

# Chapter 6

## Doing the Unconventional, Doing ‘Dirty’ Work: The Stigmatization of Sexuality Work and Unforeseen Encounters with Love



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**Abstract** We are storytellers to our own lives. When we do sexuality research, which Irvine (2014) calls ‘dirty’ work, we are in the midst of creating a story. In this book chapter, I provide a snapshot of my story in respect of doing sexuality research. I have encountered numerous pitfalls, dilemmas and problems when doing such ‘dirty’ work, but here I only tell a few by drawing on the qualitatively derived research method tool known as autoethnography. It is a method that requires the writer to use hindsight in order to resurrect not only memories of pain, torture, and stigma but also of liberation and freedom. I mainly refer to the dark memories in this book chapter to raise awareness of them for other like-minded queer writers. I argue that it is possible to write from both our heads and hearts, rather than solely from the former because we are pressured from institutions to sustain sheer ‘objectivity’ when that may not always be possible to do given that human values always enter at the beginning and the end of research. Human values are present when we interview participants. In sexuality work, the process of interviewing participants is a creative space. Interviews, whether online or offline, are spaces where subjectivities are actively created and where emotions are involved and formed.

**Keywords** Mistakes · Errors · Failure · Sexuality research · Male sexuality

### 6.1 Introduction

We are storytellers to our own lives. When we do sexuality research, which Irvine (2014) calls ‘dirty’ work, we are in the midst of creating a story. In this book chapter, I provide a snapshot of my story in respect of doing sexuality research. I have

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encountered numerous pitfalls, dilemmas and problems when doing such ‘dirty’ work, but here I only tell a few by drawing on the qualitatively derived research method tool known as autoethnography. It is a method that requires the writer to use hindsight in order to resurrect not only memories of pain, torture and stigma but also of liberation and freedom. I mainly refer to the dark memories in this book chapter to raise awareness of them for other like-minded queer writers. When doing autoethnography, I am almost reliving those memories of pain. However, it is a useful capsule for making research as transparent as possible since the writer’s emotions and human lived experience ultimately shape the research experience, rather than ignoring that they do not exist (Ellis et al. 2011). By writing this autoethnography of my torments of doing sexuality work, I would be alleviating ‘the past that had a hold on me, that kept me from the present. I wanted not to forget the past but to break its hold. This death in writing [is] to be liberatory’ (hooks, 1989 [2015], p. 261). The evocative stories that I soon tell in autoethnographic, rich detail are done so in the hope that I can be free, free from the shackles of torment and pain that have kept me trapped in the past, holding me from my present. Autoethnography, then, can set us free. Like bell hooks (1989 [2015]), I had become attached to the wounds and sorrows of such memories that emerged during my involvement in sexuality work. Glorious vines were wrapped around my mouth until now where I can share my story as a way of cutting through these vines of silences.

To share my stories, along with the struggles that I encountered during the course of my academic trajectory, autoethnography offers remedies to heal those wounds of pain. While university institutional prisms implicitly tell us that we must sustain ‘secrets’ in order to prevent university reputational damage, we are sacrificing our integrity and authenticity as queer writers (Ahmed 2017). There has been a legacy of queer writers challenging the status quo of heterosexuality and gender norms, fighting for gay rights during the Gay Liberation Front times (see Weeks 2018), yet now we as queer writers are becoming silenced again and discouraged by the academic community from speaking about our personal and intimate experiences of doing sexuality work (Javaid 2019a; in press). This is because, as Hammond and Kingston (2014) argue, those who study sexuality may face discrimination since sexuality research induces strong scepticism from strangers and non-strangers. When queer writers as willful writers name a problem, they themselves are seen as ‘the problem’ (Ahmed 2017). Coming from a strict Muslim family who strongly perpetuated stubborn inequalities and oppression, despite my resisting them with love and faith (Javaid 2019c), I always had the unmoving habit of always letting something ‘slip’ that should not be known according to the strict confines of the family institution and similarly of university institutions. I do not want to be a traitor to one’s own ‘academic home’, the teller of secrets in doing sexuality work, but a queer writer is one of bravery and is able to tell the truth of one’s own life as I had experienced it. I intend not to tell on people, but to transform my stories into knowledge and theory (Javaid 2019a; in press). My stories of struggle soon follow below, with the assistance of Ken Plummer’s (1995) idea of ‘sexual stories’. For him, queer and sexuality writers form part of the procedure of producing sexual stories so are part of the development of formulating sexual knowledge and theory. Sexual stories stem from one’s own everyday life, so ‘personal narratives...are socially embedded in the daily practices of everyday life’ (Plummer 1995, p. 15).

The main argument in this piece is that stigma is associated with sexuality research and might be perceived as a form of 'failure, error and mistake.' At various points, I will largely be drawing on the notion of 'failure' to indicate that the researcher's professional role is potentially compromised and he or she has momentarily failed to stick to the researcher script/role or that the participants failed to stick to the participant script/role. In both instances, a deviation occurs. In the case of a researcher momentarily deviating from their researcher role/script, stigma can be reproduced, and I show how throughout this piece. I also highlight the implications of their stigma.

## 6.2 Contouring 'Dirty' Work

In this section, I detail some background literature relating to autoethnography and sexuality work in which other writers express their own experiences of conducting sexuality research and highlighting their experiences of 'failing' to stick to the researcher role/script and/or the participants 'failing' to adhere to the participant role/script. Providing some context will 'set the scene' for my own sexual stories and for my own experiences of 'failing' to adhere to the researcher role/script. These sexuality writers have bravely spoke about their experiences of 'doing' sexuality research even though others may see them as, according to Attwood (2010), crude and casting suspicion against such writers. They have risked their professional reputation in the hope that their stories can shed light on the pitfalls, dilemmas and problems of doing 'dirty' work. Attwood (2010) illustrates that although:

in late modern societies we are 'incited' to speak about sex, tensions and silences still persist and some types of speech and speakers are strongly discouraged. (p. 178)

Huysamen (2018, p. 1) establishes that:

As researchers, our sexualities, both self-identified and those assumed by our participants, are always relevant to the research process.

She carried out interviews with 43 South African men about paying for sex. The men were all identified as clients of women sex workers. She critically reflects on her relationship with the men during the interviews, showing how the men 'failed' to adhere to the participant role/script in a professional manner. She was positioned in what Connell (1987) calls 'emphasised femininity'<sup>1</sup> as a passive and subordinate listener, 'titillating' her male participants' ego and facilitating their control during the interviews. She writes that she did not contest or resist her male participants' racist or sexist gestures and comments, facilitating 'the production of these problematic discourses during interviews' (p. 3). Some could argue that this is a 'mistake' because she implicitly reinforced gender inequality, but remaining silent does

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<sup>1</sup> 'Emphasised femininity' refers to the maintenance and reproduction of traditional gender roles. Connell (1987) argues that the concept is relationally constructed to hegemonic masculinity, 'performed especially to men' (p. 188).

ensure that the participants remain engaged and that the researcher is then able to collect the required data. The researcher can, then, given that she remained powerless during the research, reclaim back her power and voice by having collected the data and then being able to publish her story. Huysamen (2018) herself felt that her subordination and powerlessness were sustaining gender inequality and male dominance, both at the discursive and material levels, discursive because of the sexist and racist comments that the South African men made and material because of the bodily gestures the men made and because of the researcher's social position in the interviews as lacking symbolic and cultural power in relation to the men, unquestioningly listening to the men and encouraging them to talk and not challenging male supremacy. The gender order remained strongly in tact. However, power is fluid and dynamic: on the one hand, the female writer is subordinate and powerless during the course of her interviews; on the other hand, by the very fact that the South African men are objects of her study, she ultimately had control over the data comprising the men. They offered her the 'gift' of data that she could exploit whenever and however she chooses. The men's voices and stories were in her hands. They were *her* research 'objects', props in a play that she could choose to manipulate in whichever way she chooses. By remaining silent and not challenging gender inequality during the interviews, she performs an illusion of competence. The men found the interviews with her to be erotic, arousing and a 'turn on'. We see here, then, that the researcher can become sexualized and objectified as the participants 'failed' to follow the participant script/role. For example, one of her male participants states, 'I'll probably have to go rub-off [masturbate] after this [interview]' (Dan, 37). Huysamen (2018) writes:

[W]hen I ask Dan why he would not have been willing to be interviewed by a male researcher, Dan likens my listening to his sexual stories to other erotic acts (like massages) that a woman might offer him. In this moment, rather than just being the interviewer, I become a woman with whom he could potentially have a sexual encounter. (p. 8)

For some writers, the interview process can be one where the participant constructs it as a potential erotic encounter rather than a professional setting. Almost all of her male respondents had asked her whether she had ever sold sex, whether she would consider it, or suggested that she ought to sell sex. Consequently, being stigmatized in this way and being 'sexualised by my participants was threatening to me because it had the potential to make me feel like a "whore"' (Huysamen 2018, p. 10). Researchers can become sexual objects or sexual conquests during their sexuality research. This view is echoed in other sexuality works. Hammond and Kingston (2014) argue that they both, as female sex work researchers, experienced the 'whore stigma'<sup>2</sup> for being associated with the sexuality research of sex work. They indicate their experiences of being seen as 'kinky' or 'up for it' because of the type of sexual activity that their research was associated with. For instance, the

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<sup>2</sup>Sex workers often face the 'whore stigma', too, so this form of stigma transposed itself onto the female sex work researchers.

second author, Sarah Kingston, describes one of her experiences in which she was 'hit on' by one of her male participants who was a male senior police officer after an interview she conducted with him<sup>3</sup>:

Yeah was cool to meet one so chilled and open minded – don't let the gay thing put u off if you fancy a bit of casual sex (just don't tell the bf! [Boyfriend]) Defo give me a shout though I'll settle for coffee x. (Hammond and Kingston 2014, p. 335)

Kingston was seen as 'sexually liberal' for doing sexuality research on prostitution; the presumption that prostitutes invariably have casual sex with multiple strangers and always 'consent' to sex momentarily became transposed onto Kingston. For sexuality writers, then, sexual overtures can be frequent. Huff (1997, p. 117) also experienced sexual overtures, getting 'attention [that] consisted of unwanted romantic overtures, such as touching, hugging, poking and comments such as "hey hot lips"'. From her male respondents, Grenz (2005) also gained unwanted sexual overtures that consisted of the men wanting to masturbate over her, wanting to reveal their penises to her and requesting that she wear a short skirt. All these sexuality writers experienced sexual harassment, sexual talk and sexual objectification from their participants who 'failed' to obey the participant role/script. The researchers were assumed to be sexually available. Kevin Walby (2010), a male queer writer, argues that participants may not always see you as a professional sexuality researcher but rather as someone who is sexualized:

As much as the researcher positions as a sociologist, the respondent may position the researcher as a sex object. My body as a researcher...is part of this milieu of sexualisation... Gestures interpreted as non-sexual may be taken in another direction. For instance, I purposefully wore business attire for the interviews...the intention was to seem professional and asexual, my appearance could have been interpreted otherwise. Some of these men clearly wanted to turn the interview into more of a touching encounter. During interviews, I was often propositioned to receive sexual favours. (p. 650)

Doing sexuality research on male sex work, Walby (2010) conducted interviews with 30 male-for-male Internet escorts in Montréal, Ottawa, Toronto (Canada), Houston and New York (USA) and London (England). He became sexualized during the interviews, with many of the respondents asking him, 'Are you gay?' at the start of the interviews. Walby's (2010) response to the 'Are you gay' question was, 'I have slept with all kinds of people' (p. 647). Walby (2010) felt that his 'respondents wanted our meeting to become a touching encounter' (p. 641). For example, one of his respondents declared that, 'Oh and by the way...you are a sexy man!' (p. 649) and another respondent offering Kevin a session of S&M (sadism and masochism: the practice of using pain as a sexual stimulant):

Kevin: Do you think you could walk me through, because not everyone does this kind of service, like a typical S&M scene?  
Ricky (Toronto): I could show you.

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<sup>3</sup>Sarah Kingston's sexuality research included the exploration of community attitudes regarding men who buy sex. She conducted interviews with business employees, residents, the police, and local authority officials in a large northern city (see Kingston 2014).

Kevin: You could show me ...

Ricky (Toronto): A simple S&M scene? Those words don't go together.

Kevin: OK, yeah, not a typical S&M scene, but what exactly does the work of that consist of?

From this dialogue, the researcher becomes sexualized. In male sex work, there is a great inclusion of sexualizing and being sexualized (Javid 2019d; Walby 2010). Ricky, the male sex worker, momentarily broke away from the respondent role with his response of 'I could show you'. He 'failed' to conform to the expectations of a participant. It could be argued that a 'failure' occurred here whereby ethical boundaries between researcher and participant were clearly not drawn from the outset or, if they were, then, the participant deviated from those boundaries. There can be slippage between being 'professional' and 'unprofessional', the two are muddy waters. A 'failure' manifested in that the respondent failed to adhere to the participant script/role of professionalism. For example, Kevin Walby writes that, when Ricky said this to him, it 'came along with an impassioned glare from across the table. He had the curl of a smile forming in the corner of his mouth' (p. 650). He wanted a sexual interaction, attempting to transform the interview into an erotic casual encounter, parting ways from the researcher-respondent interaction script. Over the phone, another respondent said to Walby (2010, p. 652), 'I can give you head after we talk, you can fuck me if you want' as a way of transforming the research into a site of eroticism and sexualization.

In addition, Walby would hug the male sex workers after the interviews as a way of saying goodbye. Again, this might be seen as 'failing' to stick to the researcher script/role because it could be seen as crossing the line of becoming too immersed and 'too' friendly with your participants. Objectivity is now potentially contaminated, but one could argue that this instance is simply a characterization of 'being human' given that human values always enter in the beginning and the end of research. Hugging, for some people, could be viewed as a 'failure' or 'mistake' because the sex workers would see this as a sign that the researcher wanted more, wanted something more intimate and sexual, when the true intention was to just say goodbye. As a consequence, the role of the 'professional' researcher becomes compromised. In Toronto, one sex worker walked Walby to his hotel after they hugged; the escort asked for more hugs at each red light they waited at. Walby had to discuss that he was not in a position to have sexual and erotic relations with participants when the sex worker suggested it would be good if he accompanied Walby to his room. Here, the professional researcher attempts to rectify his potential 'failure' by drawing strict boundaries between researcher and participant. On other occasions after the interviews, some sex workers asked Walby to come back to their house to 'hear more, first hand'. This construction of gay culture can be defined by only one strand of gay culture, that is, sexual promiscuity amongst gay men. Whilst I am not claiming that all gay men engage in fleeting, casual sex, some gay men can exploit the interview setting as a way to configure sexual and erotic relations. Reflecting on his history and methodological journey, Ken Plummer experienced moments when his respondents 'went for him':

In one of the interviews a curious, tall, bearded Eastern Orthodox priest in full mufti came in – and you have to remember I was 21 and not entirely ugly – and he just went for me! There were a whole series of interviews that were very risky...this particular man pursued me for several months and he was nice enough but he didn't want the same thing that I wanted [a romantic relationship]...*there was also one time when I thought I was falling in love with the person I was interviewing* and had to restrain myself so it also happened the other way round! (Morris 2018, pp. 341–342; emphasis mine)

Here, we can see that Plummer talks candidly about his falling in love with one of his participants who he interviewed. Falling in love is unexpected and cannot be determined during fieldwork given that love is socially and culturally constructed (Javaid 2018a). Plummer goes on to say that his participants 'had little regard for me (because sometimes they were pursuing me quite dangerously)' (Morris 2018, p. 347). This intimate experience in the fieldwork could be seen by some as a perceived 'failure' for getting too close to a participant or becoming too immersed into the fieldwork. Boundaries were arguably not drawn, and ethical procedures were not strict during the time Plummer was researching. However, this might be a *perceived* rather than an actual 'mistake' because human emotions cannot necessarily be controlled and compartmentalized. Further, it is more likely that the respondent deviated, and so creating a 'failure' from his participant role/script. Plummer elucidates that, at a time when he was interviewing gay men, they were dangerously pursuing him for an erotic encounter. He suggests they lacked care and dignity for him solely in the pursuit for sex with him. The researcher, again, becomes constructed as a sexual object with which to be used to gratify one's sexual interests<sup>4</sup>. Rather than thinking that Plummer ought to have taken precautionary measures when going into the field, we should instead consider social and cultural contexts or the field as being a place of unpredictability that an ethics board cannot in any way determine. The field is not only a place of exploration but also a place of danger and risk.

According to Altork (1995)<sup>5</sup>, she cannot imagine doing fieldwork without involving her emotions, feelings and sensual input. Researching fire fighters, Altork (1995) was seduced and 'turned on' by their demeanour:

Even as I struggled to analyze their 'fire language', and to situate it as a language of power and appropriation, I felt myself to be seduced by it, and felt privileged to be privy to it as a temporary 'insider', an experience both uncomfortable and intriguing. (p. 114)

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<sup>4</sup>Ken Plummer highlights that although the interview setting can be dangerous and highly eroticized, it can also be a space for liberation. For instance, some people were coming out in his interviews, and they were, for the very first time, articulating what it means to be gay for them. Thus, his interviews were changing some people's lives. What he and his gay men respondents embodied were the 'outsider' and 'deviant' status of being gay; the interviews were spaces for their marginalized voices to speak and to be heard.

<sup>5</sup>Altork (1995) provides an interesting account of her subjectivities when she involves herself with masculine and sturdy fire fighters. She sarcastically critiques objectivity on the grounds that it weakens a writer's work and their sense of self for humans are not devoid from human values and emotions. In addition, we use our bodies together with our minds and hearts to understand something, resulting in objectivity becoming impracticable or impossible (Altork 1995).

When she locked eyes with one fire fighter who agreed to be interviewed by her, she felt an adrenaline rush of what felt like the feelings of love, arguing that ‘intense encounters with people in the field can have, at times, a seductive quality to them’ (p. 115). A romantic and sexual relationship can emerge from the fieldwork between the researcher and participant, although my view is that this should not be viewed as a ‘failure, mistake or error’. Instead, we should think through the ways in which our professional and personal lives can slip into one another, how they can create implications for others, and us, and how we can be best prepared to address such ramifications. Altork goes on to reflect on a past conversation she had with a fellow anthropologist who flirted with one of her informants. The fellow anthropologist said to Altork that, ‘We never actually had intercourse, but it certainly got intense there for a while!’ (p. 120). The fellow anthropologist believed that her work would be discredited or seen as ‘failing’ to be proper work if anyone were to find out she had developed a sexual interest in an informant, and hence being seen as a ‘failed’ researcher who got too immersed into the field, got too attached to a participant, and making the ‘mistake’ of losing sight of the aims of the research and the role as a ‘professional’ researcher. Objectivity could be lost and this could be viewed as a perceived ‘failure’. Sexual relations can and do physically happen in the field, though. Malinowski (1989) met a woman in the fieldwork who he engaged in a meaningful relationship with and who would later become his wife. Again, their role as a ‘professional’ and ‘objective’ researcher can become questioned and viewed as a perceived ‘mistake, error or failure’ for becoming too immersed into the field. During his early fieldwork in Morocco, Rabinow (1977) also experienced a sexual encounter. He describes how he made love to a woman from another village, confessing that, ‘I had never before had this kind of sensual interaction in Morocco’ (1977, p. 65). Frank (2015) establishes that having some sort of romantic or sexual relationship with a respondent can, indeed, help develop rapport and can gently ease one into the community that is being researched. This can help address the issue of a perceived ‘failure, mistake or error’ about becoming too immersed into the field and losing sight of a researcher’s professional objective role. However, sex in fieldwork can be dangerous, as Moreno (1995) details in her book chapter in which she discusses her experience of being raped in the field.

### 6.3 Stigma and Queer Work

There is wide agreement amongst some scholars that sexuality work is often stigmatizing and unconventional, deviating from ‘normal’ and more acceptable research (e.g. Attwood 2010; Hammond and Kingston 2014; Irvine 2014; Javaid 2018b). Here, I introduce the works of Erving Goffman to help shed light on the stigma of sexuality research and how that stigma often spreads onto queer writers doing queer work, making it seem that queer writers inherently ‘fail’ to abide by the professional researcher role/script.



Goffman (1968) discusses stigma as a relational entity that is situationally constructed in relation to others, whereby one occupies a role that becomes relationally stigmatized. Stigma is contextually bound; it is not an inherited entity but rather actively negotiated through social relations. Goffman (1968) writes that stigma is 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting...[including] a relationship between attribute and stereotype' (pp. 13–14). With regard to the queer writer, then, he lacks a particular attribute of heterosexuality, and so he is cast as an outsider, a deviant, someone who is devalued with a 'spoiled identity'<sup>6</sup>. For Goffman (1968), a homosexual is classified as not a 'real' man, and so one could infer that he may be constructed as not a 'real' researcher as he deviates from the normalization of heterosexuality so is potentially positioned as undesirable or as someone who is deemed unimportant. He 'fails' to occupy a 'real' researcher role. Goffman (1968) makes a distinction between two types of stigma: first, the discredited stigma, which is stigma that can be seen and is visible, so one's own gender or ethnicity, and second, the discreditable stigma, which is stigma that is concealed until shown otherwise, so this relates to information control whereby certain strands of information has the potentiality of inducing stigma. For instance, one might confess their homosexuality to family members and strangers and, subsequently, acquire a sexual stigma to mark him as somehow 'different' and unequal to the rest of the heterosexual population (Plummer 1975). To know whether a type of information can be stigmatizing is reliant upon the relationship between the storyteller and the person who is at the receiving end of this (potentially stigmatizing) information.

A queer writer doing sexuality research is, it could be argued, 'a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places' (Goffman 1968: ii). A 'spoiled identity' is often projected onto me as a queer writer, and my research often becomes stigmatized, separated into a distinct category that is labelled as dangerous and risky. Thus, when queer writers reveal their involvement with sexuality research, they may encounter a discreditable stigma. Scott (2013) argues that:

Discreditable stigmas are in some ways more dramaturgically stressful to manage in everyday life, insofar as the actor must work at keeping their attribute secret, and remain constantly vigilant about the threat of discovery. (p. 208)

However, to get ethical approval from an ethics board, sexuality writers have to confess their involvement with sexuality research, risking their encounter with discreditable stigma. Irvine (2014) found that Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) see sexuality research as too risky since they deem the researcher to be 'vulnerable', yet they play a significant but largely unnoticed role in the marginalization of sexuality research. Arguably, constructing queer writers as 'vulnerable' may be a substitute for a discreditable stigma. A female sociologist researching individuals who identify as 'kinky' declares that an IRB did not give her approval to enter a participant's home for this would be 'unsafe' (Irvine 2014). IRBs reproduce what Ken Plummer (1975) calls sexual stigma. They can discourage sexuality research, halt its development or

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<sup>6</sup>Goffman (1968) develops the notion of 'spoiled identity' to indicate an identity that creates a person to experience stigma.

completely stop it from taking place. As a result, Irvine (2014) found that many queer writers simply divorce themselves from conducting sexuality work. Queer writers become ‘doubly stigmatized’ both for being a homosexual and for engaging with ‘dirty’ work, and so we must be somehow impure, deviant or alien or somehow ‘failing’ to conduct ‘acceptable’ work. These assumptions can manifest ‘into normative expectations...making certain assumptions as to what the individual[s] before us ought to be’ (Goffman 1968, p. 12), resulting in strangers and non-strangers not wanting to ‘live within the world of one’s stigmatized connexion’ (Goffman 1968, p. 43). We often become estranged or cast as discredited ‘outsiders’, as ‘failures’.

There are mechanisms to deal with stigmatizing information or to address a discredited character. Goffman (1968) writes about strategies that can be used to hide conduct and to conceal ‘truths’ of us in social contexts. For Goffman (1968), the key is not to manage tension through social relations but to manage information: ‘to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell...to lie or not to lie’ (p. 57). As queer writers, we can ‘pass’ as normal and of equal citizen by managing ‘undisclosed discreditable information about the self’ (Goffman 1968, p. 58). For example, during romantic dates or when I am on a night out and speaking with strangers, I do not reveal my sexuality research because I fear it would induce discreditable stigma and could result in feelings of embarrassment for the ‘failed’ performer if he is suspected to be lying about his occupation. I fear the consequences of revealing my work to others given that stigma is powerful. It can hurt us, it can pain us, and it can be difficult to handle once we relationally become stigmatized. Dating partners will no longer want to date us. Family members would no longer want to become associated with our stigma. Withdrawing from conversations about my line of work is hard work and tiresome but necessary to emotionally and, sometimes, to physically protect myself. Instead, when strangers and non-strangers would ask about my occupation, I would declare, ‘I am a Dr’. Although it is never my intention to mislead others, as some people assume that I am a medical Dr as opposed to an academic Dr, it offers me an avenue to ‘pass’ as acceptable and ‘normal’. I am in control of how I present myself to others at particular contexts, times and places, forming a particular ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman 1959) that creates an illusion of competence. It enables me to make conversations work without a discreditable stigma emerging. The irony of all this is that, although I may define myself as a queer writer and scholar, I start to question ‘who am I?’ in the midst of putting on and taking off masks.

## 6.4 The Research Project

There is a particular research project that I draw upon in the next section that is based on rich, autoethnographic descriptions. The project is entitled *Masculinities, Sexualities and Love* (Javaid 2018a). It sought to examine the ways in which love is socially and culturally constructed, questioning what is love? Why does love hurt so much when a significant other leaves us? Why does love matter to us? Is love even

relevant in current society for gay and bisexual men or has sexual promiscuity taken over? These questions, and more, have fascinated us when we experience emotion, pain or heartbreak. This project sought to problematize the notion of love. It paid close attention to the ways in which love intersects with men, masculinities and sexualities. It draws on empirical data gained from interviewing/speaking with 23 gay and bisexual men to understand how they construct and re-construct love. Thus, the men's subjective experiences of love and loneliness were considered in this project. I had informal conversations with these men via Grindr, Tinder and POF (Plenty of Fish), which are popular apps that men often use to seek casual, 'no strings attached' sex; infrequently, men also use these apps to seek dates/relationships. Access was straightforward. Prior to the research commencing, I already had Grindr, Tinder and POF profiles. I continued to use these profiles when getting access to the men, reaching out to them and having unstructured and open-ended conversations with them. I had identified as gay, which I still continue to identify as, which made it easier for the men to connect with me. The conversations lasted, approximately, anywhere from 1 h to 5 h during 2016–2017 in England. The unstructured interviews with the men generated some interesting data, though some data were not useful since sometimes some of the men steered the conversations to sex. They wanted to have sex with me. Many sexual proposals were offered, which I declined, as I solely wanted to gain an understanding of their constructions and views about love. To help overcome this challenge of 'distraction', I employed covert research. To understand more about the methods and methodology of the project, see Javaid (2018a). In the next section, I detail some of my personal and intimate experiences with some of the men who I interviewed for this project, using autoethnography so using hindsight to resurrect my memories and experiences with the men.

## 6.5 Doing the Unconventional: Falling in Love

### 6.5.1 *Biography*

I identify as a male gender and sexuality theorist and have conducted sexuality research for about a decade. I am a British Muslim/Pakistani who does queer research. For the Muslim community to which I belong, this is difficult to accept; so I am often estranged or cast as an 'outsider' because I deviate from the radical perspective of Islam. I strongly sustain a liberal perspective of Islam. There is an expectation of me to get married to a woman and to sustain heteronormativity in the household. My identity, as a gay Muslim single, fuels tensions in the Muslim community. I am constructed as deviant. Rahman (2014), too, draws attention to the suspicions that are often cast upon us as gay South Asians/Muslims since there is seemingly an incompatibility between the paradigm of Islam and embodying a queer identity. The former is constructed as non-Western, whereas the latter is seen solely as a Westernized phenomenon and that the two are simply antithetical

(Rahman 2014). When the two coincide, an explosion of violence, abuse and exclusion is encountered. I still identify as Muslim, Pakistani and queer, nevertheless. I do believe in the divine other from a very *liberal* viewpoint – I pray on a daily basis to strengthen my emotional and spiritual connection, repairing my broken soul and heart with faith and love. A radical stance on Islam sustains an evil outlook on life, ‘killing’ love, beauty, and faith whereas a more liberal stance counteracts evil. I was born in 1989 in Wales (Newport). I am a sociologist and a criminologist by training, and my doctorate thesis explored male rape, masculinities and sexualities (see Javaid 2018b), looking at the ways in which male rape is socially and culturally constructed, and a number of publications have emerged from this project (e.g. see Javaid 2017, 2018c). I also write around violence (e.g. Javaid 2019b). I identify as middle class and a professional, working as an academic at a university in London. I live alone in the West Midlands, UK, as a single person. For Lahad (2017, p. 118), the single is stigmatized, whereby others view him/her as ‘the lonely spinster without anyone to go out with’. I embody this stigmatized, single identity in my everyday life, having been single for over 7 years at the time of writing this. I am very often alone and single in my daily life, attending bars on my own, going to the cinema as a single, eating alone and walking alone, all of which reinforce my single identity in my social life. Lahad (2017) argues that the performance as a single person can lead to the risk of stigma, embarrassment and shame occurring under the close observation of others. For a long time, I have struggled to contest my single identity and to become ‘unsingle’ in order to defeat the stigmatized category of singlehood that I am positioned in. In the fieldwork, however, it was a space of hope, of possibilities, with which to address the stigma of my gay Muslim single identity because it offered intimacy and love. In this section, I detail the manners in which I momentarily deviated from my professional researcher role/script and how it brought about stigma. I ‘failed’ to adhere to a ‘professional’ researcher role/script on some occasions due to the ideology of love and because of my faith.

## ***6.5.2 Perils in Sexuality Research: Encounters with Love***

### **6.5.2.1 Case Study 1: Chris**

I am on a long bus journey to Teesside, which typically takes 1 hour or so to reach my destination. The travel to work often gives me substantial time to peacefully reflect. I sit at the near front of the bus to do this, catching glimpses of the sunlight outside the grimy bus windows. This double deck bus is not so full; many seats are unoccupied. I can breathe and relax in this silence, preparing for my class to teach. The silence in the bus seems to comfort me, but it is painfully silent; boredom soon creeps in. Nobody else on the bus is talking to each other. I sit silent, and then suddenly one of my participants messages me through POF. I light up, and, all of a sudden, butterflies erupt in my stomach. How can this be? Surely, I should not be feeling in this way as a ‘professional’ researcher? I am supposed to be ‘objective’. However, us humans have no control over how we feel; our emotions are uncontrol-

lable. On POF, I used my profile to recruit some of my respondents, including Chris who messages me during my being on this bus. He was so handsome, attractive and good-looking, with his muscular toned white body and pale white skin. At the time of his inclusion in the covert research, he is 27 years old, white, British born and a Geordie and works as an engineer; he is away a lot for work. He is roughly of 5'7 height. He identifies as pansexual and currently had a girlfriend during the time of the research. He is not out of the closet as pansexual; people know him as straight. He may not know this, but I had seen him out on nights out some years ago prior to the research-taking place; I longed for him then, too. Now, he is speaking to me, interested in *me*. It was like my dreams were coming true, but should they come true when I am including him in my research? Whilst on the bus, he continues to message me flirtatious and sexual messages: 'I think I'd like to be penetrated, I'd like to ride you I think so I'm in control of it [my penis] inside me, I want to make you cum!...As you're entering me for the first time I'd like to guide it in so I'm controlling how it feels!' I feel my butterflies flapping their wings, and I smile on the quite bus. I am blushing, like the old teenage boy that I was who had his first crush on his handsome geography teacher.

The boundaries are now blurred between the 'value free' researcher and 'respectful participant'. I could not just disclose my research to him now, having come so far into it. The covertness would be jeopardized, so what do I respond to Chris? I flirt back. I 'failed' to stick to the professional researcher role/script; objectivity was compromised. He made me feel good, making me feel like I am the only person in the world. My naivety took over as a single, hopelessly romantic person. He knew how to say the right words. I suggested to him, 'I want you inside me' to 'make love to me'. The double-deck bus is still active, and I am nowhere near my destination yet. Chris messages me some more. He talks about love, making me think, 'Could he be the one?'. He says: 'Love is something that builds between two people when they genuinely like each other and each other's company!...Big thing for me, I want someone who I connect with and can trust. [T]hat doesn't come overnight you know'. Love is, according to him, something that gets actively created. Jamieson (2011) calls this notion 'practices of intimacy' that allow, produce and maintain a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special to one another. I figured, as he is practising emotion and telling me all his secrets and desires, he is making the conscious effort to build love between him and I: he is 'doing' love. I continue to naively think, 'I found the one' and that 'I am may no longer be single, finally'. Oh, how terribly wrong I was.

I'm not really attracted to guys I'm more pansexual, attracted to personality. I've only ever been [in] a relationship with women, I fancy women but I'd love to have a guy on the side like a secret life. Sex is about enjoyment, excitement, the feeling of pleasure. Secret life may be a bit of a harsh terminology, I meant to explore my sexuality, I don't want my life broadcast I'd like to be discreet oh and I haven't had sex with men...I'll never be a boyfriend, I might class myself as a lover but not a boyfriend! (Chris, 27)

Now, my hopes and dreams that were erect on the bus crumbled as fast as the wheels on the bus were turning. I gathered, 'He just wants sex'. He makes it clear to me that I would just be a bit of 'fun', nothing serious, especially when he has a

girlfriend. The sunlight outside the window of the bus suddenly seems to be fading, I crawl back into the seat of the bus and deeply reflect: ‘How could he cheat on his girlfriend?’ I thought. I’ll never be anything more to him in a romantic sense. He is not ‘out’; therefore, only discreet sexual activity can take place between him and I Chris says to me: ‘I think there’s a lot of straight guys who have bi sexual thoughts, me for one;) [emoticon via POF message] [sic] although I want to act on mine!’ (Chris, 27). I look at his pictures non-stop, flicking through them while the wheels on the bus go round and round. Although we did not have sex, and although I did not even kiss or hold him, the thoughts were there where I imagine his muscular body on mine, where I imagine his soft lips on mine and where I move my hands into his light brown hair whilst he is on top of me. As Altork (1995) writes, ‘protecting oneself from being “touched” by the field, might be unnecessary [sic] in certain circumstances’ (p. 121). I did, however, ‘protect’ myself, as I did not meet with him to have sex with him but only chose to not do so for my not getting hurt and emotionally involved given that he has a girlfriend. Still, I ‘failed’ to sustain objectivity and to draw boundaries between the participant and myself. I ‘failed’ to take on the professional role of a researcher. I knew I would be nothing more than just sex. The feelings I had for him made me momentarily believe that I was ‘in love’. For queer writers, the feeling of being ‘in love’ can be encountered at any stage of the research, although this is not specific to queer authors. We cannot know with any certainty when/if this falling in love will occur.

After my research was completed, and I included him in my book (see Javaid 2018a), many months had passed until I saw him again in the flesh. On my own, I was out on the gay scene in the North East region. He was with a group of friends, including his girlfriend. On the noisy dance floor, with loud pop music playing, from Lady Gaga to Britney Spears, we locked eyes together whilst my close proximity to him. It felt like the whole bar had stopped for a minute or two; both of our souls were reuniting. The feelings of love came rushing back to me for a few moments. His eyes were deep as the ocean; I felt like I was sinking in love, again, with no way of swimming out of his eyes. No words were shared between him and I. His eyes sparkled with desire as he continues to stare at me. I wondered, ‘What could he be thinking? Does he remember me?’ My heart tells me he does. Next to him, his very tall and plump female friend, with short flamboyant black hair, interrupts our souls reconnecting. She acts as a vessel for his words and states to me: ‘He has told me everything about you and him. He’s just a bit unsure about his sexuality’. Quickly, she becomes concerned given that his girlfriend is only five steps away, concerned that I might tell her that her boyfriend had been cheating on her with me as the other ‘side chick’. Although I would never tell on him, not only because it was not my place to tell her but also because I still cared for him, his tall friend rapidly collects her friends together to announce that, ‘We are leaving. Onto the next bar’. They left. I never did see him again ever since (either online or offline). His words leave an imprint on my memory of what could have been. As they left, my ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman 1968) was reproduced because their leaving me acted as a catalyst for reinforcing the notion that the gay Muslim single is stigmatized as the ‘other’ for falling in love with the forbidden (Javaid 2019c).

### 6.5.2.2 Case Study 2: Kieran

Kieran is 24 years old at the time of speaking with him. He identifies as bisexual, saying that, 'I'm bisexual. I thought my parents knew, but then I brought my previous two exs home and then they thought not haha [sic]'. He had the look of a slim, toned, 'straight-acting' model. He was beautiful, with golden tanned complexion. He was roughly of 5'10 height. His dark, blonde hair made him stand out. As an aircraft engineer, he tells me that he is often away from his home. He is always 'on the go'. Whilst based in the East Midlands, UK, he travels frequently with his friends either within the UK or abroad. Because of his hectic lifestyle, it can sometimes get in the way of sustaining a romantic relationship: 'My career gets in the way', he says. From all the men I spoke with for the project, Kieran was the one I connected with the most. He opened up to me in a way that a patient opens up to their counselor. He had told me his secrets that propelled me to deeply connect with him, resulting in my 'failing' to adhere to the professional researcher role/script on some occasions.

For example, on one particular ordinary evening at my family home, I was laying back on my parent's gold two-seater sofa. I am relaxing on there, wearing my pyjamas. My mother who is now estranged from me occupies the three-seater sofa across me. The room was silent; my mother reading her magazine while I am navigating on my silver MacBook. Suddenly, Kieran messages me on Tinder. My eyes light up as I flick through his handsome pictures. In every picture, he is clothed, making me wonder what is behind such clothes. He wants to see me; he wants to be with me. This feeling that I feel is all too familiar—could it be the feelings of love? Again, I question my objective researcher role, as I 'should' be treating him solely as an emotionless research participant and treating myself as a heartless researcher, devoid from human values. I am 'failing' to follow my script.

In fact, the reality is we are both humans with human feelings and values. Walby (2010) argues that the researcher stopping himself/herself from being 'touched' by the field may be unnecessary because, in some cases, it might be necessary to get close to one's respondents. This is true in order to develop rapport and a trusting relationship. I felt that I got very close to Kieran; he opened up to me. Had I not developed a close relationship with him, I believe I would not have gotten rich, detailed data. Kieran wants to see me urgently when he messages me while I am on the sofa. My heart beats at an unusual rate, and, in a panicky state, I think, 'What do I do?' He says:

[M]y house does get a bit lonely...The only real way to get to know someone is in person. Give it 2 months, I could be talking shit...people can talk shit over text and act all different in person. Only real way to know someone is in person. My thinking anyway...I've never met anybody that I've met on here [Tinder] that I don't get bored of. If I don't meet someone soon, it's like nah boring. I hate texing. I think its [sic] boring and fake. Ive [sic] met people before that and they have been different to what they made out to be on text. And I really do get bored of texting haha. I need to meet someone like nearly straight away...otherwise for me it's like talking to a wall. Nothing may ever happen and it's pointless. Like I don't even want to just have sex or anything straight away, I just need to meet someone properly rather than texting...it's just not natural to talk to someone you haven't met. When you meet

someone for the first time on a night out, what is the [difference] if you don't get on; you go separate ways. With chatting on the phone, after one phone call, I'd be like, "right lets meet up." It's just more natural to meet someone in person. I'm not a modern day guy. (Kieran, 24)

He puts pressure on me to meet him as soon as possible. I look to my mother, but she does not suspect anything. She continues to read her magazine. I reach out for my can of coke, tasting the fizziness to dilute the butterfly feeling in my stomach; the butterflies are flapping their wings like no tomorrow: my stomach hurts. Why am I worrying so much? He wants to meet, fine; but I feel I am not ready to meet him. Although he claims he does not want sex on the first meet, I silently thought to myself, 'What would we do? What would I talk to him about? Could I continue to keep my research covert when/if I meet with him?' These questions, and more, rushed to my head like the speed of light. I am 'failing' to address this interaction as a professional researcher: I do not know what to do. Kieran gets annoyed that I prolong to meet him when I say, 'It's too soon to meet'. I do indicate that 'I want to meet', but when I am ready. I also confessed my liking him. I 'failed' to sustain an objective and professional barrier between myself and the participant; the wall came down and I let him in. I made the 'mistake' of becoming too immersed into the field. Nonetheless, Oakley (1981) establishes that some personal, mutual disclosure should be a necessity in qualitative research. Both Kieran and I have now disclosed personal disclosures as a way of building rapport and eradicating any power imbalances during our conversations. We talk some more. He 'touches' me through his words, disclosing what Ken Plummer (1995) calls 'sexual stories'. For instance, he tells me an intimate story, which is a 'practice of intimacy' (Jamieson 2011) as it gets me closer to him because it creates and sustains a subjective sense of closeness and being attuned and special with one another. He gets emotionally and spiritually closer to me by telling me about his deceased ex, Beth:

I had a girlfriend, love of my life, childhood sweet heart. I'd just turned 18. My ex girlfriend died. She was also a close family friend. Was meant to go funeral with my best pal dale. He text saying we should go together, as when she got bullied out of school, it was only us left that were her friend. He never showed. I had to go with my girlfriend, who ironically enough was in the friendship group that bullied Beth out of school. After that day of losing [both] Beth and Dale (like haven't spoken to Dale since, and it's been 6 years), I don't know why he never replied, I saw him in town like 6 months later, confronted him and he said, "Don't run this up again and walked off". After losing them, I was just angry and upset, blamed it all on my girlfriend, saying "[You] bullied her out of school, or her friendship group did and she just watched and didn't help, yet she had the right to come to her funeral and pretend to care and cry. I said things I shouldn't have [said] and lost 3 close people...Horrific. Never got over it...Ever since my first love, I keep a guard up. And I've not managed to love anyone since then. As soon as it gets to nearly that point, I end things. Guess I'm scared of love again. Too painful when it ends...I don't know how I'll get over it...I feel like a dick but I can't help it...I find out it's me getting scared. I had a bad experience that's left me broke to say the least. I let no one in...I hope I get over it, I keep telling myself I am, then am clearly not...and now I'm scared to love...Real life is hard and isn't as easy as words are. I go to [Beth's] house every Christmas and knock on the door and her mum still breaks down in tears and holds me for 5 minutes. It's heartbreaking...I just don't take well to letting people in now because its heartbreaking when they leave. And the less you let in, the less you feel when they go. Shit way of thinking, but I cant [sic] help it. Not good really...I'm pretty sure I am slightly depressed and socially isolate myself at times,



and pretty sure I have a lot of anxiety going on but, what can you do? In fact, that's the first time I've ever admitted that, so, weird feeling haha...I doubt I'll ever truly be happy again, well I know I won't because I've got this OCD self consciousness that every morning and afternoon and night, [including] random points of the day when I'm not busy, and it just says 'Beth'. It's been 6 bloody years. Surely I could go a day without thinking about her.

As mentioned, Kieran has told me 'sexual stories' that he has not told anyone ever before. He trusted me. He confided in me, which strengthened the feeling of closeness and being attuned and special with one another. He suggests to me that he cannot love someone ever again, including me. Tears start to form in my eyes. Again, I 'failed' to stick to the researcher script/role to sustain objectivity; instead, I became emotional, and my human values entered the field, whereby I became emotional. I showed human feelings and emotions and the boundaries between 'professional researcher' and 'being human' became blurred. As we had reached the threshold that propels Kieran to block out 'almost lovers', he had ended things with me and eventually deleted me on Tinder. Those butterflies that kept fluttering their wings could no longer flap their wings. They died. Not only had they died, but also my dreams and hopes with him had deceased. Whilst I had his stories kept on file to document in my book, my stigmatized single identity was reinforced. Kieran will never 'love again', he implies, resulting in my 'waiting for the one' and being positioned in a stigmatized category as the gay Muslim single. I miss him.

## 6.6 Conclusion

Sexuality research is controversial and risky. It opens up countless possibilities for 'failures'. Drawing upon my own personal experiences of conducting what Irvine (2014) aptly calls 'dirty work', I shed light on my different (sometimes presumed) 'failures' when doing sexuality work. I located my experiences in their cultural and social contexts, delving into hindsight to resurrect those memories of pain and loneliness when doing sexuality work, with the assistance of autoethnography. In this chapter, I exposed my vulnerabilities with regard to doing sexuality work and what this could mean for other queer and sexuality writers. I provided honest examples of such 'failures'. The raw examples that I offered detailed some of the implications that I encountered when doing 'risky' and stigmatizing research, providing an individual and personal reflective account to elucidate and make sense of such 'failures'. These experiences of mine are likely to resonate with other like-minded queer writers' similar incidents. The raw experiences that I provide include falling in love with respondents, which meant that I momentarily 'failed' to adhere to the professional researcher role/script to sustain sheer objectivity. I used autoethnography to speak about my subjective and personal experiences that elucidated how I 'failed' to draw strict boundaries between researcher and participant. As Altork (1995, p. 120) argues, 'all relationships and events with which we are involved in the field change us in subtle ways and affect the way we perceive, and write about, the field'. By talking about my own experiences and feelings of love in the field, I am able to

offer a more transparent and honest account of my research and the processes by which I reached my conclusions in my work. I argue that it is possible to write from both our heads and hearts, rather than solely from the former because we are pressured from institutions to sustain sheer ‘objectivity’ (also known as institutional ‘evil’) when that may not always be possible to do given that human values always enter at the beginning and the end of research. Human values are present when we interview participants. I argue that, in sexuality work, the process of interviewing participants is a creative space. Interviews, whether online or offline, are spaces where subjectivities are actively created. Plummer (1995) argues that interviews are best conceived as performative collaborations since both the researcher and the respondent have the capacity to shape the encounter. Emotions and feelings are created during interviews with participants.

As bell hooks (1989 [2015]) profoundly reminds us:

The longing to tell one’s story and the process of telling is symbolically a gesture of longing to recover the past in such a way that one experiences both a sense of reunion and a sense of release. (p. 265)

For me, by using hindsight to relive the memories that I share in this book chapter, I momentarily recaptured the feelings of love. I resurrected those feelings and emotions. It had been so long. The need to remember and temporarily hold onto that feeling of love and what it taught me has been all the more important. It has allowed me to emotionally protect myself in the future when doing further queer work with human participants and to try to stick to the ‘professional’ researcher role/script as best that I could so that I do not get emotionally hurt. Reflecting on my history, past experiences and biography allowed me to see love from a dissimilar perspective, notably from a liberal Islamic perspective with the use of my unmoving faith, to use this perspective/knowledge for self-growth and transformation in a productive way. It reproduces love, a love that is unbreakable by evil. Writing saved me; it rescued that young, naïve and hopelessly romantic queer writer from being uncared for. Using hindsight formed part of therapy through words. These words I shared healed my broken heart, making it whole again to making it possible to truly love myself first and to not let ‘evil’ hinder self-love.

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From a sexuality research perspective, Aliraza Javaid opens up about possibilities for mistakes, errors and failures. Drawing upon his personal experiences of conducting what Janie M. Irvine aptly calls 'dirty work', he sheds light on his different (sometimes presumed) mistakes, errors and failures when doing sexuality work. He locates these in their cultural and social contexts, delving into hindsight to resurrect memories of pain and loneliness when doing such work, with the assistance of research diary extracts. In his chapter, Javaid exposes researchers' vulnerabilities with regard to doing sexuality work and what this could mean for other and potential sexuality writers. He provides examples of his own work and opens it up for further discussion about how to deal with 'risky' research constructively.