Washing 'Dirty Work' in Academia and Beyond: Resisting Stigma as an Early Career Researcher Investigating Sexuality in the Digital

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Abstract: During my PhD studies, my ethnography of the r/NoFap subreddit involved grappling with challenges that questioned my research design, academic posture, political stance, gender identity, sexuality and desire and asked for mutable choices to deal with them. With over 1.1 million members, predominantly men, this Reddit channel advocates abstinence from pornography consumption and excessive masturbation as a means to overcome a self-diagnosed porn addiction, porn overuse, and compulsive sexual behaviour. The related conversations are dominated by evolutionary narratives on gender and sexuality, men's sexual entitlement to women, and the heteronormative coital encounter as an imperative. Academic literature has identified heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses in the community (Prause, Ley 2023; Burnett 2021; Hartmann 2020; Taylor, Jackson 2018). My ethnographic journey demanded substantial emotional labour as I navigated potentially toxic technocultures (Massanari 2015) and non-sex-positive environments. What I had not foreseen was the systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation in both institutional (academic) and non-institutional contexts (social and familial). This paper provides a detailed account of these experiences, shedding light on the personal, institutional, and emotional struggles inherent in gender and sexuality scholarship as a result of the pervasive stigma and delegitimisation. This account aims to shed light on the consequences of doing 'dirty work' and suggest strategies of personal resistance, with the awareness that transformative actions cannot be merely individual but are necessarily structural and collective.
Keywords: sexuality studies, stigma, dirty work

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The last decade has seen the expansion of local, regional, and global groups, websites, forums, blogs, channels, and profiles on the most diversified platforms that seek and promote abstention from masturbation, pornography, and orgasm. This composite and loose community is mainly, but not exclusively, attended and formed by heterosexual men, and it commonly falls under the umbrella term 'NoFap'. Its name comes from the onomatopoeic slang term 'fap', which refers to male masturbation. These fragmented homosocial online spaces are discursively held together by the belief that abstaining from porn and masturbation and quitting a self-diagnosed porn addiction, porn overuse, and compulsive sexual behaviour can massively improve health and quality of life as well as work productivity and sexual life.

The headquarters of NoFap is the online Reddit community r/NoFap, where the number of members almost doubled from 477k in 2020 (Hartmann 2020) to 1.1 million in 2023 (r/NoFap, Sept 2023). On r/NoFap, the Reddit channel of NoFap, it is possible to find posts discussing abstinence, pornography, the porn industry, masturbation, erectile functioning, gender, sexual orientations, masculinity, relationships, self-development, confidence, productivity, attractiveness, sex work, trafficking, suicide, mental health, the state of modern society, vulnerabilities, stigma, sexual health, muscularity, energy, and shame, with a general male-oriented heterosexual tone.

While NoFap users often state that they actively engage in the fight against misogyny, since they decide to abstain from pornography, which, according to them, degrades women, previous literature on NoFap communities and spaces has stressed the presence of strong indicators of misogynistic attitudes, entangled with heteronormative beliefs, in the NoFap environment. For instance, members' narratives and conversations are dominated by 'strongly heterosexual male tenor' tropes (Taylor, Jackson 2018: 624), emphasising essentialist and evolutionary narratives on men and women and a construction of masculinity rooted in rationality and self-control, where the heteronormative coital imperative (McPhillips, Braun, Gavey 2001) is envisaged as the promised land for men and men's sexual entitlement to women is an asset (Meenagh 2020). By contrast, masturbating is defined by members as an emasculating and vile activity that hinders subjects from reaching their full potential. Masturbation is depicted as a practice that is hierarchically inferior to 'real sex' with a 'real woman' (while porn actors and sex workers are defined as 'pixel women'), with the result that non-heteronormative sexualities and queer sexual practices are delegitimised, silenced, or pathologised. This is in a digital context like Reddit where the risk of being doxxed (having personal information leaked without consent) or harassed or becoming a target of shitstorms from some community members is high, especially those with anti-feminist views (Massanari 2017). A recent paper by Prause and Ley (2023) investigating violent content in r/NoFap revealed a high prevalence of expressions of violence within this subreddit, particularly directed at the pornogra-

phy industry, sex workers, and women. The study also underscores the concerning trend of threats aimed at scientists, primarily directed at women researchers. Additionally, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism considers NoFap a component of online extremist misogyny (Prause, Ley 2023) and the Violent Extremism Risk Assessment (VERA-2) identifies 'NoFap' as a term associated with online violence and misogyny (Chan 2023).

r/NoFap configures itself not only as a non-safe space but also as a potentially risky environment for a gender and sexuality researcher who identifies as a transfeminist[1] sexually fluid questioning woman. However, contrary to initial expectations, the most daunting aspects of my ethnographic journey conducted as an early career researcher as part of my PhD degree, were not merely field confrontation, navigation, and interaction, but rather the systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation experienced in both academic and non-academic contexts. While these shortcomings are identified through subjective experience and might not be representative of the challenges faced by other researchers digging into similar ethnographies, I believe this project sheds light more generally on the difficulties in gender and sexuality scholarship. Drawing on the suggestions of Keene (2022), my aim here is to provide an account of my research journey and illuminate the consequences of engaging in what the literature defines as 'dirty work'. I also discuss strategies of personal resistance, recognising that transformative actions must extend beyond individual efforts to encompass structural and collective change.

Conceptual background

Everett Hughes (1958) introduced the term 'dirty work' to describe labour that is essential for the public good yet is perceived as degrading, repulsive, and disgraceful, a concept further elucidated by Irvine (2014) as work that is socially necessary but stigmatised. Scholars such as Irvine (2014) and Keene (2022) effectively characterise

[1] Transfeminism is a movement of resistance and a theory that views gender, arbitrarily assigned at birth, as a social construct, a construct that is exercised as a tool of a power system that controls, oppresses, and limits bodies to fit the heterosexual, racist, ableist, and patriarchal social order. Transfeminism is grounded in the material realities, lives, experiences, and precarities of trans, feminist, and queer people. It acknowledges the complexity and diversity of gender and sexual identities and recognises the interwoven nature of the patriarchal and capitalist oppressions that affect all individuals who are not white heterosexual cis-men (https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/abbiamo_un_piano.pdf). '*Transfeminisms are network movements that use gender, migration, cross-cultural contexts, vulnerability, race, and class as transversal spaces to build emancipatory alliances against cis-hetero-patriarchal and racist violence*' (Valencia 2018). To do so, transfeminist movements move away from the neoliberal reconversion of feminism's critical apparatus and traditional 'biological policies' or cis-women policies.

sex and sexuality research as a form of 'dirty work' because of its marginalised status within western academia and society at large. According to Keene (2022), conducting research on sex and sexuality-related topics can be viewed as a type of 'dirty work' because it is often tolerated but marginalised, delegitimised, and considered unimportant within academic and broader societal contexts, despite its significant public relevance.

This delegitimisation extends to sex and sexuality researchers themselves, impacting their career trajectories and 'reputations' and subjecting them to stigma by contagion. Researchers frequently encounter their work being trivialised and face challenges in obtaining validation from colleagues (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). The sociologist Janice M. Irvine (2014) asserts that specific institutional practices within the US university system contribute to the stigmatisation of sexuality research, perpetuating patterns of institutional inequality. These practices include limited training opportunities, lack of funding, poor job prospects, dismissive and 'visceral responses' responses from review boards, lack of validation from colleagues, and derogatory remarks and jokes about the researchers' sexuality, who are often portrayed as 'perverts' or 'sex-crazed'. Sexuality researchers also experience difficulties disseminating their work within academia, the publishing system, and the public sphere. Irvine (2018b: 1234–1235) describes how sex and sexuality research and topics have been 'trivialized, sensationalized, or stigmatized by journal editors or reviewers'.

Despite the expansion of sexuality research, which examines sexuality as a domain of analysis, and not as a biological drive or characteristic, across disciplines in the social sciences and humanities and has been driven by influences such as poststructuralism, feminist and queer theories, activism related to AIDS, and trans activism, this progress has not eliminated repression, conflicts, and stigma. Irvine (2014) argues that although sexuality research may receive some recognition and may have become 'trendy' within certain academic and activist circles, it still faces challenges in achieving academic legitimacy. This field remains marginalised, and sexuality scholars continue to experience stigmatisation or, at best, controversy in the westernised academic environment because of their work (Irvine 2018a: 16). Incorporating sexuality studies into research may cast suspicion on researchers owing to the stigma surrounding sex and sexuality, producing occupational bias, as noted by Irvine (2003). But as Keene (2022: 2) has explained, *'such experiences are not confined to the walls of the ivory tower'*.

The sexual culture of western societies, as discussed by Irvine (2014), is affective and characterised by contradictory emotions such as desire, excitement, and fear, being sex recognised as vital but also repulsive at the same time. This is in part because sexuality is political; systems of power organise it in ways that benefit, support, and celebrate certain subjectivities and practices, while they simultaneously scold, admonish, and restrain others (Rubin 2007: 171). Thus, sexuality is submerged and immersed

in conflicting interests, systems of power, discourses and practices of oppression/repression/reproduction (Foucault 1978), and political manoeuvres.

This contributes to the production of widespread public stigma and moral/social panics targeting specific populations or practices defined as deviant, degenerate, and to be eradicated to ensure the survival of society, leading to the criminalisation of certain behaviour and the proliferation of discourses dictating appropriate forms of sexuality and acceptable discourse on the topic. Sex and sexuality research provides tools to treat *'sexual variety as something that exists rather than as something to be exterminated'* (Rubin 2007: 155). By legitimising sexuality as a central area of individual and collective experience and knowledge production, sexuality research becomes a political project of resistance against sexual and social stigma, advocating for the existence and recognition of non-heteronormative practices, bodies, and lives. Sexuality research becomes simultaneously a way to deconstruct stigma and violent oppressive power dynamics and a battleground where stigma and oppression are enacted, thus highlighting the complex dynamics involved in studying and challenging societal norms surrounding sex and sexuality.

Methodology

During my PhD research, I adopted a digital ethnography approach to the study of the r/NoFap community on Reddit, conceptualising it as a form of ethnography conducted 'on, through and about digital media' (Abidin, de Seta 2020: 6) while also taking advantage of digital methods (Caliandro 2018). This approach particularly emphasises the epistemological integration of computational techniques in the ethnographic continuum to understand the complexities of online communities, especially within platformised digital environments. This is because within digital platforms user relations and the processes of content production tend to be massive, real-time, networked, and algorithmically structured, all of which are features that the ethnographer should keep in mind and understand when 'seeking' the help of computational tools. The goal is to avoid extractive reasoning and metric-based analysis when examining societal phenomena and instead maintain a qualitative perspective.

My approach involves a creative amalgamation of computational and qualitative methods, grounded in an inductive framework (Brown 2019; Ford 2014). By repositioning computational techniques as integral components of the ethnographic process, I aimed to integrate them seamlessly into the broader continuum of ethnographic inquiry. During the one-year-long ethnographic research that I conducted from December 2022 to December 2023, I engaged with both the community and the language of the machines that structure the community. The digital ethnography within the r/NoFap community started with two months of lurking (silent observation) using

a new Reddit profile. This phase provided crucial insights into the community's overall atmosphere and dynamics, prompting ethical reflections on the researcher's positioning within the field. During this preliminary stage, a covert ethnography approach was adopted, where I refrained from revealing my identity as a researcher and from explicitly disclosing any social categories to which I recognise myself as belonging. The decision to conduct covert ethnography primarily stemmed from ethical considerations, which are sensitive both to the researcher and the specific context. From the start of the initial lurking phase, the community exhibited a strong homosocial atmosphere, hosting heterosexist, patriarchal, and misogynistic discourses (Hartmann 2021; Burnett 2021; Taylor, Jackson 2018). This is coupled with what appears to be a non-sex-positive environment, stigmatising non-heteronormative sexual practices and upholding conservative values concerning family, relationships, sexuality, and what they refer to as a modern porn-corrupted society.

While taking notes during my r/NoFap field immersion to address specific ethical and personal challenges related to the content and interactions within the community, which I will not elaborate on here, I began to notice structural challenges affecting my academic, professional, and social life. At that point, I started to take fieldnotes, mostly in the form of reflexive journaling (Janesick 2015), on events occurring outside the r/NoFap community fieldwork, such as conferences, workshops, board reviews, chats with friends and colleagues, and random encounters with strangers that were still connected to my work and research topic. What happened was that *'Research in the field can become real life and real life can become research'* (De Craene 2024: 9). Reflexive journaling offered me an opportunity for spontaneous reflection on significant experiences as they occurred and how they resonated with my work, my identity, and, more generally, my life within and outside academia.

Reflexivity, a core feminist practice (Rose 2007; Harding 1991; Haraway 1991), was crucial in helping me understand and manage my emotions, ultimately empowering me. Embracing feminist (auto)reflexivity, as described by Jordan (2018), allowed me as an ethnographer to critically reflect on power dynamics, my position, and my influence on the events around/in me and my research topic. In this sense, this approach considers the personal aspects of body, desire, and emotions as inherently political.

In the literature, feminist reflexivity involves continuous pauses and examinations at every stage of the auto/ethnographic process. This means reflecting on who we are, what we observe, what we feel, and what we believe. Such introspection serves as a powerful analytical tool for deciphering personal experiences and uncovering related hidden power structures, especially in relation to gender and sexuality. However, this approach extends beyond the systematic analysis of personal experiences and emotions; it facilitates the confrontation of tensions, conflicts, and contradictions within and beyond the field. By doing so, it reveals complexities masked beneath the

surface of what is presented as logical and progressive. Importantly, it breaks free from methodological positivist limitations, allowing emotions to be integrated into the auto/ethnographic process. Recognising power and position also challenges the traditional notion of the ethnographer's detachment and emotional neutrality in research (Adjepong 2022; Mama 2011; Naples 2003). This reflexive process legitimises personal feelings, emotions, and desires, acknowledging their centrality in gaining critical insights into some taken-for-granted aspects of social life (Delamont 2009).

In this sense, thanks to the article by Keene (2022), I realised that my personal experiences were reflecting the structural and sociocultural challenges of doing and investigating 'dirty work'. I then decided to systematically analyse my personal experiences in the form of autoethnography, connecting them to a broader understanding of cultural experiences (Ellis et al. 2011) of being a sexademic (Keene 2022). This work took the form of a situated autoethnography that pays attention to power dynamics, embodied emotions and reactions, and forms of violence and oppression based on the autoethnographer's specific social identities and standpoint (Tarisayi 2023). Thus, doing autoethnography is necessarily handling research as a socially conscious and political act (Javaid 2020).

Therefore, the reflections presented in this paper return to the experiences of a white, European, able-bodied, fluid, and questioning woman, who easily and often 'passes' (sometimes strategically) as a cis-straight woman. For these reasons, compared to other marginalised subjects and underrepresented groups, I may encounter some privileges in conducting sex and sexuality research in and beyond academia. However, while individuals with different backgrounds, identities, and bodies may produce different results and observations (Are 2022), it is essential to highlight various insider experiences of challenges in sexuality scholarship. This necessary partiality helps to illuminate the current state and differential impacts of power dynamics and the stigma of doing and investigating 'dirty work' on diverse bodies, identities, and subjectivities.

The fieldnotes were qualitatively analysed to identify emotional and discursive patterns and connections between personal experiences, the existing literature on the stigma associated with sexual and sexuality research, and feminist activism's strategies to resist oppression and violence in and outside the workplace. Starting with an initial file containing all my reflexive journaling, various poems, and drawings collected during my PhD studies, related to what Keene (2022) defines as 'institutional, professional, and personal hurdles encountered during a dirty work journey', I began to trace common themes according to these three dimensions. I then divided the data into institutional, professional, and personal hurdles, linking these experiences to the findings in the existing literature presented in the 'Conceptual background' section above and the complex range of emotions described in the journaling for each event

noted. This resulted in two main topics: 'Embodiment and intimate hurdles' and 'Systemic + Stigma = Systegmatic hurdles'.

Following the analysis below, I provide an account of the strategies of personal resistance that I employed, with the aim of offering insights and possible suggestions for researchers embarking on sex and sexuality research.

In presenting the results of this autoethnography, I acknowledge that some information may lead to the identification of cited individuals as professors on my doctoral board and as colleagues and friends. I have made every effort to ensure anonymity to protect myself from potential accusations of libel, negative repercussions in the workplace, and potential risks to my future academic career. The decision to speak my truth is not taken naively and does not overlook the potential vulnerabilities or impacts on the people involved, even when they are in positions of power. Rather, it is the result of extensive reflection on the need to legitimise marginalised, stigmatised, and delegitimised voices and knowledge productions both within academia and in broader society. Analysis of the everyday experiences of sex and sexuality researchers can be used to critique structural power systems and illuminate how they operate in daily interactions, and this is not solely with the purpose of a callout and identification of people involved in the situations (De Craene 2024). Above all, it is a commitment to the political responsibility of reclaiming our spaces and voices, which are too often silenced, marginalised, and demeaned within the academy and beyond (Keene 2022).

Findings and discussion

During my year-long ethnographic journey in the r/NoFap subreddit, I grappled with challenges that questioned my research design academic posture, political stance, personal life, gender identity, sexuality, and desire, and to which I had to respond with various decisions. As described in the methodology section, I've grouped these issues into two main clusters:

Embodiment and intimate hurdles: This section addresses the impact of my desires and corporeality, considering the physical and mental repercussions and emotional labour involved in engaging with gender, sex, and sexuality research.

Systemic + *Stigma* = *Systegmatic hurdles*: This section explores the challenges posed by systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation in both institutional and non-institutional contexts.

The first section of the findings, *'Embodiment and Intimate Hurdles'*, explores the impact of conducting gender and sexuality research on my desires and corporeali-

ty, the mental repercussions, and the difficulties of finding spaces to verbalise these challenges and seek support. This is also a consequence of the structural omission of emotions and the erotic, the 'awkward surplus', from academic research. The second section addresses the systematic stigma encountered in both academic and non-academic contexts, which I term 'systegmatic', a fusion of 'systemic' and 'stigma'. This term encapsulates the obstacles stemming from systematic stigma, discomfort, and delegitimisation encountered within institutional (academic) settings and in non-institutional contexts (the social and familial spheres) as I navigate the landscape of gender, sex, and sexuality research as an early career researcher. The third and final section provides suggestions and insights on how to address and cope with these hurdles as a transfeminist and positioned gender, sex, and sexuality researcher. As Keene (2022: 15) argues, referring to the practice of sharing the difficulties of doing 'dirty work' in and beyond academia: *'When sex and sexuality researchers provide brave reviews of their research journeys, they help to illuminate the consequences of doing dirty work, or detail how they survived them. This awareness-raising may provide a sense of shared understanding or community for those of us researching in the sex and sexuality space, but also help new scholars feel more prepared as they commence risky research projects.'*

Embodiment and intimate hurdles

The role of my desire and corporality emerged prominently during the research. My body and the bodies of the participants were omnipresent in my ethnography, even without their materiality. Shared images, specific trigger words, explicit stories from members, and the stigmatisation and pathologisation of non-heteronormative sexual practices all summoned my contradictory emotions, desires, and sexual fantasies into the field. As noted by McLelland (2002) in his study on online gay culture in Japan, the researcher inevitably responds physically, experiencing attraction or aversion to the sexual narratives and images encountered. Cupples (2002) discussed how we cannot escape our sexuality when we are positioned in the field, as it is an essential aspect of our research journey that must be recognised and addressed.

My stance on pornography and masturbation came under scrutiny as the solitude in a non-sex-positive environment significantly impacted my sexual desire and overall sexual life, often proving to be detrimental. The fieldwork expanded my knowledge of porn genres and sexual practices, most of which were unknown to me. I had to document myself and search for definitions and visual representations of content labelled by the community as degenerate and unhealthy. The anti-porn atmosphere combined with the expansion of my porn knowledge changed and interrogated my porn consumption and my relationship with self-pleasure. Establishing clear boundaries between myself and the material required considerable effort. Deliberately utilis-

ing my body and self-pleasure became a means of resistance, particularly when confronted with content that stigmatised my preferences as deviant. Additionally, there was a deliberate reclaiming of the notion that both the content and I were considered deviant, and it was possible to find pleasure in this reappropriation.

> *I do question my position in relation to pornography; my consumption of porn material has changed drastically. It is hard not to be affected by the group tone. I started to use the language (like brain fog or the matrix) and the same humour.* (Fieldnotes, 05/04/2023)

Grauerholz et al. (2013) examine how, in traditional sociological ethnographies, researchers feel hesitant to speak about about attraction in/during a research encounter and the management of related feelings. According to Adjepong (2022), this is because researchers tend to conform to academic insistence on objectivity and positivism, demanding the suppression of feelings and challenging emotions in the field as well as political stances. The author highlights how the erotic can be pervasive in ethnography and that it involves not just sex or sexual intimacy between researchers and interlocutors. Anima Adjepong (2022) describes it as an ineffable and powerful energy that connects not just people and artefacts and that creates an exchange, guiding our decisions and movements in the world. This does not mean that the erotic always unveils as pleasure, but it means that it can be present in a full range of emotions, including sadness, stress, anxiety, and disgust. Emotions such as anger, pity, eroticism, desire, inadequacy, shock, frustration, and discomfort consistently shaped my journey, and they need to be acknowledged and reflexively discussed.

In this regard, citing McLelland (2002), my exploration of the NoFap community, although confined to my office or home, constituted an online journey with not just physical but also mental repercussions, triggering anxiety, disgust, and discomfort. Engaging with the community almost daily for a year proved to be mentally draining. Confronting the prevailingly non-sex-positive atmosphere, the subtle hate speech, and benevolent sexism posed significant challenges. Feeling compelled to address and initiate reflections on the community's language of hate and violence became a point of necessity, although it was rarely well-received. Moreover, the subreddit is pervaded with posts on anxiety, depression, and suicide, often reinforcing negative emotional cycles and portraying a pessimistic, irretrievable view of human existence. These posts often served as triggers for my own struggles with anxiety disorders and depression.

> *So I decided to stay away from the field since this weekend was my birthday and I took a bit of time off. It's a cloudy morning and the light is unbearably white.*

It's a rainy but humid May. A dear friend of mine is here with me, she will go home in the late afternoon. The sub is constantly surrounded by negativity – it is like a backdrop, an atmosphere, an omnipresent feeling that heavily affects me. It is a negativity coupled with distrust in society, pain, and emotional distress.' (Fieldnotes, 29/05/2023)

Indeed, navigating the fieldwork involved negotiating and carefully managing the tension between pleasure and danger (Vance 1984), a challenge I struggled to address and articulate in my research and writing.

'Is my body resisting or indulging? Why is there more honour in resisting than indulging? What if indulging is a form of resistance? My multiple pleasures will save me.' (Fieldnotes, 02/10/2023)

How not to get aroused? My desire is constantly triggered and my body is here with me on the journey. [I] cannot do without it. At the same time, I am a bit disgusted about these men talking about the feeling of the vagina dismantling women's bodies into pieces, using a metonym to refer to women's bodies, reducing their identity to it, reducing desire and pleasure to penetration, making the idea of a woman and a vagina homogenous. (Fieldnotes 16/09/2023)

Building on the theories and insights from Irvine (2014) and Kulick and Wilson (1995), Florian Vörös (2015) argues that while sexuality and related emotions are somewhat accepted when the scientific subject is embodied by others/by other people, it poses a challenge for traditional social science when embodied by the researchers themselves. The attempt to create a clear distinction between embodied objects and disembodied subjects does not align with the intricate and complex reality. This complexity often results in self-dismissal, making it challenging to acknowledge how the research has impacted me and to find spaces in which to verbalise these challenges and seek support.

I find [it] difficult to face what I feel, a rollercoaster of anger and resignation. To name my emotions in the confusion, to legitimise them, to name their sources as they are. There is violence there; there is fear. In the end, there is power and it is excoriating. A scarification that I cannot have the pleasure to touch. (Fieldnotes, 29/11/2023)

Anima Adjepong (2022) refers to the omission of the erotic, emotions, and uncomfortable instances from research as an 'awkward surplus'. They are edited out because

they are believed to disclose too much about the researcher's personal considerations, comfort, and well-being, ultimately impacting the goodness and soundness of the research. This occurs within the context of an erotophobic academy (De Craene 2024) that diminishes and dismisses radical reflexivity by refusing to acknowledge the central role of the researcher in shaping knowledge, especially regarding erotic/sexual/sexualised interactions, emotions, and desires (De Craene 2024). This work demonstrates the pervasiveness of this 'awkwardness' in the production of knowledge, both within and beyond the ethnographic research conducted during my PhD years, and its impact on the research, its trajectories, and the life of the researcher as an agent within the field. Acknowledging this helps expand our understanding of the mechanisms of knowledge production and embraces the complexity of a reality where emotions and experiences cannot be edited out and massively contribute to the structuring of reality. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge that production is always situated and positioned and thus necessarily 'partial' – partial in the sense of being non-objective and without claims of universality.

In this regard, Haraway, in 'Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature' (1991), dismantles the idea of the existence of pure and objective knowledge: all knowledge is historically, contextually, and personally situated. Haraway proposes an epistemological alternative to the objectivism typical of western sciences and the abstraction of philosophical cultural relativism. This methodological approach departs from the scientific narratives of western cultures, which traditionally link objectivity to relational distance, transcendence, and the division between the acting subject and the object of investigation. Situating what is being studied allows us to localise it and to hold the subjects and objects involved in the discursive and material construction of knowledge accountable. Consequently, partiality, rather than universality, becomes the condition for rationalising complex and contradictory knowledge, moving away from simplistic claims and embracing the 'partly understood' (Haraway 1988). Localising and situating mean embracing a certain degree of vulnerability and resisting the closure and finiteness of assumed knowledge. The seemingly objectivity of situated knowledge is thus a categorical rejection of a 'simplification in the last instance' (Haraway 1988: 590). For Haraway (1988), the translation of the social is always interpretative, critical, and partial. This interpretation of social data is primarily political: on one hand, theoretical critique problematises the social and relational reality in which we are immersed, the knowledge of phenomena, and the assumptions according to which we structure our understanding; on the other hand, it considers the researcher's viewpoint, their positioning, and the theoretical and methodological choices applied, to be fundamental. Therefore, the decision to write this article and include this auto-ethnographic section in my doctoral thesis, from which this work is derived, stems from a political stance aimed at legitimising emotions and desires

and making visible what is commonly labelled in the academic world as 'research surplus'. In this way, this surplus is finally dignified to the category of the thinkable and therefore existent, recognising its significant impact on knowledge, its producers, and its consumers.

Systemic + Stigma = Systegmatic Hurdles

While I was seemingly prepared to encounter emotional hurdles, what I failed to anticipate, rather naively, was the extent of the pervasive delegitimisation and stigma within and beyond my professional environment, encroaching upon my social networks/circles and identity. Reflexive accounts of doing sex and sexuality research, as a form of 'dirty work' (Hughes 1958; Irvine 2014), highlight how researchers in these topics are vulnerable to experiencing stigma by contagion, being labelled 'dirty workers' (Ashforth, Kreiner 2014). They are marginalised through institutionalised practices within universities and circuits of knowledge production (Irvine 2014; Msibi 2014), subjected to barriers and peculiar requests in review processes and publications (Irvine 2014; Allen 2019), and trivialised by colleagues (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017), impacting teaching and career progression (Irvine, McCormack 2014). The stigma also extends outside academia and work-related contexts (Attwood 2010), resulting in personal consequences such as discrimination and online abuse (Javaid 2020), gendered experiences of sexualisation and objectification, hostility and aggression (Keene 2022), and identity crises (Israel 2022; Keene 2022).

The academic stigmatisation surrounding the study of masturbation and porn consumption became evident early, during my project colloquiums, where I found myself compelled to justify why I chose to investigate the NoFap practice specifically, facing resistance and scepticism from white cis-male professors regarding the legitimacy of my research. I was repeatedly asked to explain why I specifically chose to explore the construction of masculinity and sexuality through a practice related to pornography and masturbation, and why I didn't opt for something more 'acceptable' and 'mainstream'. This painful experience persisted when I was met with giggles every time I mentioned the word 'masturbation' during my presentations. Additionally, there was a request that I sanitise my language in my presentation and the provocative title, as they were deemed too 'evocative' and 'eccentric'. Similarly, the aforementioned uncomfortable behaviour manifested in the opposite way during conferences, where male professors and scholars expressed excessive enthusiasm about my project. They engaged in personal oversharing, assuming I was comfortable discussing both my and their personal solo sexual experiences, irrespective of the power dynamics and gendered status of the interaction. Janice Irvine explains how the common experience of women-socialised sociologists researching sex and sexuality is being sexualised in the workplace, *'producing stereotypically gendered expectations about their*

desires and availability' (2018a: 18). The explicit statements from these scholars and, less often, precarious colleagues highlighted how my project was considered 'cool' because it introduced something 'spicy' and 'sexy' into the academic discussion. As Keene argues (2022), sexuality research is claimed to bring more 'enjoyment' to research, but this fun is then offset by trivialisation, mockery, and the undermining of the seriousness of the work, both within and outside of academia (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). I experienced Fahs, Plante, and McClelland's (2017) description of doing critical sexuality studies as engaging in work that is simultaneously trivialised and fetishised because it is deemed easy, enjoyable, sexy, and not meaningful. These experiences reveal the academic boundaries and gendered power relations in defining which topics, methods, and bodies can be considered legitimate in research in the context of the machist and masculinist academic structures and politics of science and knowledge production (De Craene 2024). At the same time, my reluctance to oppose or sanction discomforting situations and the strategic exploitation of certain subordinate positions has led to a sense of not being taken seriously and feeling sexualised or stereotyped as the kinky, sexually open researcher. While I embrace this definition as constitutive of my personal identity when I feel I am in safe spaces to counteract the stigma, it cannot be imposed by external privileged and 'powerful' subjects, nor can it constitute an assumption in professional interactions. This constitutes processes of sexualisation by colleagues and scholars because of my research topic and produces a 'personification' of the dirty work of sex research, externally imposing upon the researcher the identity of a dirty worker themselves (Irvine 2018a) and confusing a person's professional life with their personal life (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017). This is why I dedicated my entire doctoral journey to finding conferences and networks that felt relatively safe, avoiding troubling contexts or consciously participating in them as a disruptive act, but refraining from interacting outside my presentation to minimise the possible negative impact. I deliberately steered clear of spaces where I might encounter individuals with delegitimising perspectives, aiming instead to construct my own positive, supportive bubble. As Aliraza Javaid argues (2020: 1222), *'strategically avoiding certain places where certain identities are likely to be unwelcome and deeply stigmatized can be life-saving'*. Again, however, safety is coupled with a form of conscious and painful self-silencing.

Moreover, this stigma extended beyond the academic sphere. It influenced people's perception of me outside the academic environment, significantly impacting my life and further blurring the line between my personal and professional life to the extent that, in certain contexts, my identity became tied to people's perceptions of my work. As discussed by Keene (2022), doing dirty projects implies, because of the sociocultural stigma attached to them, that it is not just the participants of our research who are under scrutiny, but we are as well. This results in both professional

and personal costs (Fahs, Plante, McClelland 2017; Keene 2022). I have encountered this in three distinct ways:

1. I faced dismissal and scepticism regarding the relevance of my research, primarily from family, relatives, and adults, often accompanied by laughter and awkwardness. Over time, I engaged in 'closeting practices' (Irvine 2014: 649), steering away from explicit terms like 'masturbation' and 'pornography' and opting for more widely accepted and 'neutral' language such as 'I am investigating the construction of sexuality in male-dominated digital spaces'. I became progressively more hesitant to share or disclose the nature of my work. However, this self-policing, often resulting in self-censorship, done in an attempt to ensure my own safety and the comfort of others, did not ultimately leave me feeling safe, happy, or comfortable. Instead, I constantly found myself on alert, pressured to conform to societal norms, 'hyperaware of my surroundings', and afraid of 'ruining the mood' or potential attacks. This emotional labour has been, and continues to be, extremely heavy taxing.

2. People who learned about my research through friends often categorised me as an expert in male masturbation, men's sexuality, and penile matters. This often led to gendered and hypersexualised allusive jokes about my own sexuality and assumptions about my sexual availability. Men were frequently obsessed with interpreting my words for signs of 'sexual degeneracy', attributing my interest in male masturbation to questionable motives. On one occasion, an unknown individual speculated that my fascination was rooted in Freudian penis envy. According to him, this envy was so strong that it had turned into a desire to be a man, and that must be why I am so fascinated with trying to understand men and what they feel, and why my appearance does not fully align with 'traditional femininity'. For others, I am so into male masturbation simply because I crave it or because I am a 'sex-obsessed' person.

3. Friends introducing me as the 'porn expert', implying that I possess comprehensive knowledge of all porn categories and insinuating that I am open to discussions on topics ranging from their sexual interests to pornographic habits and even inquiries about penis size. Establishing and maintaining boundaries became a constant endeavour, extending beyond the confines of my fieldwork. As in the case of Israel (2002), the association between myself and my research topic was constantly attached to my identity, eventually becoming my identity. In 'friendly' contexts, my control over how much I wanted to share was limited by the choices of others.

Ultimately, assumptions were made by others as to why I had decided to pursue this line of research (Javaid 2020). They wondered what it was my personal intimate background story capable of explaining why I needed to engage in 'this kind' of study so far away from the norm. What was the skeleton in my closet?

Strategies to resist the stigma of doing dirty work within academia and beyond

Throughout my PhD journey, from which the reflections in this article are drawn, I grappled with a spectrum of emotions: sadness, disgust, anxiety, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and a pervasive sense of unworthiness. My emotions and perceptions permeated the data, and by recognising them I was able to dig into my strategies, conflicts, identity, and bodywork in the field. Above all, I experienced a profound anger, not just concerned with the field, but also directed at the patriarchy and westernised academia, and even within myself. Recognizing and reflexively addressing this anger made me aware of its power. Anger allowed me to be conscious of these challenges, and it puts me on the alert to take care of myself by finding an empowering way to positively embrace it. This awareness served as a catalyst for me to empower myself, fostering a motivation to imbue my research with political significance, and heightening my awareness of my position within the academic landscape and the direction of my research. It compelled me to be fully present and engaged. To approach these emotions, particularly anger, I first needed to understand them and then articulate them in words. Firstly, reflexivity, as a fundamental practice rooted in feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge and knowledge production (Rose 2007; Harding 1991; Haraway 1991), played a fundamental role in helping me navigate and make sense of my emotions and ultimately gain power over (and thanks to) them in and beyond the field. Embracing feminist (auto)reflexivity, as outlined by Jordan (2018), allowed me as an ethnographer to critically reflect on power dynamics, my position, and my influence within and outside the field. This approach extends to considering the notions of body, desire, and emotions as personal in the political. Secondly, poetry immensely helped in not only facilitating the reflexive process of understanding these emotions but also embodying a tangible manifestation of that understanding. Inspired by Lea Dorion's reflections (2021) on Audre Lorde's (2019) cultivation of the writing moment as an emancipatory process, I embarked on a journey into the transformative potential of poetry as a place where the power dynamics can be subverted and the ethical constraints of silence can be surpassed. Lorde (2017) describes the politics of poetry as a unique form of expression capable of articulating profound and oppressive emotions. Throughout the research process, within and beyond the fieldwork, poetry became a source of solace and empowerment. It played a particularly crucial role in reclaiming a voice that was deliberately muted by my decision to withhold my

identity within the group. Subsequently, this voice was further marginalised or delegitimised as a result of a combination of internal and systemic constraints. Poetry, in this context, emerged as a transformative force, enabling me to not only confront but also overcome the deliberate silencing and delegitimisation and thereby reclaim agency and expression in my research narrative.

Poetry was crucial during my lonely PhD journey, and it proved to be essential, although not always sufficient, in the context of my research on sexuality. Through this experience, I've come to realise that supportive collective actions are essential for sex and sexuality researchers so that they can at least diminish or share the burden of these personal and systemic shortcomings. Below I present a non-exhaustive list of practical suggestions, with the awareness that transformative actions cannot be merely individual but are necessarily structural and collective:

My first suggestion is to connect with fellow scholars and researchers in Gender and Sexuality Studies to help you discover people who may help in addressing some of these challenges and to gain insights from their experiences (Keene 2022).

My second suggestion, in conformity with Keene (2022) is that when it is possible to do so and when done as institutional and not independent research, you should secure strong and supportive supervision and foster relationships with your 'mentors' that enable open discussions about the emotional hurdles inherent in researching sex and sexuality.

My third suggestion is to explore the opportunity to discover a collective feminist space within the university or your local community and nowadays even online. Seek out a supportive environment where individuals share a commitment to feminist principles. These spaces are more likely to provide meaningful discussions, collaboration, exchanges of ideas, and support.

Within certain collective or feminist spaces, there may be opportunities to engage in informal debriefing sessions or access mental health support. These resources are often equipped with the language and tools necessary to address issues surrounding power dynamics, gender, and sexuality. These spaces can provide a valuable outlet for individuals to discuss and process the challenges they may encounter in these domains, and can offer a supportive environment that acknowledges and addresses these challenges.

Conclusion

To conclude, I acknowledge the unavoidable partiality of my experience. However, I believe it speaks of broader systematic and systemic dilemmas, doubts, and shortcomings in the ethnographic study of sexuality, especially within male-dominated spaces, both online and offline. Situating myself in this framework, I echo Keene's

(2022) call for researchers to openly share their journeys, illuminating the consequences of engaging in 'dirty work' and offering prospective researchers a more informed perspective on potentially 'risky' projects. Moreover, as discussed by De Craene (2024), it is essential to shed light on the context in which we conduct and write research to illuminate how power relations, institutional academic structures, and everyday practices privilege certain forms of knowledge production by stigmatising, silencing, delegitimising, or dismissing others. However, as illustrated in this paper, exposing oneself as a sex researcher or a sexademic, exposing emotions and potential vulnerabilities, involves significant personal and professional risks, challenges, and forms of both material and symbolic violence and oppression. In the literature, as well as in my experience, sex research has a long history of being considered unscientific and still generates academic and societal distrust, stigma, and delegitimation. Indeed, this paper serves not only as a reflection but as a call to action, emphasising the imperative need for a supportive community within the realm of sex and sexuality research. Such a community can foster a shared understanding that can guide those embarking on demanding research endeavours like mine. Following Keene (2022), recognising the need for a supportive space, my ultimate aspiration is to foster an environment that cares for and supports an understanding of stigmatised topics related to sex and sexuality. Let's create a safe space for the dirty to thrive! This community already has a possible name: in the direction of a political demand, we can reappropriate and resignify the name 'dirty workers', which we proudly are because we decide and we choose to be so, and because sex and sexuality exist as a central and legitimate part of human existence.

Once we realise that we are exposing ourselves through our work, we can feel fear for ourselves. Yet, as Audre Lorde (2017) powerfully epitomized, the transformation of silence into language produces fear because it is an act of self-revelation, and this is always fraught with danger. In the end, Lorde's profound wisdom resonates: 'Our silence will not save us' (Lorde 1984).

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