

Fiona Morrison-Fleming

January 25th, 2021

User, researcher, outsider: Navigating multiple identities while conducting research on dating apps in Northern Ireland

Researchers must necessarily bring themselves to their fieldwork, and much has been written about the advantages and disadvantages of outsider and insider identities. This piece considers how the researcher's multiple identities—as someone who both uses and researches dating apps, and an outsider in Northern Ireland—interact and affect the research dynamic, writes *Fiona Morrison-Fleming*.

In Janelle Ward's "A Dating App Autoethnography: Presenting Myself as a Researcher and User", she writes that "[m]eeting for an interview about Tinder is almost exactly the same as meeting for a Tinder date" (2019:136). The blurred line of date vs. interview, love life vs. professional life is something that I, too, experienced while conducting research on and using dating apps. Like Ward, my research interest was born from my own experiences and observations while using dating apps, leading me to write an MPhil dissertation titled "'I guess that's conflict resolution': Dating apps as a site of intergroup contact in Belfast". This piece contemplates the unique challenges presented by this dual identity of researcher and dating app user, and the further complication of conducting research in Northern Ireland as an American.

User

It is one of my personal rituals upon moving to or visiting a new place to open Tinder and peruse the offerings. Beyond the vague desire for romantic connection, I find that dating apps offer a window into a city or country's heart: Users' profiles might provide insight into a place's sense of humor, norms around dating or courtship, or culturally significant activities. When I moved to Northern Ireland for graduate school, I yet again found myself using Tinder as a lens through which to interpret society and this ultimately culminated in a dissertation on identity presentation and cross-community relationships in the dating app era.

My first foray onto dating apps in Northern Ireland was colored by my knowledge of the country's history. Euphemistically known as "the Troubles", Northern Ireland's decades-long civil conflict saw British security forces pitted against Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries, ending with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 (Darby & MacGinty, 2002). While the treaty may have brought an end to violence, relics of the conflict remain: Northern Ireland continues to suffer from the legacy of the Troubles in increased rates of suicide and addiction, a polarized political system, continued paramilitary violence, and high rates of residential segregation (Tomlinson, 2012; North South Inter-Parliamentary Association, 2014; McDowell, 2018; Vardy, 2018; Holland & Rabrenovic, 2018; Smyth, 2004; Shirlow, 2008).



The peace wall separating the Falls and Shankill Roads in West Belfast as seen from Clonard Monastery, where the first secret talks with the IRA took place (Crutchley, 2014). Photograph by the author taken in October 2018

It was the reality of residential segregation in such a small city that initially sparked the idea for my research. While someone living in the Catholic stronghold of West Belfast would be surrounded by fellow Catholics and might not encounter Protestants in their daily lives, their Protestant neighbors on the Shankill Road live only a few blocks away; an app like Tinder, which filters on the basis of age, gender, and distance, would ensure exposure to the outgroup members. It would then become a matter of the user “telling” the community affiliation of the profiles shown on their app, and accordingly, how much of their identity each user chose to exhibit. In Belfast, it is not unheard of for a person to go through much of their life without ever having a meaningful relationship, be it platonic or romantic, with someone of a different community background (Blevins, 2019). It occurred to me as I swiped past discernable and indiscernible Catholics and Protestants alike, that dating apps were a site where previously impossible contact might be made.

I quickly found myself trying to “tell” people’s community backgrounds through their names, bios or photos: a Séan, for example, was clearly Catholic, while someone pictured wearing a red poppy pin could be easily identified as Protestant (the poppy indicating support for the British military). There were also those who presented their identity in more aggressive ways, whether through references to paramilitary organizations or one such warning stating “you shouldn’t date me if... you’re not a Protestant” accompanying a photo of a masked man holding a paintball gun. I was curious, too, about my own identity—was it clear that I was American, and therefore beyond the parameters of community affiliation? Or did my Irish name out me as Catholic (which, incidentally, I am)? Soon enough, dating apps and the sectarian presentation of identity became a frequent topic of conversation on my postgraduate course, with classmates regularly sending me screenshots of particularly interesting or extreme profiles. It felt simultaneously like an overtly sectarian space, where it was reasonable to pose with flags and guns, and like an alternate world where a Catholic and a Protestant might fall in love (or lust) when they might not otherwise have had such an opportunity.

Researcher

When I initially conceived of researching sectarian presentation and intergroup contact on dating apps, the idea seemed far too ethically fraught: Could I use screenshots of profiles taken by myself or my classmates? Would I use my own profile to recruit participants? I ultimately did neither of these, recruiting participants through student groups at the local university, as well as through friends when the former proved insufficient, and eschewing the use of pictures in favor of simply speaking to my interviewees about how they constructed their profiles. However, the complexities of my dual identity as researcher/user remained.

In spite of the sterile manner in which I obtained interviews, the meetings themselves often had the slightly awkward edge of a Tinder date. Ward writes, “I’m starting to wonder how this is different from any of the Tinder dates I’ve had in the past year. The difference is, of course, that this is an interview, not a date. Or is it a date disguised as an interview? Or is it an interview disguised as a

date?” (2019:136). I was anxious about the possibility of seeing interviewees on an app later on. I was also hyper-aware of my self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) for these interviews, attempting to dress in an approachable, professional, and in no way date-like manner while also avoiding anything that could be perceived as sectarian. I was heartily engaging in impression management even as I interviewed people about their own self-presentation online. When one would-be interviewee stood me up, the letdown was akin to romantic disappointment—right down to the embarrassment of leaving the cafe half an hour after telling the staff I was waiting for someone—though the loss of valuable research material made it somewhat worse.

Unlike Ward, I used my experience on dating apps as an entry point for my interviews. Starting interviews with my story of how I came to the research seemed to be an effective inroad, and had the result both of putting my interviewees at ease—clearly, there would be no judgement from me as a fellow dating app user—and being the most authentic way for me to engage. Similarly, I often illustrated questions with examples of my own opinions and experiences. When asking an interviewee what their hard “no”s were for swiping, I shared my own rules (admittedly more relevant in the rural USA): no American flag swimming trunks or tank tops; no guns; no fish.

Outsider

The issue of my outsider, American identity is perhaps best represented by the experience of one interview. After the no-show of a Catholic male interviewee, I turned to my supervisor for help in procuring a replacement and luckily he was able to enlist a family friend, Conor (pseudonym). During our interview, I asked Conor my standard question about his exposure to cross-community relationships growing up, to which he responded that “you just would’ve heard about it... not in any way that is like bad, or good, you just would’ve heard about certain people’s parents, one being Catholic and one being Protestant”. I discovered afterwards while talking to my supervisor that Conor’s stepfather was Protestant, a fact he had neglected to mention. In response to my astonishment, my supervisor posited that Conor might have been trying to maintain a picture of traditional Irish Catholic-ness when interacting with me as an American. Of course I don’t know if this is truly the reason, but it certainly highlights one of the difficulties of conducting research as an outsider.

Conclusion

Every researcher brings themselves into their work; the issue is how they acknowledge this, and in what way it informs the final product (England, 1994; Merriam et al, 2001; Bourke, 2014). It is impossible to know how my findings might have changed if my identity was different: Had I not been American, an outsider in Belfast, Catholic but not *Northern Irish Catholic*, I might have been perceived differently and received different answers. Had I not been a dating app user, I might have had more professional credibility—or I might have failed to gain the same trust and rapport from my interviewees. The different impacts of the various layers of my identity on my fieldwork

demonstrate just how crucial it is to be aware of one's positionality and experiences when conducting research.

For citation: Morrison-Fleming, F. (2020). User, researcher, outsider: Navigating multiple identities while conducting research on dating apps in Northern Ireland. Field Research Methods Lab at LSE (25 January) Blog entry. URL: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/fieldresearch/2021/01/25/user-researcher-outsider-navigating-multiple-identities-while-conducting-research-on-dating-apps-in-northern-ireland/>

About the author



Fiona Morrison-Fleming

Fiona Morrison-Fleming received her MPhil with distinction in Conflict Resolution from Trinity College Dublin at Belfast, and was recipient of the James Haire Memorial Prize for outstanding coursework. She is currently applying for PhD programs in hopes of continuing her research investigating dating apps as sites of intergroup contact.

Posted In: Digital research | Researcher's Positionality



© LSE 2024