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Pandemic Observations on Research as Impact: Insider Research and Academic Kindness



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Introduction

Doing social research during a pandemic is difficult but doing transnational research in a phase of lockdown was a particular challenge. To approach this challenge for my doctoral research on how queer friendships developed during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and the United Kingdom, I conducted video-based discussions with friend groups and dyads, asking them to share their experiences of the pandemic. The discussions were conducted in 2021 via video-call, as most interaction took place digitally during phases of lockdown. My intention was to mirror this experience of video-based social interaction, and thereby to meet the friends in a space that many used increasingly in their private lives, too (Self, 2021; Watson, Lupton and Michael, 2021). I focussed on how I could gain insight into friendships as the object of my research by using friendship as a method, and whether it was feasible to conduct discussions via video-call while maintaining ethical and academic standards. I addressed data protection and informed consent with participants, but only later considered what the (group) discussions would be like for my participants. Being invited to a conversation with their friends that would be guided but also observed closely could be challenging for them. Many had gotten to know this setting rather intimately over the first nine months of the pandemic, and suddenly a researcher intruded into this space. However, when the researcher is an insider to the community or to the friendship itself, participants' experiences with the research are not entirely straight forward. Thus, in this essay, I explore the impact of my research on the participants of the study, using the individual participant experience as a point of departure. In particular, I focus on the positive impact on participants and evaluate the role of kindness in this (insider) researcher-researched relationship. In line with the theme of this issue, academic kindness, I ask how kindness translates to the research situation, in what ways I could and did offer kindness to my research participants, and what the limitations of kindness in this scenario are.

My consideration of the positive impacts of my research on the participants is inspired by a blog post by Maria Tomlinson, who researches 'menstrual activism and its impact'

(2021). Tomlinson's post explores the impact of her research on the teenagers participating in her study. She proposes that researchers 'can have a positive impact during [their] fieldwork itself', rather than through the (published) results alone (2021). Through sharing what her participants gained from participating in focus groups, for example, the space to share experiences and ask Tomlinson questions, she shifts the focus from 'what we could learn from our participants' to 'what they might gain from taking part' (Tomlinson, 2021) in the research. I apply Tomlinson's question of what the benefits for the participants are to the fields of insider and friendship research, fields that previously concerned themselves mainly with questions of their merits for the research and negative impacts on participants (Taylor, 2011). While much attention has been paid to the relationships formed during research, much less attention was given to doing research with our own friends or participants who are friends with each other (Taylor, 2011).

As a small case study, I will explore a discussion I conducted with two close friends of mine who are close friends with each other. I picked this case from a larger sample of friend dyads and groups that I conducted discussions with for my PhD research, choosing only one case to examine in detail for the purpose of this paper (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 2). This dyad was suitable because it was one of few discussions in which a conflict between the friends was discussed and resolved in the conversation that I facilitated. Based on the discussion with this dyad, I examine the benefits of my research for the pair and think through research as impact in pandemic times. Their discussion was framed by the early weeks of the pandemic, in which the two of them had differing views on personal safety, and the research setting gave them a space to thoroughly discuss their respective positions and for apologising to each other. The main benefit for them, I argue, was the facilitation of a space which explicitly presupposed a conversation about their friendship for my research, thus being somewhat public, but was also intimate because it was facilitated by me, an intimate insider in this context (cf. Taylor 2011). Ultimately, they both described the experience as beneficial. In what follows, I first give methodological context for my study, then I introduce two methodological approaches: *friendship as method* and *intimate insider research*. I then share three observations from my research and analyse them in light of Tomlinson's invitation to consider how the process might benefit participants. Lastly, I identify some of the limitations I encountered in conducting these conversations on friendship during an ongoing pandemic.

Methodological context

To provide some context for how the (group) discussions were conducted, how I sampled participants, and how I communicated my 'insider' position to participants, I now briefly give an overview over the research process. Building on the method of group discussions (a qualitative method similar to focus groups but specifically located in social research, rather than the focus groups more closely aligned with market re-

search (Bohnsack, 2014)), I conducted discussions with groups and dyads. The discussions with dyads, while bearing the possibility to turn into a couple-interview (Hirschauer, Hoffmann and Stange, 2015), were more closely aligned with the group discussion format, which is why I refer to them as discussions rather than interviews. I did not interview the participants with a set of questions but instead offered initial prompts and invited the friends to talk to each other, allowing their conversations to flow more naturally. Therefore, I use the term (group) discussions to describe the approach. To sample participants, I used my network within queer communities in Germany and the UK to share my call for participants on social media and asked queer organisations to share the call on their websites and in their newsletters. Social media turned out to be the most successful sampling strategy, which also ensured that participants had access to my social media profiles¹, thereby getting insight into who I am. My profile illustrates my queerness and provides demographic data about my person. Furthermore, because many participants were friends of mine or friends of friends, I could be certain that my identification and positionality were transparent. Participants then approached me, expressing interest in participation, which I followed up by asking them to recruit their friends to join (Jones et al., 2018). I then shared with them a written overview of how the discussions would take place and how their data would be processed and stored, thereby asking them for their informed consent, which I confirmed once more during the video-meeting. I met once with each group, conducting one to two hours long discussions, and have made plans to meet with each group one more time in the future. Initiating the discussions, I shared what my role during the meeting would be: semi-silent observer who might occasionally interject to ask clarifying questions. I offered to answer any questions before or after the discussion, and participants asked a variety of questions regarding my research motivation, my positionality, and my progress. A few of the groups invited me to share my experiences of certain issues during the discussions, often related to the regional pandemic experience or my inspiration for this research topic. I answered all questions honestly and met participants with friendship as method in mind – explained in the following section.

Friendship as method and intimate insider research

Because the pandemic has exacerbated feelings of loneliness (Peterson, Vaughan and Carver, 2021), I had concerns about asking participants to share their experiences and asking them to be vulnerable in a digital space, from which they would ultimately return to their locked-down living situations (cf. Cheded and Skandalis, 2021). However, only a few of the participants lived alone; several visited each other or lived together and joined the call together, while others lived alone and called alone. To help support the transition from the potentially difficult conversation to the post-discussion solitude, I invited participants to decide how long they wanted to stay on the call, and in some cases concluded the discussions with informal chatting after I had stopped the recording. As an intimate insider researcher, I knew some of the participants privately,

¹ I shared via Twitter and Instagram.

some were acquaintances, some were close friends of mine. While this constituted part of my research design, which I approached with friendship as method in mind (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), it also raised ethical questions of intimate insider research (Taylor, 2011).² In the following section, I introduce both approaches and put them in conversation with academic kindness.

Friendship as method, introduced by Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003), suggests that researchers approach their participants with care and an ethic of friendship. Tillmann-Healy developed close friendships with a group of gay men whom she was researching and discovered the merits of shared intimacy for ethnographic approaches. Importantly, Tillmann-Healy writes, 'Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project' (735). The aim of friendship as method is not only to approach the participants, but the research itself, with friendship in mind. That is, the 'practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship' (734) should be central to research with a friendship as method approach. I find Tillmann-Healy's initiative to utilise the practices and contexts of friendship deeply applicable for my work: friendships, alongside most interpersonal interactions, shifted to digital spaces during the first lockdown. This means that conducting (group) discussions with participants who share friendship over video-call allowed me to meet many (though not all) of the participants in the digital setting they were using to spend time with their friends. The 'practices, the pace, [and] the contexts' of friendship (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) were central to how I conducted the discussions.

I shared different levels of intimacy and acquaintance with my participants. Some were close friends of mine, others were friends of friends, and some I was meeting for the very first time.³ I wanted to approach all participants with an ethic of friendship, but of course the degrees of closeness I experienced towards them, and they towards me, varied, too. To find a level of connection with all of them, one that was inspired by the ethic of friendship, was born out of academic kindness. Academic kindness, here, expands beyond ethical research standards, to me it signifies a more personal level of investment, a more egalitarian and more caring approach to the relationship between researcher and participants. Centring kindness allowed me to approach each participant in each group with compassion and with openness, ultimately, it helped me approximate an ethic of friendship.

Researching the friendships of queer people, I was already an insider by being queer myself and sampling from communities I was part of, but this was reinforced by my friendship to several of the participants. Jodie Taylor (2011) calls this 'intimate insider research', that is, researching from not only an insider position, but an insider position

² I have briefly discussed the ethical considerations of this study elsewhere (Schwarz, 2022).

³ In contrast to Tillmann-Healy, who was acquainted with many of her participants but developed friendships through the research, I already shared friendship with some of my participants. This is mainly owed to the snowball sampling technique I used, whereby I initiated the sampling process through my personal network in queer communities in Germany and the UK (cf. Jones et al., 2018).

in which close relationships with participants exist. Taylor points out how knowledge of another impacts the perception of them, illustrating this with an example: Taylor's friend painted her portrait as a birthday present, to which Taylor subsequently asked herself, 'why had he chosen to represent me in this way and what part of knowing me resulted in this particular two-dimensional image?' (4). Taylor suggests that the level of knowledge of another, or the level of intimacy of the (pre-existing) relationship, influences the level of detail the researcher might receive from their participant. Interestingly, Taylor's discussion of the ethics of friendship in research expands beyond the ethics of research. Taylor refers to the 'rules of engagement' in friendships, which may at times compromise the research: 'what you allow yourself to see as a researcher and what you choose to communicate with outsiders; that is, what you say and what you do not say' (13). In other words, as friend-researchers, it is paramount to recognise and acknowledge when shared information should not be included in the research (13). Furthermore, intimacy goes both ways, and the 'friend-informant' may want to 'please' their friend, which is why Taylor cautions 'against the exclusive use of friend-informants in social research' (15).

Taylor's conception of the intimate insider highlights the complexities of friendship in research, and equally points out the complexities of research on friendship. This is precisely the point of departure for this essay: not only does friendship complicate the research situation, but this ambiguity impacts the participants and their friendships, too. Because the topic of this study is so personal, and the participation so intimate, kindness is a central facet of my research relationship to the participants. The (group) discussions about experiences with the pandemic got increasingly emotional, and the participants and I often shared experiences of isolation and loneliness. My position as researcher was not as fixed as I expected it to be. I had to approach each participant with kindness and compassion, but I also had to extend this kindness to myself. When participants spoke of experiences that I shared, we began to experience the situation mutually. In (group) discussions with my friends we tackled topics that we had not discussed in private conversations before and in (group) discussions with people I had not met before, we built profound emotional connections. In one case, I subsequently developed a great friendship with a participant. Going back to Tillmann-Healy, then, she wrote that 'friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying 'them' to studying us' (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, 735). 'Studying us' can take various forms. For my study it meant that the dynamics between the participants and myself, as well as my affective responses to the settings and discussions, will be integrated in my research. 'Studying us' also meant that participants were incorporated into the research with an ethic of friendship, that the study design honoured their interests and vulnerabilities – vulnerabilities that were often exacerbated by the pandemic, as I show in the following section.

Observations of kindness

Researching friendship and the pandemic during the pandemic demanded an immersive engagement with it, both on my part and for the participants. Not only was my research setting demarcated by the pandemic restrictions, with many participants only being able to see each other digitally, but the conflicts and difficulties and opportunities that arose from the pandemic became central parts of our conversations. The research was accompanied by the overarching theme of loneliness and isolation; an experience shared by me and many participants, as transpired in the discussions. Indeed, this shared experience initiated my thoughts about the impact of my research: the setting and format of my research provided a space for friends to be in friendship with another, to *do* friendship. This is what I propose as one aspect of academic kindness: the provision of a space for friendships to unfold in times of social distancing. While this was not the impetus for my research originally, it is the aspect I would like to now highlight.

In what follows, I discuss one specific case, one friendship pair that participated in my study, based on a transcript of the discussion conducted in May 2021. The dyad, Dafne and Joanne, have been friends with each other and with me for seven years.⁴ In March 2020 they lived together in a shared house, with two other flatmates, in a large UK city. Most of our conversation for this study reflected on that time. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the research setting offered a space to discuss difficult topics, and to explore a conflict they had experienced in the run up to and during the first lockdown. I have picked out three examples of discussed topics that illustrate the beneficial prospects to their friendship and to them individually.

The first example is a reflection on Joanne's behaviour towards Dafne before the first nationwide lockdown in the UK. Joanne had confidence in the political and public health response to the pandemic and trusted that the newfound coronavirus would be handled swiftly. Dafne, conversely, was in the process of a medical assessment and unsure if she qualified as vulnerable to the virus. Dafne had carefully asked Joanne to take precautions. Joanne recalled Dafne asking, 'Are you sure it's a good idea to go to that gig?' It took Joanne some more time to realise that, as she said, 'this [Covid-19] is like an actual thing that's not going to go away'. Only later did Joanne understand Dafne's vulnerability to the virus and her concerns about infection. During the conversation Joanne explained that she now understood how she had dismissed Dafne's concerns, and that she had not taken the risk seriously. She apologised to Dafne.

The second example is of Dafne reflecting on her relationship to her community in their city, and her reactions to her friends' behaviour. Dafne made use of the setting to share her perspective and her frustration with their community. She spoke about the lack of solidarity she received from the other two people living in the house, as well as the larger community and circle of friends, who are politically left wing and for the most part queer. She explained how disappointed she was to see how quickly her friends

⁴ All names have been pseudonymised.

abandoned all precautions when the government lifted many restrictions. Supposedly ‘anti-authoritarian’ people began listening to government advice as soon as it fit their agenda, when in other situations Dafne had known them to be respectful of other’s boundaries. She expressed frustration because she felt that their solidarity with disabled and chronically ill people was severely lacking.

A third example is of Joanne telling the story of a falling out that occurred between her and her close friend Anna, one of the other people living in the house. Anna had disrespected the boundaries Joanne had set in terms of reducing the risk of an infection with Covid-19, which Joanne pointed out and asked for her boundaries to be respected. Anna reacted with anger and did not offer understanding, leading them to cease all contact. This was described by Joanne as a heart-breaking ‘friendship break-up’. Dafne, who had already moved out at this point, knew of the situation but had ‘forgotten how bad it was’.

The first example most clearly demonstrated how they utilised the space to mend their issues, the second showed how Dafne used the space to express frustration with her wider community, and the third allowed Joanne to share her experiences after Dafne had moved out. All three examples show how the two of them utilised this space to air their grievances, to apologise, and to share their stories with me and each other, illustrating the benefits of this research for their friendship with each other, but also for the friendship between the three of us. To return to the theme of this issue, I retrospectively consider this situation one of shared kindness. I propose that creating a confidential space that is solely dedicated to the friendship between participants in a time when friendship was difficult to do is an act of academic kindness. While the purpose of the discussion was for my research, with the aim of studying their experiences with friendship during the pandemic and their engagement with the digital space, academic kindness can be understood as its by-product. Dafne expressed that the conversation gave her a chance to reflect on her friendships and on how they were impacted by the early phases of the pandemic. She later told me that this conversation was an important step in processing the pandemic experience. Moreover, for Dafne to express these frustrations felt, to me, like an offer to understand her position better, both as a researcher and as a friend. I have gained insight not only as researcher but was also privy to topics that had not been shared with me before, despite regular contact and conversations. At a later point, Joanne described the conversation as cathartic, which aligned with my impression of the conversation at the time. Having known that there were issues in the shared house, which ultimately lead to all of them moving out at different times during the first lockdown, I invited them to reflect on their experiences which was accepted by both participants.

While I primarily focus on the academic kindness brought about by the research setting, I suggest, too, that academic kindness in this instance was reciprocal. Their participation in my study was a kindness they extended to me; to vulnerably share their pandemic experiences, their conflicts, and their feelings with me was a kindness. In

other words, the participants took part in the study out of their own motivation; their motivations might include contributing to research into queer communities or, one group expressed, as a past time on a boring lock-down evening. Nonetheless they were communicating with their friends and allowed me to observe and record them, which I perceived as a kindness that my study relied on (and that much empirical research relies on). Likewise, in facilitating a conversation that ended up being valuable to them, I had tried to appreciate and reciprocate this kindness. The impact of research on the participants, then, can be understood as an act of academic kindness, just as their participation itself was an act of academic kindness.

Limitations

Of course, academic kindness is not a catch-all fix for research. There are questions around accountability and vulnerability for doing research with friends. For instance, Gesa Kirsch argues that participants might feel “misunderstood or betrayed” (Kirsch, 2005: 2163) when their friendly conversation is later analysed – these feelings might occur despite their informed consent to participation. Kindness can be a way to mitigate these feelings of betrayal and instead offer appreciation for participant’s vulnerability. Moreover, Jodie Taylor points out that as intimate insider researchers we might be privy to information outsiders would not be (Taylor, 2011: 14). This applies to my research and naturally the topic of my research came up time and again in private conversations with some of my ‘friend-informants’ (Taylor, 2011), too. Whenever I wanted to incorporate information from such conversations, I checked with them first. Furthermore, the practice of communicative validation, that is, confirming the researcher’s understanding of the research conversation with the participants (Degele and Winker, 2007; Ganz and Hausotter, 2020), must guide friendship research in order to uphold the friendship ‘rules of engagement’ (Taylor, 2011: 13).

The pandemic element complicated the situation further: a lack of spaces for friendships, and queer friendships in particular, to unfold during phases of lockdown (Trott, 2020; Anderson and Knee, 2021) meant that the digital spaces that offered opportunities for sociality and friendship were more valuable, but also more challenging. The digital setting acted as a constant reminder of the distance and isolation, while at the same time providing relief to some of these difficult affects. Many queer spaces were translated to digital spheres, like digital pride celebrations and queer book clubs. Mohammed Cheded and Alexandros Skandalis explored the affective and corporeal translations in those types of digital queer spaces (Cheded and Skandalis, 2021). They showed that digital queer spaces did indeed provide connection and fostered a sense of community, but ‘also contributed to a sense of frustration at the end of online social interactions; when closing the laptop, this meant a return to a space that felt terribly empty’ (345). This risk is there, too, with my friendship research, because the contrast of the connection experienced during the discussion to the post-discussion solitude could be challenging. As I invited friends to join me and share their experiences, I asked them to be vulnerable in front of their friends. In socially distanced times, this

often meant opening up about the experiences of loneliness, the lack of connection and the reminiscence and hope for a more connected time (offline). To then release participants back into their homes in which many of them were isolated, several in challenging living situations, was hard – for me and participants. I tried to mitigate this challenge by offering informal conversation after the discussions and inviting participants to leave or end the discussion when they felt like it. Based on what they shared in the study, I could assume that not all of my participants were returning to a ‘space that felt terribly empty’ (Cheded and Skandalis, 2021); some returned to shared and social living spaces. Retrospectively I would have liked to offer more specific solutions or support for subsequent feelings of loneliness or distress. My hope for all of them, though, was that the friends whom they spoke to in the group discussions were friends whom they could reach out to if they felt lonely after participation. Conducting this research with groups rather than individuals, while limiting the insights into pandemic experiences to well-connected individuals, did ensure to some extent that participants had a support network.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to demonstrate that research participation can have a positive impact on participants and carries the potential for kindness. In my study participants were invited to do friendship in a time where friendship, for many, was restricted and experiences of loneliness were common. I shared three examples from one conversation I facilitated with two friends. The examples illustrated how they utilised the space to have an open, honest conversation with each other, reflecting on their experiences of the pandemic. Research, I have argued, can have a positive impact on participants in addition to the significance of results. Their participation in the study was an act of kindness on their part, as my study depended on their openness. Moreover, providing this space for friendship for the participants can be considered an act of kindness, too. This is a conclusion I have only arrived at retrospectively; I did not have kindness and impact in mind when designing my research. Nonetheless, I find promise in the concept of kindness when considering the impact of my research. However, the digital setting can also function as a reminder of the traumatic social distance that characterised the first and second lockdowns. Centring the conversation around friendships, reflecting on what was missed and the conflicts that arose, became at times a painful reminder of the difficulties of navigating the pandemic. Academic kindness, it seems, can have ambivalent consequences. I suggest that kindness is an unarticulated premise for Tillman-Healy’s friendship as method. The ethic of friendship described by Tillmann-Healy (2003) aims for an emotionally rich research practice. Emotional richness, then, can incorporate the ambivalence of the research impact, that is, the ambivalent affects that may arise in the research process. I understand Tillmann-Healy’s approach to be open to ambivalence, which furthermore must be met with compassion. While the participants might gain something from participation, as Maria Tomlinson (2021) suggested, they do often offer vulnerability, which must be met with

kindness, too. The research setting, characterised by ambivalence, requires reciprocity and care. To me this is what academic kindness embodies.

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