalised and need highlighting in order to challenge them. An experience detailed by Grenz (2005) illuminates this when she talks about how, in the past, she has often overlooked sexist remarks and put them down to her ‘youth’ instead. It is easy to see how this can happen. Much of the way in which women researchers are positioned plays on markers of youth, including naivety, innocence and vulnerability. This will likely especially resonate with women at the early stages of their career, since they do the majority of qualitative research and because they are often referred to both in the field and in the academy as ‘young’ researchers despite age and/or experience. Indeed, it is impossible to tell what age is best for a woman to be a researcher as she moves almost overnight from the naïve youngster of the likes of Dingwall’s (1980) imagination to a position of invisibility. Arguably then, we can give gender a central focus without losing sight of its intersection with other dimensions of experience. Indeed, placing gendered dynamics in the context of multiple forms of experience is not only necessary, as the rich body of black feminist theory reminds us, but can reveal broader issues at stake. This includes those most relevant to the research, as I will go on to discuss.

\section*{3. Being woman ‘versus’ being researcher}

It is worth noting that this paper has not emerged through a conscious effort to pay attention to how sexualisation occurs and effects interview dynamics or the process of doing a research study. Rather, it has come about after reviewing data that had been collected for a particular project and on beginning its analysis. The initial analysis was framed around a series of research questions around race activism and policies towards racialised minorities. These where questions that informed the original research for which these interviews were intended. The analysis for this paper has come about more latterly and has involved a re-reading of interviews and fieldnotes to explore gender and sexualisation in the interview encounter. As explained above, the original study did not have an obvious focus on gender and did not have an interest in sexuality or sexual practices. And, the interviewees were not in positions of notable power, but were largely officer level workers across a range of public and voluntary sector positions. Specifically, the initial idea for writing this paper came about following the ‘discovery’ of this extract from an interview whilst I was reading through transcripts that had been returned by an external transcriber: \textsuperscript{6}

\begin{flushright}
\textbf{Author:} …the one thing I haven’t asked you. Has the referendum [on Scottish independence] had any effect locally on the way—?\textsuperscript{6} \textbf{Respondent:} Not really. No, not really.\textbf{Author:} Okay. [Pause]. Is there anything else you think I should have asked you?\textbf{Respondent:} What are we doing tonight? [Laughs] You’re taking me for dinner. Let’s go for it.\textbf{Author:} [Recorder switched off]
\end{flushright}
of the interview had centred on discussing local housing issues, ranging from the history of local housing provision to changes in local population. In light of the aims of the research, much of the focus had been on the changing migrant population and representation of, and organisational interaction with, people categorised as ethnic minorities. The respondent was a white man who was, I would guess, in his mid-thirties. This made him the same ethnicity and probably a little younger than me. I had never met the respondent before and the interview had been arranged by email. The first time we saw and spoke to each other was at his workplace immediately before the interview took place. The interview happened in the kitchen/break-out area set back from a semi-open-plan office floor. It was therefore not entirely private and, during the interview, a couple of people came in briefly to use the kitchen. Immediately after the interview I went straight to another interview elsewhere – a non-typical arrangement, but brought about due to fitting in between tight schedules. It was this rapid shift to another interview, I assume, which led me to forget entirely about this invitation. Reading the interview in print, I was struck by how out of the blue the question appears. Listening back to the recording I note how my tone sounds quite typical throughout. I know from hearing my voice that I was tiring towards the end of the interview and I asked one of my default-type questions when closing – to confirm there was nothing more that the respondent wanted to say before I switch off the recorder. In short, there appears to be nothing to warn me that this proposition is coming and, since I switch the tape off quite abruptly in response, indicating my discomfort, I do not know what I said in reply. I do, however, remember having a brief conversation about music with him as I was leaving the building and this was followed by two emails giving me advice of places to go out to listen to music and an invitation to join me at some point, which I had ignored.

On discovering this small section of transcript I felt both frustrated and disappointed. To my mind, I had conducted a professional to professional interview. I had acquired interesting and useful knowledge relevant to my research questions. However, for some reason I had not been read as I had assumed myself to be perceived. In this moment of re-reading, I realised I had been read as an ‘available’ woman first and foremost. I was being evaluated in terms of my gender and sexuality (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and not for my abilities, skills or ‘professional’ performance. This interview and the discovery of this text made me look again at the rest of my transcripts and fieldnotes from the same project. Less acute, but no less frustrating, were the experiences in which over-familiarity was adopted by interviewees. The examples I found were the kind that are familiar and well-documented (representing informal conversations) with a respondent who had been especially memorable because of the nature of the interaction. This was an experience that I had earlier dismissed as an individual case, not salient to the research itself. I summarise the interaction between us here:

I met [X] in his place of work, together with his colleagues, in what constitutes a community neighbourhood space. I walked in and spoke to three co-workers who were present (X, another man and a woman) about the research I was doing locally. They offered me a cup of tea and the exchange was pleasant. They told me I could drop in any time and make use of their Wi-Fi and toilet if I needed. I took them up on this offer and did indeed return several times. On one such occasion I met [X] for the second time and on his own. He is black and, I would guess, in his 40s. He immediately began flirting with me, offering to take me ‘out’ – an offer I declined. Despite my attempts to change the topic, he ignored my discomfort and persisted in asking questions about my personal life. In my responses, I began to allow him to fabricate a life for me by answering yes to a series of his questions. I understood this exchange to be about establishing my sexuality and ‘availability’.

X: Do you have a partner? (Gender ambivalent) A: Yes (I am not available) X: Does he also work at the university? (Gender specific to establish sexuality) A: Yes (I am not available – but am heterosexual) X: Have you been together long? (How available might you be open to be?) A: Yes (I am not available) X: Would he be annoyed if he knew I was asking you out? (You are available if not for his annoyance) X: Yes (I am not available) … And so on to create an entirely false identity.

I had already declined the initial invitation to ‘go out’ and so this conversation acted as a kind of relentless pressure to establish my sexuality and availability in a way he wanted. I understood that it did not matter how I replied. He had already decided I was heterosexual enough and available enough for him to pursue. This becomes clearer when he switches the conversation back to the issue of us going out. He likes me, he says (he doesn’t know me of course). He wants a nice Welsh woman to marry (me?). Then suddenly from nowhere it seems (to me, but not to him) he tells me that if I was ‘with’ him he would make it possible for me not to work. Abruptly this catches my attention and perhaps tellingly I stop being passive and/or ignoring him. “What do you mean?” I ask. He asks me why I would want to work as an academic, would I not rather be at home and be looked after? I laugh, but quickly realise he is not joking. I provoke him and ask him if he is really serious. He looks confused and tells me of course he is serious. Women, he continues, simply belong at home through a “natural” order of things. He wants a wife who will cook and clean for him while he provides for her. He proffers the latter as a way, I think, of telling me what a thoughtful man he is. I ask him if he has considered that women might not want to live in the way he describes. He responds by querying again the sincerity of my own working practice. Then, sticking with the work theme, he shifts gear to add that there is too much political correctness in the workplace. He asks if I remember a sitcom from the 1970s where the manager (I assume a man) would slap the office girls on the ass. He says he misses this kind of joke and does not understand why people would find it offensive when it is ‘obviously’ ‘just’ good natured banter. I am angry, I tell him I’m finding the conversation frustrating. I check again if he is trying to wind me up. He again looks confused. I tell him the conversation is too frustrating for me and that I am going to leave. I become very aware that we are alone and I wish for someone else on my side of the argument. I go towards the front door and he comes after me apologising – not for winding me up as I hoped – but for upsetting me. He reiterates that he likes me and wants to make me happy. I stand outside on the doorstep marking a distance from him and I look back confused and then walk away. Over the following weeks I get texts on my mobile phone from him. They read typically:

‘Well, that’s [not right] for one my love’

And they included attempts to be chivalrous by trying to seat me and offer to buy me refreshments (usually rejected by me) in attempts to assert a particular power dynamic (see also Presser, 2004 and Messerschmidt 1993).

In her research, Pini (2005) found that heterosexuality was performed more typically in informal rather than formal settings. She suggests this because, in her own observations, sexual innuendo was used typically only in front of her when men were speaking informally to other men, rather than when she was doing formal one-to-one interviews. I did not find the distinction between formal and informal to be particularly significant. Indeed, I found it surprising what went on the recorded interviews. That said, my reflections did focus initially on the fieldnotes and email communications (representing informal conversations) with a respondent who had
HOWS U7 or HOWS [AUTHOR FIRST NAME]? (Capital letters in the original)

I also get emails typically asking the same and then some months later I receive this:

Dr [First name of author]. LOL!!!(The full text of an email received from [X] which comes as a forward of an email circulated by my research centre in which I was referred to using my academic title).

In this email he reiterates, in case of any misunderstanding, that he does not read me as someone who could hold an academic title. The possibility that I could be both the naïve folkish caricature of the Welsh woman that he imagined and ‘wanted’ and an academic apparently was such a contradiction in terms that it became funny, for him.

Revisiting these notes and placing them alongside the other examples I had found, I began to see them as part of the same practice. It was not that I had not been alert to most of the experiences discussed here at the time but in the moment I had thought of them as individualised events and did not draw out their deeper connections and their resonance for the research, or for my position as a researcher. There is also the fact that, as Davids points out, ‘people that irritate us the most are often left out or driven into the margins of studies’ (Davids, 2014: 52). On re-reading the narratives, however, I began to see that the experience with [X] became merely an accentuated version of the other perhaps more subtle attempts to undermine me as having a subjecthood beyond that of being a ‘young’ (until I’m too old) white woman. In this paper I want to think about how these interactions and the ways in which they emerged can also have deeper significance for the research being undertaken.

4. The research interaction: looking beyond description and ‘data’

It is significant that much of the previous discussions on the role of sexualisation in research interactions have focused on their pertinence for the quality of data acquired. And, that success is measured in relation to how successfully the original research questions have been addressed/accessed. Much of the advice on offer tells us to focus on getting the data we are after by performing gender in specific (normally passive) ways. Rarely do we see instead consideration for how the sexualised interaction itself affects our knowledge. In addition, rarely is this type of interaction itself considered data in its own right because the connection between what we are ‘seeking’ and how we and our respondents manage the interview situation is underdeveloped (see Behar, 1995 and Gordon, 1995 for discussion of this). Yet, feminist ethnographers illuminate the potential usefulness and indeed the necessity of such a practice when they reflect on how their (albeit non-sexualised) relationships to their informants shape their own knowledge production and interpretation of the data (see, for example, Buitelaar, 2014; Davids, 2014; Nencel, 2014; Schrijvers, 1993; Van Stepele, 2014; Willemse, 2014). In this section I want to think about how we might come to understand these sexualised research interactions in ways that might be useful to our work beyond the data that we set out to gain access to. To do this, I want to consider how the interview is an encounter composed of a mixture of both the familiar (rather than natural) and unfamiliar (especially to the respondent).

The conversations we have with our respondents may be driven by a desire for convivial and non-exploitative relationships, but they are nevertheless ultimately research conversations/interviews driven by particular research agendas, even whilst they pose questions about how we can conduct those conversations with different positions of power (Schrijvers, 1991). After illustrating how sexualised interview dynamics arise I will then consider how what emerges out of both the familiar and unfamiliar can give us deeper understanding of the context in which our research takes place and opens up a space in which what might otherwise go unsaid is spoken. Since I am drawing entirely from my own experiences, it is perhaps important to note that the reflexivity entailed in these discussions is only here in so much that it is useful to generate discussion ‘that goes well beyond the confines of any individual’ (Kobayashi, 2003: 349). The level of detail is therefore that which is necessary to situate the research within the broader social and political contexts at work, as recommended by other authors (see, for example, Davids and Willemse, 2014 and Behar, 1996).

4.1. The interview: a familiar and unfamiliar reality

Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) suggest, as noted above, that we fail to take note of the role of sex in research interactions because it emerges as part of a ‘normal’ process. As such, it is important to draw attention to these ‘normal’ processes in order to challenge their effects in and out of the field. However, I want to think about how these ‘normal’ processes can also have salience for the research itself. To illustrate this, I will draw on experiences in which a particular form of familiarity was established through sex and processes of sexualisation. I want to think about the effect of these experiences on my positioning as a researcher and how they might speak to the broader research questions. At the heart of this discussion is the understanding that sexualised interactions can be understood as normal, but they are not universal in the way in which they are produced and experienced. The experiences I describe emphasise how familiar tropes and forms of positioning are drawn upon and produced that say something beyond the fact that women researchers are objectified. They remind us how women are perceived as academics and they tell us about the nature of the research relationship but these experiences are also situated knowledges (Haraway, 1998) and can therefore tell us something about the research contexts in which we are working.

Shared social meanings (whether we agree with them or not) are drawn on by interviewer and interviewee alike to produce an imagined familiarity in an unfamiliar context.6 In the examples that follow I want to emphasise how this imagined familiarity is often produced through what the men think work as compliments. These compliments manifest through typical gendered and heteronormative tropes and establish the man as he who bestows ‘tolerance’ of the woman researcher, in place of mutual respect. In this sense, they work in the interview as a form of flirtation in the way that Easterday, Papademas, Schorr, and Valentine (1977) discuss. Men drew on familiar representations of how they understood me as, for instance, the ‘right-on/socially conscious woman’ (white woman studying race), or ‘the white Welsh woman’ (from Wales doing research in Wales) as if this is a compliment. However, moving beyond this, I want to also suggest that the familiar gendered tropes are specific to the context and used to imply a broader sense of good intention towards the research subject itself. This is perhaps driven by a concern that we are ultimately in charge of the analysis, or interpretation, of what they say. First, I want to provoke thinking about how the familiarity that is imagined in the conversation might help us to better understand the situatedness of our research.

It is telling that, on reviewing the transcripts and fieldnotes for this paper, I started by revisiting the conversations and interviews I had done in Cardiff because I remembered these moments most readily. These conversations were remembered because they spoke to a particular kind of sexual objectification that I was both familiar with, but had not experienced for some time. Furthermore, they occurred in the context of the research – which meant they represented a very particular and familiar kind of sexualisation, but in a new terrain. This was the first time I had done research in Wales where I am immediately

6 This idea of familiarity versus unfamiliarity is distinct from the ‘insider-outsider’ debate which largely centres on matching (or not) interviewer and interviewee along the lines of particular forms of identification and on exploring the interview effects and which risks being reductionist (see, for example, Gunaratnam, 2003 and Bhopal, 2010). What I am drawing attention to here is that all interviews are constructed of a mixture of both familiar and unfamiliar social registers (regardless of position as ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’).
recognised as Welsh – an identity which often goes unnoticed elsewhere since my accent is now weak, unless my name is recognised as Welsh. My identification as Welsh is worth noting because its placement in the sexualised interactions gave prominence to a set of issues that helped understand the context in which the research was conducted. Furthermore, it illuminates how I had recognised the way in which I was then positioned as a sexual object through my Welshness and therefore not relevant to my role as ‘the researcher’ – as if the two could be separated. Indeed, I think it was precisely the familiarity through which certain ways of objectifying me occurred that meant I did not find them remarkable at the time, nor take note of them as ‘a researcher’. In other words, I did not take note perhaps of how my presumed naïvety – here through my imagined sexual promiscuity, coupled with a folkish sense of innocence – shaped my interactions with research participants and how they dealt with the research questions. Nor did I initially consider what this could tell us more fully about the context in which men were operating and in which the research was situated. The contextual material is presented here as a means to try to unpick what social registers are at hand and drawn upon which are in the first place familiar. I will then go on to explain what this means beyond the individual experience.

To place these interactions in context it is worth noting the long history of portrayals of Welsh (especially rural) women as being simultaneously hyper-sexualised and imagined as folkish/backwards; much of which has resonance with how working class women more generally are imagined (Mannay, 2015). Indeed, it is worth highlighting that similar tropes of hyper-sexualised women’s bodies can be found in the ways in which working class women are imagined more broadly and there are certainly deeper and more embedded reprehensible representations of black women as sexual objects. A representation of Welsh women is such that it imagines them to possess an innate high sex drive which is in some way derived from being embedded in nature – thus being uncontrolled/wild and both highly sexual and naïve at the same time. Jane Aaron, for example, has written on the different ways in which Welsh women have been eroticised and depicted as ‘wild, immoral, sexual, uncontrolled and irresponsible creatures’ (Aaron reprinted in Pritchard & Morgan, 2005). This has caused such levels of concern in the past that moral control orders have been demanded on Welsh women. In the 19th Century, for example, an English Commission into education report detailed concerns over the immorality of Welsh women, specifying claims of promiscuity and high levels of illegitimacy and which included comparison with ‘well-behaved’ English farm women (Williams, 1991). Moral guidance brought in during the 19th and 20th Century set out to depict what ‘the perfect Welsh woman’ with ‘high Christian values’ should do and look like (Williams, 1991). In addition to its promotion in schools and the church, this image emerged prominently in a populist periodical called ‘Y Gymraes’ (translated as The Welshwoman) that acted as a sort of moral guidance pamphlet. The legacy of Y Gymraes is perhaps most visible in what is now considered the traditional and sufficiently modest outfit of Welsh women that it helped to develop and popularise and which Welsh schoolgirls continue to be helped into on national festivals and saint’s days. More recently, Deirdre Beddoe (2000) has described how Welsh women are ‘subjected to a particularly virulent strain of patriarchy’. And, the image of the Welsh woman as a sexual object certainly continues to have purchase, whether it is in the revelation that they are the most dominant in the bedroom,7 depicted as drunk, wild and licentious in popular TV,8 or held accountable for upholding sexual purity as mothers (Mannay, 2015). These are contemporary views that are perhaps most concisely summed up by someone I met in East London during the research, who, on learning I was also doing research in Wales and am Welsh asked to have sex with me because (as if a compliment) he “like(s) Welsh women, because they go like trains”. The salience of this shared understanding of what is a Welsh woman was visible in the example of [X] above who clearly stated that he wanted ‘a Welsh woman’. Here though I want to explore what more this can tell us beyond the repetition of this form of pejorative discourse. To do this I summarise an interview with [Y].

[Y] is a man who describes himself as Black and English. He is, I guess, in his mid-40s, and works part-time as a teacher in further and higher education. Before the taped conversation starts he tells me that he’d like to ask me a few questions. He starts by asking a few general questions about the project and then asks me where in Wales I am from, where my family is based and what is my proficiency of the Welsh language; all of which I answer freely. The interview then starts and centres on a brief history of the locality in which the research is taking place. The first part pays particular attention to how his experiences of racism have shifted over time. As part of his narrative he reflects on how, in his early 20s, he found he was “becoming more prejudicial towards white people, starting to hate them”. Later in the interview he talks about his teaching and iterates four times that the ‘local’ white women in his class are the most interested and engaged in his classes discussing racism and colonialism. Given the description of white women here I ask him whether that anger and hate he’d talked of earlier in our conversation had altered. In response, he tries to reconcile these two views:

[My anger] was mainly to white males because I’ve got a thing for white females. You know, it’s what I’m attracted to. So it was hypocritical (both laugh)…. So it’s hypocritical, it couldn’t have worked. And if it did materialise, it couldn’t have had a shelf life for longevity, couldn’t have, because I’ve got five kids, you know what I mean, with white women.

He repeats this sentiment a moment later with an ambiguous use of ‘you’:

Yeah, You know, you’re okay. You’re a white female, I fancy you and it’s just the males (both laugh)—

And then again six transcribed pages later:

… You know, it’s like I was saying, that hypocritical approach. You know, it was like when I was going to go and hate every white man out there, but it’s okay because I’m into white women (laughs), you know.

At the end of the interview, as we leave the café he reiterates again (now off tape) that he has a preference for white women. This time Welsh is used directly as a prefix, whilst only implied during the interview because his students are “local women”. As we walk along the street, now dark because it is around 5 pm and in winter, he invites me to go for a drink with him. I decline giving an excuse that I have to do some more work. He asks me which hotel I am staying in and I respond suitably vaguely with something like “in the city centre” and quickly make an exit by diving into a nearby women’s clothing shop, saying I want to shop.

Again I had initially put this interaction down to an individualised case, much like I did with [X]. It was not until on re-reading that I began to see connections between this interview and others. The discomfort now audible in my laughter (when he laughs) had distracted me from noticing. However, what becomes conspicuous when I re-read transcripts is not only the emphasis on my Welshness, but what such an identity is imagined to mean in the local context. ‘My’ gender and sexuality became interwoven into the stories of ‘the community’ because this is a key means through which its history is told. Nationhood we...
know is entwined with a woman’s sexuality and reproduction. At this local level this is reproduced and exacerbated through the understanding that Welsh women are both virile and fecund and subsequently are the ‘root’ of the community. I re-read all the transcripts and note how men tell me that ‘we’ (implicitly a nod to me) are understood as, to quote one respondent, the ‘Celtic matriarch’ of the ‘community’. White (typically coded as ‘local’) Welsh women are proclaimed as the (re)producers of the local working class community:

If you’re in [the community], you want for nothing. You can be born here, local women would come in and birth you. You could die here, local women would come in and wash the body.

I remember when I was growing up [here], everyone used to leave their doors open and while the men were at [work], all the mothers would just come together and support each other.

These images of a ‘matriarchal’ community are somewhat perversely intended to be complimentary. They speak to me, but they also carry the broader message that women ‘like me’ are ‘desirable’. However, I want to suggest that they also carry another function – they attempt to distract me from thinking about the women who are not spoken of. In this case it is the women who do not meet the criteria of being local and white. Perhaps they think by appealing to my image that I will not notice how parochial these representations are, nor how they are constructed with the understanding that there are women who cannot and do not fit into this story, even though they (not I) are part of ‘the community’. This is revealed here, for example:

There’s a new generation of children being born, right. And I’ve noticed now, when I walk down [the] Street, past the Mosque … some of the kids are looking at me like as if I’m a stranger. You know what I mean? There’s now becoming a disconnect between the generations. Before it was like, if you saw a few kids, you’d go, “Oh, I know you’ve got to be part of the [family],” it was like you could see a stamp, genetically, in their features… But now we’re losing that because obviously the parents that these children have weren’t from the old community anyway, so they don’t have that connection to the historical root.

Perhaps because they are intended to appeal to me they think I may then be complicit. But, I understand that my desirability, as told through the story of the community, is intended as a distraction from the pathological representations of black women and especially Muslim women. This is the case in interviews with both white and black men. As such the views on ‘newer’ generations of women, who we know not to be white, only appear when scattered amongst these familiar and nostalgic images. The women who do not fit into the community fantasy do not exist beyond mention of the demise of community and it is to what is ‘unsaid’ and who is unspoken of that I now want to turn.

4.2. The interview: listening to the unsaid

The things that go ‘unsaid’ in a research interview are often those that are most revealing (see also Byrne, 2003 Nencel, 2005). As noted above, modes of familiarity are employed to deflect from, or conceal, other issues and these are often those most salient to the research. One of the common means through which the white male interviewees in this study would attempt to imagine commonality was through imagining a sort of alliance and complicity between them and me on views towards ‘immigrants’ and/or ‘ethnic minorities’. This kind of talk was produced in a specific context – in conversation with a white woman asking about race. What is nevertheless important to note is that these views were presented as if imagined to be ‘correct’ and, since I was imagined to be complicit, they were also presented with the assumption that they were the answers I would ‘like’. Some men emphasised this through the use of strong language and swearing against ‘racists’ (I place this in quotes as ‘racists’ tended to be referred to in somewhat generic ways with little definition of what that constitutes). For example, saying such things as ‘X [racist group] has been a real fucking problem”. It is more interesting when we look around these statements, because then we can understand them beyond solely being expressions of machismo for our imagined benefit. Instead, these statements are inserted to somewhat blur how the respondents identify and form opinion. In the following extract, for example, a white respondent who later invites me on a date tells me that he despises ‘rednecks’ and suggests he has a counter opinion. However, he struggles to talk about ‘ethnic minority communities’ and ingrate himself towards me at the same time. This is because he does not know how to talk about ethnic minorities without using dominant narratives that pathologise so-called ‘group’ behaviours.

I think people see a lot of the consequences of overcrowding and then, you know, I’m probably straying into difficult territory, it’s difficult to explain without sounding like the kind of rednecks I despise. But, you know, there are certainly issues within certain ethnic minority communities with waste disposal, mainly because some people have not had experience of recycling, haven’t experience of separation of waste, have not literacy so can’t understand the instructions on how to handle waste.

In a similar example, a community centre worker who is white and probably in his mid-late 50s uses air quotes to say what he wants without being held accountable. This interaction sometimes takes on a more paternalistic/sexualising tone. He is the manager of a centre and most of the volunteers, who also act as interpreters, are young women. From the start, he takes on the tone of someone who knows a great deal. At first I find him to be incredibly helpful but later I find him condescending. The repeated use of air quotes made me uncomfortable. My discomfort was made worse because the tone of condescension increased when he spoke to some of the young women volunteers from central and Eastern Europe who have English as a (fluent) second language. At the start of the interview [Z] establishes himself as someone who is committed to social justice, again swearing:

I think what I’m trying to reflect is that – I mean I live and breathe diversity both professionally and at home. So I’m just always aware how fragile the whole bloody thing is.

Like the respondent above, [Z] then goes on to discuss different ethnic groups, always addressing each ‘group’ as ‘them’ or that ‘they’ do this. And, as in the first example, he attempts to distance himself from these ideas when he uses air quotes to symbolise populist or dominant thinking as if that is distinct from his own. The most uncomfortable moment for me however is during the following extract. Here I am made uncomfortable because he imagines a kind of complicity between us through our white-Britishness and this extends to staring at and evaluating a group of women based on their physical appearance. In these moments, the fact that we are both white and British seems to override our gender differences in his imagination and it is precisely and perversely only in this moment when I am imagined to have ‘knowledge’ – a ‘shared knowledge’ of the ‘Other’.

[His attention is diverted to a group of women carrying babies who have just come in through the door]

Z: Ah ha we have two new… interesting. Right go on speculate, who do you think these – where do you think they’re from? [Woman’s name] is Czech, she’s the beautiful thin one - is from Czech Republic.
No, this one’s English. Okay. That’s interesting, interesting.

Author: Are you talking about the women with the babies?

Z: Yes, yeah. Polish! She’s gone straight into Polish with [woman’s name]. So there you are. Sorry, it’s guess the stereotype inertia. I shouldn’t be doing it. It’s part of the fun to speculate. Would you say they were Roma? Dark featured aren’t they?

Author: I wouldn’t know, I don’t know.

Z: [Woman’s name – he greets her] how are you? Happy New Year, darling.

Volunteer: Thank you.

Z: Nice to see you. Oh, you’re cold [holding her hands in his].

Volunteer: No, it rains.


Volunteer: Hello [she turns to address me, but I don’t get opportunity to reply].

Z: This is [Author] who is coming to do some research. [Name] is from the Czech Republic and has come to – well, you came looking for work; you came with your family. You are a fantastic volunteer who has improved your English a lot and so on and so forth [this is spoken in an affected accent to over enunciate words, miss out pronouns etc. so she might ‘understand’].

I suggest that the way [Z] talks to me and the other women in unfamiliar ways is imagined to work as a potential defence in case of getting caught out saying something ‘wrong’. This is salient to all social research, but produces a particularly interesting dynamic when we discuss ‘difficult’ issues as in this case when white men talk about race and racism with white women.

The ‘close’ relationship advocated for by some is an illusion in these examples – no different to many of our everyday encounters. This is ok. It is not possible to ‘like’ all our interviewees. They can be filled with ‘unpleasant emotions’ (Nencel, 2014). Familiarity is manufactured and allows the conversation to function but it also allows the interview to take on particular turns if we let it. This is not, however, as a result of the seductive appeal of the woman researcher. It is a result of male interviewees taking advantage of oppressive discursive repertoires to assert control over the interview process and is a result of how male interviewees want to manage the research subject. What we learn from these examples is that respondents struggle to discuss issues of race and ethnicity, yet want to portray themselves to be proficient and ‘right on’. The way they use gendered and sexualised tropes of familiarity are mediated through our shared whiteness, which in itself illuminates the operationalising of racialized ‘Othering’. Arendell (1997) suggests that men challenge the role of women researchers by shifting the focus of the interview onto what they consider to be most important. I suggest that it can also be the case that men shift the focus away from what they know to be the most important, but do not want to discuss. They attempt to disguise their reluctance through invoking a sense of over familiarity that is imagined to appeal to us.

5. When women ask questions: discussion and conclusions

This paper has explored how sexualisation occurs in the process of asking questions. It has emphasised that more attention needs to be paid to the role of sex in the research process in order to better understand our positioning and the contexts in which we situate our work. To do this we need to reach beyond the description of the performance of gendered roles within the interview and beyond imagining these experiences as individualised events. We must also caution against giving one-size-fits-all type advice on how to manage research interactions. Sexualised processes that emerge in research interactions are familiar and form part of normalised interactions between women and men more broadly. Displays of power through different modes of masculinity – be it through the use of overfamiliarity through bodily interactions or verbal communication, condescending responses to questions, commentary on appearance and inappropriate invasive questions into one’s personal life – ultimately represent precisely the types of activity that women often deal with in the workplace more generally (see, for example, MacKinnon, 1979). The experiences discussed here illustrate how being a woman and being a researcher are often forced to struggle for compatibility.

The paper challenges the way in which qualitative methods texts emphasise the necessity to develop close relationships with interviewees without giving indication of the complexities of how closeness manifests in research interactions. This is particularly problematic so long as women are conceived of as especially good at being empathetic and seductive listeners. The operationalising of the sexualised positioning of women within the ‘field’ is only an echo of that which resonates throughout the academic sphere more broadly. As Gayle Letherby has discussed in detail, women have struggled to be included fully within the academy because of the way in which women are ‘not only excluded from rationality but rationality itself has been defined as against the feminine and traditional female roles’ (Letherby, 2003: 28). This link is necessary to explore and highlight when thinking about the issues that arise in the doing of research because we cannot imagine them as separate. It is telling, for example, that whilst Dingwall ponders the ethical dilemmas of placing “young women” researchers into interview situations he does not have the same level of reflection on his own practice of imagining women in this way. Instead, he nonchalantly draws a parallel between a woman academic and the legend of Mata Hari, a woman accused of prostituting herself for information.

The relationship between interviewer/ee is important to consider at each stage of the research process but we are not doing ourselves any favours by focusing on the significance of rapport building to get good data. If we do then we would have to assume certain types of interaction are necessary. And, we would have to yield to an expectation that we should be treated in a particular way in order to do our jobs. We cannot conclude that women are only good at asking questions when they are ‘women’ i.e. bodies that are sexualised in normative ways. It is crucial to reiterate that, whilst women researchers might share the experience of being conceived as irrational/emotional etc., the ways in which this manifests and has effects is not uniform. Experiences can only be properly understood in the context in which they are produced and this includes taking account of how women are positioned in multi-faceted ways across social experiences of race, class, sexuality, age, disability and so on. Indeed, it is because sexualisation is produced in different ways that means by paying attention to them we can learn more about the research contexts in which we have situated ourselves. How interviewer and interviewee choose to deal with and manage the research interaction is entwined with how the interviewer/ees want to direct the content of the discussion, including how particular topics might be evaded. Paying attention to sexualised interactions can therefore be useful beyond their description because they tell us about how women are produced and gender dynamics work in the contexts in which the respondents operate. They can also be drawn on to consider how modes of familiarity are employed to deflect or conceal other issues
References


