CHAPTER 13

Reflections on Fieldwork

Exploring Intimacy

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All ethnographic research fundamentally involves “intimacy” in the broadest sense. The choices central to the ethnographic method—living with people, sharing everyday lives, building relationships—fundamentally require closeness and empathy, if not trust. Indeed, ethnography is a methodology premised on building intimacies and then leveraging such intimacies into analysis.

Relying both on the ethnographer’s abilities to build connections with people in a fieldsite and those people’s willingness to share stories, opinions, and experiences, long-term fieldwork comes to be “a site of social intimacy in the fullest sense” (Herzfeld 1997, 20). Behar (1997, 3) argues that contemporary anthropologists create ethnography by, in part, making themselves vulnerable and working hard not to observe “too coldly,” and Aretxaga suggests that ethnography requires a researcher to place him-or herself within social structures in “situations of profound intimacy” (2005, 163). David Plath offers the descriptive term “deep hanging out” to describe the anthropological project (cited in Kelly 2013, xix). At the same time, these methods raise myriad ethical and political questions, particularly for researchers who also want to address injustices. Armbruster suggests that contemporary ethnographic methods are built on principals of empathy that can, in practice, conflict with “real experiences of closeness and distance” between researchers and interlocutors (2008, 13). Many scholars trace the ways that friendships and other intimacies both assist and complicate their projects (Abelmann 2009; Grindal and Salamone 2006; Hume and Mulcock 2004; Leonard, Reddy, and Gold 2010; Lewin and Leap 1996; Mookherjee 2008; Shryock 2004; Walker 2013; Wolcott 2002). Although
some fieldworkers argue that romantic or sexual relationships occur regularly and can facilitate analysis (Golde 1986; Kulick and Willson 1995; Markowitz and Ashkenazi 1999; Newton 1993; Rubenstein 2014), others enact the principle that friendship is the most basic building block of any fieldwork project (Killick and Desai 2010, 4).

All anthropologists, no matter their research topics or questions, must consequently negotiate the social, personal, and emotional dimensions of intimacy in the course of fieldwork. For generations, anthropological monographs have narrated ethnographers’ efforts to become close enough to potential research interlocutors (so-called “informants”) to build the trust and relationships necessary to gather data and build analysis. We do not have to go back as far as Malinowski’s (1967) salacious diary to find anthropologists reflecting on the complex challenges prompted by fieldwork’s intimacies, the effort and skills it takes to get close with people, as well as the conflicts and confusions such closeness can cause (Behar 1993; Kondo 1990; Rabinow 1977).

But scholars exploring research topics that are actually centered on intimacy face an additional set of challenges. Doing ethnographic research about what we’ll call “intimate topics”—from birth control practices to marital decisions to domestic violence to sexual desire—presents particular challenges to methodological norms. At the most basic level, participant observation, the axiomatic ethnographic method, is at least partially foreclosed around these topics. With a few exceptions, ethnographers are neither able to participate in nor observe intimate acts, and the ethics of erotic relationships during fieldwork remain a contested, if underdiscussed, topic. As a methodology, a researcher cannot participate in sexual relationships as he might participate in an annual harvest. In contrast to researchers in other disciplines who might, say, create robust surveys to gather data on “intimate topics,” ethnographers face particular challenges stemming from the private, personal, or stigmatized character of these topics.

Taking these challenges seriously, this chapter offers reflections from each of the volume’s contributors about how they designed, engaged in, and completed research about intimate topics. The range of successful methodologies reflects the researchers’ diversity: we are native and foreign anthropologists, of varying nationalities, characteristics, ages, and sexualities. However, we are all female, a truth that has prompted much discussion within our group. Although we invited a number of male colleagues to contribute to this volume, none were ultimately able to, and we understand this gender skew to reflect both the discipline’s recent gender imbalance and the high likelihood that in the current moment projects framed
around “intimacy” are more likely to be created by female researchers. We look forward to future research from different perspectives and hope our reflections might facilitate greater diversity in the field.

These methodological reflections are written in response to a question we all regularly encounter: How were you able to do fieldwork on your chosen topic? Although we employed many different methods, these reflections, partial though they may be, make clear that we ultimately came to share helpful patterns. For instance, many of us found that some balance of distance and connection enabled people to feel comfortable sharing deeply personal narratives. We describe our research methods here in the hope that they will further understanding of the topics we analyze, as well as assist other scholars as they plan fieldwork.

OVERCOMING INSTITUTIONAL RELUCTANCE AND GAINING ACCESS: Yukari Kawahara

In this research project, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork at one junior high school and three high schools in the Tokyo metropolitan region. To compare curricula among schools and to get some sense of how social class mattered, I located myself in schools with different social and economic positions: two public schools designated as “model” schools, a commercial high school where students were almost entirely working class, and an elite private school for girls.

Negotiating with schools for access was a difficult and time-consuming task. Almost one year before I entered the field, I began by contacting an educator who had dedicated himself to sex education and was a former member of a board of education in the Tokyo region. With his introduction, I began to negotiate with the two “model” schools. I found access to the commercial high school when I met a committed health education teacher at a national sex education conference and asked to observe his class. Yet I was allowed into the schools only after particular teachers negotiated with other teachers and brought my research up in teachers’ meetings, a process that suggests the relatively high autonomy of high school teachers.

Entry into a private high school was still more difficult. I was rejected by two private girls’ high schools before I was accepted in a third. The first two schools didn’t give me a reason for their rejection, but I noticed during my preliminary interviews with teachers that they were very concerned with “school reputation.” Despite my promises of anonymity, I suspect that they probably feared that any scandals about the students’ sexual behavior and sex education instruction would become public. In fact, any sexual scandals could be the ruin of a private girls’ high school because parents are as concerned about girls’ sexual reputations as their academic achievements.
Overall, once I got into the schools, I was not particularly welcomed by the teachers. Instead, teachers frequently tried to keep their distance from me, especially in the beginning. Time helped. I was gradually invited to drinking parties and school trips. Teachers began to open up and discuss their opinions and points of view about sex education. I had to be patient, however, and wait at least six months before they began to share such disclosures.

In contrast to the teachers, I did not have to wait so long for the students to open up. Students were very responsive partly because they were always looking for something new in their lives, and I represented that newness. Some of them were interested in my experiences living in the United States, and eventually I was invited to give talks about my American university life at three of the schools.

Before the interviews, I worried about whether boys especially would speak frankly about their sexual feelings and activities to a female interviewer. To be sure, it took longer to elicit responses from boys than girls. However, boys were generally more responsive and cooperative than I had expected. There was a generation’s difference between me and the boys (in Japanese terms, hitomawari chigai, or twelve years’ difference), and I came to believe that the age difference helped moderate the boys’ hesitation and shyness.

I entered the fieldsites as a native anthropologist. Native anthropologists must consider the problem of “detachment” between themselves and their own cultures (Ohnuki-Tierney 1984, 16). Native researchers tend to take people’s practices for granted and have difficulty discerning the implications of practices in their own cultures. Ohnuki-Tierney (1984) suggests that one way to accomplish sufficient distance is to research another culture before beginning the study of one’s own. To address this problem of distance, I studied sex education in two schools in and around New Haven, Connecticut, before beginning my research in Japan. Because the New Haven area had high rates of teenage pregnancy and HIV, I was quickly exposed to heated debates among teachers and school nurses. This comparative observational experience helped me frame and structure my work in Japan.

PERSONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT “ILLEGITIMATE” TOPICS: Shana Fruehan Sandberg

In her now classic ethnography of a Japanese hostess club, anthropologist Anne Allison recounts that it was difficult for others in Japan to understand how she could treat mizu shobai (the “water trade,” or hostessing and prostitution) as a legitimate area of serious scholarship. “To look at the
tea ceremony or marriage practices would be far more sensible, respectful, and healthy, they implied” (1994, 146). Yet her work demonstrates that there is much to be learned about normative family and corporate relationships by closely examining what two male researchers mockingly called, in reference to her research, the “dirty [kitanai] side of Japan” (ibid.).

Similar encounters surfaced as I conducted research on young women’s changing understandings of romantic relationships and contraception in Tokyo a decade later; these led to questions about the legitimacy of the topic. One researcher remarked that the Japanese women I interviewed must feel great discomfort having to talk about such personal issues with an American. And yet in practice, I found that there was quite a range of responses; some women were quite comfortable speaking directly about their experiences, while others were politely vague. I took cues from each woman individually and adapted my questions accordingly. Many women pointed out that it was much easier to speak with someone who (they imagined) came from a place that valued frank and open discussions and that it would be more difficult to speak with someone from Japan in the same way. Moreover, all the topics we covered were regularly examined in great detail through text and illustrations in pull-out booklets from popular women’s magazines and in other media.

At the end of every interview, there was always a chance for the interviewee to ask me any questions she had about my own experiences or the research project and in turn to say anything she had not had a chance to express earlier. Sometimes this prompted interesting discussions about the similarities or differences in our experiences, and I revealed a great deal about my own feelings and experiences in past relationships. These interviews felt much more like reciprocal conversations, with both parties sharing their experiences and perspectives. Many women said that they wished they had more opportunities to speak openly about such issues, which were important to them.

One additional note may be useful for researchers who conduct interviews on similar topics. At first I assumed that the best method for identifying potential interviewees was to approach them about an interview after we had known each other socially for some time and had become closer. I tried this approach a few times, and it seemed to work well enough. It was not until after a friend recommended that I interview one of her friends that I began to realize that an acquaintance with one degree of separation typically led to a much richer interview. Reflecting on this, I realized that being recommended signaled that I was someone whom the friend could trust, and yet I was not part of the same social circle, meaning that I did not know her boyfriend, classmates, parents, or anyone else that she might
mention during the interview. In this way, I became a “trusted outsider” in relation to the interviewee.

**RELATING TO “UNCONVENTIONAL” WOMEN:**
Laura Dales and Beverly Anne Yamamoto

We met our “unconventional women” in cafes, restaurants, workplaces, and on two occasions, in our own homes. While interviews are inevitably bounded opportunities, our discussions created a space for closeness and self-revelation for both interviewees and researchers. The scene-setting for the interview involved not only an explanation of the project, but also some autobiographical storytelling on the part of the researchers; one of us is a British-born long-time resident of Japan, married to a Japanese man, and has two children; the other is Australian, single, and without children. By offering something of ourselves through storytelling, we created trust and a space for reciprocity. The relative ease with which the women shared their own experiences and perceptions of romantic intimacy reflected this, as well as their individual personalities and propensities to self-revelation.

The effect of this relationship was particularly evident in the joint interview of Matsuda and Motohashi, held in Dales’s apartment. Because they were childhood friends, the two women’s conversation was studded with comfortable overlaps, casual silences, and shared laughter. In this interview there was an additional connection: Motohashi is Dales’s friend from university. The established friendship of the interviewees and of one of the interviewees with one of the researchers meant that the topics of romance and intimacy were not unfamiliar or uncomfortable territory. Motohashi’s knowledge of the researcher, gleaned from socializing, late-night chats, and occasional digital communications over a decade, enabled an ease of conversation that is evident in the casual register and flow of the discussion. Dales had originally met Motohashi through the latter’s university boyfriend, and Motohashi had spent time with one of Dales’s previous romantic partners. Relative to other interviews, this was a conversation in which Dales was likely to interrupt, to offer her own perspective, and to push the interviewee (Motohashi) for further details. It felt, to the researcher, like one of any number of chats she had shared with female friends over afternoon tea.

The gender and ethnic background of the researchers was clearly pertinent. In the Japanese context, it would have been highly problematic for male researchers to carry out such a study even if they were of the same ages and backgrounds. While not universal or uniform, the commonality
of certain experiences of womanhood arguably laid a foundation for discussion of romantic and sexual intimacy. Furthermore, the researchers’ non-Japanese-ness may have made it easier for these women to break the taboo of silence around the issues we discussed. Some interviewees noted that they would not have felt comfortable sharing certain stories with us had we been Japanese. Our interviewees felt correctly that we would not judge them. Ironically, if our women are “unconventional,” then perhaps a shared sense of being different opened possibilities for sharing stories that may not have been there otherwise. Our difference produced a sense of similarity, or at least familiarity, with our interviewees. Thus “unconventionality” shaped our research in another, unintended way: producing an intimacy based on the shared experiences of women who do not quite fit in, be it for reasons of ethnicity, age, marital status, or sexuality.

FACING STIGMA AND SUPPORT: Allison Alexy

Because divorce is such a personal, private, and potentially stigmatizing experience, many people in and outside of Japan were initially incredulous that any anthropological research could be done about it. Almost everyone who asked about my project was curious about how I was planning to do any research at all. “Do people really want to talk to you?” is one typical question I continue to hear, followed quickly by, “How do you meet people?” Outside of Japan, these questions often seem to reflect stereotypes about Japanese people as reticent; inside Japan, the questions instead seemed to assume that divorce is so stigmatizing or shameful that no one would want to talk about it. Neither is correct.

Throughout my research, the how of my project was intimately wrapped with being asked to explain myself. Because of how I look, most people correctly assume that I am not Japanese. When I walked into a party with friends, struck up a conversation with someone at a bar, or sat down in a support group, it was extremely natural and obvious for other people to ask me, “Why are you here?” My obviousness—which often felt like awkwardness, both physical and linguistic—not only made me an object of curiosity for some people, but also enabled me to start talking about my research in conversations in which it might not have otherwise come up. I am convinced that the structure of my literal face (I have a big, round face with lots of freckles) and my being raised in the American South (which has a culture of chatting, even with people one has just met) make me approachable, and I rarely have trouble talking with strangers. I was there, I told anyone who asked, to learn about divorce and families in contemporary Japan, and this unusual and unexpected topic was often enough to get
people talking. I met a lot of people who were willing to talk with me about their own experiences and/or introduce me to other people they knew. Because people knew why I was in Japan, they were more likely to bring up divorce-related topics in casual conversation, and this meant that I was much more likely to hear about divorce. Commenting on the unusual focus of my life, a few different people labeled me a “divorce geek” (*rikon otaku*), using a word that suggests a person obsessively, and probably unhealthily, consumed by one thing. People’s identification of me with divorce became so strong that they would literally gesture toward me when they said the word “divorce” in conversation, in a motion similar to what they might use to link me with “American.”

Through these motions of identification, I encountered what I came to call “ambient divorce stories.” Knowing what I studied, or hearing it for the first time, led people to tell me long stories about divorces they had heard about or watched happen. In these, in addition to the first-person accounts I was gathering, I would hear about their friend’s divorce, their bartender’s divorce, or their co-worker’s divorce. As I very usefully became known as “the divorce girl,” these ambient divorce stories followed me like a cloud. Through them, I was able to gather more general opinions about divorce from people who had not experienced it firsthand. During the course of my fieldwork, I was worried that by focusing specifically on divorce, I might inadvertently overdetermine the results of my research; asking directly about divorce might lead people to think and talk more about it than they would otherwise, and I would end up with a skewed sense of what was going on. For these reasons, I tried very hard to put myself not only in situations where divorce was the topic drawing all participants in (for instance, support groups), but also in others where people came together for more common reasons (like co-workers going out for a drink after work).

In Japan, as elsewhere, some divorce stories are ultimately happy narrations of freedom or self-discovery, but there were many days during this research that left me very sad. It is emotionally exhausting to hear about deeply difficult marriages punctuated by serious violence, neglect, or the gradual withering of dreams, and I began developing parallel mechanisms to respond to my interlocutors with genuine empathy and to keep myself sane. In support groups, I often found myself sitting next to a relative stranger who was sobbing, and I struggled to figure out culturally appropriate responses. (My American urge to give enormous hugs doesn’t quite translate in Japan.) I finally figured out that carrying packs of tissues in my bag and offering them to anyone crying was a way to demonstrate empathy with someone who likely wouldn’t appreciate being touched. During
this fieldwork, my self-care often consisted of a lot of physical exercise and retreats into dumb or easy television. It remains the case that the more emotionally difficult my research is, the more light and easy I need my entertainment to be. More broadly, like any anthropologist, I work hard to be good friends with people—staying in touch, getting together whenever possible—and such contact helps me remember to contextualize the more difficult moments within a longer life.

COMPROMISING BETWEEN SAFETY AND CONTROL: Kaoru Kawajima

It was when I was working at a women's organization that I first really learned about domestic violence, although I knew that in Japanese society hitting a wife or child has been condoned in the name of “discipline.” Due to the limited amount of research about and public attention to this issue, I decided to look into the support system for domestic violence victims in Japan. Because such support systems are a junction point that includes the victims as well as both non-governmental and governmental support agencies, working with the organizations seemed the most feasible way to conduct my fieldwork. I conducted “subway ethnography” (Clifford 1997, 217), consisting of short repeat visits where an ethnographer dips into and out of fieldsites, simply because I had to balance research and care of my children, who were five and nine at the time. Obtaining contacts was not particularly difficult because of my background working at a women’s center for ten years. Through that position, I had met or heard the names of famous activists, professionals, and leaders involved in supporting domestic violence victims.

My fieldwork included several shelters run by both local and national government agencies in charge of gender equality policy and social welfare for women and children. I worked as a volunteer at three different shelters at varying times between 2005 and 2009. Before I began my fieldwork, I was afraid that the amount of violence experienced by people in these shelters would be overwhelming and emotionally exhausting. However, especially at longer-term shelters where I could build relationships with residents, it turned out that I found talking with women interesting and even encouraging, and every week I was anxious to go back and spend time with them. Some women gave me various tips—about cooking and money saving, for example—while also sharing stories about their partners. Of course I heard only the woman’s side of the story, but many women described how much their male partners wanted to control their lives to extraordinary degrees.
They stayed at the shelter in fear of being found by a person whom they had once cared about and loved. It felt as if even after they were physically away from the perpetrators, they were surrounded by the unseen power of “intimacy,” which chased after them and tried to pull them back to the perpetrators.

As safe places, shelters were very strict about safety measures. As I reflect on it now, I was rather preoccupied by their strict rules and ways of “controlling” the lives of women in order to protect them. Every time staff said “safe” or “dangerous” or “protect,” which they said on a regular basis to explain the shelter activities, I was unsure what it was they were trying to protect or be protected from. Was it the lives of women and children? Was it other women and staff staying at the shelter? Was it the support system for the victims of domestic violence in Japan? It was not clear to me, and asking those questions seemed rude.

One day at an emergency shelter, I was having a conversation with a shelter director, and I started to say, “A shelter can’t protect against. . . .” She interrupted and shut me up without letting me finish my sentence. She stared at me and said in an angry tone, “It is arrogant to even start a sentence about what a shelter can’t protect against.” She must have thought I was criticizing the shelter. Or maybe I sounded judgmental.

What I meant to say in that moment was that the shelter was one of many resources to protect or save victims of domestic violence, but it was available only to women who came to the shelter. The women who did not or could not escape their homes obviously were in no place to be “protected.” I was wondering what it was that kept women in a violent relationship and how the shelter wouldn’t be able to offer them any protection. The director explained, “Women enter the shelter with an understanding of our rules and conditions. We make sure again and again that they understand them. Otherwise, it would be a violation of their human rights. Their safety is maintained through our surveillance. That is what their situation requires. That is domestic violence. We protect them by controlling them.” She said it all in one breath.

I was frustrated because the director did not understand my viewpoint. But then I did not agree about what she believed in, either. This episode left some bitterness between us for quite some time. I wished that I were there not as a fieldworker but just a regular staff member. It was even harder for me, as I have known the director for some time, and it changed the nature of our relationship. This tension and nervousness followed me during my fieldwork much more than the depressing, horrible stories women shared with me.
EXPLORING MASCULINITIES AND LABOR THROUGH INTIMACY: Emma E. Cook

Although my chapter in this volume is based primarily on a documentary film, analysis and contextualization of the film’s themes are critically embedded within the extended ethnographic fieldwork I conducted with men and women about masculinities and irregular labor. It is this fieldwork that my short reflection concerns.

Talking and asking directly about masculinities can be tricky. Ask someone about that person’s masculinity sometime, and you’ll see what I mean! What is masculinity and how is it lived, produced, and reproduced? How are masculinities and labor interlinked? These can be difficult research questions to answer, in part because they are so difficult to ask people about. However, it was through intimacy—the intimacy developed through rapport; through the sharing of stories about our lives and our intimacies (for example, about relationships with parents, peers, and romantic partners); and through a mutual vulnerability and openness—that I was able to explore the links between labor and masculinities in Japan. I found that to get men and women comfortable enough to talk about such topics, my personal openness, willingness to share stories, and the ability to be empathetic to their experiences were critical.

Being female, foreign, white, and living with a male Japanese partner were also elements that factored into the development of rapport, trust, and intimacy, though of course these also shaped and limited the possibilities of fieldwork in particular ways. The deep listening of informal ethnographic interviewing can be heady and flattering for interlocutors, and I was always conscious of this when talking with men about their lives and intimate relationships. It was an ever-present balance that I was aware of and subconsciously monitoring. In situations where it felt that people were starting to misunderstand my interest, I was careful to remind them of the existence of my partner by sharing stories that included our relationship in an attempt to maintain boundaries and prevent misunderstandings. In rare cases, however, such strategies did not work and led to a desire for more intimacy than I was willing or able to provide. Indeed, in one case, one man so misinterpreted the deep listening that anthropology entails that he suddenly became insistent about his romantic feelings. Although I was saying “no” about any romantic interest in him (initially gently and later with more vehemence), he believed I really had—or would develop—feelings for him and declared that he would keep trying until I said yes. After being bombarded by text messages (often sent in the small hours of the night) that vacillated between apologetically insisting I would come
around to his love and aggressively doing so, he finally stopped when I threatened to call the police. While this experience was personally distressing and led to the loss of not only his friendship, but also that of a group of musicians and artists for whom he was the gatekeeper, it was also highly informative—providing insights about power, gender, and masculinities—and it led to revealing conversations with both women and men about their dating experiences and the gendered dynamics they experienced in relationships.

While my living with a partner typically marked me as an off-limits but safe interlocutor, it also limited the possibilities of research methods. For example, I initially anticipated that much of my research with young men would take place over drinks after work, engendering an intimate camaraderie and lessening conversational inhibitions, but this didn’t happen. Although some unmarried people live together in Japan, it was relatively rare where I undertook research. Most people therefore assumed I was married and consequently unavailable for after-hours socializing. Even after knowing my unmarried status, co-workers at the cinema where I conducted much of my fieldwork were hesitant to ask me out to drinking parties. Reasons became clear when at one party a young man turned to me and said, in all seriousness, “Emma, it’s past 10 p.m. Don’t you need to go home to run the bath for your husband?” I assured him that my partner was perfectly capable of running it for himself, and I added that he also did most of the cooking and therefore was able to fend for himself. With a grin I then ordered myself another drink. This information elicited a chorus of shocked exclamations as both men and women at the table enthusiastically told me that typically in Japan the household division of labor—and expectations of labor—were gendered in ways that my household obviously was not. In their understanding women cooked, looked after the household, and ran baths for men. Although my “married in the minds of others” positionality limited the number of invitations I received to evening get-togethers, it also allowed men and women to talk with me more deeply about both the dominant discourses of gender and gendered roles, as well as their own desires within intimate relationships and for future households.

These reflections are just small components of building and managing intimacy in the field. Of course, all fieldwork is intimate, and indeed anthropology hinges on the successful development of intimate relationships based on trust, rapport, and shared conviviality. Nurturing and managing these relationships from our own particular positionalities makes research on intimacy not only possible, but also makes intimacy always present, even if it is not our explicit focus.
Heart-pounding excitement, heart-rending disappointment. One feels overwhelmed by a tidal wave of conflicting feelings in the process of trying to build relationships. Disappointment leaves one bereft and grasping. Yet this feeling can quickly give way to extreme emotional buoyancy, the end result of joy and the passion of the undertaking. Nervous excitement can give way to pure terror or be transformed into sheer pleasure. Whether or not one has experienced these varying emotional states, anyone with even a passing familiarity with mass media (whether Japanese or Euro-American) can identify such passions with that of love and the building of intimate relations. Yet for this fieldworker, such a dizzying array of emotions is not the exclusive province of love but is reflective of the field research process itself. While the multiple emotions evoked by the “doing” of love may, for many, mimic those of fieldwork, the similarities extend beyond the affective. I claim that fieldwork, akin to love and intimacy-building in contemporary Japan, as discussed in my chapter, is burdensome. Requiring the cultivation of deep interpersonal skills, fieldwork forces one to confront the ways in which “failure”—being rejected by a stranger one would like to get to know—translates into professional difficulties when those relationships are at the heart of your work. Moreover, the fear of rejection, or actual repudiation, is inherent in the process.

Like dating, ethnographic research can be a series of struggles, not only to find and connect with potential informants and fieldsites, but also to be recognized. Sociologist Miyadai Shinji (2013, 65), in his most recent work, compares the act of nanpa with fieldwork, claiming that both necessitate the building of rapport and have the potential for catharsis. In many cases, my interviews have felt more like a series of blind dates or one-night stands than any attempts at long-term relationship building. For instance, on one memorable occasion I felt a connection with a young man, and when our formal discussion ended, we moved onto casual conversation about hobbies while smoking cigarettes together at a local cafe. Unfortunately, when I emailed him the following day to thank him for his time and the nice evening, going so far as to suggest we get together for karaoke in the not-too-distant future, I received no response. Like someone following up after a first date, I found myself wondering what I had done wrong or what signs I may have misread. Reflecting on my various fieldwork experiences, I find that they often read like an article in Cosmo (or An-An) on the pitfalls of contemporary dating. I understand that such rejections may reflect the particularities of the amorphous group with whom I was attempting to
engage, but I am convinced that feelings of rejection, as well as elation, resonate with other fieldworkers.

Like dating, fieldwork necessitates a certain amount of self-confidence that must be built and maintained throughout the research period. I empathize with the young postal worker at the Ebisu machikon that I described in my chapter; we had both come alone and, in different ways, were potentially unprepared for the evening ahead. No amount of training prepares one for the rejections that can occur in the field, just as in the dating world. Fieldwork is a minefield of possible rejections, of rebuffs for no clearly discernible reason. At the “Smash Christmas” demonstration I attended in December 2013 I had one young man silently though rather violently (to my fragile sense of self) turn his back on me as I approached. I have thought of taking the advice of nanpa sensei Fujita-san: “Look in the mirror every morning and tell yourself that you are desirable,” though in this case “I am a researcher worthy of respect” would be more appropriate. My efforts to “polish the self” in order to be more “attractive” to potential interviewees came to include a beauty routine that would make Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* proud. Yet unlike with the game LovePlus I described in my chapter, there is no preset formula to increase my “anthropologist power” (*jinruigakusha no chikara*).

Despite the challenges I faced in both “attracting” potential interviewees and creating long-term bonds, there have been moments of intimacy, mediated through my own feelings of empathy with these men. When one young salaryman expressed concern regarding his age of losing his virginity, especially compared to Americans, I easily quelled his fears by confessing my own “late” age. This revelation and the joking manner in which it was delivered prompted him to both trust me—that is, he felt that I would not pity him—and allowed for candidness in our following conversation. Overall, despite what I often feel to be a lack of deep rapport, I feel a certain intimacy with the men of Kakuhidō and those who struggle to find a partner, such as the young postal worker mentioned above. This is not an intimacy born out of a deep relationship but one mediated by empathy.

**MOVING ON AND OFFLINE: S. P. F. Dale**

Given the lack of printed materials about x-gender, my initial research and information gathering about the topic were conducted on the Internet. I myself found out about the term online, and at the time there was a growing online community of x-gender individuals. My fieldwork came to consist of three stages: forging an online presence, creating a community, and in-depth interviews.
Most of the discussion about x-gender seemed to be occurring online, and in order to engage in it I needed to have a visible online presence. I created accounts on social networking sites (SNS) where there were x-gender communities, such as Mixi, Twitter, and Ameblo. I started discussions with individuals who identified as x-gender and also conducted preliminary interviews via email and online messaging. I also started a blog where I wrote about my research, as well as about myself and my personal research motivations. I would refer potential informants to my blog so that they would know about me prior to our meeting.

There did not seem to be many “physical”/offline spaces for x-gender individuals to meet. I decided to create a discussion group about x-gender issues, hoping that such a group would not only help me to find out more about x-gender, but also that it could provide a safe space for x-gender individuals to meet with each other. This discussion group (initially monthly but then bimonthly) ran from April 2011 until mid-2014, when I stopped running it because of time constraints. Some of the members of the group still continue to meet individually with each other.

Creating a group is certainly an unusual step for an ethnographer, and it is also questionable as it would seem that one is creating the community one is supposed to be studying! I should emphasize that this group does not figure prominently in my analysis of x-gender community and was not an object of my study. It rather served as a forum for me to gain a broad understanding of some of the issues x-gender individuals experience. Running this group became not so much a research project for me but rather a community/activist one; I myself am queer, and my partner would also participate in this group on occasion. Participants in this group (as well as informants in general) came to know and understand me as such—as a non-Japanese, female-assigned individual in a relationship with another female-assigned individual. Participants in the group had various gender identities and sexual orientations, and the group was a means for us to discuss issues pertaining to gender and sexuality. I, in this broad sense, was one of them—not as x-gender but as a queer person.

I found informants for in-depth interviews through posting calls for research participants on Twitter, my blog, and Mixi message boards. I was also introduced to some informants through snowball references, and in total spoke with twenty-five individuals. Interviews were conducted in a variety of places, depending on the preference of each person. We met in karaoke boxes, noisy cafes, quiet cafes, and homes. I had a prepared set of questions that I wanted to ask each individual and passed each a copy at the start of each interview. However, I also emphasized that as far as possible, I would like our conversation to flow naturally, and the questions were
referred to only when there was a lull in the conversation. I wanted to find out about how the individuals understood x-gender and how their everyday experiences may be entangled or defined through their gender identity. The questions reflected these issues and encompassed themes such as sexuality, language, appearance, coming out, and relationships with friends and family. Interviews lasted between an hour and four hours, and I also met with most of the informants a year to two years later for follow-up interviews.

It is difficult for me to reflect on the role my self—non-Japanese (but “Asian-looking,” being of Chinese/white European descent), non-x-gender (but queer)—had on my interactions with individuals. To an extent I very much identified with many of them, and it was indeed my own grappling with gender categories that made me embark on this project. I didn’t experience any difficulties in gleaning information, but this was also perhaps because most of the individuals with whom I spoke were people who wanted to speak with me—they had read my blog and in most cases had initiated contact. As such, they desired to speak about their experiences.

I made it a point to be as open with my informants as they were being with me. They were free to ask me questions about my sexuality and gender, and this mutual openness allowed us to engage in candid discussions about very intimate issues.

**UNspoken and Unwritten Intimacies: Kathryn E. Goldfarb**

Sometimes the most intimate conversations happen with total strangers. In my contribution for this volume, I describe my interview with a woman I call Hamabata Toshiko, an adoptive parent of a teenage boy to whom she had not yet “confessed” his adoption. While she knew that he somehow knew about his past, she could not bring herself to tell him straightforwardly that he was not her biological son. These words remained unspoken between them during the span of my doctoral research in Japan, from 2009 to 2010. One might remark on the oddness of a person making this “confession” to a foreign woman she barely knew when she could not tell her own son the truth. And yet as my research progressed, I came to realize that Hamabata would not have spoken to me so frankly if I had not been a near stranger. A good friend of hers, a foster parent whom I had recently met in the course of my research, had introduced me to Hamabata, but at the time I was not yet embedded within their social circle. Hamabata’s failure to tell her son about his own past flew in the face of the foster and adoptive parent community’s understanding of best
practices, and her awkwardness around this topic was palpable. Once I knew this community well, I attempted a few times to suggest a follow-up interview with Hamabata, but she always gently demurred. My research topics were certainly intimate, focusing on family practices stigmatized in contemporary Japan: foster care, adoption, infertility treatment, and life within Japanese child welfare institutions. I had initially imagined that I would seek a comfortable rapport with research interlocutors before delving into their most intimate family stories. But after several intensely intimate interviews with people I had met for the first time and upon realizing that my own situatedness within a social circle might make me a less desirable conversation partner, I embraced the possibility of interviewing people I did not know and might not see again. Of course I had to interpret these interviews with a grain of salt; my deep relationships with other interlocutors and my participant-observation research helped put these one-off stories into context.

And then there were the people whom I came to know intimately and yet felt I could not write about. The people who influenced me most and appear the least in my writing are the children I met, and came to know well, at the child welfare institution where I conducted fieldwork. I spent several days a week with these children, who ranged in age from three to twelve. I was present during paroxysms of laughter and of tears; I carried them on my back and helped them in the toilet; they showed me their photo albums from before they came to the institution; and we ate snacks and watched television together. Before going to the field, I had received research clearance to interview children and had prepared a “child-friendly” oral informed-consent form. However, upon becoming acquainted with the children themselves, I realized that “informed consent” for a ward of the state seemed both meaningless and misleading. These children were already documented and traced in so many ways they could not control; how could I ethically participate in bringing their words to pages they would never read in a language they did not know? At a pragmatic level, how could I guarantee that my questions would not trigger traumatic flashbacks or waves of sadness that I could tell hung sometimes just beyond the surface? As these children grow up—I have now known them for almost ten years—some may be interested in participating in an interview or becoming more formal “research subjects.” Until then, these intimacies will continue to inform my ethics as an “engaged anthropologist,” as I work to produce research that will be relevant to anthropologists but will also contribute to child welfare policy and practice. These intimacies will also continue to indelibly shape my writing.
ASKING “SOCIALLY INAPPROPRIATE” QUESTIONS: Chigusa Yamaura

“Why do you want to marry a Chinese woman?” This seemed to be a simple, straightforward question, and it was the question I needed to be asking for my project. And yet I had a hard time asking this question of the Japanese men I met. This difficulty was possibly because I felt that the question sounded rude, especially as it appeared to entail some type of normative judgment. Somehow I felt this question was almost like asking, “Why aren’t you married?” or worse. This question delved into the questionee’s intimate life and, more particularly, the “problems” with that intimate life. Marrying a Chinese woman through a commercial transnational marriage agency was not seen socially as a neutral practice; it transgressed the social and cultural norms of “what normal marriage should look like” in Japan. Indeed, as a Japanese woman who grew up in Japan, I was never outside of such social norms and probably unconsciously shared such a view. And by sharing these norms (or at least feeling that I did), I was conflicted between being a “culturally competent Japanese” and an ethnographer who should be able to ask any question.

In order not to appear voyeuristic or sound offensive, whenever I met Japanese men for the first time, I tried to be as pleasant, polite, and friendly as possible. I met almost all the men I interviewed through transnational marriage agencies, usually at agency offices in Japan or during matchmaking tours in China. After introducing my research topic and myself, I usually sat next to them, observed what they were doing and talking about with the brokers and staff members, and occasionally engaged in ordinary conversation. Sometimes, the Japanese men asked about my research before I asked them about their experiences. Usually my first encounters with the Japanese male clientele occurred when they participated in a matchmaking meeting or party with Chinese women who already lived in Japan. I witnessed how they gradually shifted their focus to Chinese women in China. During matchmaking tours in China, I also sat in on their meetings, joined their engagement parties, and eventually went to some of their wedding parties. After the Japanese men left for Japan, I joined in Japanese language lessons with Chinese brides and often hung out with them afterward. When I did not accompany the matchmaking tours to China, I met the Japanese male participants when they returned to Japan and visited the agency.

After we had met multiple times, many of the Japanese men—and also I myself—came to feel more comfortable talking about their experiences
and feelings. When we had the opportunity to meet in both Japan and China, we were able to get to know each other better, making it easier to ask more personal questions. This was partly owing to the fact that we shared transnational experiences, including the joys and discomforts of traveling in China, and partly because the men felt safe, knowing that I would not criticize them for their practices. I also visited a number of couples once the Chinese wives arrived in Japan. My visits with couples I had already met before their marriage were relatively easy, and I felt welcomed. I was one of the few people who knew what they had gone through without judging them.

After spending some time with the Japanese men, asking “Why do you want to marry a Chinese woman?” was really not necessary. The men answered this question in many different ways. Sometimes, we assume that our informants have their answers and we have to find a good question to tease these answers out. Actually, our informants might also be asking the same question of themselves. Many Japanese men I met did not know if they really wanted to marry a Chinese woman and kept asking themselves if they were making the right decision. Thus during our casual conversations, they gradually shared with me their complex, and sometimes contradictory, feelings—not simply to provide me with information, but also to try to make sense of their own marriages.

**TALKING, AND NOT TALKING, ABOUT INTIMACY: Diana Tahhan**

When I was conducting my research in Japan and people found I was researching intimacy in the Japanese family, I was often met with bewildered responses and humorous remarks: what was possibly important to ask about intimacy in Japan, and why would I be doing this for my PhD research? A beloved host father used to take great enjoyment in laughing at my keen interest, and he would dismiss any questions initially and blame my lack of Japaneseness as the reason for my ignorance.

One day, he sat on his armchair after a late night working in the family’s soba shop and asked me how my interviews were going. The concept of deeply depending on loved ones (*amaereu*) came up, and he sat back thoughtfully and reflected on it in the context of his relationship with his wife. He explained that he didn’t need to tell her or show her how he feels because she could feel it. And besides, he couldn’t run the shop without her.

I remember my host mother’s shocked reaction; he had *verbalized his need for her*. She reminded me of a schoolgirl finding out that the boy she has a crush on wants to ask her to a dance. It illuminated something major
to me: even though their subtle forms of communication obviated a need to communicate their deepest feelings, she still felt happy hearing his words.

Years later, I was settled back in Australia with my husband and children, and my main Japanese social network had become the Japanese playgroup my children attended. Through friendships I would often hear of the different dynamics in family relationships, particularly in the context of Japanese women’s cross-cultural marriages to Australian men. While these women had adapted well to Australian society and seemed to genuinely enjoy the lifestyle and bringing up their children here, there were patterns in their concerns or complaints about their husbands—namely, their husbands just “didn’t get it.” That is, they just couldn’t understand what the women wanted and how they wanted to do things, and there was constantly a need to verbalize feelings and issues. There seemed to be a yearning for the more subtle forms of communication about which my contacts in Japan spoke so readily or, like my host father, simply took for granted. The openness through which these women communicated their frustrations with me, and then the eagerness through which their husbands divulged their own frustrations when I would see them at social gatherings, inspired the chapter in this volume and my research. I was genuinely surprised when I began “formal” research that many of these women held back and that the men barely responded to my requests to talk about the very same topics they had discussed so eagerly in other situations.

This paradox revealed to me that while my Japanese contacts in Japan had initially found my research topic humorous, over time they understood the deep significance of intimacy in their lives. My Japanese-Australian contacts, on the other hand, reacted differently. It was as though the topic touched them a little too deeply and, for some, brought to the fore some cultural differences and concerns that they weren’t yet ready to tackle.

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The above reflections remind us that there is never any one-size-fits-all answer to how to do research on intimacies within Japan (and elsewhere). Much depends on positionality, personality, empathy, openness, and mutual trust. The process of doing fieldwork can require that ethnographers leverage the characteristics or skills they already have, but it can also push them to transgress social norms by broaching difficult topics. It is typically assumed that to generate trust takes time, effort, and mutual empathy—and indeed we see such dynamics working well in many of the reflections written above. Yet we can also see that being so situated can limit the possibilities of sharing intimate stories. Being unsituated
in social settings—being a relative stranger outside of existing social circles—can generate deep intimate confessions because this status provides a space apart from existing social bonds and the demands such bonds entail. While it is therefore often claimed that spending time deep-listening and building empathetic friendships with our interlocutors is the only way to engage in intimate research, these reflections remind us that closeness can also be, at times, an impediment to the intimate sharing of personal experiences. The politics and potential repercussions of closeness are also relevant when considering the ethics of both asking people about their experiences and representing those experiences to a broader audience.

NOTES

1. Bestor (2003) has convincingly argued that despite popular terminology, few ethnographers are able to both fully participate and observe—the two actions are often diametrically opposed—and instead he offers “inquisitive observation” as a more honest description of ethnographic methods. Given the sensitive and private nature of many “intimate topics,” inquisitive observation poses challenges similar to those associated with participant observation.

2. As Kulick and Willson (1995) describe in their framing of a volume about the erotics of ethnographic fieldwork, substantial lacunae, silences, and hypocrisies exist around this topic. Although many fieldworkers might indeed have sexual relationships during the course of fieldwork, acknowledging these relationships or analyzing them as elements of the production of knowledge is sometimes met with hostility.

3. By this we mean that although many fieldworkers apparently participate in sexual relationships during the course of fieldwork, few describe such relationships as a research methodology per se. Hermanowicz (2002), for instance, suggests that although it might be helpful to metaphorically imagine a great research interview as a date or a sexual relationship—presumably precisely because of the intimacy those activities prompt—ethical standards forbid such relationships in the course of fieldwork. An exception that proves this norm comes from Lunsing, who states, “I did not endeavor to avoid having love and sex relationships in the field” because “resistance” to “men who would want to have sex with me and with whom I would want to have sex” would “only complicate matters” (1999, 178, 180). Explaining his eventual conclusions with both rare honesty and self-serving fatalism, he says, “Increasingly, therefore, I took a lighthearted view of the ethical matters relating to love relationships in the field and gradually abandoned the idea that a researcher’s ethics prescribe avoiding hurting informants. Pain is part of life, and relationships may produce pain” (ibid., 183). We ask: “lighthearted” for whom? Although such assertions are far from common in anthropological writing, they give a sense of the edges of the debate over fieldwork erotics.

4. By most calculations, anthropology as a discipline is substantially more female than it used to be. There are many possible measures by which to judge how gender correlates with an interest in anthropology—for instance, the number of undergraduate majors, students in MA or doctoral programs, students who complete a PhD in anthropology, adjunct or tenure-track faculty, or authors of publications. Focusing on just one possible measure, the number of PhDs completed in the United States, the NSF “Survey of Earned Doctorates” tracks a substantial shift in gender ratios in the field. For instance,
in 1966, the earliest year of data available, 23 percent of anthropology PhDs were issued to women, a number that climbed to 47 percent in 1980 and 63.6 percent in 2012 (National Science Foundation 2012; Thorkelson 2009). Scholars have examined these gendered patterns in the United Kingdom (Mills 2003) and the United States (Philips 2010), as well as by subdiscipline (Bardolph 2014).

5. This reflection was compiled from Kawahara’s doctoral dissertation (Kawahara 1996, 12–18).

6. While in common speech nampa (literally, “soft faction,” referencing early and late Meiji/early Taishō era distinctions among men; see Ambaras 2006) refers to “flirting” with or “hitting on” women, Miyadai (2013, 12) uses a much broader definition, claiming that it can be ascribed to any activity that attempts to build a relationship with another person (tasha to kankei o kizuku).

7. Some of my preliminary online findings about x-gender and the Internet have been written about in Dale (2012).


REFERENCES


