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Doing culture and diversity justice: Using peer-to-peer ethnography in research on young people, ethnicity and sexuality

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ABSTRACT

The challenge in this study is to ‘do justice’ to ethnic diversity in research on young people and sexuality in the Netherlands. I argue that current research practices are unintentionally implicated in constructing and maintaining ethnic boundaries, tending to (re)produce very limited views of ethnicity and culture as fixed identities that steer youths towards adopting adverse and risky sexual behaviours. I argue that this tradition fails to ‘see’ the quintessentially social, multifaceted and contextual natures of ethnicity, sexuality and culture, which are best understood as being ‘always in the making’ within young people’s lived and embodied sexual experiences. Consequently, I went beyond conventional sociological approaches that are crucial in reproducing current biases and severely limit the researcher’s access to these experiences. The methodological solution I explored is a peer-to-peer ethnography of sexuality at parties. I discuss the merits, challenges and limitations of this approach, along with the practical and ethical choices made when conducting the fieldwork. I then review some of the main results and the value of this methodology for addressing key issues in contemporary cultural sociology.

1. Introduction

Research on youth sexuality routinely focuses on marked sexual practices, formulated as those deemed risky or ‘bad’ from a public-health perspective, and marked research populations, specifically ethnic and racial minority youths. These practices are dominated by topics like teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, licentiousness, violence and suppression, which are all routinely studied with an interest in ‘diversity’. Yet in practice, the focus is on assumed cultural differences in ethnic minority group’s vis-à-vis white majorities. Scholars have lately criticised this routine, arguing that it inadvertently contributes to constructing and maintaining ethnic boundaries (e.g., [Krebbekx, Spronk & M’charek, 2017](#); [Van Oorschot, 2014](#)). Cultural sociology has a rich tradition in studying such boundaries, including in relation to their fabrication, histories, dynamics, hierarchisation and the forming of collective identities that often-become institutionalised social differences (for an overview, see [Pachucki, Pendergrass & Lamont, 2007](#), in this journal).

This article engages the issue that ethnic boundaries have precursors within the twin desires to ‘do justice’ to diversity and ‘take culture seriously’ as a factor in the formation of our social lives. Fulfilling these desires has not been completely achieved, as conventional research is limited in how it can make culture visible. Consequently, it tends towards reproducing a wider public and political discourse that anchors the very definition of ethnicity within the conception of presumed sexual-cultural difference ([Krebbekx et al., 2017](#); [Nagel, 2003](#)). Youth-sexuality research within this context systematically magnifies differences between ethnic groups

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while glossing over differences within them, reducing the otherwise messy, complex and multidimensional concepts of ethnicity and culture to a set of stable and comprehensive characteristics or tropes of the other (cf., Gilman, 1985).

This approach has not only limited our understanding of ‘ethnicity and culture’ but has also focused on a narrow and reductionist conception of ‘sexuality and culture’ amongst young people – as if the latter only concern public-health practices and their adverse outcomes. In reality, youth sexuality constitutes a much broader phenomenon that includes a wide range of activities, dispositions and emotions: from private erotic fantasising and events that take place beneath the proverbial sheets, to public acts like flirting, dressing, dancing and kissing. From a cultural-sociological perspective, it is within such acts that different conceptions of culture, ethnicity and sexuality are created, contested and resolved through what are best understood as young people’s lived and embodied experiences (cf., Bosman, Spronk & Kuipers, 2019; Jackson & Scott, 2010; Spronk, 2014). Culture is made and remade in and through bodies, thoughts, feelings, movements and interactions, all of which are sites of ‘meaning making’ in which culture functions as a resource in the fashioning of selves and managing group identities and differences (cf., Swidler, 1986). In creating these identity boundaries, people draw from both deeply and more superficially internalised repertoires, symbolic gestures, morals, tastes and physical skillsets arising from long and short-term processes of social learning (Lizardo, 2017; Patterson, 2014).

These insights have challenged me to pursue an alternative methodological framework and approach to studying ethnicity and sexuality that expands the concepts of ethnicity and culture beyond their categorical use as socio-sexual predictors, meaning that ‘diversity’ is neither assumed nor imposed, but is truly ‘done justice to’, and where culture is really ‘taken seriously’. This necessitates studying the continuous ‘making’ of ethnicity from the perspective of the young people involved, along with their fashioning and managing of ethnic selves based on different sexual morals, ideas, practices and skills. The methodological solution I propose is a *peer-to-peer ethnography of sexuality at parties*. I review the theoretical inspirations for this methodological innovation, how I have employed it, some of the results produced and some of the challenges encountered. The article ends with a critical assessment of the value of this method in contemporary cultural sociology.

1.1. Thinking culture, sexuality and ethnicity through established techniques

I purposely talk of my findings as ‘produced’, as I recognise they arise from the research material itself and the ways it is mobilised and brought into dialogue with particular empirical phenomena; with findings following on from, inter alia, the types of research question asked and not asked, the theories used to approach them and, crucially, the methods employed (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; M’charek, 2010; Slootweg, van Reekum & Schinkel, 2019). The information sought by researchers is thus acknowledged to be fundamentally shaped by the analytical techniques adopted to approach the world, i.e., the topics deemed ‘worthy’ of study, the social groups assumed to have something ‘meaningful’ to say, and how we choose to categorise, contrast and compare.

In the social sciences, especially, this is not a one-way track, as our findings find their way back into the same world from which they were created, having extraordinary power to change the way people think, approach and group themselves and others. This means that in creating knowledge about the social world, social scientists are simultaneously implicated in producing it (Hacking, 2006; M’charek, 2010). Research thus has a performative effect, because it creates and maintains identities through its practices of naming and defining (Butler, 1997). A famous example comes from Foucault who, in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (1998), analyses the “invention of the homosexual” by sexologists and psychologists tasked with mapping sexual ‘diversity’ in the 1850s onwards. Through their process of ‘finding’ diversity (their “will to knowledge”, as per Foucault) relating to both acts and individuals, these scholars created social categories that did not yet exist empirically, but from their inception forced people to relate, self-identify and create sexual others on their basis. Foucault (1998: 43) argues that it was from these practices that:

“The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology.” (Foucault, 1998: 43)

This is akin to the domination of contemporary youth-sexuality research by a similar focus on public health and diversity in the form of ethno-cultural differences. These not only reduce the spectrum of youth sexuality to risk and danger, but simultaneously create identities by magnifying certain differences between ‘ethnic’ groups and minimising differences within them. They also diminish their similarities, especially those existing between minority groups and young people who belong to the hegemonic or ‘ethnic’ majority.

The latter are commonly white middle-class youths who, it transpires, completely avoid being classified as having an ethnicity or culture. They do not think of themselves as having a culture (cf., Perry, 2001), and their sexuality is therefore not associated with, or at all seen as, an expression of ethnicity (Van Bohemen & Roeling, 2020). In this context, not seeking diversity in youth-sexuality research is also problematic: if scholars do not proactively try to include different social groups in their work, they run the risk of presenting a one-sided picture of youth sexuality that comes only from the majority perspective and reifies the notion that this is ‘the norm’ or ‘normal’ (Cense, 2014). Moreover, it may even be empowering for certain social groups to be acknowledged as ‘different’ from others, i.e., as having their own distinct identities (cf., Paschel, 2010). Nonetheless, problems often arise when the cultural bases for this difference come not from those who consider themselves to be different but are imposed by researchers in their quest to ‘do justice to diversity’.

A recent study by (Krebbekx et al., 2017) on youth-sexuality research in the Netherlands shows that established techniques force researchers to do precisely this, namely make a priori decisions about what matters in youth sexuality and in ethnic diversity, i.e., which cultural differences matter. This forces them to work with a particular definition of ‘ethnic youth’, the relationship of which to social reality as experienced by young people is often contentious, at the very least. Consequently, different studies use diverse definitions of what constitutes ‘ethnic youth’, with some focusing on religion and others on racial markers (even if race is not labelled as such; M’charek, Schramm & Skinner, 2014). Nevertheless, others (the majority) focus on geography, categorising ethnicity based on

the birthplace of parents and/or grandparents (Verkuyten, 2018). These definitions are not constructed from thin air, but reflect wider public concerns, debates and nationalist discourses on ethnic youth and sexuality (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). The result is an incomplete conception of ethnicity that focuses on a limited number of ‘usual suspects’: i.e., ethnic groups already identified as having ‘an alternative’ or ‘problematic’ sexual culture vis-à-vis the majority.

These practices, it transpires, occur in both quantitative and qualitative research, even though the latter leaves more room for young people to define what is important to them concerning their ethnicity and sexuality. Yet even in those studies it is difficult for researchers to discount decisions made in advance about which groups of young people to approach. Consequently, in qualitative research, too, the focus is mostly on the groups named above, which is an approach that is legitimated with arguments like those promulgated in quantitative studies (Krebbekx et al., 2017). Nonetheless, the latter also have the disadvantage of needing large research samples to make statistical analyses possible. As Krebbekx et al. demonstrate, in practice this leads to a strange process where youths who do not belong to the ‘larger ethnic groups’ are lumped in with those who do. As these scholars argue:

“The limitations of the statistical options result in a foregrounding of ethnicity, the merging of ethnic groups based on assumed similarities in relation to ‘culture’, and a homogenizing of ethnic groups, obscuring other possible markers of difference due to the statistical need for large, comparable groups.” (Krebbekx et al., 2017: 646).

They also demonstrate that statistical analyses in other survey research require the creation of a reference group, which is almost always composed of white middle-class youths. The consequence is that this group’s sexuality is again reified as ‘the norm’, even as ‘diversity’ is, supposedly, taken on board. Indeed, it is adopted as an unscrutinised baseline from which ‘Other’ sexual cultures, which are assumed to yield to ‘ethnic’ backgrounds, are read.

In my view, this tradition fails to see the quintessentially social, multifaceted and contextual natures of sexuality, ethnicity and culture, which are best understood as the results of ‘doing’ that through repetition become experienced as forms of ‘being’ (cf., Butler, 1997, 2011). Sexuality and social identities are always accomplishments literally ‘brought into existence’ by people acting and interacting within specific contexts. They come about in and through young people moving, touching, feeling, remembering, perceiving, experiencing, all of which are activities through which they ‘make meaning’, i.e., through which they define a situation as pertaining to a particular ethnic group, or not, as sexual, or not, as morally good or bad, desirable or undesirable, physically pleasurable or unpleasant, and everything in-between. Ethnicity and sexuality as I conceptualise them are transformative activities, bringing something into existence that did not exist before: an experience of the self, our body, its sensations and emotions, as well as an experience of others and our similarities, differences, connections and boundaries. An experience, moreover, that may be entirely different depending on which young person you ask and the context in which you ask them.

1.2. Thinking through culture, sexuality and ethnicity by exploring a new technique

My position is greatly indebted to feminist standpoint theory, which suggests that knowledge, including that concerning ethnicity and sexuality, is socially situated and grounded in lived and embodied experiences. This means that what we know about sexuality and ethnicity can (like anything else) only be properly understood if we ‘see it in context’, i.e., if we consider it from within the social settings where it is brought into existence, and where it is probably also contested (Desyllas, 2014). According to feminist standpoint theory, this also means that different marginalised social groups have epistemic privilege because of their positions within these settings (Haraway, 2004; Harding, 2004; Hill Collins, 1990). The ideas young people from various backgrounds have about the meaning of ethnicity may not only differ from those of researchers, but may also arise from various forms or aspects of ethnicity and sexuality unknown to the latter to start with (because they are placed differently). Feminist standpoint theory thus requires us to go beyond approaching young people as mere respondents in studies of their sexuality, and to actively include them in the production of the research and its findings (cf., Chappell, Rule, Dlamini & Nkala, 2014; Coppock, 2011; Lushey & Munro, 2014).

As explained above, conventional methods limit a researcher’s access to the lived and embodied sexual experiences of young people. They do not allow us to see how ethnicity is made and unmade within specific social contexts in ways that matter to these youths. The consequence is that findings tend to be formed around the researcher’s prior cultural dispositions or schemata, which means they are inclined to represent reality in terms of abstract and static identities. To remedy this, I explored peer-to-peer methods, which are unconventional within the social sciences, albeit not completely without precedent. These methods are particularly found in action-based research around public health, education, community services and development, with many studies inspired by Paulo Freire’s, (1970) pedagogical empowerment philosophy, which focuses on giving voice to social groups who are often talked *about*, but rarely talked *with*, when it comes to their everyday lives (for overviews, see Coyne & Carter, 2018; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2014). Like feminist standpoint theory, Freire’s empowerment education approaches youths not as passive recipients, but as active co-creators of knowledge who offer a window into their lives from an entitled insider’s perspective and, through dialogue, are able to improve their individual and communal circumstances (Desyllas, 2014; Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi & Pula, 2009). On the other hand, it approaches researchers as learners who are no longer listening to stories from a distance, but instead come to represent them. Different research techniques are used, and often combined, to achieve this. These foreground young people as co-constructors of knowledge and include photo elicitation, play and creation exercises, mass observations and workshops (see, e.g., Allen, 2008; Desyllas, 2014; McDonnell, 2014). Inspired by this, I devised various small-scale research projects in which I collaborated closely with young people as peer researchers, which together contributed to one larger project: *a peer-to-peer ethnography of sexuality at parties*.

I used parties as the social context for studying young people’s situated makings of ethnicity and sexuality, because they offer a relatively accessible public space in which both aspects are practised and experienced. Parties are commonly viewed as “sexual

marketplaces” for young people (Grazian, 2007), where they experiment with sexuality as it is broadly conceived (e.g., flirting, touching, kissing, dancing, hooking-up). Yet they are also sites for experimentation with ethnicity and identity (De Bruin, 2011). In urban settings in particular, where there is a wide array of available parties, ethnicity appears to be an important dividing and structuring agent (see De Bruin, 2011; Schwanen, van Aalst, Brands & Timan, 2012), albeit not in any clearly defined, stable or comprehensive way. Research on this topic paints a very complex and diverse picture of how ethnicity may matter, with some pointing towards the popularity of particular music styles and dance scenes amongst various groups of young people; meanwhile, others refer to some youths’ religious norms concerning substance use, and others still to exclusionary door policies. As such, parties are excellent contexts for studying the complexity and multiplicity of ethnicity and sexuality as embodied, practised and experienced by young people.

The peer-to-peer ethnography for this study involved both semi-covert participant observations conducted by young people aged between 20 and 26 and extensive in-depth interviews with their peers who frequent the parties observed. Most of the fieldwork took place in Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands (after Amsterdam), which was chosen for strategic reasons as it has the largest share of ethnic minority groups in the country; moreover, as previous research has shown, this has produced a very diverse and ethnically segmented party scene (Schwanen et al., 2012). Furthermore, the Netherlands is a good example of a country in which ethnic boundaries tend to be formed around public notions of sexual-cultural difference (see, e.g., Mepschen et al., 2010), which are also reflected in youth-sexuality research conducted there (Krebbekx et al., 2017). To date, 19 of the current study’s peer researchers have completed observations at 50 party events, as well as 85 in-depth interviews with their peers who attended them.

1.2.1. *The peer-to-peer ethnography part 1: participant observations*

The extent of the covertness of the participant observations was the subject of ongoing reflections and debates with the peer researchers, and depended on the specific social context and relationships the latter had with particular informants (see Calvey, 2008; Lugosi, 2006). This covert dimension is common in research on, and taking place within, the context of public parties (e.g., Measham & More, 2006), where there are both good methodological reasons and practical constraints on full disclosure and consent (Calvey, 2008). Prior to the fieldwork, we obtained approval for this study from the Research Ethics Review Committee of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Following the co-constructive principles of standpoint theory, the peer researchers were fully briefed on the purpose of the study and given the opportunity to provide feedback and suggest changes before, during and after the fieldwork occurred. They also revealed the research questions and purpose to their peers who participated in the formal in-depth interviews and joined them at some of the parties where participatory observations took place. The only people who were unaware of the research were the other attendees and personnel at the various public party sites, whose identities were unknown to the peer researchers. In our many discussions about this, we agreed not to actively approach these unknown youths at the parties; in situations where they approached us, consideration was given to disclosing the reason for our presence, if it was deemed safe to do so.

Due to this need for continuous reflexive engagement with the study’s methods and ethics, I chose to only work with highly educated peer researchers who already had some background in both. They were recruited during the early stages of the research in 2015/2016 and in each of the years that followed, whether through master’s theses and honours’ programmes, or bachelor’s internships and formal research-assistant positions. In these early stages, the peer researchers helped to create and finalise an observation and interview protocol, which was initially piloted. At this stage, I accompanied some of these researchers to a number of the parties they observed; this meant I could compare my and their observations and, if necessary, amend the observation protocol and the training I provided before the start of the fieldwork.

Using standpoint theory further in the design of the method, the observation instructions incorporated a strong auto-ethnographic component (following Ellis, 2004), recognising that the peer researchers are themselves part of the very thing they are examining, since they also produce sexuality, ethnicity and culture through their lived experiences and embodied practices at parties. This means that they will also experience continuous transformations in their acting and thinking, which will affect the research and its findings (cf., Wacquant, 2005). Consequently, I did not ask for ‘objectivity’ in their observation-memos, as this is never completely possible and would obscure, rather than reveal, the work put into the production of the research findings. Instead, I asked them to be open and candid about their feelings and opinions on the events they experienced.

The peer researchers achieved this by writing observation-memos in which they documented, amongst other things, how they prepared for the parties, what the party spaces looked like, what music was played, how the crowd behaved, and any notable events. The memos were written during various stages of, and in various spaces at, each party. This guided an extensive *emic* description of developments, with the peer researchers writing from the position of party-goers. They could drink alcohol and use other substances if they wanted, but they were asked to limit this to ensure that their ability to observe was not compromised. Importantly, they were explicitly told not to do anything they would not normally do or felt uncomfortable about, and were encouraged to leave a party if they experienced it as risky or unpleasant.

1.2.2. *The peer-to-peer ethnography part 2: in-depth interviews*

While ethnographic observations were employed at the parties to study the observable formations of ethnic identities and boundaries around (broadly conceived) sexual practices, in-depth peer-to-peer interviews were used to achieve a deeper understanding of the various meanings attached to these practices by the young party attendees (cf., Lamont & Swidler, 2014). These interviews were semi-structured, with enough space for the participants to add their own topics (cf., Holstein & Gubrium, 2004). We asked them about their experiences at certain parties, what makes them enjoyable, and if, how and when they become sexual. Each of the interviews started with the questions: “Can you tell me about the sort of parties you usually go to?” and “How would you describe

the atmosphere at these parties?" Thereafter, we slowly proceeded to ask: "In your experience, is sexuality also a part of these parties? And how so?" The answers formed the basis for a more in-depth discussion of why a participant did or did not associate a certain party scene with particular practices of sexuality. Within these discussions, we listened closely to whether, when and how the participants coupled these practices with ethnicity and/or culture for themselves and/or others. The interview data were transcribed and stored in a Word file in which the participants' names were anonymised. All the data were saved in a secure vault at Erasmus University, and only the peer researchers and I were able to access it.

2. Findings

The peer researchers conducted the fieldwork at various sites, including barn, queer, Asian, techno and student 'house' parties, as well as shisha lounges and carnivals. All these events featured very different crowds of young people displaying very diverse cultural practices, perceptions, morals and skills that fit the broad definition of sexuality in this study. This sexuality took various forms and guises within the different party contexts. At some events, it was formed by referencing a type of drug that produced certain kinds of sensory pleasure. At others, it was seen in and through music and dancing, where some focused more on dressing 'sexily' and the play around 'looking and being looked at'. The sex happened at some parties in and through eye contact; at others, hugging and kissing dominated the scene, or they were all about hooking-up. The party observations and interviews also revealed numerous ways, some subtle, some overt, in which ethnicity was 'done' in relation to these practices.

2.1. Example 1: dancing the kizomba

At a kizomba party the sexuality is mostly situated in the dance, which was described by the youths as "close", "intimate" and "sexy", especially in the way it accentuates the female form. This was the first time 26-year-old Shequira had attended a kizomba event, and she started her observation-memo by detailing the following exchange.

When I told my girlfriends Angela (22; Cape Verdean heritage) and Christa (21; half Dutch, half Mauritian) I was about to attend a kizomba party, I asked if they'd heard about them. Christa said she had, but Angela reacted differently. Surprised at my question, she said it's normal to dance like that in her culture. She told me kizomba originated in Angola and later spread to Cape Verde. When I asked her what type of dance I could expect, she enthusiastically took to YouTube and explained the difference between people who take kizomba lessons and those who have the dance *in their culture* (my emphasis).

"It's predominantly white girls that take lessons and dance with an exaggerated hollow back that sticks their ass out, which they move around like mad women. Whereas kizomba's actually a subtle dance where curvy movements should flow naturally from the steps," said Angela. Christa looked at the videos and reacted by saying she's not a good dancer: "That's because of my Dutch roots; I completely go for it, but it doesn't look like much." We all laughed. Then Angela decided to give a demonstration, taking the role of the man and dancing with me so I'd have an idea of what to expect. We danced on the relatively empty university terrace, with Christa as our audience. Christa said I was doing well because I was following Angela quite easily. Angela agreed: "You see, you can just do it because it's in your *roots* (emphasis in original)." I'm Surinamese.

This excerpt serves as an introduction to the ethnicities of both Shequira and her friends. Shequira initially does this through a bracketed reference to the countries of birth of her friends' parents. As explained earlier, this is a common way for the Dutch to conceptualise ethnicity, so much so that it is also the classification method used most in youth-sexuality research about ethnic diversity (Krebbekx et al., 2017). Nevertheless, Shequira's description of one of the girls as having "Cape Verdean heritage" and the other as "half Dutch, half Mauritian" shows that there is much greater variation and complexity than commonly allowed for in such research (cf., Verkuyten, 2018). These origins do not fit within a neat or widely used category, and as we read further, we can see how their ethnicities are complex, messy and situationally accomplished in reference to their knowledge of kizomba and their ability to perform the dance.

The girls evoke ethnicity by citing 'culture' and 'roots' as decisive factors in whether or not someone is a 'naturally' good kizomba dancer. Angela's assertion that 'white girls' need lessons and are still 'doing it wrong' is a clear example of the ethnic boundary work through which she identifies herself and Shequira as 'ethnically' different (cf., Jaspal & Cinneralla, 2012; Pachucki et al., 2007). This is then used by Shequira to introduce herself to us as Surinamese. The peer-to-peer observation method allows us to see this process in which ethnicity is formed and reformed in interactions within specific contexts. It enables us to see the unicity of these interactions and contexts, but also the places in which they converge. Indeed, the way culture is evoked here as a repertoire for distinction is not unique to this specific exchange, but was repeated often in the observation-memos of the peer researchers. Here, culture acquired a 'naturalness' that was treated as the basis for ethnic difference. These 'natural' differences created by culture were then argued by these and other young people as revealing themselves in embodied knowledge, morals and capacities; or what cultural sociologists call habitus (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998; Wacquant, 2015).

Christa's assertion that she is a poor dancer because of her "Dutch roots" is a similar reference to ethnicity as an abstract notion of 'culture' affecting the capacities that some young people have, or do not have, when it comes to 'doing' the kizomba. It is noteworthy that she uses this here to self-identify as Dutch, but would she also do this in other contexts, or are there circumstances in which she would assert her Mauritian roots? This again underlines the idea that ethnicities are situationally created and recreated, unstable and messy. They exist from meanings that "are collectively worked out in contexts", so that "values belong to situations as much as to people" (Mears, 2014: 302).

Over the course of the study's peer-to-peer ethnography, I have come to regard the kizomba dance and other cultural resources employed in different party contexts as - in a Foucauldian sense - 'technologies of sex', i.e., cultural resources that permit "individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves" (Foucault, 1988: 18). This creates sexual thoughts, morals, feelings and attractions that can serve as the basis for the creation of identities and boundaries. Like other technologies of sex, kizomba serves as a reference point along which ethnic identities are made and unmade. Shequira's observations detail how this process of forming ethnic difference is often fraught and fluid, as her memo continues:

I waited for Nicole, my Dutch-white and kizomba-loving friend to pick me up. Nicole is 24 and has been practising various dance styles for years. But she only started kizomba lessons four months ago, and she's already in with the advanced group.

In this excerpt, Shequira somewhat contests the formation of ethnic difference through dance skills, referencing the fact that even though her white Dutch friend is having kizomba lessons, she can nevertheless be viewed as a good dancer. More pronounced challenges of ethnic identity and boundary formation around embodied dance skills came from some of this scene's professional taxi dancers, i.e., young men who are regarded as exceptionally skilled and are paid by venues to dance with female party-goers.

Romano: Actually, they say darker-skinned men are somewhat better dancers, but everyone's a good dancer. Skill, everything, can just be learned, everything can be learned... Everyone that comes here is just a good dancer; it doesn't matter what skin-colour you have, it's just a dance that once you've mastered it, you can be great at it. You don't need to have a special ethnicity to be better at it.

It is notable that Romano not only challenges the connection between ethnicity and dance skills, but does this by referencing skin-colour (not 'culture' or 'roots', unlike in the previous examples) as the deciding factor determining the ability to dance. This contrasts with public and academic discourse, which tends to claim that ethnicity is vastly different and separate from race. Nevertheless, in practice, this distinction seems to be difficult to maintain, as racial imagery is often implicitly at the heart of notions of ethnicity (Krebbekx et al., 2017; M'charek et al., 2014). This is true, for instance, for ideas on how people with a certain skin colour are better at some things than others with different skin tones. Moreover, people make assumptions about identity in their everyday interactions. This is largely based on visual markers - and skin colour is very visible, whereas 'ethnic culture', except for some forms of dress, often is not. This was something the peer researchers struggled with throughout their fieldwork. This becomes clear in Shequira's description of the crowd at the kizomba party:

Nicole and I walk up the stairs into a relatively dark and crowded dancehall. Many girls are standing on the side of the dancefloor, almost, but not completely, pressed against the wall. I make my way to one of the benches. Everyone is continuously changing dance partner. Most of the time, it's the boy who makes a gesture with his hand, which the girl grabs to start dancing. Occasionally, a girl will drag a boy onto the dancefloor. Ninety percent of the crowd looks noticeably young to me and the majority of the girls are white. The boys, however, are largely non-white. Because Nicole knows many of the people there, she's able to tell me that most of the white girls are Dutch. The non-white girls are mainly Cape Verdean or Surinamese. The boys have an Antillean, African, Surinamese, Somali or Cape Verdean heritage.

Evident here is Shequira's attempt to determine the ethnic diversity of the crowd, which she can only do using different skin tones. Initially, therefore, ethnicity and ethnic distinctions are not based on 'cultural' differences, but racial markers. It is only because her friend Nicole knows these young people that ethnicity becomes a reference to a country of origin or 'heritage', i.e., something akin to a reference to culture. This also highlights the complexity of conducting research on ethnic diversity, especially when its goal is to approach it from the perspective of young people's everyday lived experiences, which are rarely, if ever, clear cut.

2.2. Example 2: smoking the shisha

At a Moroccan shisha lounge, 21-year-old Lucia viewed smoking the shisha pipe and dress as important technologies of sex. Lucia is white-Dutch and, as she explained in her observation-memo, this made her self-conscious about going to the shisha lounge: "I heard from a classmate that there's a particular atmosphere at the lounge and people can tell rather quickly that you don't really belong." The classmate in question was 20-year-old peer observer Sam, who had earlier visited a Turkish shisha lounge with his Turkish girlfriend. In his memos, he noted that he "felt as if lots of people were staring at me, and my girlfriend Dilem sensed this as well".

I suspect people are looking a bit funny at us because I'm the only Dutch boy here and perhaps I look a bit young and 'studenty' compared to the others. I hadn't smoked shisha for a long time and couldn't remember if you're supposed to inhale or not. I didn't want to appear 'dorky', so I chose to inhale, which I thought the other people were doing. It seemed best to act as inconspicuously as possible and mirror the behaviour of the others. I ordered two more sodas and took another drag of the shisha when I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that one of the Turkish boys making trouble at a table nearby was imitating me, while the others were laughing. I think I was doing something wrong in how I was smoking the waterpipe.

This excerpt enables us to experience Sam's fear of being 'out-of-place' in a context he is unused to and so does not know "the rules of the game" (cf., Lareau, 2015: 2). In this interactive space, the smoking of a shisha pipe becomes a marker of social boundaries: between those who do, and do not, know the implicit codes of conduct concerning how you should, and should not, smoke. In this context, Sam becomes acutely aware of something he is probably unaware of in many other party contexts: his Dutch ethnicity. The

peer-to-peer ethnography provides a unique insight into how the embodied experiences, thoughts, feelings and actions of the young ethnographers are implicated in this formation of ethnicity and ethnic identity. It shows how these identities and ethnic differences are made through the embodied interpretations of what other young people are doing and how they react to them.

The fear of being 'out of place' also played on Lucia's mind before she headed to the Moroccan lounge with her Moroccan classmate Karima. She therefore contacted Karima beforehand to ask what she should wear. "I'm going back and forth between a dress and some regular jeans. Both were fine, according to Karima, who added "btw you can only pay by cash there." Lucia described how Karima had visited so many lounges before that she had acquired what cultural sociologists would call 'a feel for the game', which was something Lucia had yet to develop.

The lounge is larger than I'd expected, with a black ceiling with small lights changing colour. It's like I'm peering into a starry night. The whole atmosphere reminds me of the folk tale 'One Thousand and One Nights', including because of the beautiful waterpipes and the smoke that's filling the room with mist.

A boy escorts us to a table and asks Karima if we'd be willing to sit with other girls. "You're specifically asked to join other girls, because it's not customary to join unfamiliar boys at a table", Karima explained. I briefly greet the two Moroccan girls we're sitting with, but Karima strikes up a conversation where they overtly pay each other compliments on their appearance: their make-up, hair and outfits. This feels a bit theatrical to me, but I sense it's something of a 'cultural thing' amongst Moroccan girls. Each girl in the lounge is made-up beautifully, with heavy make-up and foundation, and they appear to have spent a long time on their hair.

Here, too, culture returns as an abstract foundation for ethnic difference, but this time the focus is on clothing. This appears to be related to dress as an important technology of sex in the lounge. It was not only the girls who had paid considerable attention to their appearance; the boys had also done so, walking into the lounge wearing tight t-shirts, jeans and trainers from, what appeared to be, expensive designer brands.

Karima explained that it's possible for boys and girls to sit at the same table, but the medium for doing this is 'eye contact'. If you see someone in the lounge you like the look of, you could try to make eye contact. If the other person reciprocates, this often leads to conversation and, eventually, joining them at their table.

Lucia then noticed something she previously had not: a group of young men at a table nearby were staring at her. Indeed, as she looked around further, she saw more eyes staring. Lucia and Karima tried their best not to appear interested.

Karima makes a video for Snapchat, where she blows the smoke from the shisha into her camera. She says she "always does this when [she's] in a shisha lounge." When I ask her why, she replies she just likes to do it, because she generally makes a lot of Snapchats of the things she does, and so people will know she's at the shisha lounge. I think this is, on the one hand, connected to a subcultural practice; on the other, to me it is also something "sexy"; it looks kind of "sexy" to blow smoke in this way directly into the camera. It makes me think of a particular music video by Major Lazer – Jet Blue, which also shows attractive girls who, in different ways, are blowing smoke from a shisha pipe.

In the end, I visited this shisha lounge multiple times, after which it seemed to me that some people are very skilled at smoking the shisha, and the more smoke you blow, the better or sexier it is. My first time there I don't quite manage this, also because I'm a smoker and let the smoke get to my lungs to only puff out what's left through my mouth or nose. This isn't how to do it. Karima explains you should keep the smoke in your mouth and then blow. After visiting the lounge more often, I notice that I'm becoming more practiced at emitting a lot of shisha smoke and that I like to experiment with blowing it in various ways.

In this excerpt, Lucia is somewhat more explicit about how smoking a shisha pipe can function as a technology of sex, the success of which is determined by how skilfully someone blows out the smoke to make it appear 'sexy'. This skill requires specific knowledge, dispositions and techniques. This excerpt is also testimony to Lucia being transformed into a more skilled shisha smoker and insider in the lounge. These are transformations that a researcher undergoes within his/her body, thoughts, actions and feelings, and through which they gradually take on the dispositions of the researched. This is precisely the type of 'deep involvement' that this study was seeking to achieve, i.e., trying to view the world from the standpoint of those being researched (cf., [Wacquant, 2005](#)). The comparative peer-to-peer ethnography approach has the advantage that it makes these transformations visible from the reflexive notes made by the peer researchers.

Smoking the shisha is not just a technology of sex, but also a means of ethnic self-formation and exclusion. The peer-to-peer ethnography continues to show that ethnicity is a performative achievement; it is not a fixed 'cultural' identity, but an image of the self and others that is obtained through the techniques people perform on the self and the social situation in which they find themselves (cf., [Burkitt, 2002](#)). The shisha pipe, clothing, music, Snapchats and dance are all examples of the cultural resources young people can employ to perform these transformations on the self and others. The peer-to-peer ethnography has shown in detail that these resources are surrounded by subcultural modes of doing and being, which are morals and embodied capacities that are often ethnicised by the young. It is through this that they tend to echo the public discourse that naturalises culture as a basis for ethnic distinction (cf., [Nagel, 2003](#)). Nonetheless, there were also contexts in the study in which the knowledge and capacity to use a particular technology of sex was not explicitly linked to ethnicity or culture.

2.3. Example 3: raving on ecstasy

The reference above concerns the drugs consumed at predominantly white party-scenes, like ecstasy at a techno setting. Ecstasy is described in the in-depth interviews for this study as a 'love' drug that creates intense feelings of friendliness, intimacy and connectedness on the dancefloor, although "it is not experienced as an aphrodisiac" (Ter Bogt, Engels, Hibbel, Van Wel, & Verhagen, 2002: 167). Our interviewees were adamant about keeping the sexuality at techno parties limited to the space of the party itself and to acts like dancing, cuddling, handholding, sometimes kissing, but no more than that (see Van Bohemen & Roeling, 2020). "Because when you use drugs, you don't necessarily want to become horny or something", argued Fela. Ecstasy instead means:

Kiki: You're really happy and euphoric. A friend then also says 'I'm making myself horny'. Like 'I'm dancing and becoming aroused from myself'. It's activated by the drugs, so people become more physical or intimate.

Fela: [But the intention is] not to go to bed with each other. Especially when I've done drugs, I'm just rubbish in bed. You know, there's not so much use in that.

Such characterisations were plentiful during the fieldwork in the techno scene, but ethnicity and culture went almost completely unmentioned. Anouk, a 25-year-old peer researcher who conducted most of this fieldwork, documented how interviewees always described the scene as 'highly diverse', but without referencing ethnicity; instead, they mentioned differences in clothing styles. This was also a recurring pattern in her observation-memos. Ethnicity was explicitly evoked only in exceptional cases, such as when an individual or small group broke the implicit rules by attempting to (in the youths' view) 'abuse' the affective workings of ecstasy to entice other young people into having sex.

Richard: For a while there was a group of older black guys and I really got the idea they were feeding young girls with pills so they could take them home. That's really sick. (...) But that's also really the exception.

Something similar arose in one of Anouk's observation-memos, in which she discussed how she and her friend Joan were dancing when they were approached by a young man in a way that they both deemed to be unpleasant:

The boy's somewhat older, from an Asian background, and wears a blue shirt. I can't see from the look on his face if he's on drugs, but he's being very touchy-feely and friendly. When we continue dancing, he comes in-between Joan and me and puts an arm around each of us. We both walk away and decide to dance a bit further up on the floor.

The story continues when Anouk returns from smoking outside:

I suddenly feel two hands on my shoulders. I look behind me and there's the boy in the blue shirt. I look at him in an unfriendly way as he asks: 'Do you mind if I massage you?' I answer: 'No I wouldn't like that'. I'm beginning to think the boy isn't on drugs, but is trying to act as if he is in response to the people who are. He's too persistent in his advances for someone on ecstasy. But he also knows very well that a massage is very pleasant for someone on it. I walk down the stairs, where Joan is waiting for me. We agree he's an unusual type at a techno party.

That such explicit references to ethnicity were exceptional cases was probably related to the homogeneity and majority position of the young people who enjoy these types of party. Our fieldwork corroborated earlier research on this issue by showing that these youths are overwhelmingly white, middle-class and well educated (cf., Measham & Hadfield, 2009). It is known that ethnicity tends to be hidden from white people, especially when they are amongst fellow whites (e.g., Perry, 2001). In these contexts, in which youths are all from the same dominant social group, the prevailing notion is that they have no ethnicity and no culture. When the peer researcher also belongs to this group, there tends to be no overt construction of ethnicity or ethnic identity – or at least not in a way that is meaningful to the peer researcher or the youths being researched.

Yet does this mean that ethnicity has no role here? Can acts not have ethnic cultural precursors and consequences that are unknown to those involved but that, nevertheless, produce social boundaries? This is increasingly a topic within cultural sociology that is answered in the affirmative, and it is here that the peer-to-peer ethnography appears to have some crucial limitations. By showing us the world from the eyes of its beholders at the social-interaction and individual self-formation levels, the broader patterns within which these interactions are embedded may recede from view. This is especially true for contexts that include people from the same dominant social group, whose habitus means that they do not think, let alone speak, of the existence of hierarchies and other social boundaries. In these contexts, researchers are required to effectively 'go beyond' what respondents are saying and doing, and sometimes also beyond what they are feeling themselves, instead looking critically at what is *not* being said and done and the implications thereof.

3. Discussion

This study considers the issue of what 'doing justice to diversity' and 'taking culture seriously' should mean in research about ethnicity and sexuality. I argue that researchers should attempt to avoid the creation of ethnicity in terms of fixed and stable categories or identities, instead allowing diversity to show itself as complex and contextual, messy and unstable. A peer-to-peer ethnography of parties is a good way to demonstrate this, as it allows us to see how ethnicity is performatively achieved within micro-sociological contexts. As such, this method enables a detailed look into how cultural values and ideas are evoked differently within different contexts to create different configurations of ethnicity. This makes visible how cultural meanings belong to interactive contexts, as much as to people (Mears, 2014).

Yet these meanings are not created out of thin air. The field of cultural sociology has gravitated more towards showing how these meanings are made of explicit and implicit cognitive schemata, dispositions, tastes, physical characteristics and skill-sets, which people have acquired through social learning (e.g., Leschziner & Green, 2013; Lizardo, 2004; Lizardo, 2017; Patterson, 2014; Wacquant, 2015). The result is that people may not always be aware of the social antecedents of their actions and are still contributing to the (re) formation of ethnic boundaries (cf., Vaisey, 2009).

A peer-to-peer ethnography of parties is less equipped to uncover these broader interactive and boundary-making processes, which extend beyond micro-level contexts. Other methods within cultural sociology, like multiple correspondence or network analyses, appear to be better equipped (Mears, 2014), while implicit association tests, and other more experimental cultural-sociological set-ups, seem to be more appropriate for the task of unearthing the deeper embodiment of the cultural schemata called on by the youths in this research to construct various ethnic boundaries in various ways (cf., Lamont, Adler, Park & Xiang, 2017; Miles, Charron-Chénier & Schleifer, 2019; Moore, 2017; Schaap, Van der Waal & De Koster, 2019). What the peer-to-peer ethnography is, however, uniquely suited to is showing the meanings that (young) people themselves vocalise around these dispositions and schemata, which are multiple and thus evoked differently within different social interactive contexts (cf., Pugh, 2013). The peer-to-peer ethnography allows us to take a detailed look at how this happens, i.e., how meanings are made within contexts and how they change when the contexts change. This significantly enhances the room for diversity in cultural sociological research, as it enables scholars to circumvent a priori decisions on what meanings matter in issues of identity. Another advantage is that these meanings are studied as embodied within lived experience.

However, another limitation of this method arises from the nature of the work, which required young people to: write at length about their experiences of sexuality at parties, know when and how to probe during the in-depth interviews, and engage with these research practices in an ethical manner. It is for this reason that I relied solely on peer researchers from my own university network, whose ethnic, educational, sexual and regional backgrounds influenced the types of data it was possible to obtain. Consequently, this data is not an accurate representation of youth diversity in the Netherlands, as it is biased towards the peer groups within which the peer researchers were embedded. This means that non-university educated young people are somewhat underrepresented, and white youths somewhat overrepresented, in the data. While a complete representation of diversity was never a goal of this study, given that it is, at its core, a critique of the notion that such a thing is ever possible, it is nonetheless worrying that it was so difficult to reach non-university educated youths and include their perspectives with the same depth as those of their university-educated counterparts. This is especially so since the data shows that ethnic boundaries are but one type of social boundary formed around sexuality in party contexts (see Van Bohemen & De Graaf, 2021; Van Bohemen & Van Zoonen, 2020).

This difficulty in achieving complete representation is also a potential limitation of this method for youth-sexuality research that aims to enable health interventions. A peer-to-peer ethnography of parties has the advantage of revealing the complexity of ethnicity and its relationship to sexuality from the position of young people themselves. This could be used to make health interventions more accurate and more attuned to the wishes and life-worlds of the youths involved, while also giving them more agency in the research (cf., Coyne & Carter, 2018; Groundwater-Smith, Dockett, & Bottrell, 2014). However, the innate messiness and contextuality of ethnicity also make it difficult to produce direct statements on how it matters for sexual behaviour. This limits its value for informing health policies and helping professionals who work in the youth field.

Nonetheless, given that these policy and professional interventions can have far-reaching implications for young people, it is important that we, as researchers, make more effort to include their voices and concerns in our studies (Krebbekx et al., 2017). Thinking and rethinking peer-to-peer research methods, like the one discussed in this article, may prove vital in allowing us to do a better job at this in the future, whilst also engaging a new generation of researchers in cultural sociology.

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