



Follow up: #Tinder as a research method

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Following the unexpected popularity of my May article [Tinder as a Methodological Tool](#) I was asked by Allegra to write a follow up, expanding on the subject and addressing the feedback. The original article was the culmination of 8 months' fieldwork in the Occupied Palestinian West Bank during which I experimented with location-based dating app Tinder as an alternative way of understanding and navigating the space and people around me. Tinder turned out to be crucial for understanding the social divisions of occupied space, in which



illegal Israeli settlers and native Palestinian population live alongside each other but not together. This unconventional methodological approach gave me a unique opportunity to understand the spatial politics of the Israeli settlement project, while simultaneously affording me a great amount of safety and privacy in navigating this complicated political landscape. In my article, I hence explored the practicalities, safety concerns, and preliminary findings from using the app, while addressing some of the necessary ethical issues of using an app associated with sex and romance to conduct fieldwork. The article went viral with a reach of over 20,000, almost 2,000 reads, and an overwhelmingly positive response on social media that was both touching and encouraging.

I have been interested in exploring the uses of social media in methodology, both practically and theoretically, since I began my PhD studies and I am excited to see others sharing the same enthusiasm. With its salacious reputation of easy-access sex and superficial photo-based interface, Tinder can often be something of a sensational topic – this being a dimension that might have ultimately contributed to the popularity of my original article. However, it appeared that many commenters were already using Tinder or thinking about Tinder in relation to ethnographic practice, and were therefore already thinking about the relation between romance, ethics, and methodology.

Little is written about anthropologists pursuing romance or sex in the field, and even less on the complex ethical issues involved in the construction of ethical relations between parties in such situations[\[1\]](#).

We are encouraged to be reflexive, to consider our own subjectivity and influence on situations as gendered, sexual, and racialised bodies, but not where this concerns not only our romantic or sexual encounters, but also our use of romantic or sexual dynamics with our interlocutors when in the field.

Some commenters of the article cited that Tinder is “ethically problematic” and “unsafe,” so I explore here what I think some of these ethical problems and safety concerns might be, and why some readers may be uncomfortable with



the idea of a sex-oriented app as a research method.

I suggest that perhaps those who participated in the rapid adoption of such technologies or at least live in areas where they have been well integrated into urban life may be more comfortable than those who are less familiar with them. This potential comfort-gap between frequent and novice- or non-users of location based apps and social media functions may well remain wary of them and the safety of their use.

Making “authentic” contact

Before I began my fieldwork I was familiar with the political but not the cultural or spatial environment of the West Bank. During the early months of my work I learned just exactly how the Israeli and Palestinian populations I worked with are geographically mixed but rarely socially mixing. Although Israeli settlements are often built directly in the middle of pre-existing Palestinian communities, they are surrounded by a high wall and an extensive security infrastructure supported by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF). Some Palestinians may work inside settlements in service industry or manual labour positions but the majority of Palestinians are barred entry. In turn, Israelis are legally denied entry to Palestinian cities in Area A^[2] by the Israeli occupation regime. Inside the West Bank there are no means of public transportation that will deliver a person from an Israeli settlement to a Palestinian space, and though they are often metres apart, walking is not safe. Palestinians are not welcome on settlement-bound Israeli public transport as Israelis, especially settlers, tend to be, at best, wary of Palestinians and often arm themselves against them. In contrast, I have frequently experienced Palestinians referring to Israelis as “*akhwat*,” (“brothers,” Palestinian dialect Arabic) acknowledging their shared Semitic roots. The occupation administration and the settlers it protects, however, would prefer that the populations do not mix, and enforce legal and spatial restrictions by way of walls, checkpoints, armed private guards, and army protection around Israeli spaces. Tinder allowed me to safely navigate this enforced spatial and social



separation without attracting a large amount of attention to myself or putting myself at risk. By browsing profiles from my living room, relatively anonymous, I could screen my Tinder matches not only for their relevance to my research but also by cross-checking their names with Facebook or Instagram profiles, talking with them, as well as exercising common sense – anyone who messaged me with explicitly sexual content, who did not want to meet in a public place, or who seemed in any other way threatening I could easily ignore and remove from my matches list.

Since Tinder is by no means a traditional means for ethnographers to meet research interlocutors in our fieldsites, perhaps some of the discomfort in using it for research purposes originates in a feeling of ‘necessary ethnographic toil.’ Tinder bypasses the more conventional and perhaps less convenient means of locating informants and gatekeepers in person through trial and error, perseverance, and often happy accident. These steps are perhaps seen as a part of the rite of passage of the discipline to initiate ethnographers to struggle, to learn for themselves the methodological and culturally appropriate means of establishing contact and trusting relations with a subject community in traditional academic methods.

Using new media technology

The adoption of user location-based social networking apps is impacting the way we conduct ethnographic research. As I mentioned in the original article, social networking services can reduce felt distance between our home countries and our fieldsites as well as presenting new ways of meeting new people, whether socially or professionally.

In many cities and countries meeting strangers from the internet is now a regular and unremarkable part of everyday life[\[3\]](#). Apps like Uber, Deliveroo, Tinder, Grindr, AirBnb, Couchsurfing, and Facebook have all become hugely popular methods of locating strangers and meeting up with them in person for various purposes. Having used Tinder in London I was well briefed in necessary safety



measures we took as women there – meeting in a public place, letting someone else know you’re meeting someone from Tinder, perhaps sending their picture to a friend. Prior to meeting anyone, regardless of location, I would put them through a basic screening system – extended conversation prior to a date, disclosure of a real phone number or Facebook profile, Googling their name, meeting in a place that I knew and knew how to get away from safely.



Nichols, Carol (@carols10cents). July 1, 2016. Tweet.

It is possible that some of the safety concerns that using Tinder exacerbates exhibits a potential generational or experiential gap where digital literacy is concerned. I am reminded of the popular [Tweet](#) examining rapid shifts in internet use and conceptions of safety (pictured). This Tweet received over 100,000 retweets and 150,000 likes and was widely circulated online. It highlights a temporal shift in conceptions of internet safety and actual internet practice, and also draws attention to the encroachment of social media into how we perform certain every day activities. Tinder is very much part of this encroachment, and while I would never deny or downplay the dangers involved, like other such stranger-summoning apps it does contain a reporting function for users harassing other users or deemed dangerous.



Ethnographer safety

As Wilson and Kullick discuss with regard to female researchers being propositioned by potential interlocutors or gatekeepers, “this kind of encounter takes on a special urgency, because the impulse to respond to them as one might at home can conflict with the anthropologically distilled awareness that one is dealing with culturally grounded interactional forms that one may not fully understand, and with fear that, therefore, any reaction might be interpreted as a socially destructive *over-reaction*” (1995: 7). Occasionally in offices or peoples homes, conducting relatively routine fieldwork visits, my safety was threatened and I was harassed, and I felt unable to respond as I would in a Western country or a different circumstance.

I felt unwilling to threaten my relationship with the gatekeeper or interlocutor at that time, and was not prepared with any means or conception that I could refuse or move away from such situations from my university's pre-field training.

Certainly these were conditions and risks I was aware of before embarking on this research. I was often offered lifts home by the families I visited, and several times harassed by the (male) driver, either a husband, brother, or cousin, who I had presumed to be a non-risk because their wives had offered or condoned the ride, and they were recommended to me by gatekeepers who took personal responsibility for my safety. To refuse such offers of hospitality and instead take a taxi home would be considered rude when the family were extending their own expense and inconvenience to keep me safe. Conversely, in a date environment, relations are more easily broken, occurring in a public place and with a single individual (as opposed to a family) who is less likely to be a gatekeeper or reasonably expect me to get in their car. The date premise feels more experimental, the boundaries of social practices are more blurred in that it is down to the two individuals present on the date to decide and act upon what is and isn't inappropriate; I can get up and walk away from a table in a cafe or bar with relatively little impact on my work or reputation.



Ethics and values

Ethnographic success is often measured by an anthropologist's ability to get people to 'open up' (Wilson and Kullick 1995), but what about the ethnographer's own ability to open up? While we have traditionally objectified the sex and romantic lives of others (Mead 1935, Malinowski 1989, Weiss 2011) there is value in exploring our own sexual and romantic practices, especially as they change and adjust to life in the field. Desire is a useful sensory means by which an anthropologist might explore his or her own position as a transitioning and cultured self. If romantic or sexual feelings emerge in the context of a Tinder date, how should we make use of them? Are they inappropriate, instinctively unethical, or abusive of the relationship?

As Dubisch points out, there is a "disciplinary disdain for personal narratives" (1995: 3), especially those of women, which are often regarded as inappropriate, indicative of a lack of professionalism, or abusive of the unavoidable power relations experienced between outsider anthropologist and native informant (Manderson 1997).

However, if we are to embrace the examination of the impact of fieldwork and ethnography upon the self, it does not to me make sense to ignore feelings of desire and sexuality as if they are not a part of fieldwork or influential upon both our establishment and pursuit of interlocutor relations. As I pointed out in my original article, it would be naïve to assume that the way my interlocutors interact with me is not informed by my position as a single European woman, so why do we not consider it naïve to ignore our own feelings about our individual interlocutors?

Finally, it is also worth considering that Tinder was a gatekeeper to conducting participant observation in a field of discourse that it was not easy for me to access based on my own subjectivity. As a student of everyday life in the West Bank, romance, sex, and love practices certainly interested me and were something I considered to be a part of everyday life. However, as an unmarried woman, it was



rarely appropriate for me to take part in extended conversations about sex and married life, with groups of women often splitting into married and unmarried sections when such conversations occurred. The use and gradual understanding of such practices also opens a window to collective morals and values of the subject community, namely, the understanding through practice of what is and isn't appropriate as far as romantic and sexual practices are considered. Through my use of Tinder, I was able to gain insight into differences in sexual and love related practices in both Israeli and Palestinian populations, often by contrasting which practices were and weren't adopted by either population. As an example, the very practice of dating is less common in Palestinian communities and partners often meet through chaperoned meetings organised by family members of interested parties. However, the widespread adoption of sex and romance based apps by Israelis is indicative of a less family-driven and more secular approach to dating and love, something I was able to determine not only by my own participation in this field, but also discussing common dating practices with those Tinder users I spoke or met with.

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[1] Kulick, D., and Wilson, M.. (1995) Taboo: Sex, Identity, and Erotic Subjectivity in the Field.

[2] Areas under the exclusive administration of the Palestinian Authority and the areas of most dense Palestinian populations in the West Bank, approximately 18% of the West Bank according to 1967 borders (Btselem, 2014).

[3] Sophie-Claire Hoeller, [“The top 15 cities around the world for Tinder users”](#), (June 6, 2017).

Catherine Clifford, [“These Are the Best Cities for Uber and Lyft Drivers”](#), (June 6, 2017).

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