The Ethics of Researching Friends: On Convenience Sampling in Qualitative Management and Organization Studies

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Abstract

Scholarship on the ethical complexities resulting from friendships which develop with respondents during qualitative data collection is well established. There has also been consideration of the ethics of researching existing friends across various disciplines. But, although management and organization scholars use convenience samples of the latter kind in qualitative research, there is virtually no discussion in our field of the ethical implications. In seeking to rectify this, I draw on my experiences of a project (Author, 2011) where I gathered data from six friends on their experiences of and attitudes towards sexual relationships, motherhood and life-work 'balance'. I discuss the reportage of what sometimes felt like confidences, the use of 'ex ante' data, the objectification of participants and difficulties relating to respondent validation, in order to highlight some of the ethical challenges in qualitative management and organizational research with friends.

Keywords

Convenience samples, ethics, friends, management and organization studies, qualitative research

Introduction

This paper is a retrospective reflection on a project where, between August 2008 and March 2009, I gathered qualitative longitudinal data by email from six longstanding friends about the intersections between sexual relationships, motherhood and life-work 'balance' (Author, 2011). Convenience sampling amongst friends – which raises rather different issues when compared to the development of friendships during data collection – has been discussed by researchers from anthropology, sociology, health and social welfare studies, social work, education, social geography, nursing, women's studies and cultural studies (eg, Barton, 2011; Birch and Miller, 2012; Brayboy and Deyhle, 2000; Browne, 2003; Ellis, 2007; Humphrey, 2007; Irwin, 2006; McConnell-Henry *et al.*, 2009-2010; Neal and Gordon, 2001; Taylor, 2011; Tillmann, 2008, 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). But this is not the case in management and organization studies (MOS). Haynes' (2006, 2010) reflections on her collection of oral histories from female accountants, including friends and former colleagues, are one exception. Another is Karra and Phillips' (2008) discussion of Karra's ethnography of a company established by her father, where she had previously worked.

The paper at hand adds to this very small body of literature by considering the ethical issues raised by convenience sampling amongst friends in qualitative MOS research. I focus on the following, inter-related issues. First I discuss the discomfort we can experience when writing about sensitive stories told by our friend-respondents and the difficulty of assessing whether they would be so open with a stranger-researcher. I also reflect on whether telling such stories is painful or cathartic for our friend-respondents. I go on to focus on 'ex ante' data – in other words, the prior knowledge we have about friend-respondents before any research commences, and the need to be extremely careful about using this information in our work. The fourth issue is the possibility of reducing friends to little more than paper stereotypes, of objectifying them in our writing so that their individuality is stripped away. Then I comment on the specific challenges of respondent validation when those respondents are also our intimates. I include observations from my friend-respondents throughout, based on their reading of a draft of the paper. Although I concentrate on qualitative research with friends, I believe my arguments relate to some degree to any empirical project where MOS researchers enrol existing contacts. I think they are similarly relevant for those of us using snowball samples, where we ask our contacts to identify members of their networks who might also participate in our research.

Interestingly, the recruitment of respondents from amongst our personal networks is not commonly reported in qualitative MOS publications. Other than Haynes' and Karra and Phillips' work, and my own (Author, 2004), the recent exceptions I have found are summarized in Table 1 below. All these studies used qualitative interviews or focus groups. Some justify their sampling tactics on the basis of access difficulties posed by other approaches. But any additional commentary is limited to remarks on the lack of generalizability inherent in convenience sampling. None contains any reflection on the ethics of this kind of convenience sampling, as Table 1 also establishes.

Table 1: Convenience samples in recent MOS research

Authors	Research focus	Respondents	Sampling technique	Justification of sampling technique	Additional reflections on sampling technique
Vandenbosch, Saatcioglu and Fay (2006)	The management of ideas in organizations	53 US executives	Approached 'members of a business school visiting committee, business associates, university alumni and people suggested by interested colleagues' (p. 267)	Convenience sampling suitable as authors sought to build theory: like other exploratory work, 'generalizability [was therefore] a secondary concern' (p. 267)	Acknowledgement that a larger sample would be needed to test findings in other contexts (p. 279)
Richardson (2009)	Internationally mobile academics	30 British academics working in other countries (and a more 'strategic' Canadian sample – p.	Four countries selected where researchers had 'professional contacts' (p. S163)	'the significant challenges of collecting data across international boundaries' (p. S163)	None

		S163)			
Adams and van Eerde (2012)	How managers in Madrid relate to time	30 Spanish and non-Spanish managers	All selected ‘through previously known contacts’. Intention was to recruit managers with work experience in Spain and elsewhere, from a variety of organizations (p. 178).	None	None
Belgorodskiy *et al.* (2012)	The gender pay gap in New Zealand and UK IT labour markets	70 New Zealand and 14 UK respondents (study also employed survey data)	None	None	None
Li *et al.* (2012)	Are expectations of independent directors of Chinese listed	30 respondents	Use of ‘personal and professional contacts in China’ to ‘provide a	Random sampling not possible because of access difficulties.	Acknowledgement that a ‘random, larger and more comprehensive sample’ in future work would

	companies realistic?		pool of potential companies we could access' (p. 210)	Study exploratory however, and so sample deemed suitable (p. 210)	overcome the limitations of theirs (p. 219)
Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012)	Do workers provide better service to customers with whom they share a characteristic (eg, ethnicity)?	20 ethnic Turks living in Germany (study also gathered data from gay men in the US)	Selected from a sample of 'Turkish graduate students and Turkish families' (p. 245)	All respondents were known to the Turkish interviewer, so 'he was able to obtain rich data on a sensitive topic that many Turks do not discuss' (p. 245)	None
Snell *et al.* (2013)	Perceived undervaluing of unobtrusive elements of good performance and over-emphasis on mistakes by managers	63 Hong Kong Chinese respondents	Began by interviewing personal contacts then used snowballing (p. 260)	Sensitive subject matter and importance of 'face' to Chinese respondents meant use of personal contacts was necessary (p. 260)	Reflections on its limitations due to single location and ethnicity of interviewees (p. 272, p. 274)

I have now identified the gap I seek to fill in qualitative MOS research and the reasons why I think it needs to be filled. As I have also stated, commentary on the ethical challenges of researching friends certainly exists in other disciplines. I make use of several such contributions, as well as other commentaries on research ethics, throughout this paper. However, Haynes's and Karra and Phillips' insightful work aside, I have found no such discussions in MOS, even where researchers acknowledge the use of convenience samples. Of course I have also only found a small number of recent studies where qualitative MOS researchers report enrolling existing contacts. So perhaps I should conclude that convenience sampling is something very few of us practise. However, I don't actually think this is the case. My experience suggests we often advise our students to employ this approach for their dissertations and theses, due to expedience. I also believe convenience samples generated from personal networks are far more commonly used than MOS publications indicate. After all, even in more avowedly reflexive MOS scholarship, detailed accounts of methodological decision making are usually conspicuous by their absence. And we have been slow to participate in debates around research ethics taking place in other social sciences – including those about research with friends. Indeed Cunliffe and Karunanayake comment that 'within organization and management studies … articles addressing research relationships and positionality are relatively rare' (2013, p. 365); and Whittle *et al.* echo this in arguing that 'the process of negotiating the research relationship is rarely studied in great detail in the management literature' (2013, p. 3). Further, as I have suggested elsewhere, if we don't write about our methodological practices and their attendant ethics, perhaps 'they recede into the background such that empirical praxis may indeed come to be seen as lacking 'substance' or importance when compared to theoretical insights' (Authors, 2008, p. 1526). Outlets like *Organizational Research Methods* and the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography* are welcome antidotes to this trend, as of course is Methodology Corner.

To set my discussion of convenience sampling amongst friends in qualitative MOS research in context, the next section outlines the aforementioned 2008-2009 longitudinal research (Author, 2011) in more detail. This involved my friend-respondents Bella, Catherine, Georgie, Judith, Madeleine and Wendy.[1]

I get by with a little help from my friends

Prior to the 2008-2009 project, I ran focus groups with these and five other female friends on similar issues in 2002 (Author, 2004). This earlier project explored the intersections between 30-something professional women's relationships, careers and lives in London, given substantial evidence that it was a propitious time to do so. The participants all belonged to the relevant social group, so this convenience sample was also purposive as well as being straightforward to generate within the usual limitations of time. Access negotiations for both projects were relatively easy because rapport and empathy already existed between us. Moreover, my sampling approach was based on the fact that the themes I was exploring were ones we chatted about in the normal course of our friendships.

The empirical work for these sister projects took place according to the standard ethical parameters of an open and explicit data gathering process, with assurances of confidentiality, anonymity and respondent validation built in. Table 2 reproduces abridged versions of the invitation email and the respondent validation email, sent in August 2008 and March 2009 respectively, for the second project (Author, 2011). The former talks about what I sought from my friend-respondents and how the data would be used. It also guarantees anonymity and confidentiality. The latter asks these women to identify anything they wanted me to 'add, amend or remove' from a good draft version of the piece. I moved institutions shortly after the earlier paper (Author, 2004) was finalized and so I don't have email records of the same correspondence for this project. No hard copy documents remain either. However, such emails would have been written in very similar ways.

Table 2: Abridged access and respondent validation emails

Abridged access email, August 2008	Abridged respondent validation email, March 2009
Lovely ladies … You may remember about five years ago taking part in some focus groups that I ran focusing on women's lives, loves and work in London. This is an incredibly cheeky request, especially to Elizabeth as I haven't contacted you for ages and Georgie who I only bumped into again in the summer after God knows how long, but I was wondering whether you might be willing to help me out again on a similar project. Basically I have been asked to write a chapter for a [reference removed for blind review]. These, as Georgie and Elizabeth will know, are massively popular in academic publishing right now but difficult to produce for as chapters need to focus on something you are reasonably 'expert' in, be accessible to students but also academically up to scratch, and also say something new and interesting. The eds have asked me to do something (and I quote) '[removed for blind review]' … Anyway to cut a very long story short I have always felt that I never made the most of those	Hi [name] I have finally produced the attached which is a 'good' first draft of the focus groups revisited stuff. If you have time I'd really appreciate you having a goz at it and letting me know of anything you would like me to add, amend or remove. This is, as I say in there somewhere, about allowing you some form of control over how the text represents you and to make sure I haven't got you totally and entirely wrong anywhere. There's no mad rush as although I have to send the editors this draft by Tuesday next (and am gonna send it today because I've done as much as I can at the moment) this will then be reviewed and I will probably have to make further changes as a result. So the final MS isn't due until the end of August, and I would need your comments say by mid July latest. Anyway do fire away with as much or as little as you want to say. Apologies for not managing to get this out for comment well in advance of the first deadline so I could make all the changes beforehand, but the usual excuses apply. I've also found this chapter very difficult to write and am not quite sure why.

focus group data. They produced an article which I am still very proud of but I never went back to all the lovely data and did anything else with them. I was considering trying to do that for the [reference removed] but in all honesty it feels wrong because I know things have changed for most of you (as they have for me ;)) pretty significantly since then and I would feel like I was misrepresenting you. So what I was wondering was, if the eds agree to what I am proposing (and I haven't checked with them yet), would you be willing to update your biog, read through specific sections of the paper I published first time round as I am not planning to revisit all of it, plus some summaries of data that weren't included about related issues, and just comment on where you are 'at' now with regard to your original remarks? This would all be done by (individual) e-mail as everyone is so scattered now plus I don't want to take any more of your time than I am already asking for. Anonymity and confidentiality would of course be respected. I'd be trying to send stuff to you by mid-Oct latest and would ask for responses by say mid-Nov.	OK that's it for now. Thanks again millions and millions for doing all of this for me: appreciate it loads. And no pressure if you really can't face making any comments, or if you don't have any :)

Although the earlier project was conducted at a time when my then institution had no ethical approval system, the second was approved through the procedure at [institution removed for blind review]. This consisted of submitting outline projects to a Department Ethics Officer who approved these where no specific problems were identified. One section of the relevant form asked 'whether or not your research raises any particular ethical issues and how you plan to address those issues'. I referred to the sensitivity of the themes, the use of email to gather data, secure data storage, guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity, use of respondent validation, my [institution removed] email account being password protected and so on. I did not state that the respondents were friends, neither did the form encourage me to.[2] Nonetheless, I vividly recall approaching the process as a bureaucratic hurdle to be leapt. At the point of seeking ethical approval, in fact, I had already contacted my friends to see if they would participate. I had even collected some data.

I could duck these issues by criticizing the system itself and invoking the flaws of anticipatory ethical review procedures for assessing qualitative research, given the impossibility of identifying from the beginning what the risks might be. As O'Connell Davidson (2008, p. 63) remarks, no one can predict how any human relationship - a friendship, a research connection or one which is both/ and – will turn out. Space does not permit an extended review of the relevant literature, but Tillmann-Healy (2003, p. 740) emphasizes such unpredictability in the context of researching friends in particular. But relying on these arguments would be an unwieldy post hoc rationalization on my part. I actually believe I was simply reassured by having 'ticked the boxes' of the ethical approval procedure and therefore felt I had 'done enough' to proceed.

It was not until I was writing up the 2008-2009 data that it very belatedly struck me that my convenience sampling – perhaps especially in the second project, as I asked the six respondents to reflect on the original findings and what had changed for them in the interim – raises a number of ethical difficulties. Indeed the respondent validation email in Table 2 records my observation that 'I've also found this chapter very difficult to write and am not quite sure why'. When I eventually began to reflect on and read about the ethics of my sampling, I also remembered I had undertaken a project in the late 1990s on women's experiences of their bodies, using the same approach to recruit most participants. These included work colleagues (some of whom were also personal friends, one a former housemate) and my postgraduate students. And my career has undoubtedly benefitted from all these studies. From the 2002 and 2008-2009 data I published a journal article (Author, 2004), which was then republished in an edited volume (Author, 2006), as well as the most recent piece (Author, 2011). The embodiment project produced three chapters in edited volumes and two in journals (Author, 1999, 2000; Authors, 2000; Authors, 2001; Authors, 2004).

In many ways, then, the late arrival of my concerns is astonishing. Like Browne (2003, p. 141), who also researched her friends, I am genuinely surprised that the ethical implications of my convenience sampling did not occur to me for such a long time. Although I do not have room to reflect on the embodiment project, everything I discuss here pertains to that research as well; perhaps especially to the interviews I conducted with my students, due to the power relationships in play. I should add that none of the publications from the embodiment data states that many of the respondents were personal and professional contacts. Even more remarkably, neither does the 2011 chapter; although I mention in the 2004 piece that 'all my respondents were friends, or friends of friends' (p. 1824).

Looking back, I suspect I eventually began to experience the discomfort I describe above in the wake of another project. This is the aforementioned Authors (2008) paper. It marked the beginning of my preoccupation with research ethics and was finalized not long before the 2008-2009 data gathering began. One of the claims we make there is that research 'texts are frequently constructed such that respondents' voices are subordinated to the presumed authority of the researcher' (Authors, 2008, p. 1529), and I expect this was fairly fresh in my mind when writing these data up. Certainly by then I had begun to change my practices in other areas we discuss in the Authors (2008) paper; including de-emphasizing my 'expertise' in author biographies. Nonetheless, I am at a loss to explain why – when we had criticized the 'hurdle' approach to ethics in the same discussion – I did not reflect more carefully on the ethical review procedure earlier in the 2008-2009 project. Nor can I explain my omission of my relationships with the six respondents in the resultant publication.

Having set the focal project in context, I now move to my discussion proper. I begin with the theme of betraying what began, during the writing up of the 2008-2009 data, to feel increasingly like confidences.

From 'private' to 'public'

The frankness and depth of the narratives I collected from my six friend-respondents are, I feel, in large part a product of our friendships. Similarly, McConnell-Henry *et al.* (2009-2010, p. 3) suggest that, in their experience, such connections produce very rich data 'because time has not been 'wasted' establishing a forum in which the participant feels comfortable opening up'. One of my anonymous reviewers also wrote that 'Other qualitative researchers will tell you that data gathering is actually enhanced by knowing respondents, especially when you are gathering sensitive data', something to which I return later.

But whilst writing the 2011 chapter, I began to experience what Fraser and Puwar (2008, p. 10) describe as follows:

> 'we take what are often intense private moments of exchange into the public realm in the name of a scholarly 'good'. The dissemination of primary data to a wider public can be plagued with a sense of betrayal and disloyalty.'

I found this 'sense of betrayal and disloyalty' especially profound when using data from Judith about the breakdown of her relationship with her girlfriend and her subsequent online search for a male partner 'because I couldn't stand the thought of the closeness you get with another woman. I wanted someone who would forever be at a distance from me' (quoted in Author, 2011, p. 151). She met and married Pavel as a result. Similarly evocative was Judith's disclosure that looking after her stepchildren triggered a desire for children of her own - something Pavel was much less keen on. Likewise, I remember being struck by the contrast between Bella's 2002 account of her strong urge to have children with her then husband and her 2008 suggestion that she was relieved they had not had a family, as well as her emerging ambiguity about having children with her partner Kieran. Significantly in this regard, Parry (2008, p. 35) refers to the apparently 'completely contradictory dynamics' of intimacy and research. As she establishes, intimacy concerns the private and personal whereas research is 'primarily revelatory – its purpose is to draw back the veil of secrecy'. And Howell (2004, p. 345) identifies the same tension I experienced, where she suggests it is friendships in research which often produce the richest and the most sensitive data but at the same time these are the relationships which we are especially 'reluctant to betray'.

As established earlier, the data gathering for the 2008-2009 project was conducted according to the standard ethical protocols of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality and respondent validation (see Table 2). So all six women were aware of how I planned to use the material they shared with me. Indeed, Bella told me she may have been *more* honest with a stranger-researcher, because as a friend she is concerned with what I think about her. And, as Howell (2004, p. 325) argues in the context of feminist research into gender-based violence, scholars 'may wish to enter women's accounts of such violence into the ethnographic record to document and accurately reflect the concerns which shape women's lives and choices'. MOS scholar Haynes, who has produced some of the very scarce commentary in our area on researching friends, makes the same point about her own work. She writes 'What is first articulated in a personal voice allows private perspectives and understandings to be communicated and formulated as public knowledge, to challenge social and cultural structures' (2006, p. 218). In other words, there is a greater public 'good', as Fraser and Puwar acknowledge, in representing individuals' stories in research texts, especially when the stories being told capture under-reported, complex and emotive realities – as I believe is the case in my work.

I could therefore offer the above as a retrospective defence of my decision to publish all of these narratives. But I cannot gauge whether Bella, Catherine, Georgie, Judith, Madeleine and Wendy forgot our email exchanges were conducted primarily in the name of research, and instead confided things to me as they would in our friendships. As Taylor suggests, 'Given the levels of intimacy that friends share, [they] are likely to divulge more to you, forgetting that you are recording and may potentially publish what they are saying' (2011, p. 14 – also see McConnell-Henry *et al.*, 2009-2010, p. 4; Tom and Herbert, 2002, p. 598). My familiarity with all six women means these lines are difficult to draw. Certainly Georgie told me that, although she tends to be open about what she thinks and feels anyway,

> 'I think I definitely did tell you things in a particular way, and with a particular level of intimate detail because you are a friend. I do not think I would … have been quite the same with another researcher who was a stranger to me.'

And, as a friend-researcher, I arguably have the capacity to affect these women's lives more than if I were a stranger, by moving our 'private moments of exchange' into the 'public realm'. Moreover, if it is difficult to predict how a qualitative project might turn out, as indicated earlier, then it is even more difficult to envisage how it will feel to have one's personal stories recounted in an academic publication. Still, by way of contrast, Judith suggested that 'for my part at least I definitely remembered that anything I said or wrote might end up in print'.

Hard stories and voyeurism

Staying with the broad theme of confidences and betrayals, the stories my six friends told me by email – and those recounted during the 2002 focus groups - were, as I suggest above, often 'hard stories'. I borrow this term from Tom and Herbert, who write that

> 'We may believe that the act of telling such stories contributes to greater understanding of the experience of loss and marginalization and to increased chances that we can address those harms, but even when we attempt to paint those telling the stories in the best of terms, it hurts to tell the stories' (2002, p. 600 – also see Haynes, 2006, p. 210).

The first part of what they have to say reflects the notion of a public good in research. But, as they add, it can be painful to tell hard stories. Similarly, McConnell-Henry *et al.* (2009-2010, p. 5) cite FitzGerald's observation about her doctoral research into experiences of chronic illness; her 'feeling of having let some people down upon concluding the interview process, noting that the responsibility associated with asking people for their life experiences was enormous'. They also refer to the guilt researchers may feel 'in association with ‘using’ participants or becoming excited by ‘juicy’ data at the expense of the participants’ feelings’ (p. 6). And Fraser and Puwar (2008, p. 5), following Bourdieu, identify the associated risk of exposing respondents to readers’ ‘voyeuristic gaze’; a gaze which may not do justice to their experiences and feelings. This is particularly significant for me because, like FitzGerald, the subject matter of my research projects was sensitive to begin with. I also made a conscious decision to approach my friends as potential respondents as I thought they would be more willing to talk to me about these issues; a similar strategy to that used by Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) and by Snell *et al.* (2013) (see Table 1).

Now it could equally be that involvement in my projects helped my ‘participants to feel heard, known, and understood’ (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 737). This is something which is a part of friendship anyway, but Judith’s comment on receipt of the access email for the 2011 chapter (see Table 2) is worth reproducing: ‘Totally in. I love being asked about myself!!! ;-)’. Georgie, commenting on the current paper, wrote ‘like ‘Judith’ … I like talking about myself … most people do, don’t you think? [A]nd I really did enjoy the participation in the research’. She added that being asked for comments on the present paper had encouraged her to re-read the earlier pieces, and that it was

> ‘really interesting to see where my head was then, how it had changed by 2008 and how it compares with my state of mind now ... you have kind of been a chronicler of parts of my life, and I am glad it is out there somewhere for me to go and look at … I felt neither a part of a voyeuristic activity, nor that you have ever represented me in a way that I did not recognize my own voice in … ’

Similarly, Haynes (2006) comments that perhaps her own concerns around her respondent Deborah telling hard stories were unfounded, because Deborah contacted her later to say how helpful the interview had been. Another of Haynes's participants, Laura, described their meeting as feeling like a 'therapy session' (p. 210). Drury *et al.* and Brannen (cited in McConnell-Henry *et al.*, 2009-2010, p. 5,. p. 7) also point to the cathartic possibilities of qualitative interviews for the respondent. On the other hand, Madeleine wrote to me during the 2008-2009 data gathering that her 'First thoughts were I've gone backwards and I'm nowhere near as sorted as I felt [in 2002] …. Oh dear'. So the opposite possibility exists, given Madeleine's unfavourable comparisons between her life at that point and her life six years earlier – although she added that negative retrospection is something to which she is prone anyway.

The ties that bind, the ties that blur

Also relevant to the theme of confidences and betrayals, what complicates matters is that my relationships with my six friend-respondents have outlasted both episodes of data gathering. It is well established that intimacy which develops during data collection may cause problems when the researcher leaves the field, because respondents can feel abandoned as a result (see, for example, Stacey, cited in Irwin, 2006, p. 158). But Irwin suggests the real risks might arise after the research ends and the connections continue. Neal and Gordon, likewise, note that their research with friends 'will continue to be part of our lives and of the lives of the women who shared information with us' (2001, #34). So the usual assumptions that research fields are 'there' or 'elsewhere' (Browne, 2003,

p. 134, following Sparke) - or that researchers leave the empirical site 'when there is little else to learn' (Rupp and Taylor, 2011, p. 484) - do not apply to my situation. I think the same is true of any MOS scholar who has pre-existing and enduring connections with their respondents, because everyone involved must live with the eventual research text(s). This may result in our respondents experiencing a different sort of abandonment to the one Stacey identifies; feeling exploited by a friend or colleague for career-related reasons, as McConnell-Henry *et al.* (2009-2010, p. 8) point out.

And, again as noted earlier, the data reported in the 2004 and 2011 publications mirror the conversations I have with these women 'back in' the territory of our friendships. I therefore agree with Tillman-Healy (2003, p. 741) when she writes that, even where information is 'non-privileged', being a friend-researcher makes it difficult to decide what to include in the finished text and what to omit. I certainly know more about the six women than any of my empirical data reveal. These 'ex ante' data – information acquired before either of my research projects took place or in the interim between them - are discussed by Neal and Gordon (2001, #28) when they emphasize the importance of not abusing personal knowledge of friends in research. Relatedly, MOS scholars Karra and Phillips comment on situations in Karra's ethnography where she 'found [herself] arguing with interviewees about details of a particular historical event such as who said what when or the sequence in which events occurred' (2008, p. 555).

Because the data gathering episodes in my projects could be bracketed off from the 'rest' of our friendships, I was very aware of what the 'actual' data were. I therefore made a conscious choice not to include any ex ante data even though introducing these would perhaps have made my publications more interesting. Indeed on at least one occasion I experienced something akin to what Karra describes when analysing my data and thinking 'That's not how *I* remember it happening!'. Nonetheless, I would argue that where 'research exchanges' are not clearly divided from 'friendship exchanges' we must scrutinize our draft publications for any inadvertent use of ex ante data and either remove them altogether or seek explicit permission to use them. McConnell-Henry *et al.* (2009-2010) offer additional advice in this regard which is to openly acknowledge any pre-existing knowledge of our participants in the questions we ask them and to frame questions accordingly – referring back to a particular episode in a friendship, for example.

To summarize the argument so far, then, Tillmann (2009, p. 678, citing Ellis in part; also see Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 741) refers to the balancing act where researchers working with friends need to honour their 'relational responsibilities' to them and present these respondents' 'lives in a complex and truthful way for readers'. Huisman (2008, p. 379), McConnell-Henry *et al.* (2009-2010, pp. 3-4) and Moreno Figueroa (2008, p. 76) also allude to this problematic. Equally, Haynes says she was aware of 'serving an academic audience while also remaining faithful to forms of knowledge gained in domestic, personal and intimate settings' (2010, p. 224). Interestingly, I also experienced the tensions around this balancing act in reverse, when I received a request from the editors of the collection where the 2011 piece was published. They asked me to reduce the data analysis in my draft chapter in favour of extended coverage of the relevant literatures, because this was more in keeping with the book's trajectory and objectives. But I found this frustrating since I felt my respondents' voices became quieter as a result, despite my concerns about revealing too much about them. In this instance, I was less concerned about some form of over-exposure of their private lives, and more about silencing them in favour of the addition of academic commentary.

Freeze-framing and objectification

This last point opens up questions about the ethics of representing friend-respondents. Here I draw my initial inspiration from Moreno Figueroa (2008). During her research into *mestiza* (racially mixed) Mexican women's experiences of racism, she asked her participants to bring personal photographs with them to guide her life story interviews. Moreno Figueroa uses Barthes' *Camera Lucida* as a starting point for her account of the decision about whether to publish these photographs after the fact. In *Camera Lucida,* Barthes discusses a photograph of his mother and her brother as children, which he discovered shortly after her death. He suggests that only in this image was he able to 'find the truth of the face I had loved' (cited in Moreno Figueroa, 2008, p. 69). But Barthes does not reproduce the photograph in the book. As Moreno Figueroa writes,

> 'He doesn't want to run the risk of reducing his mother to the 'ordinary', and chooses not to show the picture. It seems as if he doesn't trust us – the viewers and readers of the text – and our subjective capabilities, to make this image signify. It exists only for him, for us it would be 'indifferent'' (2008, p. 69).

Reading Moreno Figueroa's commentary made me wonder whether my readers are able to make my writing about my friends 'signify'. Have I instead reduced these six women to two-dimensional characters on the page, stripping away their individuality and making them 'archetypal' divorcees (Bella), stepmothers (Judith), mothers *manqué* (Judith), expectant mothers (Wendy and Georgie), 'working mothers' (Catherine and Georgie), single women (Madeleine) and so on? Maybe my aim of 'continuing to draw down the wider social trends discussed in the academic literature – here around intimacy, motherhood, childlessness and life-work 'balance' - to where they are experienced (or not) in everyday life' (Author, 2011, p. 160) exacerbates this. After all, my friends 'appear' in the context of an extended review of research around these themes and the inevitable limitations of space do not help. Moreover, as my former colleague [name removed for blind review] pointed out, analysis of the kind I offer in both the 2004 and 2011 publications typically seeks what it is that characterizes the experiences and attitudes of our respondents as members of a social group: it treats them as 'one of a kind'. She suggested this is entirely at odds with what we try to do in our relationships with friends; in other words, to celebrate them as individuals, as special.

Like Barthes, Moreno Figueroa, despite having permission from her respondents to use the photographs as she saw fit, decided not to publish them. She was concerned that the intimacy of the research exchange might have been `diluted in the process'. She also writes of 'the risk that the images would simply constitute a visual confirmation of the stereotypes that inform the discrimination these women experienced in the first place'. Moreno Figueroa adds 'I also wondered who would be looking? What contexts would inform their gaze?' (2008, p. 78). The same, of course, is true of the written word, because once it leaves the author's hands it is continually re-authored depending on who is reading it. Relatedly, I agree with Josselson that 'Language can never contain a whole person, so every act of writing a person's life is inevitably a violation' (cited in Ellis, 2007, p. 6).

O'Connell Davidson (2008) is especially persuasive on this violation when she writes of her retrospective concern that she has objectified Desiree, a sex worker about whom she conducted ethnographic research for five years and to whom she grew extremely close. She describes this as Desiree being in permanent 'freeze-frame' as ''a prostitute'', 'for ever impaled and frozen on the pages of books and journals' (2008, pp. 56-57). O'Connell Davidson finds it difficult to imagine that anyone could consent to such objectification. This is all despite her extensive discussions with Desiree about the direction and dissemination of the research and Desiree's full editorial rights over any draft texts. But it is heightened by the fact that Desiree has now quit sex work and her friendship with O'Connell Davidson has ended as a result. O'Connell Davidson writes that she knows Desiree has revised her thoughts about the profession. But she doesn't know how Desiree feels about her publications now, quite apart from the sadness she has experienced because of the end of their friendship.

On a similar theme, Gross (2012) offers a compelling account of surgery on a man suffering from terminal cancer with whom she became friendly during her ethnography of an oncology outpatient clinic. She suggests that 'specific rituals and symbolic elements' like surgical gowns and masks, draping of parts of the patient's body, general anaesthesia and sterile conditions 'work to suppress feelings of identification and compassion … not only in the medically socialised participants but in the lay observer as well' (p. 1179). Gross remarks that such respondent objectification does not remain constant during this or any other research endeavour. But, she says, researchers need to be alert to the possibility that, 'depending on the symbolic and ritualistic setting, even the most empathetic actor oscillates between [objectification and empathy]' (p. 1180). Similarly, my respondent Bella suggested that a degree of 'caricaturization' is unavoidable, even required, in the context of academic research. Nonetheless, it is something, as Gross suggests, which we should not overlook, in the navigation of scholarship involving our intimates most especially. This suggests to me that MOS scholars should raise 'caricaturization' explicitly with friend-respondents during access negotiation, and also acknowledge it in our publications.

Respondent validation and its discontents

One way I sought to alleviate my concerns around revealing too much, not giving my respondents sufficient voice or 'impaling' them in writing was sending a good draft of the 2011 chapter to each of the six women for commentary, excision, amendments etcetera (see Table 2). I did this for ethical reasons, not to verify the text as a representation of 'the real' - and Tillmann-Healy (2003, p. 744) suggests this is crucial when researching friends. For one piece, for example, she met to 'workshop' it face to face with the gay man and his father who are its subjects

(Tillmann, 2008). Similarly, Browne (2003, pp. 137-138) sent both draft text and data transcripts to her friend-respondents, as did Taylor (2011, p. 16).

Neal and Gordon also conducted respondent validation amongst their friend-respondents, and asked about the questions themselves – should they have posed different or additional queries? However, they received very tentative responses and wonder whether 'Given the mystique of research … we should have known this might happen' (2001, #26). Taylor (2011, p. 18), likewise, says she has tended to receive brief thank you notes from her friend-respondents as opposed to comments on the contents of drafts or transcripts. She wonders whether this is because of the way academics write, and the length of our draft manuscripts. This is echoed by Miller and Bell (2012, p. 62) when they remark that such requests might require 'a greater contribution from participants than they may have thought they were consenting to'. Similarly, Birch and Miller (2012, p. 102) suggest their experiences have led them to 'consider the ways in which we may be in danger of imposing research relationships, based on particular notions of participation, which are not shared by those whose lives we set out to study'. Tom and Herbert (2002, p. 604) agree that we never know who will want to be involved and at what level in respondent validation. We should expect, they say, differing reactions to any such request. Tom and Herbert (2002, p. 599) also point to the possibility that what we emphasize in and omit from our data analyses effects especial symbolic violence on respondents who like and trust us, especially if they regard us as expert as well, because this makes it harder for them to refute our claims.

I have no evidence that any of the above was at work in my own efforts to seek respondent validation for the 2011 piece - but I only received two written responses to my request. Judith said she trusted me and did not feel the need to read the paper with a fine toothcomb, and Madeleine said she found her own remarks amusing. Later, Georgie told me verbally that she liked the chapter. It is possible, then, that what Tom and Herbert suggest may be an issue here – but perhaps more because of my pre-existing relationships with these women than my academic style, verbosity, 'status' or 'expertise'. In other words, friend-respondents may be more likely, as Judith suggests, to believe that any research text will not misrepresent them – without actually reading it very carefully to make sure.

The danger of 'flooding' our texts with our own subjectivity, to the extent that it silences our respondents and our writing becomes an exercise in self-indulgence (Fine *et al.*, 2003), is also worth indexing. After all, the 'conventional' dichotomies between 'strangeness and membership, experience and innocence, knowledge and ignorance' (Coffey, 1999, p. 20) are fundamentally disrupted by research amongst friends, especially in the context of my projects. As regards the two discussed here (and several others, including my embodiment project), my own life trajectory involves ongoing reflection on similar issues - my relationships, my decisions around motherhood and the juggling of life and paid employment. The analyses I have produced are simultaneously my stories, inflected as ever through my own way of being-in-the-world, but perhaps even more so in these instances. This might suggest improved intersubjectivity based on shared life experiences as well as friendships, because my respondents and I are not speaking 'across worlds' (Browne, 2003, p. 133, following Staeheli and Nagar, and Raju). Also I am neither 'studying up' nor 'down', but 'across'. But at the same time there is an increased likelihood that my interpretations speak more loudly about me than they do about my respondents, as Duncombe and Jessop (2012, pp. 116-117) also point out in the context of Duncombe's interviews with 'liberal middle-class women whose tastes and lives seemed closer to her own' than those of the working-class women interviewed for the same project.

Browne's (2003, p. 135) words of caution are useful here. She says we should not assume when we research 'the same' that this affords us 'pure' insider status (also see Neal and Gordon, 2001, #10; Taylor, 2011, pp. 15-16). As such, careful and ongoing reflection on the nuances and complexities of the data in projects involving friends, particularly those to whom we are very similar, is even more important. This is so that we are aware of – and record in our publications – the possibilities of overlooking the apparently quotidian or mundane. Equally we might render data 'hypersalient', over-emphasizing certain things because we have experienced them ourselves, because we were involved in the events described and/ or because we have a strong emotional reaction to the accounts (Karra and Phillips, 2008, p. 554). On a related note, Haynes (2010, p. 229) adds that she was reluctant to be especially critical of the women she knew in her data analysis, around what she saw as 'domination within [their] marriages', for example, because of fears about how they would react. Taylor (2011, p. 14) makes the same point about what friend-researchers risk if they seem to offer a critique of the relevant field. I freely admit to avoiding any such commentary in the projects discussed here, as an instinctive stratagem to maintain the 'natural order' of my friendships (Taylor, 2011, p. 15). I don't regard this as especially problematic because of the value I place on these relationships, but I would suggest that this sort of reflection should also be an element in MOS publications of this type.

Conclusions and implications

As I remarked earlier, I feel I have benefitted from these various research exchanges with my friends much more than they have, given the addition of various publications to my CV. This is important because, along the way, I may have inadvertently compromised or exploited them in various ways. Indeed Huisman cites Langellier's compelling argument about 'the danger of participants' lived experiences (*capta*) becoming our *data*, grist for the academic mill that become commodities of privilege to improve our status in the academic worlds whilst reproducing structures of domination' (2008, p. 381 – Langellier's emphasis). Similarly, Haynes has had to balance her objective of highlighting the gendered iniquities of the accounting profession with 'more instrumental purposes of career outcomes and publication' (2010, p. 227 – also see Irwin, 2006, p. 158; Neal and Gordon, 2001, #37; O'Connell Davidson, 2008, p. 64; Tillmann-Healy, 2003, p. 742). And this is something that no anticipatory or ongoing ethical review procedure would be able to account for or resolve. Instead it is something that as researchers of other people's lives we need to bear in mind at all times during our empirical work.

But it is equally possible that I have spent several thousand words agonizing about a series of ethical issues which my friend-respondents aren't troubled by at all, something which Miller and Bell (2012, p. 72) acknowledge may also be true of their retrospective reflections on negotiating consent across a variety of qualitative projects. Neal and Gordon (2001, #41) point out that none of their friends raised any concerns about participating in their research either. They speculate that this might indicate discomfort which was difficult to speak about or 'perhaps … even more likely, lack of interest in the details of ethical research even among friends. We were the researchers and that was what we were there to do. These were our interests, not theirs'. Bella, similarly, told me that 'The stories and thoughts were mine but the research was yours – I rather thought it was for you to make of it what you would'. Equally, Tom and Herbert (2002, p. 602 – their emphasis) suggest there are definite benefits from 'close engagement with research participants. The strongest of these is that we create relationships that matter to *us* as well as to them, and thus *our* behavior is shaped by the desire to maintain important relationships.'

Indeed for me to raise the spectre of exploitation is perhaps to do a considerable disservice to my friends' intelligence. Drag queen Sushi, a member of the Key West community which participated in Rupp and Taylor's longitudinal research and with whom they have formed close friendships, commented that 'I've never felt exploited by you guys … You know. We joke around about it but I don't really understand the concept of exploitation. We're smart people' (quoted in Rupp and Taylor, 2011, p. 487). My respondent Madeleine agrees: 'I was perfectly fine about the whole thing', she wrote to me,

> 'and think that for you and for us (researchees) there [were] two entirely separate things going on but I didn't feel a conflict at all – [I] simply felt we would speak about stuff and you would then do your thing with it. I never felt compromised or invaded or anything negative at all.'

However, I still feel researching our friends represents particularly delicate ethical ground. I think some of this ground has to be navigated in any qualitative research project, and I certainly do not believe we should avoid research with friends. But to me this kind of convenience sampling has a number of important ethical implications. First, qualitative MOS researchers need to consider the possibility that friend-respondents will be more forthcoming in data collection than they would be with stranger-researchers. I believe we need to raise this during access discussions and to remind friend-respondents of it during data collection as well as during respondent validation. This will afford them every opportunity to excise especially intimate confidences where they see fit. Relatedly, the stories we are told by friend-respondents are more likely to be hard stories, so we need to reflect on how it might feel for them to narrate these as well as considering how much of a 'scholarly good' we serve by reproducing these stories in our publications. Moreover, friend-researchers and friend-respondents alike have to live with these publications after the fact; something which may get neglected in the process of research itself. If we were to share our previous publications with our friends beforehand, they would have a clearer sense of the eventual outputs before agreeing to take part. This may also assist in navigating the difficulties associated with objectifying our friends in print, by asking them from the outset to consider how it might feel to become a two-dimensional representative of a specific social group.

Considerable care is also needed in dealing with ex ante data, so that these data should either not be used at all or their use formally agreed to. Alternatively, prior knowledge of friends could form an explicit part of the way that we collect data in these projects. In terms of respondent validation – a particular imperative in research with friends – we need to consider whether our existing relationships with our friend-respondents could mean that they simply trust us to 'do the right thing'. Further, we need to reflect on the specific challenges of 'studying across', and be alert to the sorts of emphases we may impose on the data as a result. These are more likely to be data which speak directly to our own life experiences and we may therefore inadvertently silence our friend-respondents in the process of analysing them. We also need to be aware of and acknowledge in print that we may have omitted particular data or particular interpretations in the context of researching friends.

Overall, I agree entirely with Tillmann's (2010a, p. 126 – also see Tillmann, 2008, p. 378) insistence that when we research our friends we should put 'fieldwork relationships on par with the project' itself. I also hope I have offered other qualitative MOS scholars food for thought in terms of research with friends and other contacts – the ethics of which we have thus far left largely undiscussed.

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Notes

1. These are all pseudonyms.

2. The current version of the [institution removed] ethical approval procedure is more insistent on the finer detail of the projects submitted. Anything above 'minimal risk' - as defined by the ESRC - is automatically referred by Department Ethics Officers to a cross-disciplinary committee. But the ESRC definition does not refer to research with friends or other contacts. Moreover, although the [institution removed] code of practice requires these committees to consider whether 'the method of recruitment proposed puts undue pressure on individuals to participate', the overall procedure is similar to the one I followed in 2008, except it is now online and contains a few extra 'tick box' type questions. As such, without the requirement that staff and students indicate whether they plan to research their friends or other contacts, I imagine projects like mine are still being submitted, without this detail – and being approved.

3. HTML version cited here – 42 paragraphs.