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'As long as you're easy on the eye': reflecting on issues of positionality and researcher safety during farmer interviews

Introduction

This article reflects on the authors' gendered experiences of fieldwork encounters with the farming community in order to highlight the implications of researcher positionalities on the interview process. Specifically, we consider issues of physical and emotional safety pertinent to interviewing farmers from our positions as young, female academics. In doing so, we raise questions about the boundaries between acceptable and intolerable behaviours encountered in the research process and consider how problematic situations might be resolved.

The geographical remoteness of many farm holdings, the strength of tradition in farm families (Gasson and Errington 1993) and the male-dominated nature of the industry mean interviewing farmers poses a unique and challenging prospect, particularly for the young and relatively inexperienced female researcher. Yet, despite an increasing trend towards researcher reflexivity in geographical research (Gillespie and Sinclair 2000, Pini 2004), which has highlighted the importance of factors such as researcher gender to knowledge production, there has been little recognition of the impact of positionality on fieldwork experiences for the rural researcher. Drawing on our experiences as doctoral students and early career researchers, we hope to prompt discussion and raise awareness of many of the ethical and safety challenges we have faced as young women conducting social science fieldwork in the agricultural community. Although we offer a realistic account of some of the difficulties we have faced, in the most part we have found interviewing farmers an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

Following a more detailed account of the uniqueness of the research context, we first discuss gender-based threats to physical safety specific to interviewing farmers. Although we would like to use our broadly positive experiences to reassure readers, we nonetheless take this opportunity to voice some of our concerns and suggest practical strategies for addressing these. Next, we reflect on the implications of our positionality – in particular the intersection of our age, gender and non-farming status – on issues of power and performance during the interview process. Whilst, as has been identified elsewhere in the social sciences (Brewer 1991, Horn 1997), we believe our age and gender have generally been advantageous in securing and conducting interviews with farmers, we raise a number of questions about the emotional risks and ethical responsibilities associated with conforming to participants' gendered expectations in our interview performances. Lastly, we highlight some of the threats to our emotional safety that emerged in the research process, and consider the role of gender in determining this kind of risk. As well as offering some practical suggestions to maintain researcher emotional safety, we also pose questions about achieving an appropriate balance between empathy and professionalism during the interview process.

Although our discussion focuses on interviewing farmers, many of the issues raised resonate beyond this context and we hope recounting our experiences will offer some interesting insight, as well as points to consider, for those – particularly young women – interviewing across the social sciences more widely.

Interviewing in a farming context

While many of the issues and experiences we discuss in this paper are not unique to farming-related interviews, there are certain risks, biases and subjectivities that arise from, or are emphasised by, the particularities of this context.

First, there are practical considerations associated with interviewing on farms, which are often located in remote areas distanced from major population centres and where mobile-phone signals are frequently weak or non-existent. This isolation gives rise to issues of physical safety for the lone (and particularly female) researcher, both in terms of the travel to, and time spent at, the interview site. Most obviously, interviewing farmers in rural UK often involves driving to locations where neighbours are few and far between and where physical harm – either accidental (e.g. a car crash) or perpetrated by another human (e.g. sexual assault) – could easily go unnoticed. Furthermore, whilst many farms are family-run and our interviews frequently involved the presence of other family members, it is not uncommon for farms to be occupied by a lone individual. This elevates concerns about physical risk to the interviewer, but it also raises emotional issues associated with the isolation that farming can sometimes entail.

Second (and potentially exacerbating some of the physical and emotional risks we consider), is the fact that unlike interviews in locations that are clearly demarcated, such as homes, workplaces or public spaces, the farm is a place where the lines between home and work are blurred (Gasson and Errington 1993). This can shift or confuse what is considered acceptable participant behaviour, and equally affect the way in which the interviewer feels able to respond to certain situations in the participants' home, such as offers of hospitality or potentially threatening remarks.

Third, the social demographics and cultural characteristics of the farming community also have an affect over the power dynamics and positionalities involved in the research process. As is widely recognised, knowledge can only ever be partial and situated (Haraway 1988) and interviewers are implicated in the construction of meanings to the extent that the resulting data should be seen as essentially collaborative (Cloke *et al.* 2004). Gender in particular is well recognised as influencing the power dynamics of a research situation (Logan and Huntley 2001, Pini 2005). Thus, the interplay between our positionalities as young, female academics and the cultural context (alongside our own preconceptions) of the farming industry have a significant impact over how farmers react to us, and us to them, in both the recruitment and conducting of the interview, thereby shaping the nature and outcome of the research process.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of cultural context relevant here is the male-dominated nature of the agricultural industry, in which 95% of 'principal farmers' in England are male (Rural Business Research 2014). Furthermore, traditional farm identities, relations and labour divisions are markedly gendered (Whatmore 1991, Liepins 2000), with men usually taking on most of the physical or mechanised labour and women – as the 'farmer's wife' – traditionally assigned domestic and administrative tasks (Gasson and Winter 1992, Symes and Marsden 1983) (though note that gender relations and identities are fluid, diverse and shifting; see Bryant (1999); Little and Panelli (2003)). Farming identities are also imbued with particular cultural beliefs, values and practices associated with being a 'good farmer' (Stock and Forney 2014) that are likely to affect the way they interpret and respond to interview questions; particularly around farm management issues.

Having outlined some of the context-specific factors that have influenced our experiences of interviewing farmers, we now consider the implications of these in more detail.

Mitigating risks to physical safety

Despite a rigorous literature pertaining to researcher safety, much of this has focused on obviously risk-prone settings or research topics, such as those concerning criminality, warfare or domestic violence (Sharp and Kremer 2006). However, as Sharp and Kremer identify, less attention has been devoted to safety issues in areas not associated with such evident dangers. Furthermore, Miller (2014) suggests that safety issues relating to gender and sexual identity have also been neglected and, where generic suggestions for gender-based safety do exist, they are often unsuitable for those researching in the rural context. For instance, some strategies for researcher safety suggested in the Social Researcher's Association's Code of Practice (2006) are either unfeasible or ineffective in rural locations (e.g. the use of a mobile phone; and ensuring you are seen when entering an interviewee's home). The lack of guidance regarding safety in a rural research context is particularly concerning since, as Sampson and Thomas' (2003) experiences on cargo vessels at sea demonstrate, fieldwork in isolated and male-dominated settings (such as ours) can amplify the risks associated with gender and research.

Although we have rarely felt threatened in our own fieldwork experiences, reports of sexual harassment towards female researchers are not unheard of (Sampson and Thomas 2003) and it is important to be aware of such risks in order to manage them. Throughout our fieldwork we have been careful to ensure that someone always had the details of when, where and whom we were interviewing, and that we checked in with that person once we safely returned home. We found a shared (but restricted) Outlook calendar helpful in

facilitating this, but each researcher must choose the strategy they are most comfortable with. Since this precaution involves sharing interviewee details, it may raise ethical questions relating to participant confidentiality but, certainly in our experience, ethics committees have recognised and accommodated this as a crucial part of our safety. We would encourage researchers to build this strategy into their research design and ethics application from an early stage and to talk openly with their research supervisors and/or colleagues.

Other suggestions for ensuring physical safety in the field include reconnoitring the research location ahead of the interview; asking someone to accompany you to the interview if in any doubt over safety; arranging for someone to call your mobile at a pre-arranged time; scheduling the interview for within office hours and in daylight; and maintaining visibility/opting to conduct the interview in a public space (McCosker *et al.* 2001, Williamson and Burns 2014).

Whilst these strategies are useful, as Miller has identified, some may be impractical (particularly in rural research) and it is impossible to offer a set of universally applicable guidelines. Although not usually included in formalised risk assessments and guides, we also feel that it is important to acknowledge the role that instinct plays in dealing with potential threats to physical safety in the research process. For instance, some of the sexist comments received in the recruitment phase of our fieldwork (discussed below) could have been interpreted as threatening, raising the question of whether or not we should go ahead with the interview. The choice to proceed in each case ultimately depended on our evaluation of the context in which such remarks were made and our instinct about the character of the person we were speaking to. Of course, instincts may be wrong, so strategies such as those discussed above take on extra significance in these cases, but it would be dishonest to claim

that researchers are not influenced simply by a sense of whether something 'feels right'. In one particular instance, following comments about a particular individual from another interviewee, our instinct did lead us to arrange an interview in a public place, rather than in the farmer's home.

We feel it important to stress here that the ability to act on instincts about physical safety in a responsible manner is dependent upon being given the space to take decisions that may go against research objectives, and on having the confidence to resist pressures (either self-inflicted or otherwise) to 'recruit at all costs'. This requires the support and responsibility of team members and mentors as well as the researcher(s) themselves. We emphasise this in recognition that, while we are fortunate to have never felt compromised by such pressures and have received the full support of our mentors and peers, others may have different experiences. Given the dangers of over-relying on instinct, we also reiterate that having an awareness of the risks, and a suite of possible solutions to fall back on, is vital. As Paterson *et al.* (1999, 261) assert, "individuals who are equipped with strategies to diffuse threats to their safety are more confident and more able to respond to dangerous situations in the field".

Gender, age and non-farming status: negotiating interview performances

Although we recognise gender as only one aspect of our positionalities (Woods 2010), during research in a male-dominated culture such as the farming community the influence of gender assumes a greater significance (Horn 1997). In line with wider understandings of farming as a 'masculine' occupation (Haugen 1990), the farmers we interviewed were typically (although not always) older men. Although we feel our relative youth and gender may have been advantageous in building rapport with participants, there were a number of

incidences where these aspects of our identities invited unwelcome, although largely innocent, comments. On one occasion, an elderly farmer claimed, "I can't say no to a lovely young girl coming to visit". Another agreed to an interview, adding, "as long as you're easy on the eye", although interestingly felt the need to apologise for the comment during the subsequent farm visit – partly at the prompting of his children who had overheard the telephone conversation. Unfortunately, these undeniably (though perhaps unintentionally) sexist references were commonplace during farmer interactions; farmers sometimes joked about not wanting their wives finding out about our time 'together', some remarked on how it had been a long time since they had received any female attention and, on one occasion, we overheard a conversation between a farmer and his middle-aged bachelor son as he tried to set one of us up with him.

Attributing these references to the overlap between the professional and the domestic inherent to the farm context, as well as the significance of tradition in farming, had we been right to excuse or laugh off such comments? By comparison, we would not expect colleagues interviewing policy makers or industry experts, for example, to accept such remarks, so what is the difference? We wonder how much dominant preconceptions of farmers as 'grumpy' or old-fashioned individuals who are 'set in their ways' (Carruthers *et al.* 2013) shaped our interpretations of, and willingness to overlook, such behaviour. As reported by others during research in male-dominated settings (Gurney 1985, Horn 1997), we often felt our need to secure interviews left us disinclined to challenge such comments from otherwise obliging farmers – a decision which arguably compromised our own feminist values.

As was the case during Pini's (2004) research, farmers frequently remarked on many aspects of our identities. Of particular interest was our position as young women. Whilst we recognise characteristics such as gender and age (amongst others) are distinct and powerful

factors in their own right, we found the implications of the intersectionality between these two factors particularly difficult to disentangle. Farmers often enquired about our ages, jovially estimating the age difference between us, or made remarks such as, “you’re young enough to be my granddaughter”. Despite formally introducing ourselves as academic researchers, our age and gender seemed to assume greater importance to many farmers and we subsequently felt, as reported by Caplan (1993), our role in the interview was largely defined by the subordinate position constructed for us. Whilst some commentators suggest such a dynamic distances the female researcher from male participants and limits what they disclose (Winchester 1998; Pini 2005), like Horn (1997), we believe our ‘unthreatening’ position as young women alleviated the pressures of the interview context and invited participants to see us as confidantes or listeners (Bloor *et al.* 2007), meaning we were often privileged to more information than older, male colleagues (who are conventionally bestowed more authority) may have been. We often felt that farmers found talking to us cathartic and many took the interview as an opportunity to disclose personal and sometimes tragic stories.

We also felt advantages conferred by our age and gender were exacerbated by our non-farming status. Following Pini’s (2004) observation that her identity as a ‘nice country girl’ afforded her a particular legitimacy when interviewing farmers, we feared our non-farming status may be met with suspicion. On reflection, however, we feel our distance from the farming community was broadly advantageous. Whilst a minority commented on our chosen career path as agricultural researchers being “a strange thing for a girl with no connection to farming to want to do”, our choice in research area was generally met with interest. Our position as non-farmers, combined with our youth and gender, appeared to confirm our harmless and inexperienced identity. By willingly assuming this role (and in hindsight sometimes even emphasising it by responding to farmers’ points with amazement or

enthusiasm), we were able to encourage dialogue and innocently pose questions in a way that a traditional authority figure may not be able to. It also prompted many of the farmers we interviewed to avoid assuming any prior knowledge, making for more detailed responses to questions. Horn (1997) describes utilising a similar technique in her work with the police, which she terms 'confessions of ignorance' (Shakespeare 1993); she noted how she found the approach effective, recalling how male officers were eager to 'impress' or 'shock' her with their stories, and by complying she received the cooperation she was seeking.

Whilst we were not as explicit in tailoring our performance to the researched as McDowell (1998), who described purposefully selecting from a spectrum of gendered identities, from 'playing dumb' to 'well-informed', we have retrospectively been able to recognise how we actively negotiated aspects of our identities during interviews. Like Pini (2004), we question to what extent the data we obtained – particularly personal details and tragic stories – were shared with us because of the (aspects of our) identities we deliberately emphasised? As researchers we cannot be devoid of gender, age, class and so on (Waldby 1995), but we wonder whether emphasising our academic identity and resisting the harmless and inexperienced identity often conferred on us would have been more ethically responsible?

Emotional well-being in isolated research settings

As previously suggested, we understand our positionalities as young females as relevant to the emotional risks associated with farmer interviews. It is well-recognised that research interviews can involve risk to the emotional health of both the researcher and participant (Bloor *et al.* 2007), and there are certain aspects of this risk, pertinent to both our gender and the farming context, which we feel are important to reflect upon here.

During our interviews, we were conscious of the difficulties that farmers face in the course of their work and were sensitive to the effects that these can have over personal well-being. The economic challenges of farming are well known. In addition, the solitary nature of farming has resulted in increased feelings of loneliness amongst the profession (Lobley *et al.* 2005), and this is exacerbated by a continual trend towards mechanisation, the closure of many livestock markets, and a wider erosion to the social cohesion of some rural communities (Reed *et al.* 2002). Combined, these factors have been shown to have a detrimental impact on mental health and are thought to contribute to higher than average levels of stress, depression and suicide among farmers (Lobley *et al.* 2004). On several occasions in our fieldwork it became clear that our participant(s) were experiencing such difficulties, and this raised questions about how the interview was impacting on both us and them emotionally, and about how we should address such situations.

One farmer we interviewed, for example, had not made a profit on the farm for several years and was caring for a spouse who was suffering severe ill-health. The farm was particularly remote, and although they did not explicitly disclose feelings of loneliness to us, we got the impression they lacked social support. Not wishing to make the farmer uncomfortable, we refrained from delving further into this topic, but left the interview feeling guilty at not being able to offer any form of support.

Regardless of whether we interpreted this particular farmer's feelings correctly or not, reflecting on experiences such as this has alerted us to a number of occasions where we suffered 'pain by proxy' (Moran-Ellis 1997). As Bloor *et al.* (2007, 26) discuss, "it is very difficult to spend time with somebody who is obviously upset and not 'offer' anything". Although this issue is relevant to all social researchers regardless of their gender, it has been recognised that emotional risks may be greater for female researchers (Bloor *et al.*, 2007).

Padfield and Procter (1996) identify how traditional gender roles and stereotypes (which we have argued are particularly pertinent in a farming context) may lead to participants feeling more able to confide in a female researcher and share traumatic or stressful experiences and concerns. This clearly heightens the likelihood of an empathetic and quasi-therapeutic (Kvale 1996) relationship developing in the research process (with potential detrimental consequences for both researcher and participant) and, in view of our experiences, we feel it is something that female researchers in particular need to be prepared for.

Fortunately, we feel that, for the most part, we have been able to adequately manage issues of emotional risk by sharing uncomfortable experiences with another member of the research team. Where the demands of lone-ethnographic work may not allow for regular contact with other researchers, we recommend the use of a journal or research diary, which, as Bloor *et al.* (2007, 35) suggest, can “allow researchers to obtain a reflexive distance from the experiences they document and can also be used as a ‘space’ for off-loading”. However, we are also aware that some instances involving particularly distressed participants can result in more severe psychological harm to the researcher, and may require more specialist forms of support. We encourage researchers to make themselves aware of the services (e.g. counselling or confidential telephone services) their institution may offer prior to embarking on fieldwork, and to talk openly and honestly with their supervisors, about their need for support.

Linked to the issue of emotional labour is the question of how to deal with extended offers of hospitality or social engagement from interviewees. The physical and social isolation of many farmers we visited meant many appreciated our visit and deployed sometimes obvious efforts to ‘keep us talking’ and prolong our visit. Whilst this typically enriched our interview data, it was often a difficult situation to navigate, particularly given the gendered

risks associated with the interview relationship that we have already highlighted. Sometimes offers of cups of tea after the interview were practically prohibited by our research timetable, and were therefore easy enough to decline. However, there were other occasions when the rapport built in the interview, and the concern created by the 'pain-by-proxy' effect, led to us feeling obliged to stay a little longer. We often felt providing such social contact increased the reciprocity of the research by ensuring the interviewee did not feel exploited, but we also believe assuming such a role can be problematic. Achieving the correct balance between friendliness and retaining an appropriate professional distance can be a difficult skill to master.

Conclusion

By reflecting on our own experiences, this paper has provided a much needed consideration of some of the ethical and safety challenges young women face whilst conducting interviews in the agricultural community. More widely, it has sought to empower those working in similar settings to consider and prepare for some of the difficulties we have faced. Although we have found some situations difficult and emotionally demanding, the context specific strategies we have refined – and shared – now allow us to approach interviews with confidence and enthusiasm.

Reflecting on our experiences has helped alert us to the multiple ways in which our positionalities might influence research encounters, as well as helping make us more aware of how to mitigate and address the risks related to our fieldwork. We are aware, though, that there are many other aspects of researcher positionality and safety that we have not been able to discuss here. We also appreciate we have only explored some of the interview dynamics and risks associated with our positionalities as young females talking to (generally)

older males. Indeed, we did not only interview men in our research, but also spoke to farming couples, as well as sole female farmers, and recognise the presence of females in these situations also had interesting implications for our interview performance and experiences. Furthermore, as the strict gender identities and relations traditionally associated with the male-dominated nature of the industry appear to be waning (Villa 1999, Fischer and Burton 2014), it is likely that future farmer research may be a very different prospect to that described here and may pose a different set of challenges for, and risks to, the researcher. There has not been space to discuss these issues here, but we consider them to be important areas for further reflection. We would also encourage male researchers to share their own experiences of working in this area, in order to provide a parallel reflection on how the gender of a male interviewer influences the research process in an agricultural context.

Whilst we feel we have made an important start in the discussion of gendered experiences of farmer interviews, we have posed a number of questions about the ethical acceptability of some of the behaviours we have adopted. There may be no right or wrong answers to such questions, but we invite others to consider and share these challenges in light of their own experiences. By stimulating such a debate, we aim to bring issues regarding gender in rural research to the fore, and hope to provide some reassurance and support to other early-career researchers.

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