

# “Ducking, diving and playing along”

## Negotiating everyday heteroerotic subjectivity in the field

Memory Mphahuli

*Department of Sociology, University of Ghent, Ghent, Belgium, and*

Gabriele Griffin

*Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala Universitet, Uppsala, Sweden*

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to explore the fieldwork dilemmas a young, female, heterosexual, indigenous South African researching everyday negotiations around heterosexuality within township families encountered in negotiating her own heteroerotic subjectivity within the field.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A heterosexuality studies approach is here combined with a critical feminist research methodological perspective.

**Findings** – The paper argues that researchers are often unprepared for having to negotiate their erotic subjectivity within the field and that such negotiations can be compromising to the researcher in a variety of ways.

**Practical implications** – The paper suggests that more might be done to prepare researchers for negotiating identity aspects such as sexuality in the field since that negotiation impacts on one’s research and the researcher’s sense of self in the field.

**Social implications** – The paper critically interrogates what negotiating one’s erotic subjectivity in the field might mean.

**Originality/value** – Little is published on female researchers negotiating their heteroerotic subjectivity in the field. The paper contributes original insights on this from fieldwork carried out by an indigenous heterosexual female researcher in South African townships. It raises important issues about the conduct of fieldwork in (non-)compromising and agentic ways.

**Keywords** South Africa, Ethnographic research, Asymmetry of purpose, Culture of instantaneity, Erotic subjectivity, Negotiating heterosexuality

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

This paper focuses on the negotiation of heterosexuality and sexual availability, or heteroerotic subjectivity, in the field, in the context of conducting qualitative ethnographic research on everyday mundane practices of heterosexuality as these are negotiated within families living in both rural areas and townships in South Africa. Researchers engaged in ethnographic fieldwork find themselves inevitably intertwined in the social worlds of their participants and in their daily lives (Robertson, 2002), and this includes the issue of sexuality: “if sexuality both produces and permeates social life, then the fieldwork experience is not different” (Cupples, 2002, p. 382). In other words, everyday mundane practices of heterosexuality do not stop or freeze for the sake of social analysis by the ethnographer; they constitute an ongoing practice from which the researcher is not exempt. Morton (1995) suggests that in the field, researchers are (also) sexualized subjects who may be viewed as wives, mothers, desirable foreign women, potential sexual partners, etc. and these views impinge on the research process in ways that cannot always be predicted. Yet sexuality, erotic subjectivity and discussions that specify (un)wanted sexual encounters in the field are largely absent in the formidable body of work on doing ethnography (e.g. Campbell and Lassiter, 2015), particularly reflexive accounts of the role



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of researchers' sexuality as part of the research process. Further, advice on matters relating to sex and sexuality are not generally part of the preparatory package for those about to embark upon fieldwork (Altork, 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), leaving them largely unprepared for that experience (Johansson, 2015).

However, similar to gender and race, sexuality as a dimension of one's positionality in the field needs to be more analytically engaged with (Kasper and Landolt, 2016). Indeed, Cupples (2002, p. 382) argues that "a more reflexive approach to the fieldwork experience and process would include a consideration of the erotic dimension and of the impact of the researcher's sexuality." Caplan (1993) and Hoang (2018) have outlined how one's sexuality and sexual availability will be constructed for one, even if we attempt to put these aside in the interests of maintaining some form of detachment or supposed "objectivity". This is true whether one is a foreign researcher or a local. In an effort to address this issue, Browne *et al.* (2010) have called attention to the need for a careful exploration of the continual negotiations in the research process which include negotiations around researchers' erotic subjectivity. Indeed, Fields (2016) argues that "Anxious situations – failures, flirtations, and misreadings – are not obstacles to empiricism; they are visceral experiences of social difference and affinity in which researchers, participants, and collaborators assert their personhood" (p. 37).

This methodological paper takes up this issue by taking a critical look at the role the first author's erotic subjectivity played in her fieldwork experience. For the purposes of this paper, "Sexual subjectivity refers to how people think about themselves [and others] as sexual beings. It includes their experiences of sex and eroticism [*sic*], as well as their conception and assessment of their own erotic and sexual desires, acts, and fantasies" (Diemen, 2016, p. 1). Hence, heteroerotic subjectivity refers to people's perceptions and experiences as sexual beings within a heterosexual frame. In this frame and in this paper, the erotic is not, as in Allen's (2012, p. 326) work, constructed as "an embodied human resource" enabling "small, specific acts of refusal" (p. 327) or resistance, but rather, and more in line with Hoang's (2018) arguments, as a "destabilizing enterprise" (p. 230), requiring from the researcher "subjecting oneself to [the] symbolic violence" (p. 231) of being objectified by male participants as part of an everyday carnal ethnography. This subjection demands of women that "they become complicit in their own symbolic violence" (p. 241) and practice "critical accommodation" (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017, p. 386), a strategy of silence, as a means of "gain[ing] and maintain[ing] access in the field" (Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017, p. 390). In our paper, this subjection, as we shall discuss, also signals "the complex way individuals neither completely identify with nor explicitly oppose elements of their culture" (Allen, 2012, p. 333). We say this here because in her fieldwork the first author effectively engaged in "her culture," the black South African townships in which she grew up and which she only left for a limited period to pursue her PhD in Europe.

This paper has three sections: it begins with a brief discussion of how erotic subjectivity has previously been explored in relation to fieldwork experience. It then analyses how relations between researchers and research subjects have been constructed within feminist methodology before exploring the issues this raised for the first author as researcher in the third section. Here, through an analysis of the first author's fieldwork experiences of "ducking, diving and playing along," the paper provides insights into how understandings of erotic subjectivity are both produced and countered in research encounters, before lastly drawing out some of the implications of this for other researchers.

### **Erotic subjectivity in the field**

The literature on erotic subjectivities in the field mostly has three sources: queer, gay and lesbian researchers' accounts of how they handled this issue (see e.g. Allen, 2011; Blackwood, 2010; Boellstorff, 2005, 2007; Lewin *et al.*, 1996; Newton, 1993); heterosexual

women's depictions of sexual harassment and sexual attacks in the field (e.g. Johansson, 2015; Kloß, 2017; Kristiansen, 2009); and accounts by researchers studying sex work (e.g. Bernstein, 2010; Parreñas, 2010; Hoang, 2018). In volumes such as Kulick and Willson's (1995) and the *Signs* issue of the summer of 2005, both queer and heterosexual women's accounts occur. Sometimes it is the erotic subjectivity of the research participants that is analyzed (e.g. Allen, 2011, 2012), at other times the focus is primarily on the researcher's. In queer accounts the ethnographers involved often spend a long time (many months, or a year or more) in the fieldwork site which is almost invariably in another country than the one they were born and brought up in, and where the researchers are socio-culturally and racially or ethnically other. Many describe experiences of feeling lonely which then lead to sexual encounters and relationships with the research subjects. Sometimes sexual relations are also at least partly strategic, either to gain access to participants or to ward off sexual attention from others. But little research exists on how the sexuality of the researcher impacts on the research process when the researcher is familiar with the socio-cultural research environment (Naples, 1996). Where heterosexual women researchers are involved, it is also – at least in the relevant methodological literature – frequently the case that the researchers go to a country and culture quite removed from their own (e.g. Johansson, 2015) where they then find themselves having to negotiate their erotic subjectivity in unexpected and often harassing ways. In the case of researchers in the field of sex work, especially where this involves sex work in heterosexual contexts, researchers who act as participant observers do not necessarily detail what sex work they themselves actually undertook (Parreñas, 2010; Hoang, 2015).

Possibly the least accounted-for form of erotic subjectivity in the field is that of heterosexual males. Kulick and Willson (1995) suggest that this is because “there seems to be a kind of unwritten, unspoken, and for the most part, unquestioned rule about the ethics of sex in the field [...] *Don't*” (p. 10). They found that “The only ones for whom we were repeatedly called on to justify the volume were heterosexual men, many of whom responded with suspicion or even hostility. The only people who actually tried to talk us out of doing the book (usually with the “think-of-the-damage-this-will-do-to-your-careers” hex) were heterosexual males” (p. xiii). Kulick and Willson suggest this may derive from a combination of the disciplinary injunction “do not” and heterosexual men defining themselves through their careers which they do not wish to jeopardize. But, as they also rightly point out, establishing rapport in the field with one's informants is a key requirement for successful ethnographic research. What the parameters of that rapport might be is worth exploring and we shall do this partly in this paper. It is possibly also worth pointing out that heterosexual men as normative presences in many contexts may be less used to scrutinizing themselves, or being scrutinized, in the ways that queers and women as non-dominant presences frequently are. Hence, they may find it more threatening to engage critically with their own practices, including their erotic subjectivities, in the field. With Kulick and Willson, and with Johansson (2015), we argue that it is important to discuss these issues, not least to enable those going into the field to be prepared for how they may be scrutinized.

For the first author, the situation was somewhat different from the ones outlined above regarding the literature on erotic subjectivities in the field. For one thing, she was not a “foreigner” going to another country but a young black heterosexual woman from a South African township returning to that site as her fieldwork location. She thus had some understanding of how erotic subjectivities are negotiated in this context. Having gone abroad to Europe to do a PhD, she had, however, also entered a different class position from the one she had left behind. This, as we will show, played a role in the construction of her erotic subjectivity both by herself and by those around her. This was further inflected by the fact that she was doing fieldwork on how black South African families living in the rural areas of KwaZulu Natal (KZN) and the townships of Soweto socially construct heterosexuality.

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Against a history of research on sexuality in South Africa which mostly focuses on issues around HIV/AIDS, on issues around homosexuality and on exploitative heterosex (see e.g. Shefer, 2016), the intention with this research was to move away from problematized forms of sexuality to engage with its everydayness and mundanities. To this end, the first author spent a – by conventional ethnographic standards – relatively limited amount of time, six months (May–October 2016), in the field in two different locations: KZN and Soweto. In KZN, she lived with a local family for three months, in Soweto she lived with her own family, also for three months. In both sites she had a key informant who would secure introductions to relevant research participants: in the first site, this was a young woman, in the second a young man. As a young heterosexual unmarried woman the researcher found that her erotic subjectivity was repeatedly brought into play and that she had to negotiate this. In this process, she experienced both agency and harassment. Given her feminist methodological stance, her interactions with her informants thus compromised her in various ways as discussed below.

### **The seductions and vicissitudes of feminist methodological exhortations**

Feminist methodological discussions, dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s onwards, about engaging with one's research participants in qualitative research, were forged as a reaction against objectivist science and the researcher as detached, un-invested observer in a position of assumed epistemic (and sometimes even ontological) superiority. Hence the emphasis in early feminist work regarding interviewing for example – refusing the supposed power and privilege researchers enjoy – was on sharing, befriending, the establishment of trust through mutual disclosure and the notion of the co-production of knowledge (see e.g. Oakley, 1974, 1982; Roberts, 1981). Indeed, much contemporary methodological discussion, certainly in feminist contexts, continues to focus on questions of reducing inequalities between researchers and research participants, on knowledge sharing and equalizing relations (see Cerwonka, 2011; Johansson, 2015; Letherby, 2003; Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman, 2017; Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002). Quite apart from the democratizing and decentering impulses that inform these exhortations to engage with one's research participants on a par, the notion of bridging differences through openness and sharing is seductive for many researchers as they find themselves in unaccounted-for positions of vulnerability when they seek to elicit information from their informants whose agendas they may neither understand nor have anticipated. "Unaccounted-for" here means unprepared for. Seeking connection is a way of reducing alienation – a sensation that anyone going into the field "with intent" experiences. And assuming a position of wanting to be open and share is one way of establishing connection. Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017), drawing on Lofland *et al.* (2006), discuss this from a research participant view in terms of approachability which "captures the emotional safety that individuals must feel to engage in the [research] process" (p. 385). These considerations also guided the first author who sought to establish trust and reciprocity with her interviewees by inviting them, in what seemed an appropriate feminist manner, to raise any questions they might have. As we shall show below this had some problematic and unintended consequences.

### **On (not) managing heteroerotic subjectivity in the field**

Feminist methodology has emphasized "researching differently" – as the sub-title of Buikema *et al.*'s (2011) volume would have it. Doing research differently in the study under review meant not using a pathologized notion of sexuality as a starting point when asking about sexuality, in order to ascertain exactly how the first author's participants themselves spoke about/understood their sexuality. As this project was interested in balancing stories, and moving away from the colonial/western-gaze experiences of (hetero)sexualities within the local broader (heterosexual) sexual context, the feminist methodological intention was instead on "developing reciprocity with research subjects – hearing, listening and equalizing

the research relationship – doing research with instead of ‘on’ (Pillow, 2003, p. 179). Johansson (2015) has written about this intent and its vicissitudes. As a young, white, foreign, female researcher in Nigeria she found herself sexually propositioned by “Big Men,” local men of influence who acted as gatekeepers in her project, and who expected sexual favors in return for that service. For the first author the situation was somewhat different: she was local and felt that she understood and was fully prepared for the interactions she would have with local men.

In order to develop rapport with the participants and to co-create a safe and comfortable space for sharing intimate details about one’s sexual life, the first author early on in her research process said to her informants that she would also tell them anything they wanted to know, in reciprocal fashion to how she as researcher was asking them questions. This proved to be easier said than done, particularly with the male participants who were in the same age group as her. Thus, the researcher inadvertently found herself repeatedly hesitant to give them information about her sexual life, practices and proclivities, whilst asking them to trust her with their intimate lives’ details. For the most part her informants were not particularly interested in asking her about herself, but some of the male informants adopted a somewhat different stance. A key issue was that whilst the first author was asking her questions for research purposes, the young men who asked about her were not asking for the same reasons. This “asymmetry of purpose” as we term it, is not much addressed in feminist methodological literature. Nonetheless it structures researcher-informant interactions and therefore requires attention. Below we discuss three situations that arose and the strategies the first author adopted to manage (or not) her heteroerotic subjectivity in the field. These situations stood out in the first author’s memory as moments that left her feeling uncomfortable beyond the situation itself since they involved her in compromising situations. Like Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017, p. 381), the first author wanted “to maintain perceptions of [herself] as approachable.” This required her repeatedly “to accept uncomfortable modes of interaction and suppress [her] more critical perspectives.” These strategies helped to deepen her understanding of the insidious nature of heteronormative sexuality as well as raising further dilemmas, particularly in relation to her research practice, discussed below. We describe these strategies as ducking, diving and playing along (see also Johansson, 2015, p. 58). One might argue that these three strategies were all forms of playing along, and remaining “accountable to the demands of heterosexuality” as one of our reviewers put it. But they involved different degrees of accommodation on the part of the first author and had distinct outcomes, hence we keep them discrete.

### “Ducking” from uBhuti

While conducting ethnographic fieldwork in rural KZN the first author was living with a host family headed by Mr Madlanduna, affectionately called “uBaba.” She shared this house with his wife, a nurse, and six of their children, the eldest being uBhuti (big brother). uBhuti only came to *umuzi kababa* (father’s home) at weekends. uBaba had a habit of challenging the first author’s feminist views on social life and gender relations as much as she challenged his, or the local societal, discourses on many of the issues they discussed. Their relationship was non-confrontational, even though they often disagreed; instead they used humor to get their points heard by the other, as they passionately debated many issues, especially practices that she was openly critical of. One topic they were both fond of discussing was gender roles. As such on this particular Saturday morning as her sister–friend, gatekeeper Sibongile and the first author stepped outside the house to join the rest of the family enjoying the warmth of the sun. uBaba in his usual sarcastic but good-humored manner attempted to shame Sibongile and the first author for being “lazy women” who just sit and let their older brother do his own washing when there were two capable women in the house. They all laughed and,

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as uBaba expected, the first author protested that washing machines were created for exactly that purpose and that women, especially educated women like herself, were not meant to do such lousy work. In a laughing tone, the first author further added that she could not sacrifice four years of her life working toward attaining a PhD abroad in a very cold Europe to be reduced to someone washing shoes for grown men. Sibongile added that uBhuti in any case would have to pay a lot of *lobola* (bride price) to afford a woman such as the first author to do his washing. More laughter erupted and yet again, in an amused manner, uBaba said that they were “useless women who just talk too much.”

Later the first author reflected on this encounter as she thought it was instructive about how she as a black woman was expected to behave in rural KZN. Feminists have since the 1990s drawn attention to heterosexuality as an institution that encapsulates far more than sexual relations (Jackson, 1999). Through the defiance to handwash uBhuti's clothes and suggesting that washing machines exist for this purpose, the first author partook in a particularly middle-class “city girl” expression of femininity by gesturing toward material goods as the answer to certain gender role expectations. In this way, she inadvertently illustrated how class affects women's attitudes toward heteronormative ideals whilst at the same time not challenging those ideals. According to Jackson (2011, p. 15), “these classed patterns of heterosexual life are linked to education as a key means by which class divisions are perpetuated.” The first author herself had linked her education to her gender role expectations and their material underpinnings, thus highlighting certain differences between herself and her informants.

Within a couple of weeks following this incident, uBhuti started making sexual advances toward her. This is when the “ducking” began. On weekends when uBhuti was home she avoided being alone with him, for fear that he would openly express his feelings for her and that she would end up finding herself in an uncomfortable position, having turned down his proposal to be his girlfriend. On WhatsApp, however, she could not avoid him. Every day during the week while at work he would send her sweet good morning messages, such as those a man typically sends to a woman he is wooing. In turn, she would respond by simply saying good morning and wishing him a great day, thus not ignoring the messages but also not engaging in exactly like manner.

When the first author took a break from her fieldwork and decided to visit her family in Johannesburg. uBhuti sent her a message on WhatsApp, asking why she had left without telling him, and taking that moment to “indirectly” make his romantic feelings known (Figure 1)[1].

Moss (2001) and Johansson (2015) have talked of the value of using their own experiences, like those of their informants, as a source of information and a means of linking empirical material with theoretical concepts. The first author did the same. By observing how some men in her study related to her, she gained a better understanding of the strategies that men in the townships sometimes use to propose intimate relationships to women. Hunter (2010, p. 182) argues that “Love certainly seems to have sped up in recent years. Text (SMS) messages, with their quick beeps upon arrival, have emerged as the quintessential way of communicating love in South Africa.” Upon close examination of the above WhatsApp chat with uBhuti, Hunter's (2010, p. 182) observation that “text messages suggest the fleeting nature of love: that love proposals can be quick, replies brash” seems apposite. In this instance, the first author retrospectively wished that she had been brash, more assertive instead of apologizing for not wanting to be uBhuti's girlfriend and ending the chat with a smiley. But at the time she did not reflect on the fact that she was engaging in and reinforcing the powerful gendered norms of the “propositioning game” (Wood *et al.*, 2007, p. 285), where propositioning in its explicit form is a masculine prerogative and a performance in which both parties know their script. She was caught up in what we here term the digital “culture of instantaneity” which invites instantaneous responses, as brand



**Figure 1.**  
WhatsApp exchange  
between first author  
and uBhuti

names such as Instagram and Snapchat make abundantly clear. The temptation in that environment is to respond immediately, unreflectively. We have no space to go into this here, but there is an interesting link between those digital cultures of instantaneity fostering immediate responses and the scripts of erotic subjectivity that are based on notions of immediate attraction (“love at first sight”).

Quite some time after her stay with the family the first author told Sibongile that her brother had pursued her. Sibongile was angry about this and wanted to confront uBhuti, but the first author quickly reassured Sibongile that she had not felt too uncomfortable and that she had managed to resolve the matter herself. In fact, it was through this invisibility and silence about her discomfort regarding uBhuti at the time of his pursuit that the subtleties of power expressed themselves (Moss, 2001) – requiring ducking from the first author and accepting the somewhat oppressive messaging she received. Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman (2017) discuss such ducking in terms of “critical accommodation” (pp. 380-381). Moss (2001, p. 4) rightly asserts that these sorts of experiences need excavation in light of people’s mundane and ordinary lives because it is in the everyday that society reproduces itself, materially and ideologically.

### “Diving away” from Msizi

Whereas the invocation of her erotic subjectivity in the field caught the first author off guard during her stay with her KZN host family, she sought to be more aware of this subsequently in Snake Park, a township in Soweto. During her three months there, her sense of her erotic subjectivity shifted and the first author found herself renegotiating her

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femininity and performing (Butler, 1990) it more self-consciously. This entailed dressing in ordinary t-shirt and jeans, and wearing no make-up, for example, to make herself ordinary and supposedly less attractive.

About a month into her fieldwork in Snake Park, the first author was introduced to Msizi by his friend Tshepo who was her gatekeeper in the field. On the day that she met Msizi at his home, he did not say much to her, only that he would take part in her study. His mother, however, had lots of questions and was very reluctant to participate in the research. She asked the first author to give her son, Msizi, her phone number. A day later Msizi made the initial contact on WhatsApp with the claim that he was checking if the first author's number was working and that he wanted to find out when she would be coming to his house for the interview. The first author was excited that he had made contact and assumed that he had spoken to his reluctant mother and had somehow managed to convince her to participate in the study. But instead he had prepared a hearty breakfast for the first author (the initial stages of the propositioning game) which he took pictures of and sent via WhatsApp, telling the first author to hurry as the food was getting cold. She turned this invitation down as she was busy interviewing another participant at the time. But she was also quick to see that this invitation likely constituted the initial stages of someone wanting to start a sexual relationship. She later sent him a WhatsApp message, asking if he would be available the following day, to which he enthusiastically responded "sure I will be." Soon after they had set up a fixed appointment, he asked about her love life, saying this was "off the record." On one level, the first author found this amusing, because she thought that she was the one recording the conversations and observations daily, but clearly observations were being made of her too: "they returned [her] gaze" (Meadow, 2013, p. 473). As Cupples (2002) insists, in the field we do not position ourselves, we are also positioned by those whom we research. But the statement "off the record" also suggested that Msizi sought to set up a parallel agenda, positioning the first author as a potential girlfriend rather than as researcher. He moved swiftly without really knowing her and sought to ascertain her relationship status "off the record," as shown in Figure 2.

Jenny Josefsson (Brandt and Josefsson, 2017) used the name of a man who was in a position of authority to negotiate the feelings of men trying to get her drunk and induce her to spend the night with them. She realized that this was an effective strategy, and less offensive than saying "no, I do not want to." Since men in her research context respected the "property" of other men, they made no further advances. However, although the first author had made it clear that she had "someone special," this did not stop Msizi from telling her about his feelings for her (Figure 3). The fact that the first author was unmarried seemed to mean here that she was "fair game," she was available, and could still be persuaded to be his girlfriend. This incident told the first author that "belonging" to another man needed to be reinforced either by his presence or by her status as married in order to prevent further advances.

When Msizi told the first author that Tshepo also liked her she started to wonder if her sexual availability was a constant point of discussion. Simultaneously she felt that she was being complicit in very problematic constructions of sexuality, more so when Msizi asked her not to tell his friend Tshepo that he too had feelings for her. It seemed as if she was complying with notions of femininity that she would otherwise not agree with in her personal life. Typically, the first author is very frank about these sorts of things and does not hesitate to let a man know when she thinks he is "out of line." But in this interaction she found herself retreating into the shell of a very docile woman. One way to think about this is that these shifts and renegotiations are particularly valuable in highlighting the performative nature of gender, which can have a destabilizing impact on normative heterosexuality (Cupples, 2002). However, the authors are not too convinced of this destabilizing impact, as the negotiation and shifting positionalities of the researcher



**Figure 2.**  
WhatsApp exchange  
between Msizi and the  
first author

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operated along a continuum of heteronormative feminine positions already available under heterosexuality in this social context. Why did the first author, for example, assure Msizi that he could trust her, as shown in Figure 4?

She worried that by giving Msizi her trust she might have given him the impression that he should persevere in convincing her of his feelings – she was possibly just “playing hard to get,” as this is another scripted tact in the dialectic between masculinities and femininities in township “love” relationships of young people (Wood *et al.*, 2007, p. 286). Furthermore, with Butler (1990) one might suggest that in the township where the first author was conducting her research, gender is policed and monitored within a “rigid regulatory frame.” This frame prescribes certain gendered behaviors as “normal” and “natural” and others as “deviant” or “illegitimate.” The way in which the first author was being positioned by Msizi made her feel very uncomfortable and she struggled to ignore it, even though not ignoring it would impact on her research. Eventually she decided not to have Msizi and his family as research participants, to save herself from the emotional and mental discomfort she was experiencing because of how her heteroerotic subjectivity was being invoked. To assert her agency and take control of the situation she called Msizi and informed him that she would no longer need his family in the study, especially since his mother did not want to take part. At this point he realized that he had made her uncomfortable and apologized. They stopped communicating. Importantly the decision not to include Msizi and his brother then meant that the first author’s sample would have more women participants than men. It thus had repercussions for her research.

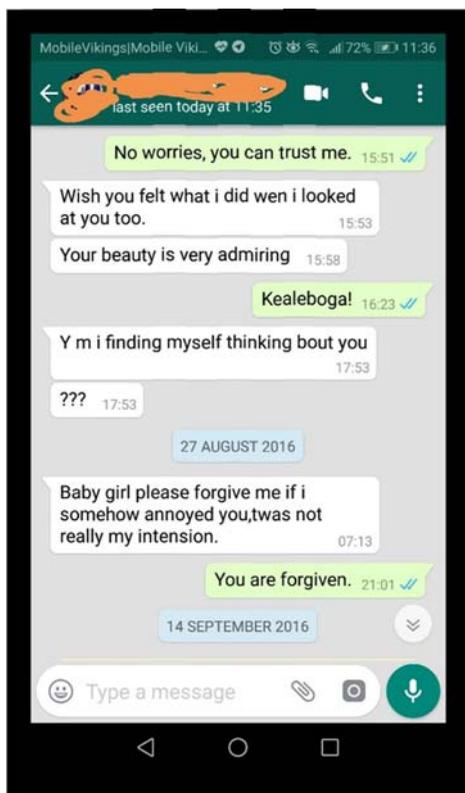


**Figure 3.**  
WhatsApp exchange  
between Msizi and  
the first author

### “Playing along” with Tshepo

Tshepo had a dual role in the first author’s research, helping her to identify potential participants in the study, thus serving as her research assistant, and he and his family were also informants. Tshepo was a shy young man when they first met. Initially he did not speak much and seemed rather uneasy around the first author. She realized that this could be a problem for her fieldwork, and therefore set about building an open relationship with him so that he might feel comfortable and trust her. Building relationships is a necessary part of gaining trust and access in ethnographic encounters (Naples, 1996). As indicated above, feminist research methodology conventionally advocates reciprocity and self-disclosure to gain the trust of participants and build rapport. This view informed the first author’s decision to “befriend” her participants. According to this literature to make informants feel comfortable in an interview situation, researchers should be reciprocal and share their own experiences with participants. The first author certainly thought “befriending” her participants would make them see her less as a researcher interested in their lives only because of her work. She wanted to be understood as genuinely interested in their experiences. However, her field experience also led her to understand that there is a big difference between encouraging informants to be open and evolving that relationship into “friendship.”

In pursuing her friendship with Tshepo, the first author and he would talk for hours about cars, township life, love, education, work, family and relationships. He particularly liked asking her questions about her relationship with her boyfriend, and she shared a lot of details about this. Tshepo seemed most interested in whether her boyfriend was white or



**Figure 4.**  
WhatsApp exchange  
between Msizi and  
the first author

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black, whether he owned a car and what kind of job he had. Suddenly out of the blue as they were walking around the township looking for food, he told the first author that he had noticed how beautiful she was the very first day they had met. She thanked him for his compliment. He continued to tell her that he enjoyed her company and looked forward to seeing her every day. He further suggested that they should take a break from her “work” and go on a date. This made her feel uncomfortable as she already knew where this line of talking was headed. She also knew his girlfriend very well who was a research participant, so she certainly did not want to become involved in some kind of “love triangle.” She knew that he did not have a lot of money and did not want him to spend the little money he had on her. But at the same time, she did not want to disappoint him by turning his request for a date down in case she ended up jeopardizing their “working relationship.” So she accepted his offer of a date, even though she suspected that he would not include his girlfriend, and this made her feel that she was being complicit in his cheating and dishonesty. This incident created yet another dilemma for her over how to negotiate her erotic subjectivity during her fieldwork and how to maintain her researcher identity.

### Discussion and conclusions

Heterosexual scripts dominated the first author’s research field, both for her key informants and for her as researcher. Negotiating her heteroerotic subjectivity was thus framed within those scripts. The basic question in a sense was, what to do when

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confronted with unwanted attention? For any researcher intent on gathering data this is a dilemma: does one refuse it and risk (self-)evacuation from the field? Does one duck, dive and play along so as not to risk one's research? And what does it mean to make any of those decisions? The first author here decided on a case by case basis how to play it and, rather than becoming victim to these experiences, developed agency through utilizing available heteronormative positions such as those created through the intersectional structure of sex and class to channel problematic views away from her. This was evident in her emphasis on her education in the conversation she had with uBaba that Saturday morning. Here she did not challenge the notion that women *per se* should not be reduced to washing clothes and shoes, but instead reified how class matters in the formation of heterosexual couples and in ideas regarding the suitability of prospective partners. Heterosexuality is classed in cultural and material terms (Hockey *et al.*, 2007); mobilizing class difference enabled the first author to duck the gender norms of her research environment.

The first author also ended up playing along with Tshepo but felt more obviously compromised by this because she did not want the relationship implicit in that exchange, that is, to be his "side-chick" or his "makhwapheni," a derogatory term used to describe women who have affairs. She encountered the script that was enacted between Tshepo and her regularly in similar contexts both in rural and township areas of South Africa, and she played along. Nonetheless, she did not really want to be caught in the position that the heterosexual script was pushing her into. This is a dilemma that is not often talked about because "playing along" is in some ways considered a kind of compromise, a compromise that is also compromising. Compromise here refers both to a negotiated position and to an expression of contamination or being made vulnerable (Griffin, 2012, p. 337). The first author experienced both. She did what many women do when they feel challenged in their heteroerotic subjectivity: she sought to negotiate without outrightly challenging. For every researcher encountering compromising experiences, views or behaviors in the field, the question of how to handle these raises its head. When one does not feel personally directly challenged, the most effective strategy may be to play along, or to maintain a neutral stance, or to deflect – since, after all, one has to negotiate difference (of opinion, behavior, etc.) all the time in one's everyday mundane life, and one cannot function by refusing all difference. But there are occasions, such as when Msizi propositioned the first author, when one needs to draw a line, even if it in turn compromises one's research. Such compromising, however, can have the effect of bestowing agency on the researcher in a context where the researcher may feel that that agency has been eroded by them being positioned in inappropriate ways.

Such positioning can come about as a function of the researcher's desire to build rapport with her informants, as *inter alia*, feminist methodology directs. However, in many research situations the asymmetry of purpose mentioned earlier comes into play. This makes the notion of an equal exchange problematic if one assumes that such equality involves providing identical information. The invitation to ask anything of the researcher then becomes something of a pit into which one may fall. The more appropriate strategy might be to suggest that the informant may ask anything but that one, like the informant, may not necessarily answer or be able to answer.

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Everyday  
heteroerotic  
subjectivity

## Note

1. The screenshots reproduced in this paper were part of the general data collection process the first author undertook, and for which she sought permission from participants for usage in her thesis and resultant publications. Informed by “the core principle of care” (Boellstorff *et al.*, 2012, p. 135), participants have been anonymized and will, in the authors’ judgment, not be identifiable from the material reproduced here.

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### About the authors

Memory Mphaphuli is South African Sociologist undertaking her PhD at Ghent University in Belgium. She is working on how mundane everyday sexualities are negotiated within families in rural areas and townships in South Africa. She has been Visiting PhD at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Sweden.

Gabriele Griffin is Professor of Gender Research at the Centre for Gender Research, Uppsala University, Sweden. She is Coordinator of the Nordforsk-funded Centre of Excellence Nordwit (2017–2022) on women in technology-driven careers. She is also Editor of the *Research Methods for the Arts and Humanities* series (Edinburgh University Press). Recent publications include *Body, Migration, Re/Constructive Surgeries: Making the Gendered Body in a Globalized World* (co-ed., Routledge, 2019) and of *Cross-Cultural Interviewing* (ed., Routledge, 2016). Gabriele Griffin is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [gabriele.griffin@gender.uu.se](mailto:gabriele.griffin@gender.uu.se)

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