

ALONE, ASIAN AND FEMALE:

THE UNSPOKEN CHALLENGES OF CONDUCTING FIELDWORK IN DANCE SETTINGS

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the methodological and emotional challenges of conducting a multi-sited and multi-method ethnography in three diverse dance settings: sweaty dance clubs in the northwest of England, the muddy grounds of a festival site and the sands of Playa den Bossa, Ibiza. Despite overlapping academic and personal interests in these dance spaces, my connection to the field did not equip me for the fieldwork task. In plotting the transition from dance consumer to field researcher, I reflexively analyse how my personal anxieties about entering the field as a novice, lone female researcher have come to shape the research process. In addition to gender, the impact of less prominent facets of my identity, including my ethnicity and social class, are also considered. The article concludes by evaluating some of the retrospective advantages of entering the field as a lone researcher.

KEYWORDS: hidden ethnography; emotions; reflexivity; lone research; bonding capital

I am currently in the 3rd year of my PhD at Lancaster University based in the Department of Applied Social Science, looking at the use of legal and illegal substances in different recreational settings. I am also interested in the place of digital technologies and the role of control within these spaces. Prior to coming to Lancaster University, I worked at the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (ICPR), as a research assistant where I was involved in various projects in areas including alcohol-related offending, youth justice, probation and prison drug treatment. I studied MA Criminology and Criminal Justice at King's College London and graduated from Royal Holloway, University of London with a BA in Sociology.

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INTRODUCTION

THE MESSY REALITIES OF CONDUCTING FIELDWORK are often absent from published research.¹ Couched in this undisclosed mess are the unanticipated methodological, personal and emotional challenges that accompany ethnographic work. Silenced by the historical influence of positivism and its quest for “objectivity” (Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010), these unspoken words have come to form what Blackman (2007) terms the “hidden ethnography”. With the aim of exposing these hidden aspects of ethnographic fieldwork, this essay traces my transition from dance consumer to field researcher in three dance settings, recounting the unforeseen methodological and emotional challenges that unfolded along the way. Drawing on vignettes from my fieldwork conducted from June 2011 to September 2012, my reflexive tales from the field provide a window into the complexities that accompany ethnographic fieldwork.

There are a wide range of spaces and scenes in which legal and illegal psychoactive substances are consumed as part of leisure “time out”. However, it has been suggested that the distinctions between these spaces are “blurring, even disintegrating and reformulating” (Measham et al. 2001: pp. 4–5). Against this shifting backdrop of homogenisation on the one hand and the continuing diversification of dance culture on the other (Rief 2009), my research, focusing on electronic dance music (EDM) spaces, aims to explore the relationship between psychoactive substance use and the diverse recreational settings in which it takes place. In addition, my research looks at the role of control (formal and informal)² alongside the use of digital technologies, such as mobile phones and digital cameras, in shaping the experiences of consumers within these spaces. These recreational dance settings are often viewed as “backstage[s]” (Goffman 1959: 132), where deviance is temporarily legitimated and in which, as Ravenscroft and Gilchrist assert, “people can present their ‘secret self’ relatively secure in the knowledge that this ‘secret’ will remain invisible to wider society” (2009: 43). Ethnographic methods were adopted to elicit the socially situated meanings that people attach to their substance use and wider time out experiences within these settings. I conducted a multi-sited ethnography (see Falzon 2009; Marcus 1995) in club spaces and festival sites in the UK alongside Ibiza in the summers of 2011 and 2012. The clubbing and dance festival sites for this project were concentrated in the northwest of England, while Ibiza as a fieldwork site added a comparative European dimension to the research.

When engaged in “identity *work*” (Coffey 1999: 1), ethnographers present multiple identities in the field. Conducting fieldwork in male-dominated settings resulted in heightened awareness (at least initially) of my gender and sexual identity and this forms the focus of this article. Yet as my research journey progressed, the interaction of other unconsidered facets of my identity, such as my ethnicity and social class, were made visible as they came to shape the research process. A detailed discussion about the methodological complexities of conducting fieldwork in the three dance settings is beyond the remit of this essay (see Bhardwa, Forthcoming), however I discuss here how the intellectual project became a reflection of the emotional and personal challenges I faced. I argue that the vast

array of emotions experienced during the course of fieldwork do not have to be sieved out from one's research, but can instead be deployed as an "interpretive resource" (Wilkins 1993: 98) to produce reflexive insights. Drawing on feminist and postmodern critiques of positivist models of social science research (see Coffey 1999; Roberts 1981; Ryan-Flood and Gill 2010), it has been argued that a preoccupation with *what* was found during the course of research—the intellectual project—has directed attention away from *how* it was found and the active role of the researcher in shaping the process (Cohen 2000; England 1994). For example, in her critique of qualitative method "cookbooks", Coffey (1999) argues that only marginal attention has been paid to the self as a unit of analysis in research, which in turn has created a "silent space" in the literature. Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010: 5) assert that:

Too often papers start with what seems to be little more than a ritual incantation of the identities occupied by the author with little or no attempt to reflect on the *significance* of those positions for the research. It is as if simply 'acknowledging' one's location is enough to eradicate its effects.

The acknowledgment of the researcher's multiple identities in the field and how they shape the research task forms the premise of this article.

The recognition that emotions form an integral part in the research process has been met with academic reluctance over the years (e.g. Hubbard et al. 2010; Punch 2012; Wilkins 1993). Increased ethical regulation of social science research via the "managerialist" arm of university Ethics Committees (Winlow and Hall 2012: 400) has produced an unequal focus on the potential emotional impact of research on the research *participants*, with incommensurable attention paid to the emotional impact of the research on the *researcher* (Holland 2007; Hubbard et al. 2010). Emotions are to be managed in social research through "emotional labour" (Hochschild 1983), and, as Coffey notes, "the emotional aspects of fieldwork are considered as issues to be acknowledged and if possible dealt with, rather than seen as epistemologically productive in the analysis of fieldwork and the fieldworker self" (1999: 6). However, with the "reflexive turn" in the social sciences has come the recognition that the *researcher* is central to the research process (O'Reilly 2005) and that "fieldwork *is* personal" (England 1994: 85). This has legitimated the articulation of emotions in sociological research (Bendelow and Williams 1998; Kleinman 2002). In critiquing existing theories of reflexivity, some writers have called for the "emotionalization of reflexivity", which places emotions at the centre of the reflexive project (Burkitt 2012; Holmes 2010).

THE MUD, THE SAND AND THE DANCE FLOOR: RESEARCHING DANCE SETTINGS

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF a few studies (e.g., Anderson 2009; Briggs et al. 2011; Briggs and Turner 2011), there is a paucity of ethnographic research looking at leisure experiences in Ibiza. Existing literature tends to be based on quantitative survey data, with a public health, harm and risk-reduction focus dominating the field (Bellis et al. 2000, 2003; Hughes et al. 2004). A similar picture emerges when looking at the literature on outdoor music festivals,

where, again, much of what is known in this area is based on quantitative research at the expense of consumer experiences (Holloway et al. 2010) and only a handful of studies draw specifically on the British music festival scene (Gelder and Robinson 2009; Jaimangal-Jones et al. 2010; Thomas 2008). In contrast, there are several ethnographic examples to emerge from the field of club studies³ Academic interest in the UK rave scene from the late 1980s, stemming from the observational work of Russell Newcombe and the Rave Research Bureau, later translated into club research in the early 1990s (Measham and Moore 2006). However, writing the self into textual accounts of ethnographic fieldwork has received peripheral attention in the field of club studies. For example, Thornton (1995) admitted to using ecstasy while conducting her club research yet, beyond this disclosure, failed to critically reflect on her experience and the impact of drug use on her subsequent research. Similarly, the work of Hutton (2006) has been criticized for the lack of attention given to her positionality within the Manchester club scene and in relation to those she studied (Moore 2007). Measham and Moore argue that, although club research is often implicitly shaped by partial insider knowledge, club researchers, constrained by ethics and politics are reluctant to produce autobiographical, reflexive narratives, leaving evident gaps in the ethnographic literature (2006: 22).

In tracing the ethnographic journeys of those who travel through the varied plains of dance culture, I used participant observation and in-situ interviews of varying lengths with dance consumers in order to understand the interaction between leisure setting, substance use and time out in the three dance settings. Away from traditional static methods, recent developments in mobile (e.g., Büscher et al. 2010) and visual methods (e.g., Pink 2001) were deployed to chart the movement of participants within and across different leisure scenes and spaces.

I had initially envisaged a sequential four-staged⁴ research plan to plot the stories of those I shadowed. However, the linear research plan failed to capture the complexities of conducting ethnographic fieldwork using multiple methods across multiple dance settings. This disjuncture from the proposed research plan was made apparent as early on as my first fieldwork trip to Ibiza in June 2011, with the four research stages collapsing into two: 1) an in-situ interview and 2) the prospect of a follow-up interview. The reconfiguration of the research plan was prompted by the methodological difficulties with conducting live in-situ recruitment. Success in recruiting participants for the initial mobile interview was not mirrored in recruitment for the subsequent follow-up stage, with initial enthusiasm of participants to take part in the follow-up stages not materialising. While such attrition rates are not uncommon in club research (e.g., Moore and Measham 2008), the methodological challenges with retaining participants for follow-up stages casted doubt on my research ideas. With implicit academic pressure to prove myself as a competent early career researcher (see Billo and Hiemstra 2012), the research task centred on clocking up participant numbers as a marker of fieldwork success.⁵

THE JOURNEY TO LONE RESEARCHER

THERE WAS A TIME in anthropology's not so distant past when we strove to emulate the brave and solitary adventurer conjured up by Malinowski's descriptions of his fieldwork (Cohen 2000: 318).

One of the greatest unanticipated challenges for me was the transition from dance consumer to field researcher in dance settings usually attended in the company of friends. There were several reasons why I decided to sacrifice the company of my friends in order to conduct my fieldwork. As a "partial insider" (Measham and Moore 2006: 16), adoption of a lone researcher status, was an attempt to make the familiar strange, creating distance between my academic and personal interests in the dance spaces I studied. Partly in response to comments that I received from participants, friends and academics, such as "you're going to Ibiza to 'work'? Yeah right!", in which the academic worth and subject matter of my research was questioned and often viewed as inferior to "real" academic research, I wished to separate work from leisure. Echoing the Malinowskian model,⁶ I believed that the ability to enter the field alone as a novice researcher was a test of competence. As my journey to lone researcher progressed, however, I soon realised that this was an idealistic view of what conducting research involves. My existing social connection to the field did not equip me for the emotional rollercoaster of conducting fieldwork in these dance settings. Whilst grappling with the ambiguity of my clubber/researcher status, I was simultaneously engaged in what Deutsch describes as the "the outward process of research but also the inward process of developing [my] own identity as a researcher" (2004: 885). Figure 1 plots my journey to becoming a lone researcher.

Following the period shown in Figure 1, from January 2012 to December 2012, there were twelve further fieldwork occasions where I conducted lone fieldwork. This included repeat visits to the spaces cited above, along with new sites in the northwest of England, including a trance night, a non-camping weekend dance-festival and monthly drum and bass nights, and culminating in a solo trip to Ibiza. New spaces threw up new apprehensions. Unlike traditional ethnographies, where researchers often spend long periods of time residing in the field, the "step-in-step-out" (Madden 2010: 94) nature of my multi-sited fieldwork produced a sense of detachment and, with this detachment, the threat of reliving the same emotions and conquering the same fears each time I re-entered the field. As Stets suggests, "Emotions are not always created anew in each situation. . . . There is often a 'carry-over' effect from previous encounters"; likewise, my fieldwork task became a case of managing these so-called "emotion flows" (Stets 2010: 267).

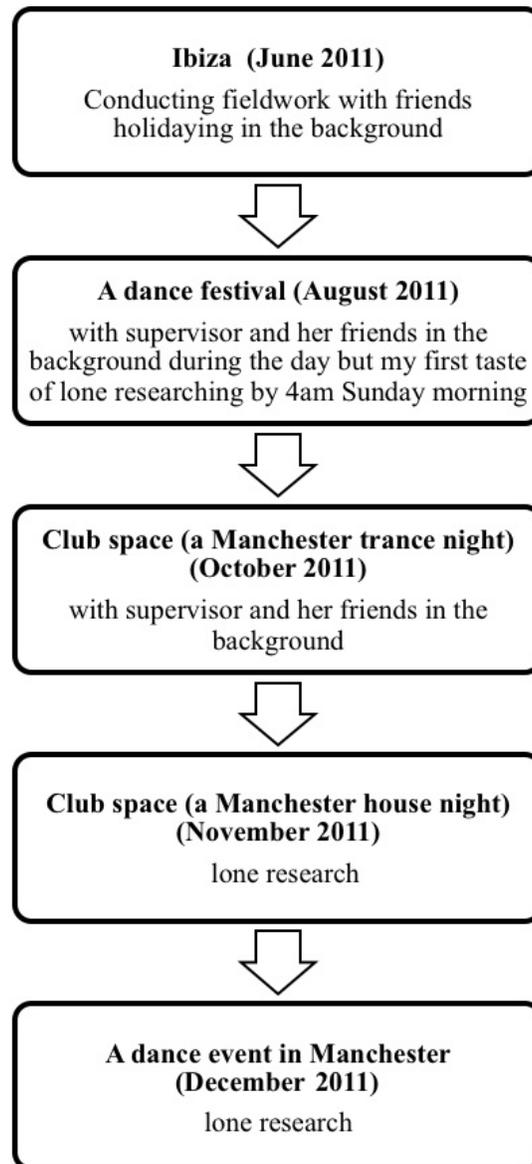


FIGURE 1: THE JOURNEY TO LONE RESEARCHER

MY FIRST TASTE OF LONE RESEARCH

THE ANXIETIES OF BEING a novice researcher alone in the field were brought to the fore during fieldwork at a weekend dance festival in the northwest of England. These feelings were not apparent during my first fieldwork stop in Ibiza (June 2011), where my trip had tied in with the holiday plans of two of my friends and where my previous visits to the island provided a sense of familiarity. The task of conducting fieldwork independently in different spaces (i.e. on the beach and in club spaces) was cushioned, knowing that my friends were nearby if I needed them. In contrast, at the festival I was confronted with unfamiliar territory and the daunting task of camping alone.

While some writers (e.g. Punch 2012) suggest keeping field notes and field diaries separate, the vignettes presented in this article are an amalgam of observations and reflections that were jotted down in-situ and then written up after exiting the field.

Field note: *Entering the campsite* (30 Aug 2011).

On entering the campsite the guy who had helped me carry my tent left to find his friends as they were pitched up in the opposite direction. I was grateful that he had helped me that far but pretty sad when he left me facing a muddy campsite on my own. It looked like utter chaos. I wasn't too sure where I was supposed to park up. There were back-to-back tents as far as I could see. So I continued to walk further down, making my way through the knee-high mud, in the hope that there would be a nice patch of green grass that all the other campers had missed! I walked past a Chinese take-away van, and started to slow down, thinking that I should stop and set up camp soon as the row of food vans would be good landmarks to remember late at night, when trying to get back to my tent. A girl who had seen me looking rather lost shouted from her tent "you can put your tent here, near ours". Relief! She kicked some litter out of the way and helped me with my bags. She introduced me to her two very drunk friends, 'we're local girls' and started taking charge of setting up my tent. 'Have you got a sleeping bag? A pillow? Do it all now.... 'cos when you're fucked later you can just crawl in'. Within 10 minutes of meeting her, I had had a crash course in 'The Virgin-Camper's Guide to Survival', which seemed to temporarily alleviate my anxieties about camping alone. I told her that I didn't think the different coloured areas of the campsite were very well sign posted and she told me that we were in the Red campsite and not to rely on the Chinese food van because later it turns into a coffee and cake van. I pulled out my padlock and key to lock my tent before heading into the main arena and she said 'trust me, later on you're not going to want to unlock that, no-one's going to take anything'. I was advised that 'bog roll and a torch' was all I needed with me and to leave everything else in the tent. I don't think I could have asked for a better tent neighbour!

The above account highlights the emergent advantages of being alone in such settings. My fears and insecurities about being alone in the field were interspersed with positive encounters, in which I, as an "acceptable incompetent" (Lumsden 2009: 509) was able to meet potential participants and experience the kindness of strangers. Nonetheless, my discomfort with being alone was a definite distraction from the fieldwork task. Knowing that my supervisor and her friends were attending the dance festival on the Saturday offered temporary solace. Exploring the festival site from the trance tent base where my supervisor and her friends spent most of their time provided a sense of security. However, when they left in the early hours of Sunday morning and with them this fixed base, my dormant fears of being alone at a festival were reawakened. I was left with the vulnerability of being alone in an unknown space, on the one hand, and open to serendipity on the other.

Field note: *What am I doing here?* (30 Aug 2011).

I left my supervisor and her two male friends who were queuing for the portaloos as we left the trance tent. I had overheard two girls asking someone which direction the campsite was and so grabbed the opportunity to tag along with them. I didn't like the thought of trekking back through the mud to my tent alone in the dark. The temperature had dropped. It was cold and wet. Everyone had retreated into their tents with the exception of a few campers struggling through the muddy floodlit path. I got back to my orange tiger-print tent at about 4:00 AM, grateful that I had listened to the advice of my camp neighbour as there was no way I would have managed to look for my padlock key in my bag whilst shivering and trying to hold a torch. I climbed into my tent after wrestling my wellies off. It was freezing! The additional layer of clothing I piled made little difference. I climbed into my sleeping bag and put my head down on my inflatable pillow. Just as I managed to get comfortable, I heard girls screaming: 'Get out of my tent! Get out of my fucking tent! We don't even fucking know you!' The sudden screams coming from the tent opposite mine in the relatively calm campsite terrified me! I didn't have a clue what was going on outside and I was too scared to look. I lay in my sleeping bag thinking 'what am I doing here? I just want to go home!' The girls were explaining to someone that they didn't know who he was and they had just returned to their tent to find him crashed out in it. I was relieved in some ways to learn that it wasn't someone who had tried to break into their tent whilst they were in it but nonetheless, the morning couldn't come fast enough!

When I woke up the next morning after a few hours of broken sleep, the fears from the night before had diminished and were replaced by a sense of achievement, which had previously been suppressed by the physical and emotional toll of lone research. The emotional ebbs and flows that characterised my fieldwork are echoed by Stets, who suggests, "emotions can take any number of different turns. They can move from negative to positive, and back again to negative, in rapid succession and within a matter of minutes" (2010: 267). As I opened the zip of my tent and peered out, two women who were in the tent next to mine yelled, "Morning!". They were sitting in their tents with cups of tea and bacon butties. They later took part in a tent interview along with two of their female friends, who they knew from university. The interview took place in their warm and cosy tent whilst the women put make-up on. Conversational drift about make-up products and student life—discussions I could relate to—closed the gap between me, as the researcher, and the women, as the researched. In producing a "more equitable identity" (Lavis 2010: 322), feeling alone in the field was temporarily forgotten. My gendered identity became a form of bonding social capital (Halpern 2005) facilitating access to a physical and metaphorical "backstage" space (Goffman 1959), a space that may have been closed off to male researchers. Because the young women had initiated contact that morning, I did not have to pluck up the courage to ask for an interview, and this contributed to a sense of renewed confidence I felt in the field. Similarly, while discussing her work with British migrant lap dancers in Tenerife, Bott

states, “my first experiences of data collecting inside lap dance clubs were characterized by discomfort, a self-conscious awareness of my lack of experience, and of my conspicuousness as a lone woman” (2010: 163). However, she continues, “after the initial sensation of awkwardness inside the lap dance clubs had subsided, I was able to relax slightly into the setting and feel more confident in my ‘skin’” (Bott 2010: 166).

THE OTHER END OF THE CONTINUUM: OVERT ADVENTURES IN CLUBLAND

ALL BUT ONE FIELDWORK site in the period under discussion in this article was accessed without gaining the permission from the relevant club owners/managers or event promoters. My fieldwork has been principally covert to those in producer positions within these dance settings, covert to those I observed but overt to the dance consumers I interviewed. Calvey argues, “overt and covert research is a moral continuum, where the boundaries can become blurred in the doing” (2008: 908). On one occasion I was able to access a sold-out Manchester dance event through one of my supervisor’s contacts. This meant unlike previous fieldwork episodes, I was granted overt access as a researcher to the venue and management were aware of my presence that evening. Arriving equipped with my “professional armour” (England 1994: 81) of a university ID card, a notebook, pen and digital recorder—items I had not always carried with me during fieldwork due to the fear of having them confiscated by club security during routine bag searches—helped resolve some of the issues relating to my ambiguous status as clubber and researcher: as an official researcher, the research props legitimated my presence in the club space. This was in contrast to previous fieldwork occasions where my presence was covert and my consciousness of being alone diverted attention away from the real task of research. In dance settings, where the presence of friendship groups is the social norm, my lone status was understood as being incongruent to the setting. My fears centred around how others perceived me. With typical reactions such as “oh my god! You’re here alone?”, my loner identity was made conspicuous and at odds with a cultural context that marks being alone as undesirable and, therefore, me as unpopular. Drawing on the work of Cooley, Burkitt argues “it is *not* the attitude of the other, taken on board in a direct and unmediated way, that influences the way we feel about ourselves: instead, it is how we *imagine* the other is looking at us and our *interpretation* of their judgement that is a crucial factor” (2012: 465, author’s emphasis).

Having seen my ID card pinned to my top, many clubbers at this event were intrigued about what I was doing and approached me, which took the pressure off of me to actively seek research participants. While “self-selection” was welcomed (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 104), with several consumers nominating themselves to be interviewed, on reflection, this may have occurred at the expense of approaching a broader range of clubbers. Nonetheless, my overt status as researcher had a direct, positive and measurable effect on in-situ recruitment, boosting my confidence in the field.

FEMALE IN THE FIELD

THE BODY OF LITERATURE exploring the presence of women in dance settings, namely clubland, has grown over the years⁷ Gendered perspectives on club culture have shown the liberating potential of club spaces, in which conventional stereotypes of female passivity have been challenged (Hutton 2004; Pini 2001). However, only limited attention has been paid to the gendered presence of the researcher in these accounts (e.g., Perrone 2010; Pini 2001;).

The literature suggests that being young, petite and female are attributes equated with being nonthreatening and, therefore, conducive to gaining rapport with research participants.⁸ This largely echoes my experiences conducting fieldwork in three dance settings. For many research participants, my identity as a researcher was displaced by my presence as a female in the field. Drawing on her research in highly sexualised club spaces, Perrone states that it was difficult to “maintain a genderless and asexual self” (2010: 717), highlighting both the challenges and advantages of presenting as “a young, petite female researching drug users in dance club settings” (730). While Perrone was confronted with unwanted sexual advances and concerns of safety, her gendered identity also allowed her to gain access to participants and to forge friendships.

An implicit trade-off was noted when I conducted fieldwork at a trance event in Leeds. A male interviewee started touching my bottom as the interview came to a close. Although I brushed it off as part-and-parcel of conducting research in a male-dominated setting, my discomfort and disappointment knowing that he was not genuinely interested in helping me with my research made me want to discount the entire interview altogether. In Box 3 I recall a similar exchange with a male interviewee at a trance night in Manchester.

Field note: *You can study me, if I can study you* (28 Oct 2011).

We walked over to the bar in the smaller room as he was struggling to hear what I was saying in the main room. Perched on the bar, he offered to buy me a drink as he bought himself a beer. He seemed happy to answer my questions and told me he was a regular DJ at a bar in town. As the interview drew to a close, I asked him whether he would be interested in taking part in a further follow-up interview when he was next out, to which he replied, “You can study me, if I can study you”. Although I was disheartened by his comment, I just laughed it off; not allowing it to interfere with what was otherwise a fruitful interview.

While the instructional literature in the social sciences focuses on how women should interview women (Burman et al. 2001; Oakley 1981), an absence of guidance discussing how women should conduct interviews with men has been noted (e.g., Green et al. 1993). Feeling indebted to research participants for taking part in an interview often means that, to some extent, the unwanted sexual by-products of that interaction have to be tolerated.⁹ As Warren observes “the pervasive gratitude often felt by researchers toward those who have allowed access to their worlds can hamper a more militant response” (1988: 38). Similarly,

while performing research in a male-dominated prosecutor's office, Gurney writes, that she "tolerated things which made me uncomfortable, but convinced myself they were part of the sacrifices a researcher must make" (1985: 56). Bott (2010: 169) argues "one cannot make oneself genderless", however, one strategy of "impression management" I used to lessen the visibility of my gendered self and to iron out my ambiguous status involved considerations about what to wear. As Perrone remarks, in "dance clubs, it was very difficult to dress genderless and asexual when acceptance in the field warranted gendered and sexual fashions" (2010: 727). While I did not want to be dressed in formal clothing in a club setting, I needed to present myself as a researcher there to do a job and not as a clubber on a night out, thereby reinforcing the dichotomy between work and leisure. I would usually wear a brightly coloured skirt, a vest top, a small jacket and flat shoes. This distinction between my professional identity and presence as a dance consumer was not always easy to sustain, especially in settings where my presence was covert and visible research props such as my university ID card were absent. In retrospect, the research props offered nothing more than the outward appearance of officialdom which translated into confidence, but this did little to reduce the visibility of my gender identity in these dance settings.

"FRIENDSHIP" IN THE FIELD

A NUMBER OF STUDIES have examined the merits and challenges of friends-turned-informants in the field, an approach often utilised by insider researchers to study the social world they are already a part of (e.g., Taylor 2011; Ward 2008). However, my research is aligned with traditional concerns related to emergent friendships during the course of fieldwork. Making new friendships in the field can lead to a blurring of the boundary between researcher and participant. Others have characterized researcher-participant relations as "fleeting friendships" (Bott 2010: 169). In discussing his covert role as a bouncer working a Manchester club door, Calvey writes, "the paradox was getting close to them without them getting close to me" (2008: 911-12). At the other end of the spectrum, feminist readings encourage "minimal social distance between feminist researchers and research subjects" to facilitate an egalitarian exchange (Ryen 2011: 429).

Questions of friendship entered the equation during an incident that occurred at a trance night in Manchester. The events that evening highlighted the extent to which I had come to rely on my key informant India¹⁰ and her group of friends for access into their social world and for their emotional support during lone fieldwork; further blurring the fuzzy boundary between researcher and research participant.

Field note: *When things turn nasty* (14 May 2012).

My interview was interrupted by a man who had come over and repeatedly asked what we were talking about. I explained what I was doing and he kept insisting that he was interviewed 'now'. My interviewee gave in and walked off. The interaction was awkward from the very beginning. He chose to sit very close to me, invading my personal space which made me feel uncomfortable. He told me that he didn't touch drugs and that

he was really into trance. He then began to quiz my knowledge of trance. He asked what other trance nights I had been to and which DJs I knew at this event, to which I responded that I only really knew Noel (a research participant) who was coming on shortly. He said if I didn't know them why was I there? I explained that I was interested in the dance space and speaking to clubbers about *their* experiences. The awkward questioning about my presence made me want to wrap up the interview as soon as possible. At this point, a young, white female in a short blue dress came round the booth and sat on my left. I thought she was a bit odd earlier as she had aggressively snatched her handbag away which was on the sofa next to me. I had smiled when she caught my eye but she returned with a dirty look. Speaking over the male interviewee she asked, 'what is it you're doing?'

I explained briefly and said I was just in the middle of talking to someone and I would talk to her in a few minutes. I then realised they were both friends and so talking to both at the same time didn't matter. She asked 'tell me again what you're doing. . . . I don't get it'. I asked her which part she didn't get, sensing her hostile tone. She kept saying 'but I don't get it'. Her male friend added, 'we just don't think you're genuine'. I was shocked that he had turned on me given his insistence on being interviewed. She continued with, 'it looks to me as if you're just using whatever you say you're doing [pointing at my notebook] to pick up men!' At this point she was standing up, towering over me, shouting 'I think you should leave!' I told her that I had not chosen to speak to her male friend and that he'd insisted on being interviewed to which she responded 'I think you should fucking leave!' I was more than happy to leave!

The male interviewee continued being awkward and when I asked him to let me pass he barely nudged, blocking my path. I managed to push my way past him and went to find India. I ended up bursting into tears in front of Noel's housemate who I had met earlier and then ran into the toilets. I was shocked and intimidated by the pair. Why had she reacted so aggressively? India found me in the toilets and I explained what had happened. I had to stop her from going over to 'have a word'; the situation would only blow up further. She was genuinely shocked that someone would act like that at a trance night and described the girl as 'disrespectful to clubbers'. Deflated by what had happened I cleaned up the mascara running down my face, and eventually went back outside. I stayed close to India and her friends the remainder of the night, consciously avoiding the back of the room where the incident happened.

As Punch remarked in field notes, "I wonder how much I should be prepared to risk for the sake of good data" (Punch 2012: 88). Upset, intimidated and alone, I too questioned the lengths I was willing to go in my quest for good data. I was exposed yet again to the fears of lone research; emotions that were magnified in the confines of a small bar setting. "The romance of the lone researcher . . . facilitates an ethos of self-reliance which can make it difficult for researchers to ask for help or envisage ways in which they could be supported

by others” (Linkogle in Punch 2012: 88). As others have pointed out, being viewed with suspicion and mistrust are often part of the dilemmas researchers face in gaining entry and acceptance in the field (Cohen 2000; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Perrone 2009).

My lack of local trance knowledge, as indicated above, marked me out as an outsider, raising further questions about my presence in the field and provoking a hostile response. The degree to which I *participated* in the culture of those I was studying may have also influenced the participant reactions I received. While others (i.e., Thornton 1995; Tunnell 1998) have disclosed their use of illegal drugs during fieldwork in the name of “criminal *verstehen*”¹¹ (Ferrell 1998: 27), I did not participate in the consumption of illegal drugs during my time in the field. However, as a participant observer, I danced, socialised and consumed a small amount of alcohol (usually a drink or two) as a way of blending in and *participating* in the social setting. As Palmer noted during fieldwork with an alcohol-centred subculture of football fans, “while drinking enabled me to develop good rapport with my respondents, I also needed to position myself as an academic who was there to do a job” (2010: 427). Sobriety added to my professional armour in the field as well as ensuring my safety as a lone researcher. As the sober researcher in the midst of intoxicated dance consumers I occupied an “active”, but never “complete”, membership role (Adler and Adler 1987). However, Measham and Moore, in their critique of absolutist insider perspectives, contend that researchers can at best attain “partial insider” status, arguing that “the fluidity of contemporary identities may mean that researchers cannot claim absolute proximity to research participants” (2006: 16). Furthermore, some of the hostility and suspicion I experienced while conducting research in dance settings may be symptomatic of historical “misrepresentation” by journalists and researchers that has spawned negative press coverage of dance culture in the UK (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Thornton 1995).

The incident described above illustrated how female researchers may struggle to be taken seriously by male counterparts in the field, whilst other females may view the female researcher with suspicion and hostility (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 74). Furthermore, the episode reinforced what I had noted at the start of my fieldwork journey about the difficulties in recruiting women to take part in my research. It was easier in most cases speaking to men (Warren 1988) and in male-dominated spaces, such as trance nights, there would only be a few women available to recruit.

Field note: *Fake friendship* (14 June 2012).

I got chatting to a friend of Noel’s after he had finished his set. The male asked if I was a friend of Noel’s. I replied ‘yes’ at first then explained that he was actually one of my ‘research participants’. We discussed what my research was about and he asked ‘so what happens next year when you finish your research?’ He was very sceptical about the ‘friendship’. ‘Do they know that you’re making notes about them? I find it all a little creepy; it’s like a fake friendship’. I told him that this wasn’t the first time I was out with them and that I’d been on several other nights out with Noel and India and that they were aware of what I was doing and had both been very helpful.

Given the occurrences that night and my reliance on India for comfort, I struggled to articulate how much I valued her friendship; there was nothing fake about it. Despite, the caveats about becoming too close to research participants, maintaining an objective distance from my research participants under such circumstances was evidently compromised. It has been suggested (Moore 2004; Rief 2009) that making friends is an integral part of the experience in the context of clubbing (and extending to the other two dance settings). As Moore puts it, clubbing “is about smiling at strangers, making friends with ‘randoms’ that you meet on the night” (2004: 461). There are three broad types of field relations I have experienced whilst conducting research in dance settings. First, in most field sites I would meet people who would learn about my research but were non-participants (e.g., Noel’s housemate). Second, there were those who were recruited to take part in my research and there has been limited or no contact beyond the first interview. Thirdly, there are the existing research participants who over regular online/offline contact have evolved into “friends”, blurring the relationship between researcher and participant.

In both scenarios outlined above, I was faced with the need to defend my intentions and presence in the field. Hammersley and Atkinson observe that it is not uncommon for the research and the researcher to be met with some resistance, where “people may challenge the legitimacy of the research and the credentials of the researcher” (2007: 65). Blurring boundaries between researcher and participant have been compounded with the use of mobile phones and social networking sites such as Facebook, which adds another dimension to friendship in the field (see Bhardwa Forthcoming).

THE “AFTERTHOUGHTS”: ETHNICITY AND SOCIAL CLASS AS “BONDING” CAPITAL

MUCH OF MY FIELDWORK journey has centred on negotiating the influence of my gender identity on the research process. Contending with such issues has meant that other aspects of my identity, such as my ethnicity and social class, did not receive the same degree of reflexive attention, to which the discussion now turns.

While there are a number of studies exploring the broader themes of exclusion, racism and criminalisation of groups in the night time economy (e.g., Böse 2005; Measham and Hadfield 2009; Talbot and Böse 2007) ethnicity remains an underexplored concept in dance culture. In particular, the place of British Asians as researchers or as participants in dance culture has received limited academic attention. Huq (2003) argues that British Asians have been marginalised in studies of youth culture, subject to othering or victimisation. In the US context, Hunt et al. suggest that, despite a growing presence of Asians active in the club scene in San Francisco, their invisibility in the Club Studies literature stems from cultural stereotypes in which “Asian Americans cannot be drug users” (2010: 211).

Unlike my gender identity, my ethnic identity as a British Indian was largely considered a non-issue in the field throughout my fieldwork journey, with only a few exceptions. The visibility of my non-white ethnic identity was noted during my first fieldwork trip to

Ibiza whilst interviewing a white male in his 30s by the poolside, who used the interview platform to air his openly racist views about African prostitutes in San Antonio, Ibiza's second-largest city. While his derogatory comments were not directed at me, they made me more conscious of my own ethnic/ racial identity. Possibly sensing my discomfort yet seeking reaffirmation of his views, he remarked, "sorry, no disrespect but they're scum, do you know what I mean?" I put off transcribing this interview when I returned home, which highlighted the implicit ways in which such field encounters can impact the research process beyond the interaction.

Explicit attention was drawn to my ethnic identity when I started attending a monthly drum 'n' bass night in Manchester. In contrast to the trance nights I had attended, which attracted a predominantly white crowd, this night was ethnically mixed, making my own ethnicity more conspicuous in some ways. Mirroring the way in which my gendered identity occasionally permitted access to participants and spaces, my ethnic identity too worked in positive ways, moving from a non-issue in the field to "bonding capital" (Halpern 2005: 19)¹² with other Asians within this club space.

On my first visit to the drum 'n' bass night,¹³ I met an Asian couple (Jay and Sonia), both in their late 20s, waiting in the door queue, whom I later interviewed inside the club. They told me that they had "been coming to [the night] since its birth" (Jay) and thought that it was the sort of event where "you can have a good time, even if you're not that into the music. . . . It's chilled out; no one judges you or what you're wearing" (Sonia). Discussions about ethnicity were explicit from the start of the interview, with Sonia declaring, "we're not very Asian". It was a statement aimed at rebutting the perceived Asian stereotype that all Asians are into bhangra: as Huq argues, "[to] equate 'Asians' and even 'Asianness' with bhangra is as much of a falsehood as compounding all African-Caribbeans with reggae tastes" (2003: 34). This "disidentification", which set the couple apart from *other* Asian groups, has also been noted by Hunt et al. (2010) in their research on Asian American youth (see also Muñoz 1999).

Like me, the man was a British Gujarati and the woman was a British Punjabi.¹⁴ The male participant and I joked about how difficult it was to pick up the Punjabi language and we exchanged the few Punjabi words we knew. This off-topic interlude helped to dissolve the rigidities between myself as the researcher and my participants as the researched. In another interview with a Punjabi female the same night, our intersecting Asian and gender identities soon led the interview into a conversation about men and relationships—"you know what it's like for us Asian girls". Moving away from the research-centred conversation, I was offered insights into the participant's personal life based on our shared ethnic background, which in turn alleviated my self-consciousness about being alone.

Comparatively, the influence of my social class and that of others in shaping the research process remained largely inconspicuous throughout my fieldwork. The tacit impact of my class identity became apparent in my post-fieldwork reflections and by unpacking some of the decisions made whilst conducting lone research in the dance spaces. During fieldwork at the weekend dance festival (August 2011), I felt I could identify with the middle class

group of female university students I interviewed, but then distanced myself from, and lacked rapport with, the local “scallies”¹⁵ who told me that they had been robbing tents and fold-up chairs in the campsite. Similarly, my decision to conduct research and stay in Playa den Bossa, Ibiza, away from the excesses of San Antonio, highlighted how my personal preferences, implicitly shaped by classed stereotypes (Nayak 2006) directed my fieldwork choices. These stereotypes were prevalent in research participant accounts, with comments such as, “I think San An[tonio] is quite chavvy¹⁶ and lower class” (male interviewee). Located east of Ibiza Town, San Antonio is heavily marketed by packaged youth tour operators such as Club 18–30s (Sellars 1998). Known for its main drinking strip—the “West End”¹⁷—San Antonio takes on a similar form to other European party islands such as Kos and Magaluf. It is home to the clubs Eden and Es Paradis and is more famously known for its sunset bar, Mambos. In contrast, Playa den Bossa, southeast of the island, is the known location for super club Space and the famous Bora Bora beach bar. The resort attracts a diverse, older crowd and tied to notions of authenticity, it is perceived to be the “real” Ibiza (Lozanski 2010). On both fieldwork trips I chose to stay in Playa den Bossa, which I perceived to be a safer environment to conduct field research, away from the alcohol-fuelled crowds of San Antonio.

CONCLUSION

DRAWING ON VIGNETTES FROM my own field research in dance settings, this article has aimed to expose the often unspoken challenges of conducting fieldwork. Methods textbooks do not always equip the novice researcher for the messy and unpredictable realities of the field. Moreover, a preoccupation with academic outputs and displays of academic competence obscures the *process* of fieldwork in research publications, a process that is as much personal as it is academic. By negotiating my way through the impact of the multiple identities I brought to the field, methodological complexities and personal challenges that were presented on the ground, I have produced detailed, reflexive and critical accounts of the culture under investigation.

Different contexts pushed certain facets of my identity to the fore while relegating others. Overcoming the emotional turmoil that followed the transition from dance consumer to field researcher has formed an integral part of my fieldwork journey. The process of becoming a lone researcher culminated in my solo-fieldwork trip to Ibiza in September 2012, a trip centred on shadowing the ethnographic journey of my key informant, India, and her friends. While my fears of being alone had not been completely dispelled, lone research presented access to backstage spaces, field friendships and ethnographic insight that may have been otherwise closed off.

Postmodern and feminist works have carved an academic space for greater reflexivity and transparency within the research process and by articulating these challenges, a realistic picture of what constitutes ethnographic fieldwork can be painted.

NOTES

- 1 See Barz and Cooley (2008), Billo and Hiemstra (2012), Law (2003), Punch (2012) and Ryan-Flood and Gill (2010).
- 2 Experience within dance settings is shaped by various mechanisms of formal and informal control. Firstly, control is achieved formally through legislation. Examples of this include the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (1994) which criminalised raves and more recently, the wave of legislation banning “legal highs” such as mephedrone. Secondly, control is sustained by a combination of formal and informal processes such as increased surveillance (CCTV), the club door queue and the searches before entry.
- 3 See Anderson (2009), Hutton (2005), Malbon (1999), Rief (2009) and Thornton (1995).
- 4 In Stage 1 of the research process, I proposed to conduct short in-situ mobile interviews. The mobile component of the interview would enable “participation-while-interviewing” (Büscher et al. 2010: 9) while causing minimal disruption to participants’ leisure time. During this initial interview, I would ask participants whether they used cameras (digital mobile phone) to take photos/videos of their nights out and, if so, whether they’d like to actively do so as part of my research project (Stage 2). I planned to use these participant-generated visual images in a follow-up elicitation interview (Stage 3). I would then ask participants if they would be willing to participate in a similar follow-up interview in other leisure settings they attend (Stage 4). While recognising that the willingness of participants to engage in the research may decline along the way, I hoped that most participants recruited during Stage 1 of the research would maintain a level of commitment to participate in the subsequent three stages.
- 5 For a detailed description of the research design, sampling and methods see Bhardwa (Forthcoming).
- 6 The Malinowskian model refers to the work of social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who proposed that entering the field alone and immersing oneself in the culture of the natives could produce contextual, cultural insight (O’Reilly 2005: 10).
- 7 See Gregory (2009), Hutton (2004), Perrone (2010), Pini (2001), Rief (2009).
- 8 Gurney (1985), Lumsden (2009), Perrone (2010), Warren (1988).
- 9 Although post-feminist writers would challenge this passivity and “inferiorized femininity” (See McRobbie 2004; Wearing 1998 144).
- 10 Pseudonyms were used for all research participants.
- 11 “As formulated by Max Weber and developed by later theorists, *verstehen* denotes a process of subjective interpretation on part of the social researcher, a degree of sympathetic understanding between social researcher and subjects of study, whereby the researcher comes to share, in part, the situated meanings and experiences of those under scrutiny” (Ferrell 1998: 27).
- 12 “Bonding social capital” is a concept developed from the ideas of Putnam (2000) which defines the networks created among individuals in homogenous groups, i.e. ethnic groups, club memberships.
- 13 I first visited the monthly drum ‘n’ bass night on 25 May 2012
- 14 Despite a shared British and Asian background between myself and the research participants, there were noted regional variations which became topic of discussion. My family are from

the western state of Gujarat in India and the local language is Gujarati (this was also the case for the male participant). The female participant told me that her parents were from the Punjab, in north-west India where the local spoken language is Punjabi.

15 A derogatory term used to describe the working-class from the north-west, usually Liverpudlians (see Nayak 2003).

16 A derogatory term used to describe the white working-class (see Nayak 2006).

17 See Briggs et al. (2011) for an ethnographic description of San Antonio's West End.

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