The observer observed. Ethnographic discomforts and (a)symmetrical relationships in a digital ethnography

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Abstract

This paper engages in a reflection about the use of social media to carry out fieldwork online for contemporary ethnography. The reflection is based on the ethnographer's experiences of discomforts and affects in digital fieldwork, in which she used her own social media accounts to interact with the interlocutors recruited for the project as a means to create reciprocity with them. This article uses these discomforts as generators of ethical, epistemological, and political reflections by discussing the positionality of the ethnographer in a digital fieldwork. First, it delves into the potential of these discomforts as a reflective tool for knowledge generation. It also reflects on the power dynamics consequence of the position that the anthropologist occupies in the field. Finally, the article initiates a political reflection on academic life when extensive exposure to fieldwork breaks down the boundaries between work and personal life.

Introduction

In every ethnographic anthropological work, the researcher and their circumstances are the primary instruments of knowledge. Similarly, it is unquestionable that anthropologists study social relationships through establishing social relationships (Strathern, 2018). That is, the relationships we establish in the field with our interlocutors are the key elements to get access to their lives, experiences, practices and social relationships. The creation of anthropological knowledge depends, to a large extent, on the social connections that researchers create during the fieldwork. These relationships are neither simple nor homogeneous and can sometimes involve several frictions, problems and disagreements between the ethnographer and his/her interlocutors. This article delves into and reflects on the discomforts and affects experienced by an ethnographer in the relationships she established with her interlocutors. These ethnographic reflections emerged as part of a research project that analysed the everyday uses of digital social media among older adults.

The discomforts and affects experienced by the ethnographer during this work arose from the methodological strategy adopted in the digital domain. We take discomfort literally, as feeling uncomfortable physically or mentally as a consequence of interacting with others, but it is

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treated as a methodological approach to engaged research. This approach is aligned with the shift that assumes that 'intimacy and emotionality are inseparable from ethnography' (Davies and Spencer, 2010).

This project had both online and offline fieldwork. In the digital sphere, the ethnographer used her personal digital social media profiles to engage with interlocutors, so that both, the researcher and the researched had equal access to each other's social media data. The purpose of this strategy was to establish, as much as possible, a symmetrical and reciprocal relationship, through which the communication and information exchange and exposure was equal. This decision triggered a very intense, immersive and invasive fieldwork experience for the ethnographer -and surely the interlocutors as well, although the focus of this article is on the researcher experience. During the two years of the ethnographic study, she was connected with interlocutors through various mobile devices (smartphone, laptop, tablet) and her multiple social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, email, WhatsApp and more). This intense experience generated a reciprocal exchange of personal information, affects and care. In turn, it generated a kind of ethnographic reversal, in which the ethnographer was as much observed as an observer. In this context, several challenges, frictions, and unforeseen tensions between her and the project interlocutors emerged, as well as affects.

The ethnographer's discomforts and affects are the focus of this paper. In this article, we observe our own discomforts in fieldwork as agitating and generative elements that challenge us to question ethnographers positions in the field. Instead of repressing the discomforts and attachments generated in fieldwork, we embraced them as a tool to acknowledge our position as subjective ethnographers. Delving into these discomforts and affects seems a necessary task in order to continue reflecting on how anthropology is done, its implications and, researchers and interlocutors positionalities in ethnographic practice. It is also a useful endeavour for us that opens up possibilities in the ways we relate to ethnographic "others". It is also fruitful for creating knowledge from epistemic reflections that arise as a result of paying attention to discomforts.

Through the ethnographic account of the frictions generated in this project, this paper reflects on three issues linked to the relationships developed between the ethnographer and her interlocutors. Firstly, it details how some discomforts served as generators of ethnographic data, specifically those arising from tensions between different social norms in digital social media and the subjectivities that affect those social norms. Secondly, the article reflects about the reciprocal observer/observed relationships, which leads to considerations about the position that the anthropologist occupies in the field. Finally, the intensity of this ethnography sparked a political reflection on the power dynamics of current academic work, as a consequence of an extensive exposure to a fieldwork that breaks down the boundaries between work and personal life. These three elements of reflexivity are part of a speculation on the anthropologist's place in fieldwork and the (im)possibilities of establishing symmetrical and reciprocal relationships while using digital tools for ethnography.

Positionality: power relationships and (a)symmetries in the digital field

In ethnography, it is well known that there are asymmetrical power relations between the ethnographer and those they study. These power relationships are present at different stages of the research process, not only during fieldwork. In the domain of knowledge production, for example, since the 1980s, anthropology has engaged in a reflexive process that recognizes social scientists as having a monopoly on the representation of the other (Behar and Gordon, 1992; Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Fisher and Marcus, 1986). This has led to the recognition that anthropological knowledge is always partial, incomplete and situated (Haraway, 1988), even when researchers make an effort to overcome these power relationships through epistemic collaboration with those we can call interlocutors (Estalella and Sánchez Criado, 2018; Holmes and Marcus, 2008; Rappaport, 2008).

Other power differences between the researcher and the research subjects, may stem from differences in their socio-cultural and demographic factors –age, gender, technical abilities, ethnicity, social class and others–. Those intersectional differences influence researcher positionality, or whether relationships in the field are between equals (and symmetrical) or are established from belonging to different social groups or social positions. This is especially relevant when the ethnographer is situated in a position of privilege over the "other". Such unequal positional power have made that ethical-methodological debates in the discipline have been present to these days (Au, 2020; García-Santesmases Fernandez, 2019; Jiménez García, 2019; Okely and Callaway, 1992; Pettit, 2020).

In this project, there were differences in age and educational background between the ethnographer –35 years old, with higher education degrees – and the interlocutors– over 65 year olds and, most of them with primary education. These differences were not trivial given the technological focus of the study and the 'so-called' digital-divide between young and old people. In fact, some interlocutors assumed that the researcher, due to her age and educational background, was more technologically proficient than they were. Given our intention to place ourselves in a symmetric position, the ethnographer will always be careful to avoid placing herself in the role of technology expert, in order to minimize the social and technological differences between her and them.

Another ethnographic consideration regarding positionality is captured in Stancey's quote: "Fieldwork represents an intrusion into a system of pre-existing relationships" (1988:23), a system in which the ethnographer is an intruder who is academically legitimized to be so. Ethnographic work is often invasive and feels opportunistic for the people being observed, who often do not have access to any information about the researchers, their lives, experiences, or relationships. Relationships in the fieldwork are not reciprocal. In this sense, some anthropological work is still tied to its colonial past and to a kind of scrutinizing and auditing power that analyses the subjects of study. In many cases, the researcher remains almost a stranger to the interlocutors. Interlocutors and researchers are, therefore, in asymmetrical positions regarding mutual access to each other's life experiences.

For the researcher doing this fieldwork, the traditional approach to interaction with interlocutors was unconvincing and uncomfortable because of the aforementioned asymmetries and power-dynamics. And while the asymmetries created by the differences of gender, age or educational background could not be unnoticed, the digital environment

provided an opportunity to give access to interlocutors to facets of the researcher's life, in an attempt to situate the observer and observed in a reciprocal relationship.

The extensive use of the Internet and digital media in contemporary social settings and research, especially in ethnography (Hine, 2005; Hine, 2015; Miller and Horst, 2012; Pink et al., 2015), has the potential to turn these power relationships around. Reich (2015) argues, for example, that the Internet enables study participants to position themselves more symmetrically to the researcher through practices such as researching ethnographers online, searching for information about the study, and even contesting ethnographic findings to digital audiences that are often broader and more dynamic than academic audiences. This does not have to be the case in every ethnographic study, as it requires participants to be able to access the Internet, as well as to have the skills, time, and willingness to engage in this way. Nevertheless, it is still relevant that the extensive and intensive use of the Internet in some social groups gives us the possibility to rethink the ways in which we interact with our ethnographic interlocutors.

The ethnography: social media use in later life

The project in which these reflections are based, investigated the everyday uses of social media among adults aged 65+ in Spain. Although online sociability has been a field of anthropological study for decades (e.g. Hine, 2015; Miller and Horst, 2012; Pink et al., 2015), most studies of older people deal with medical or assistive uses of technology, and almost all of them overlook the everyday uses of ordinary technologies (Peine, et al. 2021). This work focused on the affective and relational elements in social media (Author 2 et al., year; Author 2 and Author 1, year), by observing the relationships between technologies, places, people, and material objects in the context of everyday use of these media.

The ethnography lasted two years and involved twenty people from Barcelona and its metropolitan area. Research techniques included semi-structured interviews, digital data recording and analysis, and participant observation. In-depth interviews were conducted at the beginning and end of the project. Meanwhile, interlocutors' digital interactions on all their platforms were recorded and analysed. For participant observation, we interacted with them daily to observe their practices both online –on the social media platforms they used– and offline –in socio-cultural centres for older people, cafés and their homes. This article focuses on Arantza's experience in the field, as she was the researcher who conducted the participant observation and hung out with the interlocutors -online and offline. All the reflections are the result of the conversations, discussions and debates of the three researchers that were carried out jointly as a team (Author 2 et al., year) throughout the entire project, both while Arantza was doing fieldwork, and afterwards during the analysis.

Part of the fieldwork in this project involved observing and participating in the everyday online practices of the interlocutors. Our first methodological decision regarding this task was about which social media profiles Arantza would use to interact with, share content with and observe interlocutors: ones created ad hoc for the project or her own personal accounts? The general advice from colleagues suggested the creation of ad hoc social media accounts to undertake online research. However, Arantza wrote on her fieldwork diary:

> "If I create new accounts, I'm sure they (interlocutors) will realize that they are new, have hardly any contacts, no history, no pictures, and are created for research. I think that that can create a lack of trust towards me. And I would feel like I was deceiving them. I feel it's not fair." (Author's fieldnotes, pp. 24)

That is why, eventually , Arantza decided to use her personal social media accounts as a way to overcome this first discomfort and position herself in a somewhat more symmetrical position. If Arantza was to know about their personal life online, it would be just fair that they know about hers.

This decision, however, led to several discomforts for the ethnographer during her fieldwork which are the focus of this paper. This article follows the extensive body of literature that reflects on fieldwork affects and emotions of ethnographers as a form of self-reflexivity (Abu-Lughod, 1990; Behar, 1996; Davies and Spencer, 2010; Kleinman, 2000; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). Following the work of Hoover and García-González, in the special issue about discomfort in anthropological stances, this article shows the relevance of giving a reflexive space to the tensions and emotions in ethnographic practice and their role in generating «discomforting ethnographic knowledges» (Hooover and García-González, 2022). The aim is to better comprehend the emotional dimensions of fieldwork and embrace what these authors describe as "unsettling ethnographic insights". The notion of discomfort is used as a methodological tool that challenges conventional Western knowledge production practices, shifting towards a perspective that embraces vulnerability and bewilderment. This paradigm is often criticized due to the recognition and embracement of the subjective nature of knowledge generation. Instead, this special issue explores discomfort as a way to identify different research questions and to explore the politics and ethics of human relationality. They use a wide array of perspectives on discomfort that cover discussions such as the ethnographer's own vulnerabilities, their political and personal stances, their methodological choices, their writing techniques and their conceptual frameworks (Angel, 2022; Berná, 2022; Francis, 2022; Slater, 2022).

Building on this literature, this article applies these ideas to a digital ethnography. As Abidin and de Seta (2020) put it, "there's no denying it: The practice of digital ethnography entails anxieties, challenges, concerns, dilemmas, doubts, problems, tensions and troubles" (Abidin and de Seta, 2020:9) that sometimes go beyond classical challenges faced by the offline ethnographic work. And although since the early approaches to ethnographic work in digital spaces many scholars have been discussing methodological and ethical challenges of digital environments (e.g. Lester, 2020; Markham and Buchanan, 2015), only recently some authors have focused on the notion of discomfort as a way to reflect on the practice of ethnographic work online (Abidin and de Seta, 2020). These authors have discussed the challenges of online-offline visibility of the researcher (Abidin, 2020), discomforts around the construction of field sites, participation, and representation (de Seta, 2020); the tensions between visibility and vulnerability in volatile and contentious digital fieldsite (Maddox, 2020) and the methodological challenges of a rapidly changing digital field site (Sumiala & Tikka, 2020).

This paper uses the notion of discomfort to explore the relationality between the researcher and her interlocutors in a digital fieldsite. The use of social media to interact with interlocutors in qualitative projects has been previously explored. However, the uses so far have been either

as a complement to offline fieldwork (Dalsgaard, 2016; Reich, 2015; Schneiderman, 2018; van Doorn, 2013) or, in the cases where the fieldwork was online, the social media accounts were specifically created for the research (Estalella and Ardèvol, 2007; Driscoll and Gregg, 2010; Miller, 2011; Abidin, 2020; Maddox, 2020). There are some exceptions and while researchers used their own accounts, they were limited to particular social media platforms or specific content (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans, 2019; Kraemer, 2016; Mainsah and Prøitz, 2019; Robards, 2013; Tagg et al., 2016). In this project, following the online ethnographic proposal of following the user (Author 2, year), the ethnographer connected with her interlocutors through all her personal social media accounts and multiple devices, thus creating a dense network of digital connections with them.

We were aware of the potential challenges that this strategy would pose in relation to what has been called the context collapse (Marwick and boyd, 2011). That phenomenon entails a situation in which actors, content, and norms from different social groups –i.e. friends, family, professional contacts and ethnographic interlocutors–coincide in the same online context and it causes some tensions on interactional performances (Goffman, 1971). In principle, we didn't think that this phenomenon would be too problematic, as it is intrinsic to the social media practices to manage this situation, through, for instance performing different social roles online, having different social media platforms for different types of contacts, or posting minimal and neutral content that suits the entire spectrum of online social networks (Hogan, 2010).

However, we were aware that this phenomenon would affect both Arantza's social presentation to her interlocutors and vice versa. As a general rule, an ethnographer decides more or less deliberately how they present themselves to their interlocutors, for instance which of their own characteristics to enhance or attenuate, and how to dress or act, with the aim of gaining access to the field and have fluid relationships with their interlocutors, in a kind of role playing (Goffman, 1971). Similarly, on the Internet, all social media users perform a personal online presentation –cultural, political, aesthetic– (Marwick and boyd, 2011) appropriate to the audiences they are addressing. In this project, Arantza's offline presentation seemed relatively manageable. However, the fact that she used her own digital accounts, with her personal contacts and content, made us suspect that her online presentation in front of the interlocutors could become more complex. In order to minimize this effect, she created a Facebook group with the interlocutors, so she could decide the information that she wanted to give access to. Thus, for example, she decided not to give access to some of her personal photos. They were able to see the rest of social media information in her Facebook account, as well as all the data in her other social media and instant messaging platforms.

This strategy was partially successful and our initial guesses were mostly correct, but we had not anticipated that the everyday social media practices of the interlocutors would not follow Arantza's same social conventions and norms. Indeed, as a consequence of our decision aimed at establishing symmetrical relationships with the interlocutors, a situation was created in which the researcher was both an observer and was observed by her interlocutors. In turn, this situation caused a number of unexpected frictions, tensions and discomforts for the ethnographer.

Discomfort: online social rules and the generation of ethnographic data

One of the frictions of this ethnography had to do with the fact that the interlocutors did not follow the same online social norms that Arantza expected in their online interactions. This situation caused several uncomfortable situations for Arantza in the online field but, actually, they proved to be fruitful for the generation of ethnographic data and knowledge on the digital practices of older people.

Internet interaction, like all human interaction, involves a set of shared social rules. As Daniel Miller (2016) argued, the fact that platforms such as Facebook or Twitter are used globally does not imply that everyone will use them in the same way. Different communities around the globe use social media in various ways (Miller, 2016). In fact, even in the same socio-cultural context, different social groups may have different practices, which are often influenced by elements such as age, gender, place of residence, type of online social relationships or their own digital experience. Any given social group or social environment develops their own situated cultures and shares their own set of social rules online (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020; Miller, 2016). Thus, every user or group of users have expectations regarding the use of digital media of the people with whom they interact based on their own online experience (boyd & Marcwick, 2011; Lester, 2020; Markham and Buchanan, 2015). Before starting the fieldwork, we also had our own expectations of the interaction between the ethnographer and the interlocutors. Arantza, a middle-class white woman and academic in her thirties, was naïf enough to assume that the interlocutors would   share a similar set of social norms to hers. Instead, she encountered an unexpected number of frictions and tensions in their online interactions that caused her several discomforts during the ethnographic fieldwork. These frictions materialized the invisible, and many times unconscious, assumptions that researchers bring with them to the field.

One of these difficulties involved the time and place of online social interactions in the form of shared content. Different social media platforms have different privacy/public attachments. Generally, one-to-one interactions (such as WhatsApp or emails) are considered more private spaces than Facebook walls or Twitter timelines. Unlike Arantza and her acquaintances, most of the interlocutors shared a large amount of multimedia content one to one with all their contacts –and with Arantza– : links to news, songs, videos, memes, etc. Thus, each day Arantza received, from each of the 20 interlocutors, between 5 and 10 WhatsApp messages and 10 to 15 emails. Bearing in mind that most of them used several social media platforms simultaneously, the volume of content that Arantza received directly every day was absolutely overwhelming. There was one instance when she had 2000 unread emails in her inbox after 10 days out of the office. She was overwhelmed by the amount of memes, songs or multimedia content that she received by different means on her different devices–desktop, laptop, tablet and smartphone–simultaneously, as she wasn't used to this kind of massive exchange of multimedia content in her daily doings on the Internet. She also felt overwhelmed by the imperative of social media immediacy that made her feel she had to respond diligently to all these demanding requests for attention or contact in order to keep up with the relationships with the interlocutors.

In addition to that, the spaces of online interaction also generated a number of tensions between Arantza and the interlocutors. For example, on Facebook, Arantza considered it an

obvious social rule that each user's profile space was for personal use, although it was possible to tag or post content on someone else's sporadically. However, the interlocutors posted multimedia content on Arantza's FB profile on a daily basis, as they considered one should put content in the space of the person they wanted to receive it. Thus, in addition to the large amount of content Arantza received privately, she also received a lot of content publicly: her Facebook profile was filled daily with photos of cats, landscapes, self-help phrases, and political content not necessarily in line with her ideology, among others. Given that her personal, professional, and academic contacts could see these elements, Arantza experienced this interaction on Facebook as a highly embarrassing invasion of her personal digital space. She never expected other people to be massively posting on her Facebook feed, let alone this type of content that now appeared linked to her online subjectivity.

This subversion of Arantza's Facebook usage expectations went further on some occasions when interlocutors took part in conversations with her friends and family. On one instance, Xavier, a 75-year-old man, intervened in a cheerful conversation in which a friend wished Arantza a Happy Birthday, to tell her he needed support because he had been diagnosed with a very serious illness. This moment was both unexpected and upsetting for Arantza and her friend, and even more so when Xavier did not reply after Arantza wrote him a message of encouragement. In fact, Xavier rarely checked if he received replies. Another element that created discomfort in her interactions with interlocutors was related to the use of the language. Many people of the interlocutors' generation were unable to properly learn Catalan, consequently, they often wrote messages with spelling and grammatical mistakes. They also used to write frequently in capital letters, which implicitly mean shouting in online social environments.

For Arantza, these interactions between the interlocutors and her other personal or professional contacts were often embarrassing, especially, when she imagined what her academic contacts would think, for example, of the pictures of cute cats on her profile or of her Facebook "friends"not knowing how to spell correctly. Thus, Arantza often found herself in situations that undermined her relational "normality" in her digital social media accounts. As said, the management of the context (Marwick and boyd, 2011) and ethnographer's digital social presentation became more difficult than expected, due to a differentiated use of online social rules and an unforeseen intrusion of interlocutors into her personal spheres. Although Arantza strived to maintain a homogeneous professional self-presentation, this proved to be especially challenging in the digital realm (Reich, 2015; Robards, 2013). Day after day, she found herself in a constantly changing field and with a certain sense of lack of control over its management.

In some respects, what Arantza experienced was not so different from the cultural shock experienced by any anthropologist in a foreign culture, where they often felt surprised by some unshared cultural practices. Arantza felt disoriented and overwhelmed by the different ways of using social media in terms of time, space and interaction expectations. She felt annoyed by the contents on her Facebook profile, embarrassed by the spelling mistakes of her interlocutors, upset by the lack of reciprocity in messaging and overwhelmed by the amount and type of messages she received every day. Arantza's reaction, more or less conscious, was to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), suppressing or hiding these emotions from

the interlocutors. The concept of emotional labour is relevant to understanding the work of an ethnographer, as it implies acknowledging the existence of emotions and their management as part of the ethnographic work. In this case, the emotional labour was particularly intense and ubiquitous due to the unpredictability, instantaneity and pervasiveness that characterize the online field, as has been highlighted by other authors who have had similar experiences (Kraemer, 2016; Mainsah and Prøitz, 2019; Robards, 2013). In fact, although in the early days of Internet research, this terrain was presented as a place of disembodied and distant relationships, the truth was that online fieldwork generated a much more intense and constant emotional investment than its offline counterpart, revealing that it can be a messy, dynamic, highly demanding, and emotionally charged domain (Author 2, year).

This series of awkward stumbles led Arantza to notice that the online practices of the interlocutors did not spark any kind of tensions for them, while they did become problematic for their own children too. Arantza observed that their children, who had a similar generational profile to hers, sometimes tried to avoid interacting with their parents due to them causing "embarrassing situations". Thus, the discomforts that Arantza experienced added highly valuable insights to the project. They served to reveal some ethnographic data, as well as to understand the relationships of the interlocutors with their friends and kin.

Providing reflexive room for the researcher's feelings and emotions can be useful to provide analytical clues about the field and have a better understanding of it (Kleinman, 2000). These discomforts can offer lines of work that we would not have otherwise opened up, and they generate sociological data in complex settings in a complex way. The use of Arantza's personal accounts made it possible to establish a daily, intense and dynamic relationship with interlocutors. Without the use of her personal accounts, these data would not have been possible. These daily tensions allowed us both to learn from our own emotions and further our understanding of older people's digital interactions. We now had a wealth of ethnographic data about the interlocutors and their online experiences, connection routines, online social rules, interests, and social relationships. They also helped us to understand intergenerational relationships online, and relationships with their peers, as well as with friends and family. In addition to that, these tensions revealed our own assumptions as younger educated researchers and position ourselves in a place we could both better understand and value older people's interactions and digital practices. In short, all these discomforts experienced in the ethnography highlighted, on the one hand, the important role that emotions always play in managing a changing and demanding field (Behar, 1996; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). And on the other hand, the discomforts showed that noticing and giving them a reflexive space can also serve as a generator of knowledge and analytical arguments.

Discomfort: use of digital data, and (im)movable ethnographic positions

Another discomfort Arantza experienced had to do with a certain role reversal between her interlocutors and herself based on the use of personal digital data. In this project, the interlocutors had access to and used her data as much as she stored and analysed theirs. This discomfort was central to the development of these reflections, as it clearly highlighted the unequal power relations that often characterize the very structure of fieldwork and social

relationships that are established in it, and it made us constantly reflect about our own position as researchers in the field.

As explained above, the decision to use Arantza's digital social media accounts made explicit a willingness to reciprocate towards the interlocutors. This involved allowing herself to be affected by the field in an open and deliberate way. On the Internet, many people share personal information with their contacts, such as photographs, and have certain expectations regarding their privacy (Williams et al., 2017). These expectations of privacy in everyday online interaction hardly fit with what is considered public or private at a legal or regulatory level on the Internet (Estalella and Ardèvol, 2007; Hine, 2005). However, the uses of pictures by some of the interlocutors on the Internet created, once again, a clash with Arantza's expectations of interaction and became, again, a source of discomfort for her. It tested the limits of the methodological decision of using her personal social media accounts, which until this moment, proved productive in generating ethnographic knowledge.

Pere was a 70-year-old man who lived in the same neighbourhood as Xavier. Pere and Xavier became friends in the technology courses that Arantza also attended. In addition to sharing Internet content, one of Pere's favourite practices was creating his own multimedia content. To this end, he searched for and downloaded photos, videos, music and animations from the Internet; recomposed them and made his own creations, which he then shared with his contacts (Author1, Author 2 and Author 3, 2023). Pere often downloaded a photo of Xavier from Xavier's Facebook account, edited it in a funny way, and posted it back on Xavier's Facebook profile, along with a humorous comment. Pere also occasionally made jokes on Arantza's Facebook wall. Once, he downloaded a photo of her, edited it, uploaded it to his Facebook profile and tagged her. This was the kind of content that Arantza would not have ever shared with her contacts. Arantza never had engaged in this kind of practice. Indeed, she was freqüently asked by her friends why there were photos of her with teddy bears or butterflies on Facebook. The use of Arantza's digital photographs was unsettling to her, as she tacitly assumed that the photographs that everyone shares on social media are for other people to see, but rarely for them to use, edit or disseminate. She was thorned and conflicted. While she found Pere and Xavier's use of her photographs embarrassing at times, she also found it amusing other times. Pere and Xavier's digital practice with her was a clear consequence of her inclusion in their daily online interactions as peers, and a by-product of her own pursuit of symmetry. That is why Arantza never deleted this type of content from her profile.

The dissemination of digital content in the form of images of Arantza also created the possibility of influencing her digital reputation and online personal identity (Hogan, 2010). Arantza's management of her online social presentation was compromised not only towards her interlocutors, but also towards the rest of her online and offline contacts–friends, family, academic and professional contacts. The ethnographic field had expanded to include the social life of the researcher. And although an easy option to manage this situation would have been to admit that these contents came from a digital ethnography, the ethical imperative of preserving the anonymity of the interlocutors prevailed, especially in a digital setting, where the traceability of information makes it more difficult to preserve their anonymity (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012).

The fact that a researcher must preserve the identity and privacy of the interlocutors does not mean that they are obliged to do the same for her (Reich, 2015). José, for example, was an 80-year-old man who once sent a birthday message to Arantza through WhatsApp, adding a photograph of her in a swimming costume. This is how Arantza found out that he had downloaded all the photographs of her from Facebook and saved them in a pen drive, along with other downloaded photographs of other women. When Arantza let him know that she was stunned, he replied, surprised: "If it's on Facebook, it's not a private thing. Facebook isn't private, Arantza. Include (referring to her ethnographic notes) that I told you this." According to him and other interlocutors, whatever you find on Facebook and, in general, on the Internet, belongs to the public domain and, therefore, can be freely downloaded, edited and used. Again, the tacit social norm and digital practices were not shared between Arantza and several of the interlocutors, causing unforeseen situations that put her in an uncomfortable position.

These ongoing and unpredictable discomforts involved a highly emotional experience that overwhelmed and upset her at some points. She was used to being in a more or less comfortable position in more conventional types of fieldwork. However, this online fieldwork put her in a position that required emotional labour beyond what is expected for getting and maintaining access to the field (Bergman and Wettergren, 2015).

This setting was ethnographically paradoxical, as these interlocutors were doing with Arantza what researchers normally do with them: storing, creating and sharing content from the data collected from them. Their everyday practices placed Arantza in a kind of ethnographic inversion –or symmetry– that once again produced a feeling of lack of control over the situations created online (Estalella and Ardèvol, 2007). This situation also led to an inversion of the terms of discomfort throughout the project. That initial discomfort of being in a position of invasive and intrusive power with regard to the interlocutors had turned into the opposite: a discomfort that arose from feeling too exposed to them.

In this particular instance, these ethnographic frictions have not only served as generators of ethnographic data and knowledge but have also acted as triggers of a process of self-reflection on ethical dilemmas. We feel that these dilemmas have no straightforward or easy solution. Focusing our reflections on the ethnographic discomforts worked as a catalyst to materialize a disconcerting and embarrassing fact: Could it be possible that our methodological strategy to avoid asymmetries a way to lessen our own feelings of guilt regarding the inequality in researcher-interlocutor relationships? Is it possible that the colonial guilt that anthropologists experience, is something we truly resent in practice? Could this experience be evidence that, deep down, we might have preferred a more comfortable position? Also, we took these discomforts as "felt evidence" of how the interlocutors might feel. If Arantza had experienced discomfort in her interactions with the interlocutors, it was entirely plausible that the ethnographic work could cause the interlocutors to feel uneasy or similar forms of discomfort. Thinking about other possible ways of doing ethnography, we wondered whether the *sine qua non* of ethnographic work is meant to always be a generator of (un)resolvable frictions and discomforts, which in turn, are necessary to never stop asking ourselves how, where, and with whom we work as an ethics of care duty.

Ambiguous comforts: affection, care and the limits of fieldwork

So far, we have been talking about the knowledge making capabilities of discomforts as intrinsic to more symmetrical and ethical research. But it is important to show the other side of the story and the affects that emerged in fieldwork as well. The adopted strategy led not only to discomfort, but also enabled the formation of affective and caring relationships with the interlocutors. But, on another turn, it provoked an impossible separation between personal and professional life for Arantza, which ground the following political reflections regarding the place of ethnography in current academic practice.

Another of the unexpected consequences of using social media for ethnography was a reconfiguration of Arantza's personal and work times and spaces. In a classic, offline ethnography, the ethnographer lives in a society different from their own and conducts fieldwork 24 hours a day in an exercise of immersion in a foreign culture. In this paradigm, there are no normative working hours and the ethnographer's personal time and space are not in question. In contrast, the ethnography ''at home'' usually involves a number of places and times in which the ethnographer conducts their fieldwork, while their personal life takes place in the same socio-cultural and physical environment, but in different social contexts. In this type of ethnography, which this project followed, it might seem easy to maintain a separation between the researcher's work and personal spheres. In both cases, the use of digital social media and smartphone-like devices, together with the instant, immediate and unpredictable nature of the Internet, make this scenario more complex. It configures a research environment where the space-time boundaries of ethnography are becoming increasingly blurred and the boundaries between work and personal life are challenged (Beaulieu and Estalella, 2012; Mainsah and Prøitz, 2019; Schneidermann, 2018; van Doorn, 2013). This happens partly because the social and work lives of the researchers themselves were already happening online to a large extent prior to the start of fieldwork (Driscoll and Gregg, 2010; Mullan and Wajcman, 2019). Thus, relations between Arantza and her interlocutors, which involved reciprocal access, did not depend on scheduling to meet in a specific time or place, instead, the researcher was embedded and experiencing multiple temporalities of use of social media (as many as interlocutors). This situation, again, posed some research challenges, as will be explored in some examples below.

The times when Arantza initiated interactions with her interlocutors followed routine working hours. However, interlocutors did not always respect these times, as, after a while, they didn't perceive Arantza strictly as a researcher. Xavier, for example, used to text her around 11 pm or midnight. As mentioned above, Xavier had been diagnosed with a serious illness and, in fact, Arantza was also suffering from a severe illness at the time, which she disclosed to some interlocutors. On many occasions, Xavier wanted to talk about their illness, fears and treatment possibilities, in a sort of mutual caring relationship. As the fieldwork progressed, their relationship became closer and more intimate and enjoyable through these late-night chats, different to their previous offline interactions. The point is, that the fact that Xavier and other interlocutors talked online to Arantza at any time, and she received texts on her smartphone wherever she was, was problematic at times. Arantza received messages while she wasn't working: at home, on the street, in hospital visiting a relative, or at a party with friends on a weekend. Thus, the fieldwork generated continuous disruptions to her private life

and forced her to develop a constant ability to navigate unforeseen ethnographic situations that cut across her professional and personal life.

At one point during the fieldwork Arantza had a surgery and was off sick. Throughout this period, the interlocutors sent her messages of encouragement, phoned her to see how she was doing and expressed their concern about her health. Carmen, a devout Catholic woman, brought miraculous water to cure Arantza from a trip to Lourdes (France). Xavier offered to take her for a drive. And although it is assumed that when you are on sick leave you stop working completely, Arantza could not ignore the gestures of support and affection from her interlocutors. She was grateful for their signs of affection, and continued to be in touch with them online, although to a lesser extent than usual. Somehow, the dissolution of the space-time boundaries of ethnographic work not only produced unpleasant effects for Arantza, but also brought nice and kind feelings to reflect upon.

The latter examples show how the relationship's dynamics with the interlocutors involved a number of reciprocal interactions and feelings that not only implied the exchange of social data, but also of affection and care. Arantza felt compelled to be there for them when they explained their illnesses and fears, and she also received emotional support when they checked on how she was doing or brought her gifts. The interlocutors treated Arantza with affection, sympathy and empathy, and included her in their network of caring relationships (Author 2 and Author 1, year; Author 2 et al., year). This reciprocal affect and care was possible because of Arantza' extensive and intensive exposure to the online field. This setting enabled an ongoing, horizontal, direct and prolonged contact by many simultaneous means and generated a kind of mobile and digital affective connection (Harrison and Christensen-Strynø, 2019; Hjorth and Lim, 2012) that would not have materialized if the work would have been solely offline (Dalsgaard, 2016; Mainsah and Prøitz, 2019; Schneidermann, 2018; Tagg et al., 2016) and through non-personal social media profiles created for the project.

This intense affective experience also meant uncomfortable moments for Arantza when reciprocal access made her feel watched or controlled by some interlocutors. Teresa, a woman she met in a computer course, sent her WhatsApp messages to find out where she was if she did not go to class, causing Arantza to feel the pressure to explain her whereabouts to the interlocutors. Jose phoned her or texted her on multiple platforms if she did not respond immediately to his Whatsapp texts. This is important to note to not fall in a romantization of such an intense and proximal fieldwork. These connections with interlocutors were ambiguous. They were not always pleasant or discomforting. They actually triggered multiple, overlapping and ever-changing feelings contingent to specific situations and people.

The dissolution of the space-time barriers of fieldwork and Arantza's wide exposure to the interlocutors also raised a question related to Arantza's position as an academic. This ethnography took a personal toll on her, not only because the work effectively permeated several spheres of her life, but also because it entailed a mental and emotional overload. Always having her smartphone on, meant to continuously bear with her the weight of the ethnography, which generated a position of constant tension and attention to the field (Diaz-Fernandez and Evans, 2019; Kraemer, 2016; Mullan and Wajcman, 2019) without any break. As van Doorn (2013:390) put it, "one effectively and affectively carries 'the field' around in one's pocket at any given time and place". And that burden experienced day after day, the difficult

balance between personal and work life; and the moments when sustaining the fieldwork became more difficult made us reflect on the consequences of this situation for the dynamics of academia. With Arantza's decision to use her smartphone and social media, she had placed herself in a situation that mirrors a broader social trend that pushes contemporary workers in a constant dedication to work, especially among the more creative or high-performing professions (Mullan and Wajcman, 2019; Zafra, 2017). Also, the particular positionality of Arantza as an academic, affected the way she situated herself in fieldwork. As many authors have pointed out, both women and early-career researchers -like herself- are subtly and indirectly impelled to work harder and longer to make up for the numerous disadvantages they experience in the academic environment, such as gender discrimination, unequal pay, unequal promotion chances or disparities on funding (Acker and Armenti, 2004; De Welde and Stepnick, 2015; Breeze and Taylor, 2020).

The initial attempt to avoid reproducing some of the power dynamics in ethnography related to the researcher and researched relationship, paradoxically, placed us in a position where other power dynamics were enabled: the neoliberal blurring of work and personal life. These mechanisms have a significant impact on current academic work roles, their unliveable times, their dynamics of exploitation, self-exploitation, and precariousness of work, as well as on the normalization and invisibilization of these situations, which are often as permeable as subtle (Berg et al., 2016; Gill, 2016; Zafra, 2017). From this experience and, taking into account the ubiquity of digital technologies in current social life, this work highlighted the necessity to reflect, ethically and politically, on the implications of the use of digital technologies for anthropology as a discipline and for ethnographers as academic workers. This is important because current and future ethnographic work will ever more involve online work, as the distinction between online and offline social life is increasingly blurred in the current social experience. For this reason, anthropologists and ethnographers shouldn't ignore this situation and the ethical and epistemological dilemmas of how to do fieldwork in social media and sustain a good life-work balance.

In conclusion: the observer observed

Although the methodological option we had employed in this project had not led us to create an entirely symmetrical field, we felt that its frictions, discomforts and the power dynamics created along the way revealed a rocky path that made visible the challenges of contemporary ethnographic work. However, in spite of the challenges, we believe this is a path worth taking reflectively, now and in future projects, and to continue asking ourselves whether ethnographic symmetry is possible at all, and opening up forms of working and understanding with interlocutors, which can only be in a flexible and situated way (García-Santesmases Fernandez, 2019).

Relationships between ethnographers and interlocutors in ethnographic fieldwork often involve power inequalities, whether due to intersectional differences, disparities in knowledge production, lack of reciprocity in the field or different levels of personal access to each other. Based on the discomforts that this power imbalance generated in the researchers, this digital ethnography project took advantage of the potential of the Internet and digital social media to rethink the position of the anthropologist in the field, and to reflect about ethical,

methodological, and political issues. Using the ethnographer's personal social media accounts to conduct fieldwork, this project re-located the anthropologist to place her in a more symmetrical and reciprocal position with her interlocutors.

In this sense, the decision to use the ethnographer's digital social media accounts created several discomforts and ethnographic breakdowns that generated a series of affective, work-related, personal and ethnographic frictions. These frictions served to reflect on the place in which anthropologists position ourselves in our respective works and the ethical, methodological and political possibilities of digital social media to rethink this position in present and future ethnographic works. From this move, this ethnography generated flows of personal information, digital data, affect, care and emotions. These fluid, immediate and constant interactions allowed the ethnographer to become part of the care networks of interlocutors and generated knowledge that wouldn't have been possible in an exclusively delimited, offline fieldwork. However, this strategy also put the ethnographer in a position of exposure to her interlocutors, mirroring the usual participants exposure. We conceptualize this as a role inversion, in which the ethnographer was simultaneously observer and observed. This position made it difficult for her to maintain a stable self-presentation to the research interlocutors and to her digital contacts. Another drawback is that it created a precarious situation in her work-life balance, which threatened the sustainability of the ethnographic work.

Discomfort was an element that accompanied Arantza from the beginning of the project and became a way of being in the field. It worked as a tool to see and recognize ourselves and thus try to avoid reproducing power dynamics in the field. Initial discomfort with holding an invasive and intrusive position of power as researchers and the aim to subvert it, led to a number of situations that inverted this position and placed the ethnographer in a fragile and exposed position, from which she sometimes lost the safety net provided by the classic role of researcher. Paradoxically, this initial discomfort was, in turn, transformed into other discomforts that worked in multiple directions. Firstly, as generators of ethnographic knowledge, because through them, we observed the social rules, temporalities, digital practices, affects and relationships developed by the interlocutors with their friends, peers, and family members. Secondly, as triggers for ethnographic reflections that made us hesitate about the place we had put ourselves in the field. Those reflections also alerted us to the fact that the several frictions that arose were linked to the multiple attempts and (im)possibilities of establishing symmetrical relationships with ethnographic interlocutors. And thirdly, as a debate regarding the place in which we should or want to position ourselves as researchers regarding contemporary work dynamics, in general, and the creation of academic knowledge, in particular. The discomfort experienced by the ethnographer only highlighted the place in which we normally position our interlocutors and alerted us to both the power imbalances involved in this positioning and the frictions and new power dynamics that arise when we try to overcome them. Thus, focusing on the ethnographer's discomforts opened up possibilities for questioning ways of doing ethnography, encounters with ethnographic "others" and our own academic work.

We understand this experience as a repositioning of the classic relationships between ethnographers and interlocutors in an "at home" ethnography using the digital tools available to every researcher. It highlights the complexities of the relationships between ethnographers

and interlocutors on social media, in both the affective and political spheres. Even if these relationships were not truly symmetric in this project, this experience encourages us to continue our efforts in ethical research. But, not without questioning whether epistemologically, ethically and politically it is acceptable to pursue this endeavour. In other words, are we willing to position ourselves in a situation that reinforces work dynamics that blur the boundaries between work and personal life?

 The complex nature of ethnographic ethics gives rise to a paradox concerning the role of the anthropologist in the field, a dilemma that demands consideration from every ethnographer. This paradox revolves around the ethical position we wish to establish in relation to the interlocutors and the political role we want to take as academic professionals within the ever-evolving landscape of digitalized contemporary work culture. In this sense, digital ethnographic fieldwork cuts across these paradoxes that already exist in every ethnography and offer the possibility for debates and reflections that are particularly relevant given that the digital is part of contemporary social life and needs to be taken into consideration in present and future research.

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