Navigating a feminist ethics of care, ethnographic methods, and academic activism in researching men's rights and the far right: a researcher's struggles

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Researchers who use feminist theory in immersive qualitative research like ethnography must negotiate a feminist ethics of care where the researcher is compelled to contend with their own humanity and that of their participants, engaging with and protecting them from potential harm (Hesse-Biber 2012). But what happens when the act of protecting the individual conflicts with the feminist imperative to "repair our world" (Stanley and Wise 2013: 23)? Beyond dated critiques of feminist ethnography (Stacey 1988), there are emotional and epistemological challenges when trying to work with ethnography and feminist theory on what Fielding (1990) calls "unloved groups", in this case, groups that land on the far and extreme right of the ideological spectrum. The conflict that gives rise to these difficulties is between the emancipatory and equity work essential to feminism and the imperative to expose anti-equity rhetoric and ideology.

Using a long-term study of two men's communities on the website Reddit.com, this chapter will explore the ethical dilemmas and decision-making required when determining what content, whose names, and what details to publish in academic work on groups that have the potential to cause social (and physical) harm. It will examine the misalignments between theory and practice when the researcher's interest in exposing dangerous ideologies conflicts with the call to protect the people who express those views. What meta-ethical hurdles might we jump to justify our own practice? In addressing some of these challenging issues, this chapter will expand the conversation between feminist ethics, qualitative/ethnographic work, and academic activism, and how these can (and cannot) come together in research on the far right.

The research setting: context

To give context to what follows, I will give a brief explanation of my research on men's rights communities on Reddit. The men's rights movement is a non-uniform collection of groups that share a belief "that society, both contemporarily and historically, revolves around women, and that arguments claiming female oppression are a farce" (Hodapp 2017: viii). The groups that make up the men's rights movement are themselves part of a larger "loose confederation" of groups called the manosphere, where philosophies of male oppression, supremacy, and separatism orbit around a common core of anti-feminism (Ging 2019: 1; Cousineau 2021). Within this complex system of groups, I study two: the sub-community groups of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill on Reddit.[1] /r/MensRights is a space where discussion, supporting studies, and links are welcomed in building "a place for those who wish to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights are infringed upon" (/r/MensRights 2019). Posts generally highlight

ways in which the community members see men as disadvantaged. /r/TheRedPill presents itself as a place for "discussion of sexual strategy in a culture increasingly lacking a positive identity for men" (/r/TheRedPill 2019), and discussions are more focused on heterosexual conquest, coupled with the desire to return to 'traditional' gender roles and norms. I study discourses of masculinities in these spaces, as well as how community rhetorics and the platform that hosts them push men toward far-right and supremacist ideologies.

Reddit.com, for its part, is a content aggregator website and platform for user interaction that has become a hub in the North American cultural zeitgeist and an influencer in global economic markets.[2] Adrienne Massanari (2015) describes Reddit by saying "It's kind of like a community, message board, carnival, and play space rolled into one. … It's kind of like the best and worst parts of the internet and humanity rolled up into one space" (19). In March 2021, Amazon ranked Reddit nineteenth in global internet traffic and engagement over the past ninety days (seventh in the United States), with over 163,000 total sites linking in, and over 50 per cent of users coming from the US, the United Kingdom, and India (Alexa Internet Inc. 2021).[3]

Interrogating feminist ethics in researching men's rights online

The feminist and masculinities theories I have used in my research (Cousineau 2021; Johnson and Cousineau 2018) are rooted (at least in part for masculinities studies) within a feminist research ethos that includes acceptance of various onto-epistemological perspectives on research and knowledge, criticality of oppression and oppressive social and cultural frameworks, and an ethics of care. Each of these areas is discussed at length in feminist texts (Lorber 2012; Mandell and Johnson 2016) and significant works of theory (e.g., Butler 1990; Halberstam 2019; The Combahee River Collective 1979) and are not the focus here. However, negotiating a feminist ethics of care relative to anti-equity behaviour is necessary to help frame and understand my research decisions around community access, participant anonymity, and member checking. The centre of this discussion is whether a feminist ethics of care can, cannot, and/or should be applied when those being studied hold views and ideologies that are anti-equity in nature and antithetical to a feminist ethos.

Analysis of the ethical imperatives of researchers (both online and offline), especially feminist researchers, tends to focus on the good and bad of the relational and situational connections between the researcher and those 'being researched'. By this I mean what could happen to the participants, informants, interlocutors, etc. who are the 'subjects' of the research inquiry. How do we treat these people? Do we treat those who have provided us with research data as people, or merely as objects for production and analysis? A reflexive, qualitative approach to research must ask additional questions, including: what is the researcher's relationship to the area and people being researched? What are the implications of these relationships? How might we ensure that the data we collect are fair and representative of the individuals who contributed to the research project?

A traditional feminist qualitative inquiry calls on researchers to ask for informed consent, request access to communities we choose to study, preserve anonymity for our participants as best we can, and conduct extensive member checking to ensure that both the characterisations of research data and our conclusions about the thoughts, feelings, and expressions of our participants are properly represented in our work (Code 1995). It also works with emancipatory or social justice goals that extend beyond the individuals who might provide research data (Johnson and Parry 2016).

Feminist ethics of care

The tenets of feminist qualitative practice extend from feminist ethics of care. The feminist 'ethics of care' as an articulated approach to research has roots in Carol Gilligan's (1977, 1987) work in, and critique of, developmental psychology and her argument for an expanded conceptualisation of adulthood that included the 'feminine voice'. Gilligan's argument, which aimed to strike down the theoretical and hierarchical distinction between justice and care (also understood as the rationality of logic versus the irrationality of emotion), was that personal, ethical, and individual normative standards were centred exclusively on a male model, perpetuating norms that erased women and women's ways of being. "My critics say", explains Gilligan (1986), "that this story seems 'intuitively' right to many women but is at odds with the findings of psychological research. This is precisely the point I am making and exactly the difference I was exploring: the dissonance between psychological theory and women's experience" (325).

The acceptance of a singular human standard based on the fiftieth percentile male continues (for a series of interesting and distressing examples of this see Caroline Criado-Perez's (2019) work), but Gilligan's research and that of subsequent theorists (Fisher and Tronto 1990; Held 1993) developed the idea of care and caring into an indispensable element of feminist ethos. For Gilligan, "the distinction between justice and care cuts across the familiar divisions between thinking and feeling, egoism and altruism, theoretical and practical reasoning … these perspectives denote different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them" (Gilligan 1987: 467, 469).

This definition of care creates a flexible standard, that is carried out in action and practice and can occur in a variety of settings and institutions (Tronto 1998). Relative to research, the feminist ethics of care calls us to create a research practice that can help to "repair our world" by carrying feminist epistemological principles through, among other areas, the management of different realities and understandings between researcher and researched and complex questions of power in research and writing (Stanley and Wise 2013: 23). We are called to do so by treating our research subjects as agentic actors, real people, and to understand that our research has consequences for those researched, as well as for ourselves and society (Hesse-Biber 2012).

My purpose in exploring the nature of the feminist ethics of care in this way is to provide context for a discussion about positioning my research using feminist theory, and how the approach that I choose might be seen as a purposeful ignorance of these feminist values. In my research, I present unfiltered and obfuscated quotes from members of the communities I study. For the work that informs this discussion, I did not request access to the content of these groups from the moderators or other members.[4] I did not submit my work to the communities for member checking. A keen observer might then question whether the work can live up to a feminist research ethos having done none of these things.

What this means for my research

Negotiating a feminist ethics of care, ethnographic practices, and problematic groups like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill is complicated. Rather than a single correct approach to this negotiation, there are several pathways to good quality research that take different perspectives on user identification in research data, and the associated potential for amplification of problematic messaging.

I believe when using public forum data (as I have with this Reddit research), the choice to anonymise contributors must be all or nothing – either we must anonymise usernames and obfuscate all quotes, or nothing at all. If we choose to anonymise usernames only, for example, and present research data verbatim, the data remains searchable and is easily associated with the user – rendering the obfuscation of the username pointless.[5] For the act of anonymising usernames to be effective, we must also engage with

a version of Markham's (2012) fabrication to obfuscate the content as well. This discussion of all-or-nothing anonymisation relative to a feminist ethics of care is complicated since the expository work of communicating research on problematic groups might call us to present community discourses in the most effective (and affective) ways – through their own words. In taking this approach, however, we must contend with notions of dehumanisation and objectification from singling users out as representative.

Other authors who have worked with Reddit data have approached this challenge in different ways. Some authors have chosen to include usernames, including Richterich (2014), Bergstrom (2011), Springer (2015), and some of Massanari's (2017) work. None of these authors provide a justification for the inclusion of usernames in their research products. Authors like Robards (2018), Shelton and colleagues (2015), and Van der Nagel and Firth (2015) all choose to leave out usernames in their research with potentially vulnerable users, and each relies on the presumption of vulnerability of participants in leaving usernames out. Given my own consideration of unloved groups on Reddit, the decisions by authors like Gaudette and colleagues (2021) and Borton (2017) to remove or obfuscate usernames from their writing are particularly interesting. These authors are also researching misogynist communities on Reddit and acknowledge that the data they were using is public but choose to conceal author attribution anyway. Their research, while clearly critical of the extreme right (Gaudette et al.) and misogyny (Borton) on Reddit, does not do the kind of expository and academic activism that I believe is required to create change, and so begs the question of why do this type of research in the first place.

My approach to this challenge brings me back to considerations about my primary concerns in doing this research, and that (to paraphrase Fisher and Tronto (1990)) relates to a world that the most people can live in as well as possible. So, while I believe that members of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill are people, and some of these people have been deeply affected in negative ways by the social policies and ways of being they complain about, their central messaging is not about the emancipation of oppressed people, but rather the perceived diminishing power of male dominance.[6] Some of the concerns and issues that these men bring up may be worthy of consideration – one example is anti-circumcision activism where the circumcision of infant boys is seen as a gender-specific violation of human rights – but the personal and collective desire for a propagandised Western gender traditionalism, rhetorics of male domination, and intra-male hierarchy mean their rhetoric is decidedly focused on benefiting men, frequently to the expressed detriment of women, and some men. Given these considerations, I take a kind of meta-level approach to the ethics of care. I consider the exposure of both verbatim texts and usernames as having the potential to expose readers, in a controlled way, to harmful ideology – a move that can (hopefully) benefit the most people through a type of inoculation.[7] I feel justified in that decision given the persistent public identities and social capital/credit orientations of Reddit and Reddit users (Richterich 2014).

Even if we feel justified in maintaining usernames and verbatim quotes as conscious praxis, the ethical question of the amplification of problematic, anti-equity rhetoric through our research and writing remains a difficult one. While fears of amplification may prove justified for popular media articles with a broad reach (e.g., Tiffany 2020), or even texts by academics written for a wider audience (e.g., Daniels 2009), the idea that dissertations or academic articles (with their limited reach, paywalls, and other challenges) would amplify counterpublic messages or convert the reader presupposes that the readers of academic texts completely miss the point.[8] Given the feminist nature of my work (for example), readers are already likely to have a critical stance on men's rights rhetorics. If they do not, I find it difficult to believe that in reading my work (or other work of this type), anyone is likely to fall into men's rights or red pill ideology.

If my work did 'go viral', the question would perhaps be how I might have obfuscated the data while maintaining its integrity. As discussed above, Markham (2012) suggests that with creative re-scripting of user data, authors can craft narratives that appropriately represent the content they wish to convey without exposing the poster. Markham calls this process fabrication, representing "the activity of combining, molding, and/or arranging elements into a whole for a particular purpose" that is "not value-laden in itself" (2012: 338) but rather accomplishes sharing the message of the content while obfuscating and shielding the creator. However, in the work of exposing problematic content to protect against it, I think obfuscating it in the ways Markham suggests does two things: (1) it ignores the agency of the person who originally posted the text in a public forum, and (2) it protects them from critique. This may feel like a defensive incongruence, but if we accept that Reddit is a kind of privately owned public space, which it is, then we should also accept that users understand that the information posted there (in public subreddits) is also public.[9] If that is the case, then do users really have the expectation of content privacy beyond the individual quasi-anonymity that is provided by Reddit accounts? How could they?

My work is expository of the discourses of masculinity and male supremacy in /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. The users I quote are not confidential informants, and I include verbatim texts to best represent what users are sharing, so it also feels like the academically appropriate approach is to credit those authors in the same ways that I would credit any other author for their published work. What is the difference between Reddit posts and blogs, online articles, or other websites?

There is also the question of intentionality/expectation and whether users have the expectation that their texts would be taken up by academics and critiqued so heavily. Certainly, most users likely do not have this expectation, but I argue that this intentionality should not permit them an escape from the critical gaze. As authors in publicly accessible space, they remain open to critique of work attributed to them. Reddit runs on critique, and in both /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill, critical comments are significant portions of the discussions between users. Academic critique, although (mostly) more considered and extending from a more robust theoretical standpoint, is not all that different.

The act of protecting users in spaces like /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill in the same way that we would protect users in communities that are targets for threats and oppression also runs the risk of being protectionist and supremacist. Users from the communities I studied are not regularly under threat of physical and sexual violence in the real ways that, for example, high-profile users were/are from #gamergate (Chess and Shaw 2015; Salter 2018), women executives have been at Reddit (Pao 2017), and women users with sexually explicit content (shared willingly or not) (Massanari 2017; Van der Nagel and Frith 2015) are or have been under threat as Reddit users. To give even the impression of protecting those who occupy dominant groups (themselves sometimes aggressors) has the potential to align us with them in dangerous ways. To cloak this protection under the veil of scientific objectivity or fairness are also arguments in bad faith, as they must be made under the presupposition that objectivity exists in science, or that we owe fairness to those in power within inequitable systems. For all these reasons, I choose to include usernames in my research.

So, having shared my own approach and decisions in the face of these ethical dilemmas, I must circle back to the discussion on the ethics of care – specifically, the question of whether I owe the same ethics of care I would afford to participants that I consider vulnerable to the individual users of /r/MensRights and /r/TheRedPill. My answer, as evinced by the previous pages, is complicated. It deals with not only what I consider explicit ethical expectations from feminist research, but also the larger and deeper praxis of feminism as a means of building a better world for the most people to live in. It considers the complex

interplay between the quasi-anonymous natures of online spaces like Reddit (Cousineau 2021; Van der Nagel and Frith 2015), alongside the citational politics of using and quoting data accessed online. It plays with the humanisation of online content – content that can do multiple types of violence – through naming content authors, and by association giving them a kind of avatar of human form, but also in considering the effects of their violence on victims. It simultaneously dehumanises by allowing (or making) singular voices representative of loosely organised and complex collectives.

In my research on the far right, and particularly men's rights and red pill spaces, I believe that the meta-ethical stance of working towards a socially just world is paramount to individualised ethics of care. Simply knowing that terrible things happen (as might be the case through anonymised and obfuscated research) is not enough; we need to identify the speakers so that we can call them out when needed. I do not worry for the safety of these users, because their rights, bodily autonomy, and lives are not at risk – and will not become imperilled through my work.[10] They do, however, contribute to the growing threats to the rights, autonomies, and lives of the women they seek to subjugate and the integrity of the systems they seek to dismantle and/or redesign.[11] It is my hope that this chapter will provide others with a helpful way to think through and consider their own approach to the ethics of researching public online content, especially when that content serves agendas of subjugation and dehumanisation. As researchers, we should always be engaged in acts of consideration about the effects of our research on those who have provided our data (however we might access that data), but also on the broader implications of what that data means, what it does, and its effects on the world that the most people can live in as well as possible.

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[1] The website Reddit.com uses the designation /r/ before a community name to differentiate separate content-specific user forums (for example www.reddit.com/r/MensRights is the men's rights community page).

[2] The influence of Reddit has sprung up on multiple occasions since the website was founded, including a very significant part in the #gamergate controversy (Massanari 2017), and a role in upsetting Wall Street capitalism and the financial sector (Duffy 2021).

[3] Reddit uses Amazon Web Services, so it is likely this data is fairly accurate.

[4] It is important to note here that at the time of the research, neither of these groups had community research rules or guidelines in place requiring researchers to contact the group or ask permission to collect community content. In addition, there is some debate about whether community content from open communities like /r/MensRights requires special permission or Institutional Review Board ethics clearance since that content is available to anyone who chooses to browse the subreddit. My work did receive IRB clearance.

[5] I will acknowledge, of course, that not all public data is searchable, and this is the case for some content on Reddit.

[6] With deference to the presence of bots in both communities, of course.

[7] Here I am using inoculation in the way that Compton et al. (2021) discuss it in the context of the post-truth era – "immunity to counter-attitudinal messages is conferred by pre-emptively exposing people to weakened doses of challenging information" (1).

[8] This statement also presupposes that those academic texts are written clearly and using an approach that acknowledges far-right rhetorics and ideologies as potential (or real) threats. There are (dangerous) instances where academic work, most often written through 'neutral' or 'objective' lensing, can seem to lend support or legitimacy to these ideologies, and these are often picked up as vanguards supporting far-right rhetoric (see, for example, the use of evolutionary psychology in this way (Diogo 2019; Siapera 2019)).

[9] Here I am playing off the concept as it is used in municipal and infrastructure as an enticement to or obligation of developers (Kayden 2000; Zhang and He 2020; Lee 2020). There are also discussions on the public/private divide that are important to this argument, including Casey Fiesler's work (Fiesler et al. 2017, 2020) among others.

[10] It is important to acknowledge that users have dealt with repercussions from bad behaviour online, and rarely do those consequences follow users offline in the case of misogynistic or male supremacist speech.

[11] Acknowledging, of course, salient critiques of those systems that challenge whether they have any integrity to begin with (Werner and Lammert 2021).

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