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The Loves Of Others: Autoethnography And Reflexivity In
Researching Distance Relationships

Abstract

Reflexive accounts of research are important, but they should include attention to a wider range of relations than those between researcher and participant. The researcher's position in relation to the participants does merit discussion, especially when there is an element of autoethnography involved. However, assistants in the research such as transcribers, can play a role in accounting for the research. The relationships participants have with loved ones also shape how they reflexively account for themselves and their experiences, in this case – of being in a distance relationship.

Keywords

Reflexivity; Autoethnography; Relationality; Distance relationships; Interviewing; Transcribing

This is a story of investigating an under-researched and personal area. It examines autoethnography and reflexivity in the research process and is about the often difficult business of investigating and analyzing people's lives. The story has some characters not usually met in descriptions of method. Along with the interviewer and participants, this is about an imaginary cat and a cheeky transcriber.

These methodological reflections relate to a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council on UK couples in distance relationships. A distance relationship is defined as a committed relationship where partners spend most of their time living in different towns, each have their own house, flat or apartment and reunite as often as possible. The couples studied are different from traditional couples with an often absent husband, like sailors. These are dual-career couples with professional women who live apart to pursue their careers, being unable or unwilling to find a suitable job in the same town as their partner (cf. Gerstel and Gross 1984; Holmes 2006). Usually these couples travel a few hours to see each other at the weekends, although some live further away and are apart and together for longer periods.

This project was intended as an in-depth qualitative study to explore the joys and sorrows of distance relating, thus numbers were kept small in a focus on gathering detailed and rich quality data (Minichiello, Aroni and Hays 2008). Questionnaire data was obtained for twenty-four couples. This gives information on forty seven individuals, as one person's partner did not participate. From this sample,

fourteen interviews, including two with lesbian couples, were conducted between 2002 and early 2005. Twelve couples were interviewed jointly and two of the women partners were interviewed on their own, their partners declining. The interviews lasted around one to two hours each and were audio-recorded and transcribed. The semi-structured interview guide began with asking participants to talk about how they met, something couples liked doing and so a good ice-breaker. It also provided some context for the relationship and an idea of its length and character. The couples' experiences of distance relating were then explored by asking them what they liked, and then what they didn't like about it. From preliminary conversations, my own experience and the literature review, I observed a tendency to see these relationships as problematic ("it'll never last"). I tried to go beyond this by first asking couples to focus on the positive aspects, before detailing the problems. A range of other themes were noted on which to prompt distance relaters, but often these themes emerged in their own detailing of the pros and cons. These themes included discussing where they lived, their accommodation, whether it was 'home', and practical arrangements around children, travel and staying in touch. They were also asked about how they organized their possessions and finances and caring for each other and how other people reacted to them being in a distance relationship. The focus on getting the couples to tell me what they did and didn't like about distance relating helped make their own understandings of their experiences central (cf. Roseneil 2006).

Researching the experiences of people in distance relationships entailed both an element of autoethnography and attention to reflexivity. The first section of the paper deals with debates around these issues before turning to a specific discussion of the autoethnography involved in this project. Then the story turns to how a cheeky transcriber helped shape the research accounts, before investigating how the participants' selves and stories are produced and presented through their relations to others. It is important to think less about how research makes the researcher feel and more about reflexivity in research as a process that involves researcher, participants and a wider variety of others.

Reflexivity and Autoethnography

Reflexivity is a capacity via which individual and social lives are produced and changed as people react to their circumstances in ways no longer governed by tradition (Giddens 1990). The complex theoretical debates within sociology about the meaning and importance of reflexivity are evaluated elsewhere (Holmes 2010), but a brief summary may be helpful. Theories of reflexivity have focused around detraditionalization and risk (Beck 1992; Giddens 1990, 1992) as people try to respond to the difficulties of making calculated choices within the uncertainty of contemporary life. Uncertainty and the speed of change throws doubt on Bourdieu's (e.g. 1987) claims that habitus determines our ways of being in the world, but reflexive practices continue to connect most individuals to each other (Archer 2003; Mason 2004). Symbolic interactionism helps recognize these connections by providing ways of thinking about how our selves and social worlds are formed via the meanings we give to them and to the actions of others. In identifying the importance of the generalized other Mead (1962) highlights the relational production of social selves. This can help explain the way in which people incorporate notions of what others say, think, do and feel into their judgements (Holmes 2010: 147; Holdsworth and Morgan 2007).

Methodological literature has usually employed a more relational understanding of 'reflexivity' than in much theory. Although the concept is applied rather differently in different methodological traditions from grounded theory to public sociology, there are commonalities. Researchers try to locate themselves in relation to those they study, but some also try and understand how those they study employ implicit assumptions and taken for granted practices in their social interactions. There is arguably some amnesia in contemporary work about the previous importance twentieth century Chicago school sociologists and ethnomethodologists gave to reflexivity as something that 'enjoins the analyst to displace the discourse and practices that ground and constitute his/her endeavors in order to explore the very work of grounding and constituting' (Pollner 1991: 370; Denzin 2006). There appears to be more forgetfulness around the way these traditions dealt with reflexivity as it refers to how social settings are constituted by 'the discourse, reasoning, and interaction of participants' (Pollner 1991: 371). New gurus have emerged. Bourdieu is now often the touchstone, for not only theoretical but methodological invocations of a reflexive sociology. This means asking why do we like to do the things that we do as sociologists? In essence he advocates 'the sociology of sociology ... as the necessary prerequisite of any rigorous sociological practice'. However, he argues that not just sociologists, but everyone struggles against the temptation 'of taking up the absolute point of view upon the object of study' (Bourdieu cited in Waquant 1989: 33). The habitus is ultimately thought to explain how that reflexive struggle occurs for various kinds of people and its likely outcomes. As already noted, there are problems with relying on habitual action to explain reflexivity within a world that has at least partly become divorced from tradition (Gross 2005) and subject to complexity and rapid change. However his attention to everyone's reflexivity does demarcate his work from most sociological methodology since the 1990s in which reflexivity is discussed as a 'problem' of how researchers are related to those they study (Denzin 1994; Mauthner and Doucet 2003).

In some cases researchers include themselves in their research and this is what constitutes autoethnography. Definitions of autoethnography and understandings of its purpose are rather varied. There are disagreements about whether autoethnography should be emotive or analytic, and if so who should emote or be analysed. Although autoethnography involves emotional reflexivity, that is not a process interior to the individual, and more attention is needed to how it is played out in interacting with others (Holmes 2010). There are also debates about whether autoethnography is something that occurs 'in the field' or in the analysis and how new it is (Anderson 2006; Denzin 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2006). The kinds of autoethnography that apply to this research are researching a group in which the author is an 'insider' (Roseneil 1993) and the researcher sharing his or her own stories with other participants (Berger 2001). This then includes thinking about how to analyse these experiences and stories in final research accounts. It involves self-reflexivity about the author's relationship to her participants and to the research that she produces.

Reflexivity is about how the social is reproduced through people interacting, yet much methodology oversimplifies, over-rationalizes and over-personalises the social relations it involves. Instead it foregrounds researcher-participant power relations within the interview or ethnographic encounter; and typically ignores the relations of analysis (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Analysis could be given more attention, but many methodological accounts may now focus too much on how the researcher's experience and his or her institutional and interpersonal contexts inform the research.

Much more could be said about the reflexivity of the participants. However it is important to say something of how and why the researcher came to the research.

My project and I

This research on distance relationships is partly, reluctantly, about me. For many years I lived at a distance from my partner and I frequently encountered other academic couples in distance relationships. Although this seemed interesting, I feared the emotional impact of muddling my personal life up with work. I decided to wait until I was no longer in a distance relationship. The relationship continued at a distance and I continued to meet others doing the same. Finally I thought I would see what research had been done on distance relationships and was rather annoyed to discover that there was very little¹. What was a Sociologist to do? Here was an interesting and under-researched social phenomenon. The major book length study on the topic, dealing with what they called 'commuter marriage' in the USA, had a sample half-composed of academics (Gerstel and Gross 1984; Ferber and Loeb 1997) and my encounters with academics 'doing distance' in Britain convinced me to begin within academia and later extend to other professions². Less privileged couples may be apart, but under different conditions (Roseneil 2006) and often in ways similar to traditional absent husband patterns, but sometimes with women as the absent workers (Hoschchild and Ehrenreich 2003; Schvaneveldt, Young, and Schvaneveldt 2001). In addition it was theoretically sensible to begin with elites as this was where we might expect to see most actively at work the processes of individualization much talked of in social theory about shifts in intimacy (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2003; Giddens 1992). Distant lovers willing to share their experiences needed to be found.

In finding participants, my own networks were central. Mediators were used to gather a broad sample of couples in distance relationships where at least one partner was an academic. I contacted colleagues, friends and acquaintances in as many different universities across Britain as possible. Each of these mediators was asked if they knew any couples relating at a distance who would fill in a questionnaire and indicate whether willing to be interviewed. Names were passed on to me once the mediator had checked with the couple, or the prospective participants were asked to contact me directly. Confidentiality was enhanced via this process because, unlike in standard snowballing (Noy 2008), only one or two of the participants were known to each other. Contacting a diverse range of mediators helped me gather questionnaires from 24 couples, 14 of whom were interviewed. The sample was diverse in age, spread well between newer/older and more and less elite universities,

¹ Statistics are vague about people doing distance relationships and qualitative findings are limited. Haskey (2005) gives the best recent estimate: that around two million people in Britain are in committed and long-term living apart relationships, but this does not include the over sixties, of whom quite a number might be LATs according to other studies (Borell and Ghazanfareon 2003; Levin 2004). How many of these LATs are in distance relationships rather than near neighbors remains unclear (Author reference 2006; Roseneil 2006; Guldner, 2003 for some American information). The little qualitative work done usually includes all LATs and focuses on work family balance (Beets and Van Nimwegen 2000; Binstock and Thornton 2003; Borell and Ghazanfareon Karlsson 2003; Caradec 1996, Gerstel and Gross 1984; Kim 2001; Levin 2004; Milan and Peters 2003; Rindfuss and Stephen 1990; Roseneil 2006; Schvaneveldt et al. 2001). My interest is in what distance relationships can reveal about intimacy, equality, emotions, and care.

² Phase two, which planned interviews with British non-academics in distance relationships, was not executed because of my relocation to Australia.

included people resident across Britain and who had been relating at a distance for anything from a few months to around fifteen years. Some couples commuted a couple of hours between neighboring cities, one or two crossed the Atlantic, or Europe. The vast majority of couples travelled a few hours to meet and saw each other every weekend, or at least fortnightly. The mediated approach provided not only a breadth of sample but participants willing to be interviewed. Mediators were known to participants and able to recommend me, thus helping ensure trust, which is crucial when investigating intimate life (Edwards, Ribbens and Gillies 1999). A trusting rapport was also encouraged by telling participants that I was in a distance relationship.

Telling participants that I too was distance relating made the project at least partly an exercise in autoethnography. Removing interviewer affect was neither realistic nor desirable in this research, but I wanted to acknowledge and analyze the possible affects of my input on the interview data (Oakley 1981). As I have said, my own distance relationship made me reluctant to research the topic. The principal aim of the interviews was to hear about the experiences of others, but giving some information about my own relationship allowed me to develop rapport and to build trust (Berger 2001). Thus one couple were discussing how they regarded distance relating as a provisional arrangement but were finding it hard to get jobs and be together, when one of them asked:

Participant H1: Is our situation any that different from yours, I mean, do you not view your situation as provisional? Are you more accepting? (Interview 5).

My answer in this instance was rather garbled³, but showed that I had similar doubts and struggles. It seemed important to somehow include these in the research.

I asked my partner if he and I could become participants in the research in order to more systematically include the comparisons I would make with my own relationship, have some input from my partner, and make my 'data' more comparable to what would be learnt about others. He agreed and I promised anonymity (where that is not offered in this paper it is with his consent). Like the other couples we each filled out a questionnaire and I recorded our conversation as we went through the interview schedule together. This helped put our experiences into the same timeframe and context as the other participants, but was not without problems.

Where the research is about my relationship it can be difficult to create some distance and to get the information I want on record. My partner initially uses humour to deal with the awkwardness of being interviewed by me about our relationship.

Interviewer: What is it like, I mean, being apart. How do you feel about it?

Partner: [jokingly] It's great!

Interviewer: No seriously, are there good things about it? Do you like it?

Partner: Umm, well, yeah you don't mess up the house so much, because you're not here. And I suppose you get lots of work done, but that's about it.

A little later when I ask him to describe what kind of house he lives in, he says "it's got walls and a roof". There are various other facetious answers given to questions that I clearly know the answer to, but want him to talk about for the record. I try to create some distance from the data when analyzing our transcript, and help maintain our anonymity, by turning myself into two people. I choose pseudonyms for myself

³ I do not give the quote here because I do not wish to reveal these details about my relationship.

and my partner, as I do for everyone else. In our interview, I use the pseudonym (here replaced with 'Interviewer as partner') for any comments I make in response to what my partner is saying about our relationship. So after my partner's comment on getting lots of work done above, my version of the transcript continues:

Interviewer as Partner. Yeah, Yeah, you do get lots of work done, I get lots more work done when I'm not hanging around with you. That's true. Do you think that's been quite a good thing at the start of our careers?

As you can see, this example shows that the distinction is not always maintained, as the final sentence here surely should be given to the interviewer with the 'our' changed to 'your'. However, in the other interviews one partner did sometimes check that the version of their life being advanced was agreed upon. For example, participants might say: "is this correct so far?" (Interview 7), or make a statement such as "we were living in each other's pocket", and then ask "weren't we?" (Interview 8). They might also invite their partner's version of something by saying "she always tells it better than I do" (Interview 20). Participants all ask questions and, in joint interviews, check what they are saying with their partners (cf. Seymour, Dix and Eardley 1995). This is important in shaping the accounts.

Checking with partners is part of the emotion work of interaction (Hochschild 1984) and I involve myself in such work as interviewer. As participants generously share their emotional ups and downs with me, I want to affirm those emotions, where I can (Berger 2001; Corbin and Morse 2003). Usually what happens is that in exchange for a story that has evoked some recognition I tell a story of my similar experience. This occurs, for example, when one couple (as all did) tell me about the shortcomings of communicating by telephone. My partner recommended I include this story here, which I tell in response to a participant who is trying to explain how interacting over the telephone can be awkward if you have run out of chat:

Participant E1: And then we could talk about something else but since we have email or we send emails we have talked about everything else. We don't really have anything to talk about else and so it becomes the issue of not talking to each other which is not true but we kind of figure this out, right?

Interviewer: I felt like I would get phone calls and [my partner] would go "hello" which was my cue to sort of chat, you see and I got sick of this after a while so I said look I'm, I'm not doing this today and I'll talk to you later, which was very unusual for me because we just don't y'know do that and he was like "Oh no I'm in big trouble " so anyway about 10 minutes later he phones back and I hear the opening of a book and he goes "did you know that Russia produces 87% of the worlds molybdenum?" (Laughs) And he'd thought it through, we've known each other a long time, and he knew what the problem was so now whenever we get into a lull, he's like: "shall I go and get the atlas?"

A similar exchange occurs in another interview, where a couple respond to my question about what they talk about on the telephone by discussing how arguments on the telephone are a problem:

Participant F2: ... if you have an argument when you're with somebody in the same room you can sort things out quickly but if its over a telephone its, its impossible to do that so nip this in the bud

Participant F1: Yes

Interviewer: I think that is a tricky thing isn't dealing with y'know conflicts or potential conflicts when you're not together a lot because it is, yeah, really difficult to deal with them on the phone and I remember once hanging up on my partner, and that's not me I'm not a drama queen at all y'know, we've been together even slightly longer than you guys and I was quite surprised with myself

Participant F2: Its like wow

Interviewer: I know, Yeah exactly its almost like y'know I'm getting really annoyed and actually its better if I hang up than start saying things I maybe don't want to say when, over the telephone y'know and I feared

Participant F2: I think that's why I, I feel myself getting angrier and angrier, right I'll just speak to you tomorrow night , when you're in a better frame of mind. (Interview 20)

It would be nice to think that it is reassuring for couples to hear that they are not alone in these difficulties. The reassurance benefits me as much as the participants.

Comparing experiences builds a good relationship with the participants and often has the effect of spurring quite self-critical reflection in their accounts. For example, in the conversation above expressing my unpleasant surprise at my 'drama queen' behavior is followed by Participant F2 admitting that he was not communicating well on that occasion, saying: "no I was appalling I was just like nurr I think I've, for some reason, I found it harder this year with [her] being away, than last year...". He goes on to set out why he thinks this might be so, focusing on the disappointment of hopes that they would be together before his partner was offered her present job in a distant location. Further examples could be given to indicate that sharing my own experiences not only helped build rapport with the couple, but could encourage more critical self-examination (Berger 2001; Edwards et al. 1999; Oakley 1981) and allow couples to perhaps occasionally relax attempts to present their relationship in the best light (Seymour et al. 1995). My stories of things not going so well could make couples more inclined to give me a frank account of the bad as well as the good. It also enabled me to treat the interview less as a sociological version of the Petri dish and more as a conversation (Oakley 1981), albeit not inevitably harmonious (van Enk 2009: 1270) in which sometimes I am moved to respond to what I am being told. I am not the only one who feels moved to comment on the lives being shared. To my surprise, an important character in how the stories get told is the transcriber.

The more the merrier: the cheeky transcriber joins in

The transcriber helps shape the research accounts. Whilst looking through the transcripts I would find gems such as:

Interviewer: Fabulous (evil laugh) (Interview 7).

A less cheeky transcriber is unlikely to have used 'evil' as the descriptor.

The interjections often express the transcriber's own boredom with the tedious nature of verbatim transcription, but can help draw a line between what is relevant and what is not. There is a good humored rebuke in another interview where the

transcriber feels I have been engaging in too much idle chatter. The following is inserted in the transcript (in capitals):

TALK ABOUT COFFEE FOR A BIT. COULD TRANSCRIBE IF YOU WANT [INTERVIEWER] BUT THE PAIR OF YOU CHATTER BOXES ARE HAVE TESTED MY PATIENCE WITH THIS CATS TALK SO FOR NOW I'VE (sic) SKIPPING OVER COFFEE TALK (Cheeky Transcriber, Interview 6).⁴

The transcriber's patience is further tried because this interview went on rather long, so that my partner arrives while we are still talking. Here is his radically shortened version of the exchange that occurs:

[INTERVIEWER'S PARTNER] COMES HOME. HE LOOKS SEXY IN HIS BIKE HELMET (Cheeky Transcriber, Interview 6)

My partner is sent away again, but I remember experiencing some embarrassment about this 'intrusion' of my personal life into my professional performance as researcher. It looks like I have not planned as well as I could and boundaries between work and intimate life have been breached. When my partner appears there is also some sense of guilt on my part that this interview is eating into some of our time together.

The transcriber also reminds me (and us all) of the embodied aspects of interviewing, which is helpful in keeping a sense of the participants' humanity while performing the analysis. When reading the transcripts I am vividly transported, for instance, to one cold winter's day creeping to darkness when the transcriber writes: 'PARTICIPANT GOES TO PUT THE HEATING ON' (Interview 14). In the same interview some cheeriness was restored by a well-timed break, as I recall because the transcriber writes: 'INTERVIEWER PAUSES THE INTERVIEW FOR A MINUTE . TEA CUPS ARE REFILLED' (Interview 14). The sometimes less well-timed pauses are indicated when he notes that 'AT THIS POINT INTERVIEWER SWITCHES MINI DISKS' (Interview 15). But in one case there is an explosion of self-conscious awareness of the interviewing process, which involves food:

INTERVIEWER COMMENTS ON THE COMESTIBLES PRESENT. REPORTEDLY THEY ARE OF RELATIVELY HIGH QUALITY. [PARTICIPANT] SAYS THIS IS MENTIONED FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE TRANSCRIBER. FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE READER I WOULD LIKE TO SAY I AM EATING A BIG COCHOATE [sic] CAKE WHILE TRANSCRIBING (Cheeky transcriber, Interview 7).

Bodily gestures and emotions are also captured, which are not just reminders of embodiment, but offer interpretations. Where a bit of text is unclear it is noted that STRANGE SOUND MICROPHONE PROBLEMS. MAY BE DUE TO [PARTICIPANT C1's] CRAZY LAUGHTER (Interview 10). When I ask participant G2 'what [their] plans for the future are?' the transcriber really helps bring alive the response, although not without a perhaps unfounded interpretation of the participant's feelings:

[HE] BLOWS OUT SO HIS LIPS FLAP, INDICATING AN OPEN ENDED , FLEXIBLE APPROACH WITH A STRONG ELEMENT OF ABDICATION TOWARDS THEIR FUTURE (Interview 7)

⁴ We were chatting about the importance of her real cats in where was 'home'.

The transcriber is a sociologist who offers his own interpretation (via email) of the overall data as revealing the joys of relationships as 'comparable to the joy people experience when consuming commodities'. This is not used to bolster inter-coder reliability, and my analysis remains different, but that email also contains an account of what it felt like for him to transcribe the interviews. I am interested in the reflexivity (his and mine) that this prompts:

Often I have felt sad transcribing these interviews, either because as a single person I have felt jealous of the couples closeness to each other and wonder if I could ever be so close to someone or because things they are talking about have led me to mentally replay painful incidents in my own prior relationships. This of course is another reason why these transcriptions take so long as I have to continually wipe the tears away from my eyes every two seconds and wipe the keyboard dry so that my fingers do not slip on the wet and soaked keys (Email from the transcriber, July 2005).

I don't know if there is humour intended in the portrait of him soaking the keyboard with his tears (he's excusing a delay in getting the transcribing done after all), but he seems genuine about the sadness he feels in comparing his single self to the 'closeness' of the couples. He is moved to reflect on his own life by the accounts he has been typing. This challenges the idea of the unemotional male and makes us think about the role of the (usually female) transcriber, so often invisible in the research process. I am not suggesting that we offer transcribers counselling in the event that they may be upset by what they transcribe (Corbin and Morse 2003), but that like much in the transcripts, his input highlights the relational nature of these accounts.

Who is the research about?

I am suggesting that it is participants' relations to others, not so much to the researcher, that inform their accounts. As Jennifer Mason (2004: 167) argues: '[i]t is possible to identify a range of relational styles in people's narratives, which reflect in distinctive ways upon their experiences of kinship with others, as well as their sense of self'. I am concerned not so much with the range of relational styles but with how they express their selves through relations not just to kin, but to friends and to a 'generalized other' (Mead 1962). This departs from much sociological methodology which predominantly discusses reflexivity in terms of consideration by the researcher of her or his relationship with the participants (Denzin 1994; Mauthner and Doucet 2003; van Enk 2009: 1266). It can do so partly because the participants here are relatively privileged academics and their partners, and therefore power and other differences between the researcher and participants are relatively minimal. I produce this research account but I construct it from the participants' renderings of themselves as in relationships with their partner, friends and family.

Changes affecting intimacy (Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992; Seidman 1991) can make it hard to maintain connections to others and these distance relaters do seem to think hard about which relationships are important and how to stay connected. Social networks have supposedly become more tenuous, or at least more difficult to maintain for many reasons including long work hours, lack of involvement in local communities, to geographical distance. Yet, contra Bawin-Legros and Gauthier (2001: 43) those in non-cohabiting relationships continue to have selves born in relation to others and the couples I spoke to were very aware of important others;

although they may not be satisfied with the conditions of relating that their distance imposes. One participant, for instance, said that what she did not like about distance relating was that:

Participant A1: ... structurally it [distance relating] makes it difficult to do anything with the weekend. Umm I mean I have a lot of friends around the country. Very few of my friends actually live near me in either of the places that I live. Ummm so there are situations where I'm quite likely to see people at weekends but it would mean going away and because of the structure of our lives there isn't really much, it isn't very easy to go away for the weekend; either together or separately actually. It's much easier to be at home, one of our homes at the weekend and not have that kind of y'know, so that means that a lot of my friendships are managed with less actually seeing. I mean I do still manage them and I still see them sometimes but we manage more by other forms of communication and that for me is a disadvantage (Interview 6)

The participants' accounts are about how human bonds can take on a certain fragility (Bauman 2003), but also how tight bonds can be restrictive. Where frequent mobility is involved, maintaining ties or making new ones is difficult, as appears the case for this couple in assessing what they don't like about distance relating:

Participant E1: That's part of moving around so much that you never really have a local group of people really. I mean we have some friends here but its' ah y'know you learn, you meet them through university so you (inaudible words) just, we just do this thing I guess where you take a ceramics course outside or something like this y'know. I mean a) I, I just don't have the time to do that and then y'know, y'know if its something intimate that takes longer and then you just don't consider it because y'know you're not going to be there....

Towards the end of this conversation his partner confirms that moving can mean a lack of friends locally by asking: "why would I bother making friends here? I'm leaving in six months" (Interview 15⁵). As another participant proclaims: "it feels quite isolating as well because our weekends revolve around one another and occasionally we go and visit people and visit friends" (Interview 9, 2004). However, for one couple it was too much contact with family that was a problem. They quite frequently stayed with one partner's family who lived between their distant locations. The exclusivity of the couple relationship was threatened by the presence of family and their demands:

Participant B1: But what became the problem was, because we were, when we were spending time at [my partner's] family's, is that they had other agendas, like, it was also about them seeing [my partner] or wasn't it? And, or not really getting the notion that that was our only [time together] ... (Interview 14).

Sometimes she wanted to "just call it a day because its, just sometimes that can just be, you're negotiating a very difficult relationship anyway and having that on top of it y'know with that, all kinds of dynamics going on". For this person there were too many people in the relationship, too many emotional 'dynamics' to negotiate and not enough time to themselves. An account of their relationship means recognizing that

⁵ Interviews were numbered at the planning stage and to correspond to questionnaire numbers. This is why there are interview numbers of 15 and over when I conducted 14 interviews.

disconnection from each other was sometimes an issue because of relating closely to family.

The context in which these couples relate to each other and their friends and family has an impact on the doing of the research as well as the accounts of it. It is not easy to organise interviews given the busy circumlocutions of other distance relaters who are frequently on the move. With one couple it took me six months just to organize a time when we could meet for a joint interview, even though they were keen to be involved in the research. This email succinctly explains the difficulties involved in trying to plan ahead for many distance relaters, especially if in the process of trying to get closer.

Hi [Interviewer],

This email address will remain good until the end of September. Thanks for the holiday wishes, I'm sure it will be fun. I'll try to let you know when my partner and I are going to be in the same place and interview-able; we are both moving house (and job) over the course of the summer (twice in my case) so it is not straightforward; such complications for you are, I suppose, related to the population in which you are interested (Personal email from a participant, June 2004)

These couples appear to employ reflexivity in relational ways, and this can have imaginative aspects, as is illustrated by one couple's story about inventing an imaginary cat to help them sustain their relationship. This emerges when I ask what they 'talk' about on the phone or when emailing each other.

Participant E2: Well a lot of our, a lot of our communication is quite playful. ... Almost quite childish which is another of our, another outlet that I don't have anywhere else in my life, partly because I don't have, I don't have intimate friends around, other people whom I play with in that way anyway which is kind of verbal playing or y'know kind of fooling around in some sense

Participant E1: And we should say that we have an imaginary cat

Participant E2: Yes we do. We have, we have an imaginary cat

Interviewer: Fantastic

Participant E2: so its on that kind of, that kind of level

Participant E1: And so we just from time to time we talk about this cat y'know

Participant E2: But we have not really ever got closer to any real situation [where] we could have a cat, like ... you need your own place.

Participant E1: And, and these things then become, so from time to time they become like these issues that you have in a relationship, do you want a car together, do you want a car at all, or who's going to go and scoop it [cat poo] up at six in the morning right and this stuff. So that sort of really part of it but it has become this standing little reference we have

Interviewer: That's great. Aww love it; it's a brilliant idea

Participant E2: So, so things around that level are kind of part of, y'know, part of what we communicate especially when you're at work and you're bored or something.

Participant E1: So when we talk about, y'know like, we talk about a friend who's got a kid or something new and then we say well wait until you play with Fraser, y'know our cat's name, so and things like this so its just y'know, this kind of stuff (Interview 15).

This account tells us about the couple as related to others. Fraser the imaginary cat helps them feel connected to each other and to their friends. They have made some choices about pursuing their chosen professions even though it entails their separation and, presently, regular moves. Nevertheless, they sometimes suffer because of their inability to plan or consider 'normally' taken-for-granted steps in being a couple like getting a cat or a car together. When others are doing 'normal' couple things, like having children or getting some new possession together to show off, how can they comment? They can talk about Fraser the imaginary cat, he can help make them feel they have some token of togetherness, some way to link to others, even if made-up.

The research is about the couple and how they reflexively make their relations to each other and to a wider group of others. This is done within social constraints, but reflexivity can have playful and pleasurable aspects, and can resist social norms as well as reproduce them. Imagining a cat may seem a sad illustration of the lengths distance relatives must go to in order to turn their 'togetherness' and 'apartness' into something emotionally bearable. This can be painful but the couple who invented Fraser describe one 'playful' response to their situation. Rather than ending their relationship because they are unable to meet traditional, or even contemporary expectations about co-habitation and co-operation in various joint ventures, they make fun of all that through Fraser. This casts doubt on whether the 'pure relationship' is now dominant within intimate life. In pure relationships individuals engage with each other not for economic or family reasons, but for the sake of the relationship alone. They remain together only as long as they find it satisfying (Giddens 1992). Yet Giddens overlooks the difficulties of deciding what makes a relationship satisfying. Rational calculation cannot suffice, so in entering a relationship people consider how it fits (or does not) with others and with relationship norms. Reflexivity is emotional and comparative (Holmes 2010).

Participants' accounts tell us a considerable amount about traditional or conventional relationships against which they compare themselves. Their distance is typically presented as "a problem to be resolved" (Interview 16) or "a bad state of affairs that [they] would change" (Interview 5). However, most participants felt it was not inevitably tragic. All were easily able to discuss positive aspects when asked, and often these were discussed in relation to the doubts that some couples had about traditional co-habitational and marital relationships. Those doubts were expressed by one couple when I asked them about their plans for the future. They said they knew they would probably have to spend some time apart, but the intention was for that to be short term. However they were a little unsure *how* they wanted to be together:

Participant F1: I think its only actually because lots of ours friends have got, some of our friends have got married who have been going out, a lot shorter time I mean some, I mean we've never thought about marriage it's not something that we want, er although more recently erm we're thinking , well maybe I don't know we kind of talked a little bit about it but er I still haven't totally changed, got some

Participant F2: I think I'm, we've both got the same sort of misgivings about it...

As this suggests a couple's sense of their own relationship is often achieved through comparison to a co-habiting/married other. This helped them reflect on what was bearable, but many wanted to compare themselves to other distance relatives and asked what I was finding in my research. I responded as best I could to these enquiries, usually late in the interview in order not to lead the participants towards

particular responses. The need participants felt to talk comparatively was evident, for instance in one interview where the participant was talking about the relatively short distance between herself and her partner:

Participant G1: I mean I feel really bad talking about a distance relationship between Hertown and Histown [about ninety minutes drive apart] that was hard because y'know you're, comparatively it's actually nothing.

Interviewer: Yeah but in some ways its not about how far it is, its about how it works and stuff for lots of different reasons and that's what I'm interested in so y'know its not y'know I live further away than you do therefore y'know, I'm tougher or whatever (Interview 7).

In fact this participant is comparing herself to me, because she knows that I was travelling much further to see my partner. It is back to being about me again.

Conclusion

Reflexive accounts of qualitative research are important in order to allow readers to gauge the extent to which the research has been driven by personal concerns and how they may have affected the 'results'. A personal connection to research can produce passionate and worthy work and knowledge of that connection can help assess the quality of the questions asked and the answers obtained. In all research, no matter how objective it claims to be, the quality of the questions and answers are significantly dependent on researchers' relationships with their subject and participants. Making those relationships more transparent is important for rigorous qualitative research and involves considering whether the researcher is an (equal?) insider or (powerful?) outsider. Here the answer has been that some forms of autoethnography include the researcher as a participant who also still has power in being able to analyze what other participants say. Autoethnography can enable researchers to more systematically include their experiences in a way more equivalent to the other participants. However, researchers are not the only ones who ask questions in research and most reflexive accounts could say less about researchers' experience and their relation to participants. The researcher produces the research account but not from thin air and both interviews and analysis are shaped by interactions with research personnel like transcribers, with participants and their family and friends (as represented by them), and real and imagined 'normal' others. These interactions all contribute to my account of what the research tells us about thinking, feeling human beings.

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